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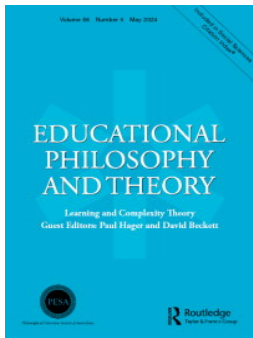
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Revisiting Rancière's 'radical democracy' for contemporary education policy analysis

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ABSTRACT

Just over a decade on from a spike of interest in Jacques Rancière's writing within educational philosophy and theory, I revisit his interventions on democracy and education to make the case for (re)engaging with Rancière's writing *now* to address important questions about contemporary education policy, the role of schools in democratic societies and public debate over the curriculum. Specifically, I argue that Rancière's interventions on the Platonism that characterises both 'progressive' and 'traditional' arguments about school curricula in such contexts offer a vital tool for understanding the shifts in education policy and educational debate that animate our current political moment. Building on work that has applied Rancière's writing to analyse *neoliberal* education policy, I argue that Rancière's writing provides a distinctive analytical lens for interpreting a recent shift towards *neo-conservative* education policy agendas, and the imbrication of schools within the 'culture-wars' that characterise the contemporary political landscape in several national settings. Taking recent policies concerned with the teaching of values in England as an example, I argue that a Rancierian perspective on such policy is helpful for revitalising research concerned with education and the role of public schooling in societies that wish to maintain some claim to democracy.

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Introduction

Just over a decade ago, several publications within educational philosophy and theory (including a special issue in this journal) addressed the potential of Jacques Rancière's writing for understanding the relationship between democracy and education, inspired by his contributions to political thought in what has become known as 'radical democracy', as well as his interventions on education. It is now not uncommon to see at least cursory reference to Rancière's writing in educational scholarship, with many applications of Rancière's writing in educational philosophy and theory involving (re)theorisations of democratic, political and emancipatory education. While these have contributed to the revitalisation of scholarship on critical pedagogy, offering an alternative theoretical source to that of Paolo Freire for thinking through the emancipatory potential of education itself (see, e.g. Biesta, 2010; Galloway, 2012; Vlieghe, 2018), such pedagogic readings of Rancière's writing are only one way of approaching the relevance of his work for educational research and scholarship.

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As an alternative, this paper builds on, and updates, applications of Rancière's writing to the analysis of education policy (see, e.g. Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Masschelein & Simons, 2010; Säfström, 2010). While such applications have offered incisive insights into the deleterious effects of *neoliberalism* in education policy, there has been less discussion of Rancière's writing in relation to *neo-conservative* influences on education policy. The originality of this contribution lies therefore in the application of Rancière's writing to the analysis of neo-conservative education policy and its place within the broader, polarised political climate of today. Taking recent education policy in England as an example, I illustrate how a Rancierian lens might bring a fresh perspective to the analysis of educational reforms undertaken by successive right-of-centre governments over the past ten years that have been pre-occupied with formal examinations, 'traditional' academic subjects, and 'rigour'. When applied to the introduction of policies centred on the teaching of values specifically (as for example in the teaching of British values and the re-emergence of character education), this line of analysis brings to the fore what Rancière (2006) describes as an ultra-Platonic 'twist' in elitist educational arguments for a universal curriculum. Applying a Rancierian lens to this policy area facilitates a reading of these developments and debates (including both the policies themselves and sociological critiques of them) as informed by an underlying Platonism, in which the role of education is seen as one of harmonising society, something which is quite at odds with the disruptive and divisive nature of democracy (Rancière, 2006).

