Restaging Rancière: New Scenes of Equality and Democracy in Education

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2011

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Abstract

This conceptual study focuses on questions of how educators might work to interrupt existing orders of schooling that have made it increasingly and problematically normative to see so many of our students as incompetent and perhaps even “impossible” (Youdell, 2006). Drawing upon the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière, I set myself up in the field to explore philosophical issues of equality and democracy in the classroom with the goal of declassification – that is, to trouble our definitions of “teaching-as-usual” (Davies, 2000) and open up questions of what it might look like for educators to practice equality and democracy in our classrooms. Following Rancière, I frame this exploration not in terms of policy or school reform but with what happens “between master and pupils” (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p.515).

The key question for progressive educators raised by Rancière is whether or not we will make inequality or equality the “opinion” whose verification we pursue in our work to disrupt and enlarge the limited interpretive universe of schooling that has given us the tools to see so many children as incompetent. Certainly, Rancière’s account of politics is not the first to emphasize the need to disrupt what he calls the “distribution of the sensible.” However, what makes his account of politics unique is his position that politics occurs only when the logic of the police (or given social order) is confronted by the logic of equality. In response to his challenge to make equality our “opinion,” I track through his wide range of works on politics to generate the following framework I will use throughout this dissertation to rethink democracy as the “practice” of equality: (1)
equality as presupposition, (2) equality as staged, and (3) equality as constructing a scene of dissensus.

In making equality our given and starting point (rather than our goal), Rancière offers perhaps the “only optimistic perspective about politics.” Rather than reaching toward a distant future in which “social equality” supposedly comes about through the gradual reduction of inequality (yet never does), Rancière asks us to make “intellectual equality” our beginning point. That is, he challenges us to find those moments when the equal “capacity of anybody” to think and speak emerges most powerfully to disrupt a given hierarchical order that has made sensible who is qualified for thinking and speaking (Rancière, 2006b; Rancière, 2009a). Rancière’s lesson for us, in part, is that pedagogical encounters can always be a site for such moments – that is, they can always be sites for the practical verification of equality, for the disruption of intellectual hierarchies. This is a hopeful lesson, not in the sense of anticipating a better future but in terms of our capacity to cultivate possibility in the present (Ryther, 2009). By shifting our orientation to the here and now of pedagogical relations, Rancière shows us that it is always possible to create new demonstrations – and perhaps inscriptions – of equality in an unequal society, and even in an unequal place like school.

Building on this insight, in the second half of the dissertation, I begin to use equality as a conceptual tool – albeit a tool that resists conceptualization – to tell different stories about equality and democracy in education. I call these lost stories (St. Pierre, 1997), or stories that bring discontinuity into the coherent scenes of “good teaching” (including “emancipatory” teaching) that are normally sought (Ellsworth, 1997). In this sense, my framework for understanding equality that I have generated in Chapter 2 is
meant to be one of uncertainty, one that is self-subversive and troubling, as these stories will challenge me to see if I can change my own reading routes and become a different kind of observer of classroom texts and events.

To explore these issues of equality and democracy in the classroom, I utilize Rancière’s method of storytelling, which begins with the assumption of equality – i.e., that everyone has equal intelligence, or the capacity to think and speak. By telling “equality and dissensus stories,” I attempt to bring Rancière’s radical ideas to the classroom through three examples of pedagogical encounters based on selected (re)readings and restagings of published stories of teaching and learning from Vivian Paley, Anne Haas Dyson, and Dorothy Heathcote where the hierarchy of capacities enforced by the school order was disrupted and students who might otherwise have been classified as incompetent were able to verify their own equality.

Expanding on Rancière’s theories, I will share several of my own stories from my time as a research apprentice during the years of 2007 – 2009 at a suburban elementary school piloting a new arts integration program. Although such a school – with little diversity and teachers and curriculum without explicit critical or emancipatory agendas – should offer few lessons in politics, I use this site to stage a disagreement over what politics means in progressive education today. With these stories, I try to make visible my witnessing of the invention of politics – or how politics happened concretely (which Rancière admittedly does not do) – through tales of an imagined counterworld that, for one particular group of teachers and students, made available a richer tapestry of resources from which to create dissensus (Tanke, 2011) and ultimately made it possible for equality to “gain momentum”.

