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Integrating the Child into the Public Sphere and the Problem of Citizenship: An Analytical Study in Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Education

إدماج الطفل في الفضاء العمومي وإشكالية المواطنة: دراسة تحليلية في فلسفة التربية عند حنة ارندت

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Article abstract:

This study examines how children are integrated into the public sphere through Hannah Arendt's philosophy of education. It investigates how children can participate in a shared world while maintaining the unique qualities of childhood, avoiding the risk of turning education into early political training. The study uses an analytical approach and is divided into three sections: The first section clarifies how education introduces children to the shared world. The second section defines the limits and challenges of children's integration into public life. Finally, the third section explains how education connects to citizenship and shapes children's political socialisation. The study finds that Hannah Arendt draws a clear line between education as preparation for citizenship and participation in actual political life.

Keywords: Public Sphere; Citizenship; Child integration; Education; Hannah Arendt.

ملخص المقال :

تتناول الدراسة كيفية إدماج الأطفال في المجال العام من خلال فلسفة خنة ارنت في التربية، وتبحث في كيفية اشراك الأطفال في هذا العالم المشترك بالحفاظ على سمات الطفولة وتجنب تسييس التربية.تم الاعتماد في الدراسة على المنهج التحليلي،وتقسيم البحث الى ثلاث محاور،بحيث يوضح المحور الأول كيف تعرف التربية الأطفال على العالم المشترك،ويحدد المحور الثاني حدود وتحديات اندماج الأطفال في الحياة العامة،أما المحور الأخير فيشرح كيفية ارتباط التعليم بالمواطنة ودوره في التنشئة السياسية للأطفال.قد توصلت الدراسة الى أن حنة ارندت رسمت خطوطا واضحة بين التعليم باعتباره اعداد للمواطنة والمشاركة في الحياة السياسية الفعلية.

كلمات مفتاحية: المجال العام، المواطنة، ادماج الطفل، التربية ،حنة أرندت.

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Introduction

The relationship between education and politics presents persistent challenges within political thought, particularly as conceptions of citizenship and participation evolve. Hannah Arendt re-examines political action and engagement by positioning education as central to entry into public life. She contends that education equips individuals for participation in a pluralistic and interactive society.

This perspective prompts a fundamental question regarding the role of children in the public sphere. **Should children be incorporated early as political actors, or should childhood remain a distinct phase to safeguard development?** The tension between political socialisation and protection from politicisation forms the basis of this debate.

This study analyses the integration of children into the public sphere through the lens of Arendt's philosophy of education. It examines the relationship between education and citizenship, demonstrating how Arendt balances the transmission of the world with the preservation of childhood. By emphasising the political dimensions of education without reducing it to ideology, this analysis connects core concepts in Arendt's thought and anticipates the thematic links that will be developed in subsequent sections.

Contemporary political thought faces significant challenges, including declining democratic participation, a fragmented public sphere, increased political polarisation, and a widening gap between formal citizenship and genuine civic engagement. These developments expose the limitations of prevailing conceptions of citizenship, which frequently emphasise legal status and rights while neglecting the processes by which individuals become active members of society. Revisiting Hannah Arendt's political philosophy is therefore not merely a historical exercise; it addresses a pressing need in current theoretical discourse. Her concepts of natality, plurality, public space, and political action provide a framework for reimagining citizenship as a developmental process rather than a status conferred upon adulthood. This perspective is particularly relevant when considering the position of children in democratic societies, as it shifts attention from their exclusion from public life to how education prepares them for future participation. Arendt's philosophy thus offers valuable tools for re-examining the interconnections among education, childhood, and citizenship in contemporary democracies.

These themes are addressed sequentially to ensure analytical clarity. The first section investigates how education relates to the shared world and introduces Arendt's perspective. The second section explores the boundaries of children's integration into public life. The third section examines the interconnections among education, citizenship, and political socialisation. Collectively, these sections lead to conclusions that reconsider the role of the child in contemporary political theory.

1. Education and its relationship to the shared world in Hannah Arendt′s philosophy.

Arendt's concept of the 'world' is distinct from the natural environment or an abstract idea. Unlike some philosophical uses, which identify the world as the totality of nature (in Heidegger) or as a purely mental construct (in certain idealist traditions), Arendt defines the world as a specifically human-created realm. It is a space shaped by the things we build, the works we produce, and the words we share, all of which enable communal life beyond mere biological existence. This world is the product of durable human effort, offering a stable arena where people can meet, act together, and maintain continuity across generations. Arendt insists

that without this enduring world, both political action and the arrival of new human beings lose their significance, leading to a crisis. (Kloeg, 2022, pp. 198-199).

For Arendt, education introduces children to this fragile, shared world created by human activity and in need of preservation (Wheeler., 2025).