Extending this discussion, I explore how a Rancierian lens might also shed light on the more recent imbrication of schools within the 'culture-wars' that characterise contemporary policy in the UK and elsewhere—as for example in recent debates about transgender rights in schools and the teaching of 'white privilege' and Critical Race Theory (CRT). In England, the latter recently resulted in the publication of revised guidelines on political impartiality in schools (Department for Education [DfE], 2022). Such insights also have implications for educational research beyond the analysis of policy; viewing both schools and public debates surrounding the curriculum as a key arena in the 'dramaturgy' of politics (Rancière, 2009) allows for the documentation, through educational research, of those moments in which democracy does occur in schools and other educational settings as well as in relation to them, thus amplifying its egalitarian potential. The paper begins with a rehearsal of Rancière's key contributions on both democracy and education before making an argument for revisiting the interpretive power of Rancière's writing for understanding current education policy debates and concludes by offering some reflections on the implications of this for educational research.

Revisiting Rancière's 'radical democracy'

While Rancière does not characterise his own work as 'radical democracy', it has been described by others as such and shares some importance features with the writing of key figures in this tradition, including Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau.¹ One key point of similarity with these authors is that Rancière (1995, 1999, 2006) also puts conflict at the centre of his interventions on democracy. However, Rancière does not write about this in terms of antagonism or 'agonism' (Mouffe, 2005) but 'dissensus'. Where Mouffe makes the case for an agonistic democratic public sphere involving contestation over the very principles of democracy, Rancière polemically claims the term 'democracy' for those radically disruptive acts that reconfigure the political community itself. For Rancière, democracy is not a set of institutions or principles (however contestable) but a *logic* of equality, which, when put into action, disrupts the very configuration of the political community. For example, Rancière locates the origins of Athenian democracy not in its institutions or political philosophy but in the seminal ruptures that initially destabilised the logic of rule by birth and wealth (such as the redistribution of Athens' tribes along non-familial lines). These disruptions are characterised by Rancière (1999, p. 9) as the appearance of 'the people' as a new political subject, when the 'part of those who have no part [in the government

of the community]’ makes itself visible by claiming equality with those who *do* have a governing part in the existing configuration and thus highlighting an original ‘miscount’ or fundamental ‘wrong’ at the heart of the community (Rancière, 1999, p. 21).

For Rancière, such democratic disruptions mark the beginning of *political* government, i.e. government without recourse to any ‘pure’ principle or foundation on which to base someone’s suitability for rule. From this point on, Rancière (1999) argues, a public sphere was opened up, characterised by disputes between, ‘the two opposed logics of police and politics, of the natural government of social competences and the government of anyone and everyone’ (2006, p. 55). Though acknowledging his debt to Foucault in his use of the term ‘police’, Rancière (1999, p. 29) does not identify ‘the police’ with the state or any ‘state apparatus’ but sees this in more diffuse terms. For Rancière (1999, p. 29), ‘[p]olicing is not so much the “disciplining” of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of *occupations* and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed’. In other words, it is the tendency to organise the community into a hierarchical set of places, spaces and roles. ‘Politics’ on the other hand, in Rancière’s terms, is the egalitarian logic that displaces such hierarchical configurations, or, as Rancière puts it, ‘whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination’ (1999, p. 30). Moving from ancient Athens to the modern revival of democracy in Europe and elsewhere, Rancière sees this opposition between police and politics played out in the expansion of the public sphere and the creation of new political subjects. For Rancière, politics generates supplementary, political subjects which resist classification to the public or private sphere. Examples of this include the struggles for women’s suffrage and the unionisation movement in Europe (1995) as well as for African American civil rights in the USA (2006). Of course, these gains are partial and contingent; on Rancière’s view, politics and its generation of new political spaces and subjects leave traces in a reconfigured distribution of roles and places, but this reconfiguration is always subject to further disputes and struggles (Rancière, 2006, p. 55).