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Dedication

Dedicated to my former students,
especially Denis and Joselyn,
who started me off on this intellectual adventure many years ago.

And to the travel agents and their teachers
who took me on an “extreme adventure” I will never forget.
Acknowledgments

I must confess that throughout the many challenging moments that have faced me throughout the writing of this dissertation, I have resorted at times to consulting motivational guides and how-to-finish-your-dissertation advice books and online articles for nuggets of insight and inspiration. Of all the advice that I have read, one particular nugget stood out. It came from a professor (whose name eludes me now) who wrote that, in his many years of experience working with doctoral students, the ones who ultimately triumphed and proceeded down graduation lane had one thing in common: the power to persevere. After nearly two years of struggling to write this dissertation, I have come to think that he’s right, and so I want to thank all the folks who have helped me to persist.

First off, I’d like to thank all those scholars whose names appear in the References section of this dissertation for keeping me company throughout this often lonely process. I quickly realized that it is impossible for me to write without reading, and I could not have written this dissertation without the benefit of your insights.

I’d also like to extend my deepest thanks to all the members of my committee who have allowed me to work at a sloth-like pace, trusting that I would eventually land right-side up. Thanks especially to my advisor, Dr. Pat Enciso, for embracing my tennis ball metaphor – and, most especially, for pushing me to keep getting it over the net. Hopefully, I’ve made it over! Ten years ago, when I was an M.Ed. student, you pushed our entire cohort to think (and think and think…). I returned to graduate school, in
large part, because I knew I wanted to think more with you and also to try to live up to the high expectations you set for all educators. (A rare thing, I think). Thanks for always seeing more in my work than I could. To Dr. Mollie Blackburn, thanks (I think?!) for suggesting this project and for believing that I was up to such a task. Your feedback at critical points of this process, beginning with the outline for question two of my general exams and all the way through the final drafts of the dissertation, has helped me more than you may realize. And there will never be thanks good enough for Dr. Brian Edmiston, whose teaching has been the inspiration for this dissertation and so much more. Your unfailing generosity – your willingness to meet, email, discuss and discuss some more, and, most importantly, to see something in all of my many xxxxxxxxxxxxx – has profoundly changed the way I see the world and also the way I see myself.

I’d also like to thank a number of other educators who have made a difference in my journey. Thanks to Jody Wallace, Program Manager extraordinaire for always looking for the best in people and for showing me the kind of teacher educator I would like to be. Thanks for always listening and taking the time for my novella-emails!

Thanks to my writing group: Camille Cushman, Denise Davila, and Allison Volz. Your passion for – and commitment to – doing work that genuinely makes an impact for the folks with whom you work are a true inspiration. Thanks to Dr. Cynthia Selfe for listening to my stories and encouraging me to find new ways of telling them. I have been blessed to have your support, insights, and many kindnesses throughout this process. And a special thanks to Dr. Patti Lather for introducing me to Jacques Rancière and for the manila envelope of articles that sent me on my way.
Finally, I would like to thank my family. Thanks to Grandpa, who I’m sure is eagerly awaiting his copy of this dissertation and who has never failed to offer a positive word of support throughout this long process. Thanks to my mother for all the ways you make my life easier and for all the sacrifices you have made over the years so that Brooke and I could pursue the things we wanted to pursue. Thanks to my uncle Don – your threats to lock me in the basement forever until I finished this thing were oh-so helpful <cue sarcasm>. Thanks to my Great Uncle Ron, for showing me the true meaning of perseverance. You are my hero. Last but not least, thanks to Brooke. There is no way in hell I ever could have dreamed of pulling this off without you. You must know that no mere “acknowledgement” could ever suffice in expressing my gratitude.
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Publication


Fields of Study

Major Field: Education: Teaching and Learning
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Chapter 1: On the Possibility of Impossible Students

Introduction to Study

"We might just be coming upon one of those times in a field of study when the question of knowing if we, as educators, can think differently from how we’ve been thinking and perceive differently from how we’ve been seeing is absolutely necessary if we are to go on looking and thinking at all."

