

Becoming a Public Person

When a child starts school, she begins, in many ways, her life as public person. At home, she lives in the personal world of her family, a family that may be part of a particular culture. This family celebrates its own traditions, has its own history, and may even have its own language. People in the family have known this child from her birth and have come to understand her individual personality, including her interests, quirks, and fears. Whether she is a firstborn, middle child, or the oldest, the child has her own place in the family.

In school, a child is now one among many and each year must reestablish her place in the classroom. In school, a child will be asked - will be required - to learn the public language, the public histories, the public traditions, and will be required to behave according to public standards of behavior. When at home, a child speaks her mind by simply speaking; in school, she will learn that you raise your hand and wait to be recognized before you speak. A child may enter school already spelling words according to how she thinks they sound. In school she will learn that there are conventional - public - spellings for words and her own invented spellings may be marked wrong on the worksheet or test. At home a child may get herself a snack when hungry but at school, she learns that snacks are eaten at a certain time and that all children eat their snacks at the same time.

When children begin school they may interact with children who come from different cultures than their own, cultures that may speak different languages, follow different traditions, and hold different values. School is a place where children learn that the world is wider and more diverse than their family; they learn that not everyone looks like they do, speaks like they do, or thinks like they do.

In many ways the public nature of school asks that children conform to certain standards: standards of language, behavior, and to some degree, standards of value. There may be certain words, actions, and beliefs that are accepted at home that are not acceptable in school. For some children this adaptation to the standards and culture of school is an easier task than for other children. For these children the culture of school may be similar to the culture of their home and family and this helps the transition to school go more smoothly. For other children the transition can be a bit more challenging and takes more time.

For all children, however, the goal of becoming a public person shouldn't be one of simple conformity. Learning the public language, histories, traditions, and standards of behavior actually is a way of developing power, the power of expressing yourself as an individual in the public arena. Learning standards of behavior allows you to remain part of the group and gives you the opportunity to voice your opinions. Learning the standards of spoken and written language gives you the power to make your own ideas heard and understood. Children need to acquire the shared, public tools of thinking so that they can then think for themselves. We may all see the same sun and use the same crayons to draw the sun but each of our interpretations will be different. Once we acquire the public language we all have access to the same words and the same grammatical rules but the sentences that we create with these words and rules are our individual gift to the public world.

T.J. Corcoran, JD, MEd
Little Leprechaun Academy