It is important to note here that Rancière characterises the police and politics as two opposed *logics*, which can be embodied and made manifest in all sorts of ways—they are not institutions, organisations, or political movements in themselves but represent the kinds of logic that animate attempts to either harmonise and control the community on the one hand, or to disrupt and rearrange it along more egalitarian lines on the other. More recently, Rancière has written of the ‘politics-police relationship’ (2016, p. 150) as a kind of symbiotic entity and has characterised his own interventions on democracy as a ‘dramaturgy’ (2009, p. 119) rather than a theory. Such language is particularly helpful for understanding the *interpretive* power of Rancière’s writing. It is also worth briefly noting here the role of political philosophy in this dramaturgy, which Rancière sees as always coming ‘after-the-fact’ of politics and democracy, as an attempt to contain and subdue it. Rancière (1999, 2006) charts several versions of this attempt from Plato’s ‘archipolitics’ (in the return to a pre-democratic era of philosopher kings), through Aristotle’s ‘parapolitics’ (muting politics by mimicking its terms and procedures, later manifest in the parliamentary systems of representative democracies) through to Marx’s ‘metapolitics’ (side-stepping politics by effacing political equality under economic equality).

Revisiting Rancière’s interventions on education

The most well-known of Rancière’s texts within the philosophy of education remains, perhaps, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Based on his archival research into the lives of nineteenth century workers and emancipatory movements, in this book, Rancière (1991) narrates the story of Joseph Jacotot, a teacher exiled in the Netherlands following the French revolution. Rancière (1991) takes up Jacotot’s story as he finds himself teaching French to Flemish students despite each have no knowledge of the other’s language. To address this, Rancière tells us, Jacotot used a bilingual edition of *Télémaque* (with French and Flemish on opposing pages), which functioned

as a 'thing in common' (Rancière, 1991, p. 2) with his students. Jacotot tasked his students with reading the book, finding that they were able to write about it in French very well by the end of the process. Rancière (1991, p. 2) tells us that the results of this 'chance experiment' led to an important discovery for Jacotot about, 'the equality of intelligence' and, subsequently, working-class emancipation. This discovery (that people could become emancipated by using their own intelligence and verifying the equality of their intelligence with any other) earned Jacotot some fame for a time and various (failed) attempts were made to incorporate his approach into educational institutions.

Although *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* has most commonly been applied in educational philosophy and theory to the development of 'Rancierian' theories of (emancipatory and democratic) education, it does in fact address several educational themes. Significantly, for example, it offers a critical intervention on the origins of mass education in France. For Rancière (1991), Jacotot's story offers a glimpse into a time when the chaotic scientific experimentation of the Enlightenment, full of intellectual adventure and the promise of emancipation, morphed into a more orderly view of scientific and political 'progress', supported by the institutionalisation of education. Jacotot, Rancière (1991, p. 134) argues, 'was alone in recognizing the effacement of equality under progress, of emancipation under instruction' and 'the only egalitarian to perceive the representation and institutionalization of progress as a renouncing of the moral and intellectual adventure of equality'. While there were certainly detractors of mass schooling who opposed the education of the working classes as a threat to the hierarchical order of society, Jacotot, Rancière argues, opposed it on egalitarian grounds. By re-telling Jacotot's story, Rancière (1991) shines a light on this moment in the history of education, re-writing the inauguration of public schooling not as a gift bestowed on the people but a burden imposed on them. Viewed through Jacotot's eyes, the institutionalisation of mass education becomes, 'the grief-work of emancipation' (Rancière, 1991, p. 134).

This intervention on the beginnings of mass schooling in France also has ramifications for debates about education in Rancière's own day. Ross (1991), in her introduction to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, draws a parallel between Jacotot and Rancière, outlining Rancière's criticism of both the Bourdieuan-inspired 'progressive' reforms aimed at reducing inequality in the school system proposed at the time and those 'republican elitist' arguments, which favoured examination, selection, and a universal curriculum. In *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière (1995) takes up this theme explicitly, rehearsing his incisive critique of the Bourdieuan theory of education as social reproduction. Here, Rancière takes issue with Bourdieu's argument that the failure of the school to achieve equality is exemplary of *democracy's* failure. Rancière (1995, p. 52) argues that the 'democratic school' is unfairly used as an argument in Bourdieuan sociological arguments to make the case that, 'democracy is lying to itself, that it is ill-adapted to the equality which it proclaims', thus highlighting how arguments against democracy emerge not only from the political right, but also from within critical theory and left-leaning sociological discourse.