- Elizabeth Ellsworth, 1997, p.195

It is the last day of class and, as usual, there is a bustle of activity in the basement computer lab where I have been working with K-12 educators over the course of eight weeks to compose their own digital story projects. With just a few minutes left until the final viewing, a small group of teachers has been scrambling to put the finishing touches on their work during an optional lab time. I eventually make my way over to Sonjia, who has run into an apparent glitch with some of her video files. I quickly fix this problem only to become alerted to a much more serious one. It appears that Sonjia has only just begun the rather lengthy process of finalizing her project, and, despite weeks of lab time, she struggles just to complete the basic first step of importing files into her movie. I learn later that, while most of her classmates are lining up nearby to download their completed projects, Sonjia is making a surprising admission to the course assistant, Amy. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” she says flatly.

My surprise later deepens into something like despair during the final screening of the teachers’ projects. Inexplicably, the short piece Sonjia has managed to cobble
together makes no mention of what we had decided over the course of two class periods would be its central narrative. There is no semblance of the “meaningful” story Sonjia has promised, the one she wants to tell her children about their great-grandmother’s historic role as the first African American to work in the governor’s office. Instead what plays on the screen is mostly unintelligible to her peers who kindly ask her to explain the meaning of the photos and interview segments that flash quickly onto the screen, providing only a brief glimpse of a remarkable woman and the painstaking work Sonjia has done to document her life. I feel compelled to explain that Sonjia is still in the process of completing her story, but I am wrong. Even with an extension and an offer of help from a classmate, Sonjia never does tell her story, never even writes a script. Days after the screening, when we receive her resubmission, Amy and I can only let out a collective groan as we watch the movie again sputter to an abrupt end with no apparent revisions.

When Amy posts Sonjia’s final grade, along with instructions on how to improve it, she suggests that we leave it up to Sonjia to make the necessary changes on her own. No more handholding. I sigh uneasily, a mental draft of an email offering help to Sonjia already forming in my mind. I don’t say it out loud but there is a discomforting thought I can’t quite shake, one that has haunted my work with so many other “failing” students over the years: If Sonjia is not the student I thought she was, then who does that make me as her teacher?

A Lost Story

The opening scene described above is one that plays out in similar ways across scores of classrooms every day, that is, one in which a “struggling” student threatens to
interrupt what otherwise might have been the achievement of a scene of “good teaching” (Davies, 2000). Because it is so commonplace, so unremarkable, perhaps it does not merit such a prominent spot at the beginning of this dissertation where surely I should have begun with something more “significant.” So I place it here as a gesture toward the “significant insignificant” – in other words, as a signal of my intent in this study to “subvert the established way of looking at the world” (Kostkowska, 2004, p.200), or to look where I ought not.

For me, this means paying attention to what St. Pierre (1997) has called “lost stories” – stories that “crop up where they shouldn’t” (p.413). Sonjia’s story, like most of the “lost stories” that have tended to find me over the years, is one in which a “failing” or “incompetent” student puts at risk who I think I am as a teacher. Although these stories are, in large part, what drove me away from the classroom five years ago, this dissertation has, as I will try to explain, become a pursuit of such stories. What interests me most about lost stories is their potential, in the words of Foucault (1981/1991), to “tear me from myself” – to “prevent me from always being the same” (p.32). From this perspective, “getting lost” is not a lack; rather, it is a “philosophical and a political stance” in which we choose to rub up against that which puzzles us – not so much for the purpose of “understanding” it, but, rather, to take up a position in which we “are not so sure of ourselves and where we see this not knowing as our best chance for a different sort of doing” (Lather, 2009b, p.346).