Education links natality (beginning anew, where Che wrote in his book The Human Condition: with each birth, a new beginning (Wheeler., 2025)), and plurality (unique people living together). This keeps the balance, avoiding the extremes of progressivism or traditionalism that can harm the world (Wheeler., 2025).

Education's core is welcoming children as newcomers. It renews the world that came before and will last beyond them. Adults must pass it on so children can live in it and maybe change it. (Widmaier, 2018).

It is the moment when we decide whether we love the world enough to take responsibility for it. It is also when we decide whether we love our children enough not to drive them out of our world. We must not abandon them to their fate. Nor should we deprive them of the chance to experience something new. Instead, we should prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a shared world. (Kloeg, 2022, p. 199).

While Arendt highlights the importance of tradition and authority in education, she underscores that these principles require an institutional framework to mediate the child's introduction to the common world. She conceptualises the school not only as a site of instruction but also as an intermediary institution situated between the private domain of the family and the public sphere. Whereas some critics argue that this emphasis can cause stifling individuality or reinforce outdated norms. Others question whether her distrust of certain progressive methods might overlook the benefits of adaptability and student-centred learning. Including these perspectives can encourage a more critical engagement with Arendt's educational philosophy.

Education rests on the authority of the educator, who protects the child from the adult world. The educator also presents that world as the child's own, without anticipating the future. Plurality ensures that education prepares for political life by honouring human diversity rather than social uniformity. (Reynolds, 2024).

Education is also understood as an intermediary space between the private and the public spheres, with the school representing a gradual transition from the family to the wider world, without itself being part of the political sphere (Kloeg, 2022).Arendt says in his book, "Between the Past and the Future: "***Normally the child is first introduced to the world in school. Now school is by no means the world and must not pretend to be; it is rather the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all…to the child, school, in a sense, represents the world, although it is not yet actually the world***". (Arendt , pp. 188-189)

For Arendt, education is the primary means of introducing children to the 'world', the enduring space of human work that sustains our way of living together. She warns that without true education, the world may fall apart, as new generations do not receive it. In The Crisis of Education, she further explains this concern (Prairat, 2022), criticising methods that substitute for genuine learning. These methods, she argues, undermine authority and expose children to the world before they are ready.

For example, Arendt describes genuine learning as a process in which children acquire knowledge through meaningful engagement with subject matter, guided by adults who have the authority and responsibility to transmit the world. Traditional classroom practices, where students encounter literature, history, and science through thoughtful discussion and sustained study, exemplify this. In contrast, substitute

methods might include approaches that emphasise group work for its own sake, allow children to set the curriculum without adult guidance, or focus mainly on developing skills for future social roles rather than on introducing the world itself. These methods, she argues, undermine authority and expose children to the world before they are ready.

Ultimately, the relationship between education and the world, as Arendt describes, underlines education's essential purpose: to renew and sustain the shared human world by preparing children, as newcomers, to both inherit and transform it. Education, situated between the private family and public society, must protect this fragile space and nurture a sense of responsibility to care for a world that will outlast us all.

2. The limits of a child's integration into public life

In one of her works, Arendt presents the following statement.

She asks, "Have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world?"

This line of questioning reflects Arendt's concern about involving children in political conflicts and burdening them with responsibilities they cannot handle. She expressed this most clearly in her 1959 essay, "Reflections on Little Rock." In her analysis of the desegregation crisis in Arkansas, Arendt strongly criticised the decision to put Black children at the centre of a difficult racial and legal struggle. She believed that forcing children to face public hostility and bear the burden of social change is a serious failure on the part of adults. (Zembylas, pp. 273-274)

According to Arendt, schools should act as a safe space, separate from political struggles. Forcing children into these battles takes away their right to a protected childhood and turns education into a tool for social change. Recent research shows that Arendt's argument is not just about protecting childhood. It also warns that using education for immediate political goals threatens the possibility of new beginnings and human diversity. When adults pass their political problems onto children, they undermine the true purpose of schools, which is to provide a stable, shared foundation for a common world. (Zembylas, p. 274)

Her stance, expressed during her commentary on the Little Rock crisis, is that exposing children to confrontation with major issues like racism breaches the school's duty. She argues schools should protect children and provide gradual education, not thrust them into adult conflicts.

Arendt's argument unfolds in several *steps that build directly from her initial question.* First, she raises the concern that involving children in political conflicts places a burden on them that they are not prepared to carry. This is particularly evident in her commentary on the Little Rock crisis, where she observed that asking children to confront deeply-rooted social injustices like racism, even for a just cause, results in the premature politicisation of childhood.

According to Arendt, this puts schools at risk of failing in their essential duty to provide a safe environment and to educate children gradually about the complexities of the world, instead of subjecting them to adult conflicts.