On this Bourdieuan interpretation, Rancière argues, public education is equated to the elitist Greek *scholē*. However, Rancière re-appropriates the terms of this debate to offer a more optimistic re-reading of public schooling. Rancière (1995, pp. 54–55) argues, contra Bourdieu, that, in one sense, 'democratic education is the paradoxical heir of the aristocratic *scholē*', acting as a site which, at least in principle, 'separates intellectual leisure from productive necessity' for all and is therefore open to different interpretations of equality. These interpretations include equal citizenship, social mobility, or education itself as a fundamental right. Rancière (1995, p. 55) argues that '[m]ost of the time, these meanings mingle, making education *neither* the mask of inequality *nor* the instrument of inequality's reduction, but *the site of a permanent negotiation of equality between the democratic state and the democratic individual*' [my italics]. For Rancière, the public school still has a significant role to play in democracy—but not in the sense that it is most often imagined, either by its champions or its detractors. This view of the relationship between education and democracy—the school as a site in which egalitarian eruptions *may*

take place and in which competing claims for equality are *negotiated*, is quite different from those commonly found in both education policy and critical research *on* education policy. On this view, public education remains an important site for democratic disruption, which therefore allow us to see education policy as a key arena for the dramaturgy of politics and democracy (Rancière, 2009).

In *Disagreement* and *Hatred of Democracy*, Rancière (1999) extends his discussion of contemporary debates over educational reforms in France, drawing out connections between these and developments within political philosophy. Rancière (1999) traces a broken line from Plato's 'archipolitical' project of a republican education through to Jules Ferry's modern republican project and on to more recent arguments for a universal curriculum, *as well as* sociological critiques of the latter. For Rancière, the various twists and turns in discussions about the public role of education and its relationship to democracy are really a re-arrangement of terms. Rancière (1999, p. 70) argues that both perspectives, 'overlook the initial nexus established by archipolitics between a community based on the proportions of the cosmos and the work of the sciences of the individual and collective soul'. In other words, for Rancière (1999), education policies, the psychological research that often informs them, and critical sociological analyses of these, all reflect a similar concern with harmonising a hierarchical society, *contra* the disruption of democracy and politics. While this might be more obvious in the case of 'republican elitist' arguments for a universal curriculum, Rancière argues that the result of sociological critiques inspired by Bourdieu ultimately rely on the same Platonic logic of order and stability, keeping working class and migrant children in their 'right' place by attributing an essential nature to them.

While the Platonism of elitist republican arguments once manifested in the idea of a universal curriculum, Rancière (2006) notes a shift away from the secular principles of reason towards something more archaic in more recent educational debates. As Rancière (2006, p. 29) puts it 'the issue yesterday concerned transmitting the universality of knowledge and its egalitarian power. What it comes down to transmitting today...is simply the principle of birth, the principle of sexual division and of kinship'. Here Rancière is describing what he sees as a shift in right-of-centre education policy, around the turn of the twenty first century, from a classically conservative emphasis on a universal curriculum to a neo-conservative preoccupation with imparting moral values that find their basis in traditional notions of ethnicity, community and family. This kind of ultra-Platonic attempt to revert to the pre-democratic authority of monarchy and patriarchy arguably informs current neo-conservative education policies concerned with instilling good behaviour, reinforcing strict divisions of gender and sexuality, and promoting shared national or cultural values. Importantly, however, from a Rancièrian perspective, sociological critiques of these policies and the attempts to instil other, alternative values, norms and behaviour can be seen as equally platonic and 'un-democratic', since they also involve the cultivation of unity and harmony rather than division, disunity and 'disidentification', which, for Rancière, are inherent to democracy. I return to these questions later in this paper, in an analysis of recent education policy in England. First, however, I offer a discussion of how Rancière's writing has been taken up in educational philosophy and theory, arguing that now could be an important moment to revisit the implications of Rancière's writing for broader questions about education policy, the role of schools in democratic societies and public debate over curriculum reforms.