Broadly speaking, I am interested in how lost stories – those stories that continually disrupt our field of vision by inserting discontinuity into what would otherwise be coherent scenes of schooling (Ellsworth, 1997) – might represent our best
chance to transform our ways of knowing and doing with students who have been increasingly and problematically categorized into various categories of deficit or failure. As a University Supervisor over the past five years, I have been well-schooled in the coherent scenes of “good teaching” that I must be vigilant about documenting and helping to produce. I know how to spot engaged children, constructivist activities, and open-ended questions. I know how to spot ongoing assessment, critical thinking, and the “teacher voice” that denotes a certain sense of authority over the classroom. And, because I am so well-schooled in detecting these coherent scenes of schooling – scenes that assure me that teachers have taught it and students have learned it – I also know how to spot and, more importantly, work to “edit” the moments of discontinuity: moments when control of the classroom has been lost, when children don’t seem to be “getting” it, when the resources children bring to each lesson have been discounted.

Still, supervising has never come easily to me. I vividly remember walking into a pre-kindergarten classroom to do my first observation. I pulled out my official observation form, looked around the room, and wondered what I ought to write about. As the years have gone on and I have learned to read the classroom differently, the job has, if anything, become more difficult. I seem to always be looking in the wrong places, away from the activities and questions and critical thinking and constructivist learning where I am likely to find “good teaching,” and toward the edges of classrooms where scenes of discontinuity can always be found. At any one time, it seems, I must choose amongst an infinite number of scenes – between those that bring continuity and those that threaten discontinuity – to make visible on my official observation forms. Do I focus on Bridget’s excellent use of prompting during her guided reading group? Do I focus on the
struggling reader who begged out earlier and has had the bathroom pass for over ten minutes now? What about Dontae who has just stormed into the room following his daily visit to the in-school suspension room? Certainly, I should mention the flying books in the back corner where “independent reading” is supposed to be happening. And on and on.

As I struggle over how to read the classroom and what to attempt to make visible and sayable in my role as eternal observer and stranger, it has actually become routine, I have noticed, for teachers to ask me to not look at certain things. Before I can introduce myself or find a place to set down my belongings, I am often warned about the most problematic children who might soon intrude upon the pages of my official observation forms. I am quickly assured that so-and-so will soon be tested, that what’s-his-name-who-sits-in-the-corner will soon be serving his suspension, that the one-who-never-gets-it “is resource room”. These preemptive moves – regularly accompanied by the censure or actual ejection of “bad students” from the classroom – send a clear message that certain students are not to be “counted” in my evaluation of whether or not the intern has been able to manage to produce a scene of “good teaching”.

Thus, by introducing the threat of discontinuity – the threat of loss of coherence and control (Ellsworth, 1997) – into various scenes of schooling, these problematic students, at least potentially, shift the somewhat comfortable, seemingly eternal, question of how to achieve “good teaching” into a very different question – a question of what can be seen, heard, and said – and what (and who) must become invisible, inaudible, uncounted – in the classroom. Ultimately, this is the question, I will argue, that is at the heart of rethinking and re-practicing democracy in education.
Impossible Students and the Question of Equality

The battle over what can be seen, heard, and “counted” in classrooms, as has been well-documented, is one that tends to be continually lost by students whose ways of acting and speaking come to narrowly “count as” failure (cf. Campano, 2007; Davies, 2000; Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Youdell, 2006). Losing students in these counts of failure constitutes the most pressing issue confronting democracy in education today. As Varenne and McDermott (1998) tell us, schooling has given us all of the tools – most notably, the proliferating categories of deficit that are waiting to acquire children (McDermott, 1993) and the enduring school “storylines” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) surrounding ability and conduct – to see children narrowly in terms of whether or not they are able to constitute themselves as “good students”¹. For effect, Youdell (2006) has compiled a current list of these ever-expanding classifications:

- high ability, average ability, low ability, gifted, talented, special needs, learning difficulty – mild, moderate, severe; emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBD), Emotional Difficulties/Behavioral Disorder (EBDB), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); autistic, autistic spectrum, Asbergers Syndrome; disabled, impaired – sensory, physical, intellectual. Special. And so on. (p.8).

