

Good Enough, Public Enough: A Response to Charles Bingham's
 "Neither Harlem, nor the Harlem Branch Y: The Taught Public"

Clio Stearns

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

Charles Bingham's essay, "Neither Harlem, nor the Harlem Branch Y: The Taught Public," asks us to rethink previously held definitions of private and public spaces. He posits the idea of the "taught public" sphere, a place that develops psychically between teacher and students.¹ The paper shows how this newly named domain allows for us to obviate the excessively simplistic separation among traditional, progressive, and critical pedagogies. Bingham leans on Gert Biesta's recent work toward rehabilitating the work of the teacher without overreliance on "learnified," or exclusively cognitivist, visions of education.²

To build this taught public space, where the teacher can engage in real pedagogy without wholly sacrificing tenets of progressive education, Bingham details the need for a teacher who is "good enough." Drawing on D. W. Winnicott's conceptualization of the "good enough mother," Bingham shows that the good enough teacher "establishes... a role that fosters the student's ability to reside in space where private needs exist in a balance with public demands."³ This teacher navigates students' simultaneous existence in private and public worlds, recognizes students as separate beings, and facilitates an outward turn while acknowledging interiority. Bingham draws on Langston Hughes's "Theme for English B" as a poetic illustration of the need and capacity for education to disrupt a problematic binary between private and public spheres.⁴

One of Bingham's important contributions is his assertion that simply describing educational spaces and stakeholders (such as teach-

ers, students, schools, conferences, and so on) as “public” or “private” is reductive and unhelpful. We cannot think of education as separate from the public sphere or as strictly preparatory. Nor can we, in line with progressive educational thought, position education as truly one and the same as public life. Bingham asks us to think about ways that teachers can actually facilitate the construction of different kinds of public domains—transitional domains where teaching occurs and where education continues. In asserting this kind of space, Bingham shows that we can establish the public facing role and ceaseless import of the teacher.

Part of what seems so important about this construction is the recognition of teaching and education as affective fields, not fields or spaces that are only physical or even cognitive. By acknowledging the affective dimensions of education, we reassert the centrality of the teacher *per se*, a figure whose emotional tenor contributes to the sometimes transitional function of this space Bingham calls “the taught public.”

Like Biesta, Bingham maintains that “learnification” has problematically removed the teacher from teaching.⁵ Bingham goes further, though, by showing how discussions of education as a public good can also be problematically diminishing of the teacher. What we need, he argues, is a “good enough teacher,” whose presence and perhaps consistency permit the student’s vacillation between public and private spheres. The role of the good enough teacher is not stagnant; the teacher facilitates the move of students from interiority and individual growth to participation in cultural and political life.

Others have described the good enough teacher as one who fosters students’ capacities to take care of themselves and their communities in a politically and emotionally difficult world and one with

the capacity to tolerate disillusionment and to cope with the affective disappointments inevitable in teaching.⁶ These iterations of Winnicott's applicability to pedagogy are important not because they contradict Bingham's project but because they underline the generative potential of the "good enough" framework to imagine education as public/not public.

In Winnicott's "good enough mother," we find a character who attunes her responsiveness to the needs of the infant and child over time. As such, the good enough mother is also a bad enough mother. This matters because it is precisely this figure's inevitable failures that allow for separation and a turn toward play, toward the other, and toward culture—what Bingham might call the public. Bingham stops short of what Winnicott explicitly names as the hate that a good enough mother, or analyst, feels toward the child or patient, and it might be worth extending the analogy because this extremity of affect has a place in educational life.⁷

One thing that allows educational work to flourish in a good enough analysis is hate—the sense that the child/patient/student will not accept the good that has been offered, the anxiety about rejection, or the fury engendered by misbehavior and even cognitive irreverence. In fact, whereas Bingham understands the teacher in Hughes's poem as perhaps not quite good enough, it might be that exactly these failures are what allow the poet to go home and create. This might be evidence of, rather than a counternarrative to, the taught public.