Beyond pedagogy

Rancière's writing on democracy and education has perhaps most commonly been taken up by educational philosophers to re-theorise (emancipatory and democratic) education. Biesta's (e.g. 2007, 2010, 2011) work has been particularly influential in this regard, applying Rancière's writing, as well as others' on 'radical democracy', to offer an argument for a more disruptive view of democratic education than deliberative conceptions of democracy allow. Biesta (2011)

argues for an approach to democratic education that would take account of those moments in which democratic society is itself disrupted and reconfigured through a process of political subjectification that is central to Rancière's account of democracy. Rancière's writing is one of several resources that contributes to Biesta's (2007, 2010) revision of democratic education here as a process of learning *from* rather than *for* or *through* democracy. Adjacent to this work, Biesta has also developed a re-theorisation of emancipatory education, based on a 'new logic of emancipation' (Bingham & Biesta, 2010) re-constructed from Rancière's writing, particularly *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. This in turn has been popular with other writers on emancipatory education (see, e.g. Galloway, 2012; Vlieghe, 2018), who offer Rancière's writing as an alternative foundation for emancipatory education to that of Freire.

Rancière's writing on both democracy and education has clearly been helpful to educational philosophers in challenging some of the assumptions inherent in deliberative approaches to democratic education, as well as offering an alternative theoretical foundation for projects of emancipatory education. Such work tends to be based on pedagogic readings of Rancière's writing, particularly of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, in which a model or theory of teaching is imputed to the figure of Jacotot (and by implication, Rancière). This is evident, for example, in Biesta's work (2017, 2010; Bingham & Biesta, 2010), where the relation of 'will to will' rather than 'intelligence to intelligence' in Jacotot's practice is taken up in an argument for the continued role and authority of the teacher. It is also evident in Vlieghe's (2018) plea for a pedagogy of the 'thing-in-common' based on the lessons learned from Jacotot's use of *Telemaque* in his teaching. However, this is only one way of reading *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and, in turn, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is only one of the texts in which Rancière explicitly addresses education—as outlined above. The development of 'Rancierian' pedagogies and educational theories therefore represent only one way of applying Rancière's writing to scholarship in education.

This approach of developing theories of (democratic) education based on pedagogic readings of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is also not without its problems. The prominence of such readings within educational philosophy and theory has arguably obscured the radically egalitarian nature of Rancière's writing. This is evident in recent critiques of educational theory that makes use of Rancière's writing, such as Leiviskä's (2020, p. 503) defence of deliberative democratic education against what she views as Biesta's (2010) promotion of a 'Rancierian education'. The risk that Rancière's radical insistence on equality becomes obscured in such pedagogic readings of his work becomes even more evident in Bojessen's (2018, p. 929) assertion that, 'the ignorant schoolmaster might in fact be the ultimate neoliberal 'educator' or instructor: an accountant of attentiveness and effort, as well as facilitator and attributor of value'. Biesta (2017) has recently cautioned against general applications of Rancière's writing to educational theory, arguing that Rancière's writing applies only to emancipatory education. Extending this point, I would argue that in our current political moment, there is a warrant and indeed important opportunity to revisit other ways of applying Rancière's writing to educational philosophy and theory that not only reclaim the radically egalitarian nature of his writing but also offer fresh insights into contemporary education policy and debate.