Furthermore, she draws attention to historical examples within totalitarian systems, such as Nazism and Stalinism, where children were systematically exploited through organisations like the Hitler Youth and were pressured to internalise and propagate political ideologies. These examples support her central concern: that assigning children the role of confronting and correcting societal issues violates their developmental needs and can compromise both their well-being and the ethical obligations of adults.

According to Arendt, **the *public sphere* consists of two interrelated components**. **The first is the *space of appearance***, *which is a domain of political freedom and equality that emerges when citizens act collectively through speech and persuasion*. **The second** is **the *common world***, *a shared realm of human artefacts, institutions, and settings that distinguishes humanity from nature and provides a relatively stable and enduring context for human activities*. (Ricciardone, 2019)

Both dimensions are fundamental to the practice of citizenship: the space of appearance enables citizenship to flourish. At the same time, the common world offers the stable foundation from which public spaces of action and deliberation can develop. (Ricciardone, 2019)

Building on this framework, Arendt acknowledges that while children are present in the adult world, their involvement in public political life should be clearly limited. She does not regard children as full citizens. Their participation in the public sphere ought to be temporary and supervised, as they are developing individuals who require protection rather than functioning as independent political actors. (Ricciardone, 2019)

According to Arendt, the involvement of children in the political realm signals a broader erosion of political authority. She observed that the stabilising influence of authority was being rejected, mirroring the earlier decline of tradition and religion. (Wheeler., 2025)

Given that political authority has historically been closely associated with parental authority, Arendt argued that the dissolution of public authority inevitably affects the private sphere, leading children to assume inappropriate adult roles. (Wheeler., 2025)

From this, it is clear that Hannah Arendt acknowledges the child's presence in the adult world but sets strict limits on their involvement in public political life.

She maintains that children are not yet full citizens and should enter the public sphere only under supervision and temporarily, as developing beings requiring protection. (Ricciardone, 2019)

Contemporary youth movements like Fridays for Future, Greta Thunberg-led climate strikes, and March for Our Lives have emerged as forces holding adults accountable for the future.

These groups mobilise youth to organise protests, address assemblies, and demand urgent action on climate change and gun violence. They highlight previous generations' failures, challenging adults' stewardship of social and environmental issues. This mirrors Arendt's concern about politicising youth, as these activists face complex political problems despite their age. However, many activists voluntarily take on these roles, arguing their voices are essential where adults have failed. This both reflects and complicates Arendt's debate about generational roles, raising questions about whether activism empowers or burdens youth.

Thus, these examples test the boundaries Arendt drew between education, protection, and political action.

In summary, the **'limits'** that **Arendt sets on the integration of children into public life** are as follows:

- the prohibition on making them bear the burden of adult political conflicts;
- The necessity that a protective boundary between childhood and political public life remains the foundation of any democratic education

3. Education, Citizenship, and Political Responsibility in Hannah Arendt's Thought

Hannah Arendt connects her ideas about education to her view of citizenship, but she does not equate education with direct political training. Arendt warns against making childhood political, saying that "education must be conservative," since it is responsible for a world that comes before the child (Arendt , Between past and future six exercices in political thought, 1961, p. 193). Here, Arendt uses the term '**conservative' not in the sense of supporting a specific political ideology**, but **to emphasise the role of education in preserving and passing on the existing world and its values to the next generation**.

For her, **education** should focus on **stability, continuity, and care for what already exists**, **rather than politicising children or transforming society through them**.

This stands in contrast to more progressive or radical approaches to education, which might aim to make students or pupils active agents of social change from an early age. Because of this, **education does not immediately create political actors**. Instead, **it helps people prepare to take part in public life later**.

This distinction sets the stage for understanding how education relates to citizenship in her thought.

Arendt delineates a clear boundary between the realm of childhood and the sphere of politics.

For Arendt, citizenship extends beyond legal status to encompass active participation in a shared world through speech and action. In *The Human Condition*, she characterises the public realm as a space "where everything that appears can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity" (Arendt , 1998, p. 50).

Entry into this public space requires maturity and judgment, qualities that cannot be presumed. Thus, education functions as a bridge between private and public life. According to Arendt, schools occupy an intermediary position—they are neither entirely private nor wholly political.

This intermediary status enables educators to introduce children to the shared world while simultaneously shielding them from its conflicts.

Philosopher S. Megan LeDaily, in Hannah Arendt, Renewing Our Common World, contends that education involves "renewing a common world" by guiding newcomers to assume responsibility for it. This perspective reinforces the notion that education prepares individuals to engage with and care for the world, rather than immediately transforming them into political actors.