Yet it asks a lot of a person to be a good enough teacher.⁸ It is exhausting to position oneself as a transitional figure, a facilitating figure, in this way. Perhaps it is partly the deleterious emotional impact of this work without social recognition that leads so many teachers to support professionalization narratives that contribute readily to

the learnification of education; the envisioning of teaching as cognitive, measurable work; and the reification of a traditional, preparatory model. In Winnicott's heteronormative, ultimately sexist formulation, the good enough mother has a father supporting her, and she exists in a holding environment entirely oriented toward facilitating the good enough mother-infant relationship.⁹ She herself comes from a good enough childhood or, if not, then from a good enough analysis, and she lives in a good enough society (as defined, of course, by Winnicott's sometimes retrogressive norms).

The heteronormative and gendered nature of the language and metaphor here is important. Most of Winnicott's contemporary followers are explicit that the mother figure he references need not actually be a mother. At the same time, how can we overlook the gendered nature of maternal labor, and of teaching labor by extension? What does it mean to ask this good enoughness, this willingness to function as a facilitating figure, of women specifically? What does the feminized nature of the teaching profession do to the vision of taught public space?

Bingham's work toward rehabilitating the teacher must, then, come into conversation with the need to rehabilitate the circumstances surrounding this teacher figure. To function as good enough, one requires containment and holding. The good enough figure also exists publicly, in community, and cannot bear the hate and rejection she must endure without, for instance, a sense that she is returning to an available public. It matters *exactly* what is happening in the public domain. Winnicott famously disrupted the intellectual work of the British Psychoanalytical Society in 1941 by standing up to announce to his colleagues, "I should like to point out that there is an air-raid going on outside!"¹⁰ This is the transition point, the moment where education

is neither public nor private, neither preparatory nor cognitive, neither entirely of the world nor, in fact, entirely in it.

Bingham also describes the move of the student into the public space so beautifully. Specifically, he shows that the student in taught public space is freed from answering the question of whether education is life or the preparation for life; perhaps it is one, both, or neither, but what is more important here is simply the problematization of the question in the first place. It is freeing to imagine an education that does not need to answer this question, and it is perhaps the release from that constraint that Bingham considers facilitative of more fluidity between a strange and ultimately false private/public bifurcation.

One complexity worth attending to is what it means to use white psychoanalytic and educational theorists like Biesta and Winnicott, who rarely address race explicitly in their work, to theorize Hughes, a poet who writes so powerfully and with such intention about his experience specifically as an African American man. Part of what Bingham is discussing is the theoretical flaw embedded in either too-private or too-public versions of education. Ignoring the complexity of the racial dynamics at play when we rely on Biesta to admire Hughes or Winnicott to make sense of him risks belittling Hughes and rendering his offerings too private. On the other hand, leaning away from this potentially fruitful theoretical partnership because of those dynamics and the history they contain is probably too public. In Bingham's taught public space, maybe we can wonder at the role of race in this conversation openly and with productive, steadfast, but fluid defenses. We can ask questions and problematize the questions too.

Bingham makes a strong contribution when he reminds us that there is in fact no honest decision to be made with regard to whether education is private or public space. In doing so, he facilitates the re-

habilitation of the teacher figure, and he also joins a necessary chorus of voices critiquing education as a learned space. The taught public comes to life in this paper as we, readers, take up a position of students to Bingham's good enough, publicly facing enough teaching.

1 Charles Bingham, "Neither Harlem, nor the Harlem Branch Y: The Taught Public," *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 2 (2021).

2 Gert Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

3 D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34, no. 2 (1953): 89–97.

4 Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

5 Gert Biesta, "Giving Teaching Back to Education: Responding to the Disappearance of the Teacher," *Phenomenology & Practice* 6, no. 2 (2012): 35–49.

6 Natalie Davey, "The Good Enough Teacher," *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* 25, no. 1 (2020): Article 7; Lisa Farley, "Radical Hope, or, the Promise of Uncertainty in History Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (2009): 537–554.

7 D. W. Winnicott, "Hate in the Counter-transference," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 30, no. 2 (1949): 69–74.

8 Clio Stearns, "The Use of Educational Objects," *Pedagogy, Society and Culture* 24, no. 2 (2015): 191–203.

9 Winnicott, "Transitional Objects."

10 Ilene Philipson, "I Should Like to Point Out that There is an Air-Raid Going on Outside!": Psychoanalysis and the Denial of the Analyst's Trauma," *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* 15, no. 1 (2018), 38.