Beyond neoliberalism: A Rancierian analysis of neo-conservative education policy

Another important strand in the application of Rancière's writing to educational philosophy and theory has involved the critical analysis of neoliberal education policy (see, e.g. Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Säfström, 2010). Säfström (2010), for example, has taken up Rancière's critique of the social sciences to address the prominence of psychological theory informing education policy, particularly in neo-liberal education reforms. Latterly, Säfström (2023) has combined other critiques of Platonic thought in education with Rancière's writing to argue for a new, more egalitarian educational approach. This is proposed as part of a broader project aimed at

reclaiming the ‘publicness’ of education following decades of neoliberal reform (Säfström & Biesta, 2023). Such work offers fresh insights into the dynamics of education policy reforms. However, this body of work has focused so far on the deleterious effects of *neoliberal* educational reform. There is an important gap here, since Rancière’s writing offers a very strident critique of the kind of Platonic thinking that arguably underpins current *neo-conservative* education policy.

Such a critique could be particularly helpful in our current political moment given the recent trend toward neo-conservative education policymaking in several national contexts. If we take education policy in England as an example, it is possible to trace a neo-conservative turn in education policy since the tenure of a right-of-centre Coalition government from 2010 to 2015, consolidated by the election of a Conservative government in 2015. Examples of the resurgence of neo-conservative education policy in this context include a curriculum review in 2013, resulting in a renewed emphasis on traditional academic subjects (and the axing of several vocational qualifications), as well as the prioritisation of ‘rigorous’ examinations over continuous assessment. The most obvious way in which we might read this shift through a Rancièrian lens is to seek parallels between these developments and those addressed by Rancière in France in the 1980s. On this reading, the emphasis on traditional subjects and examinations might be seen as an elitist backlash against the progressive reforms put in place by the previous, left-of-centre Labour government of 1997–2010. Applying a Rancièrian lens to this situation, we might argue that while they differ in their orientation, both the traditionalist and progressive approaches are informed by an underlying Platonism, in which education is seen as the extension of the state in the creation and maintenance of an ideal, hierarchical society. While this may be more obviously so in the case of arguments about ‘tradition’ and ‘rigour’, Rancière’s unique contributions allow us to see those sociological arguments that underpin the adaptation of the curriculum to supposedly more practical-minded working-class students as equally Platonic and hierarchical, thus offering a fresh perspective on recent educational policy.

When applied to the introduction of new values education policies in particular, this line of analysis brings to the fore the later, ultra-Platonic ‘twist’ in elitist arguments focused on, ‘birth, the principle of sexual division and kinship’ identified by Rancière (2006, p. 26). Taken together, the requirement for all schools in England to, ‘actively promote fundamental British values [FBV]’ (DfE, 2014) and the renewed emphasis on ‘character education’ in England (see, e.g. DfE, 2019), have been described by Vincent (2018, p. 2) as ‘two forms’ of the ‘current wave’ of values education taking hold in schools. Though different in nature, the motivations behind each of these policies can be seen as part of a broader, neo-conservative agenda: FBV policy originated in the government’s counter-terrorism agenda, while the re-emergence of character education has been supported in part by funding from conservative Christian organisations such as the Templeton Foundation (Bull & Allen, 2018). While the former emphasises civic and political values (democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual tolerance and respect for those of different faiths), and the latter emphasises personal virtues and traits (resilience, grit, neighbourliness), both involve the transmission of a supposedly agreed set of shared national and/or societal values. Read through a Rancièrian lens, we might argue that both FBV and character education are characterised by an attempt to cultivate those values that are seen as vital to the maintenance of a harmonious society. Not only this, but they are based on ideas of the community that prioritise ‘birth’ and ‘kinship’ in Rancière’s terms—as seen in the arguably narrow and racially exclusive demarcation of ‘Britishness’ in FBV (Lander, 2016).