A central concept in Arendt's philosophy is natality, the idea that each child represents a new beginning. She asserts that "with each birth, something uniquely new comes into the world" (Arendt , 1998, p. 53)

Accordingly, education should both safeguard the existing world and foster children's capacity for innovation. This principle underpins Arendt's opposition to political indoctrination, as imposing predetermined political beliefs on children would undermine their freedom and their potential to initiate change.

Although the connection between education and citizenship is indirect, it remains significant. Education cultivates political responsibility by developing individuals' capacity for judgment. In her later writings, Arendt links judgment to the ability to adopt multiple perspectives, a skill essential for participation in public life (Arendt , 1961)

Rather than producing individuals who merely comply with authority, education should promote independent thought and a sense of responsibility for the shared world.

Nevertheless, some critics challenge the feasibility and desirability of Arendt's strict separation between childhood education and politics. They contend that excluding political topics from education ignores the pervasive influence of social and political forces within schools.

Additionally, critics argue that Arendt's emphasis on shielding children from politics may restrict students' early opportunities to understand and engage with their society.

Others maintain that the notion of "**conserving the world**" through education risks perpetuating the status quo and inhibiting necessary social change.

These critiques suggest that Arendt's approach may be overly idealistic and insufficiently responsive to the complex realities of education and politics.

Arendt also criticises the use of education for political purposes, which follows from her rejection of indoctrination. Levinson, in his article, says that Arendt opposes educational systems designed to "produce citizens according to predetermined political ideals" (Levinson, 2005)

These systems can turn schools into tools for spreading certain ideas, which harms both the independence of education and the diversity of political views. This differs from the views of other major educational theorists, such as John Dewey and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Dewey sees education as closely linked to democracy and supports active participation and social reform in schools.

Rousseau believes education should shape free individuals who can help build a better society. Unlike Arendt, both Dewey and Rousseau are more open to schools having a transformative and possibly political role in shaping students. In contrast, Arendt is cautious about these ambitions and seeks to preserve a space for children's growth free of adult political agendas.

Arendt's view of citizenship is quite different from Dewey's and Rousseau's approaches to education.

Dewey believes that participating in democracy is a key part of education, while Rousseau focuses on helping children develop independently. Arendt, however, thinks education should keep school and politics apart. She says that citizenship does not come from early political involvement, but from gradually learning responsibility and connecting with the world. In her view, education gets children ready for citizenship by preparing them for future participation, without bringing them into politics too early.

From the above, it is clear that Arendt's view of education differs markedly from those of Rousseau and Dewey, particularly in how they link education and citizenship. Rousseau regards education as a means of supporting a child's natural growth and independence. Dewey regards the school as a democratic community where students learn citizenship by taking part and sharing experiences. Arendt, however, does not believe schools should be places for political participation. She holds that education should gradually introduce children to a common world, helping them develop judgement, responsibility, and respect for diversity. For Arendt, citizenship comes not from direct participation but from an educational process that prepares children to join public life as responsible and independent people. She does not reject active citizenship, but stresses that real political involvement requires a solid educational foundation first.

In summary, Arendt maintains that education does not directly produce citizens but instead prepares individuals for citizenship. By maintaining a separation from politics and gradually introducing children to

the shared world, education fosters responsibility and independence. Thus, while the immediate ***objective of education is not the formation of citizens, it remains a fundamental long-term aim.***

Arendt's philosophy provides important guidance for contemporary educational practices and policies. Her focus on safeguarding childhood may prompt school leaders and policymakers to avoid using schools primarily for political advocacy, instead emphasising the development of independent judgment and critical thinking.

Educators can implement Arendt's insights by encouraging open discussion of diverse perspectives and shared values, while maintaining an environment that does not prematurely involve children in political debates. More broadly, educational programs can preserve essential traditions and knowledge while empowering students to generate new ideas and shape the future creatively.

In this way, Arendt's approach promotes a balance between conserving the existing world and preparing students for thoughtful, responsible participation in public life.

Conclusion:

The debate over children's roles in public life versus the view of childhood as a protected stage highlights a core tension in Hannah Arendt's educational philosophy. Rather than offering a simple answer, Arendt draws a clear line between education and politics.

Arendt states that children should not be drawn into politics prematurely. She sees childhood as a pre-political phase that needs protection from public demands and conflicts. As newcomers, children deserve guidance, not early political involvement. Premature participation can disrupt development and the true purpose of education.

Yet, education and citizenship are not wholly apart. Education equips children for society by gradually introducing them to its values, fostering judgment, responsibility, and an appreciation of diversity. While it does not instantly create citizens, education builds the foundation for responsible civic engagement.

Ultimately, Arendt seeks a balanced approach. Education should safeguard both the world and the child while remaining open to new ideas across generations. Such a balance prepares children for society without pushing them into politics too early.

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