Equally, however, critical responses to these policies in educational research have tended to adopt sociological perspectives that emphasise their role in contributing to the racialised securitisation of pupils and teachers (e.g. Lander, 2016) and the biopolitical governance of society along class-divided lines (e.g. Spohrer & Bailey, 2020). Solutions offered within these sociological critiques include the provision of more anti-racism education in initial teacher education (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2017) and a greater emphasis on civic conceptions of community within

education policy (Vincent, 2018). On a Rancièrian view, both these narratives could be seen as being informed by an underlying Platonism, in which public education is seen as a way of harmonising society through the promotion of shared values—whether conservative or progressive—which has nothing to do with the inherently *divisive* nature of democracy. We might also apply such a Rancièrian lens to the general atmosphere surrounding public discourse on education and the way in which schools have become caught up in ‘culture-wars’ over transgender rights and the teaching of ‘white privilege’ and CRT in schools. Again, Rancièr’s insights on the ‘ultra-Platonic twist’ in educational arguments about the curriculum that emphasise ‘birth, sexual division and kinship’ (Rancièr, 2006, p. 26) offer an important tool for making sense of some arguments and positions within these ‘culture-wars’.

However, the interpretative power of Rancièr’s writing goes beyond identifying the motivations behind specific policies and arguments. Applying a Rancièrian lens allows us to see these issues as arguably what they are—examples of schools as a key site for an ongoing negotiation over different interpretations of equality in societies that maintain some claim to democracy. This negotiation takes place within public education, and within public debates about education policy and national curricula, as a key stage in the dramaturgy of politics in these societies. This is not to suggest that a Rancièrian view of education is politically neutral, nor that it amounts to advocating an ‘anything goes’ approach to education policy and curriculum reform. Rather, it is to say that deciding the ‘best’ values to promote in schools is a distraction from the radically egalitarian and democratic potential of public education, which lies in its nature as a key site for the confrontation of different visions of equality and shared values. In other words, Rancièr’s writing leads us to ask important, broader questions about the role of public schools within ‘democratic societies’ and offers a more optimistic perspective than might be familiar in educational research and scholarship—one in which schools and curriculum debates act as a space in which new, unforeseen, democratic claims to equality might emerge.

Beyond policy

Such a (re)consideration of the public role of schools in democratic societies, following Rancièr’s interventions, forms another key strand in the uptake of Rancièr’s writing within educational philosophy and theory. The work of Masschelein and Simons (2010) has been particularly influential here, taking up Rancièr’s (1995) argument about the school as a site of negotiation of equality between state and individual to offer an innovative reading of public education in democratic societies. Masschelein and Simons (2010) adopt Rancièr’s observation about democratic schooling as the ‘paradoxical heir to the Greek *scholè*’ (1995, p. 54) to argue that the public school can be seen as the ‘mark of democracy’ (Masschelein & Simons, 2010) since it can act as a suspension of the police and therefore of the socio-political order. They argue for the school as a place of space-time suspension, in which, [e]conomic, social, cultural, political, or private time is suspended, as are the tasks and roles connected to specific places’ (2010, p. 675).

This line of thought is also evident in work that has focused on those moments in which democracy does happen to occur in schools and other educational settings, as for example, in Ruitenberg’s (2008) question about whether the concept of ‘democratic education’ in schools is even possible when we understand democracy in Rancièr’s radical terms. Adopting a strongly anti-institutional reading of Rancièr’s writing and equating the school with the ‘the police’ or ‘police order’, Ruitenberg argues, ‘perhaps the best that can be done at the institutional level of schools and school systems is not to seek to offer democratic education, but rather to leave space for democracy to enter’ (2008, p. 5). Empirically, Ruitenberg (2010) has analysed those moments in which democracy has indeed ‘entered’ into educational spaces, reporting expressions of queerness in school that disrupt existing configurations of visibility for LGBTQ+ students. Similarly, McDonnell (2014) has reported on an instance of genuine political action amongst

young people, in the form of a dispute over price rises in a school canteen, which, though it might seem like a trivial issue, brought conflict over the nature of school as a public/private space into play. Beyond the analysis of policy then, a Rancièrian lens might be applied to understanding those moments of democratic disruption that do take place in schools and other educational settings.

There is an important opportunity then to re-visit Rancière's writing on democracy and education to address broader questions about the role of public schools in democratic societies today. Particularly helpful here is Rancière's insistence that the public school still does have a role to play in democracy—though perhaps not in the way that this has most commonly been conceived. Contra conservative and progressive arguments about schools as, respectively, a place for *achieving* the perfectly balanced society or redressing its wrongs, Rancière encourages us to see schools as an important site in which competing visions of equality and of the community co-exist and come into contestation with each other and are therefore where democracy might take place. This emphasis on broader questions about education and society makes Rancière's writing particularly helpful as a theoretical tool for interpreting debates about public schooling and the curriculum in the febrile political atmosphere of today.

Implications for educational research and scholarship

The above discussion raises several implications for educational research and scholarship, suggesting new ways in which Rancière's writing might be applied to the study of education, as well as building on existing (though perhaps less well-known) insights that relate to education policy and broader questions about the role of education in democratic states. These are complementary to, but distinct from, those applications of Rancière's writing to the development of new pedagogical theories—of democratic and emancipatory education or of education more generally.

The first important implication is that Rancière's writing might prove particularly helpful for making sense of the current trend towards neo-conservative education policies in several national contexts. The examples provided in this paper relate to the UK (and England specifically), but this line of analysis could also be fruitful in other national contexts. Specifically, Rancière's writing allows us to read these policies as part of an underlying Platonism in education policymaking and curriculum design, in which the aim of public schooling is framed as the harmonisation of society and thus is quite antithetical to democracy. Equally however, a Rancièrian interpretation would illuminate how the sociological critique of these neo-conservative policies and the proposed alternatives are also informed by this same underlying Platonism, since they also seek to harmonise society, though in different ways.

Extending beyond specific education policies and their critique in the academic literature, such a Rancièrian reading might help to shed fresh light on the ways in which schools are becoming caught up in the current 'culture-wars' of our polarised political moment. Applying a Rancièrian lens to this situation might help to read the polarised debates around issues such as trans rights and attempts to prohibit the teaching of CRT in schools as characterised by an underlying Platonism in public debate around the curriculum and the role of schools in society. On both sides of these debates, arguments are made about what shared values schools ought to impart in their role as a harmonising force in society, neither of which have much to do with democracy, when radically understood as a divisive and disruptive egalitarian force, as in Rancière's terms.

The value of applying a Rancièrian lens to education is not limited to interpreting and analysing policies and debates, however. It can also be a valuable resource for highlighting those moments in which democracy does in fact happen in schools: while Platonic tendencies to harmonise society through education may be more common, there may equally be moments in which the divisive and disruptive logic of democracy genuinely emerges in educational

contexts. That is to say that we might view schools as an important site in the dramaturgy of politics that Rancière outlines in his work. It is important to note that this suggestion is not new; it is akin to Pelletier's (2009) proposed project of educational research in a Rancièrian mode, which, contra the dominant tendency to detail inequality in education instead illuminates, 'the other of domination'. It is also evident in empirical work that has documented the eruption of democracy in educational spaces (McDonnell, 2014; Ruitenberg, 2010).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have rehearsed some of the most important aspects of Rancière's writing on 'radical democracy' and on education, as well as some important ways in which Rancière's writing has been taken up in educational philosophy and theory. I have argued that while pedagogic readings of Rancière's writing (particularly *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*) have been important in developing new and exciting re-theorisations of democratic and emancipatory education, this is not the only way to read Rancière's writing and its import for education. Indeed, Rancière's writing also has much to offer to broader debates about education policy, the curriculum, and the role of schools in societies that wish to maintain some claim to democracy. This is particularly relevant to our current, polarised political moment. As well as developing visions of a 'Rancièrian education', educational philosophers and theorists might make meaningful contributions by applying a 'Rancièrian lens' to this moment. This in turn may inform an alternative approach to educational research that centres on moments of democratic disruption and claims for equality.

Note

1. See Lloyd and Little (2009) for a thorough discussion of the different stands of thought within 'radical democracy' and their philosophical underpinnings.

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