As many scholars have shown, these categories have narrowed the interpretive universe of schooling and created a norm around the “good student” within which an increasing number of students, in particular, those who encounter not just intellectual but also race, gender, and class hierarchies, find it difficult to position themselves as “competent” (cf. Ballenger, 1999; Delpit, 1995; Jones, 2006; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986). Certainly, there are children who have real struggles; however, the point is that the
interpretive universe of schooling is an extremely well-equipped site of ordering and classification that has made it normative to interpret students as incompetent.

In this way, the ordering and classificatory system of schooling works as what French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991) has called a hierarchy of intelligences, or a hierarchy of capacities. This hierarchy divides the world into “knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable (ibid., p.6). Moreover, it sets up a regime of the visible to find out who understands and who does not. In everyday life, if we get things wrong – for example, if we are not the best cook, if we make a miscalculation, if we miss a word in the church hymnal, there is rarely a price to pay for our slip ups. Perhaps someone might laugh at us or we might be embarrassed for a moment, but we simply move onto the next task. But in school, unlike everyday life, tasks are organized – and often have special constraints around them (e.g., no collaboration, no consultation of notes or memory aids) – for the sole purpose of documenting who is doing better than whom (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). There is, in other words, a sort of “institutional visibility” in schools that means that slip-ups will most often get noticed and named – with potentially significant consequences.

Consider, for example, Varenne and McDermott’s (1998) compelling story of “Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam.” The Adam they know is a 9-year old boy who enjoys singing, playing basketball, and taking part in a successful partnership in his after-school cooking club – who also happens to struggle mightily to decode text. Generally speaking, despite Adam’s struggles, he is able to use the resources around him to get things done and to participate in activities in ways that are recognized as competent across a variety of contexts. It is only in school, Varenne and McDermott stress, that
Adam is seen as having a “problem.” In school, the “four Adams” who sing and play basketball and cook and find ways to accomplish difficult tasks are rendered invisible; it is almost exclusively Adam, the struggling student, who is seen in school. The key point, then, is that school is not a neutral site that simply reveals what Adam cannot do; rather, it is “precisely organized for making his disability apparent” (McDermott, 1993, p.273). Thus, Adam’s “problem” is really not his at all; it is the problem of a social order, a hierarchy of intelligences and capabilities, which is “so well-organized to find him not knowing something” (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p.41). Ultimately, then, it is the social organization that systematically makes students’ voices and achievements invisible and inaudible and serves to “arrange trouble” for far too many of our students – and not the children themselves who are at risk of any labeled failure – that must be our “unit of concern” (Deranty, 2010, p.6; Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

Significantly, as Youdell (2006) has written, the hierarchy of intelligences and capabilities does not just give us the categories to make students visible as “bad students” or “undesirable learners,” but it actually renders some, like Sonjia (and potentially Adam) unintelligible. In certain scenes of schooling, these are the students, Youdell writes, who actually exceed the category of bad learner or bad student; they are “so far outside the bounds of acceptability” that the good/bad student binary cannot account for them at all. They are no longer learners or students at all; instead, they are impossible. The rendering of students as unintelligible is not a particularly exceptional occurrence; in fact, it often appears to be quite routine. For example, consider the following scenes:
Impossible Student #1

“Don’t talk to him,” a teacher tells a student who is about to chat with a boy who has presumably broken the rules and has been asked to sit out in the hallway. Some time later, following a staff meeting, when teacher educator Davies (2000) leaves a meeting with several teachers, the boy is still sitting in the hallway sobbing. Although it makes Davies uncomfortable, she follows the lead of the teachers who have grown accustomed to seeing him out in the hallway and walks right by him, his cries becoming inaudible.

Impossible Student #2

Tevon’s desk has been pushed all the way into the far back corner of his classroom, away from all the other children’s seats and right by the coat closet where I am headed. From what I have heard, Tevon is always in trouble, but he seems polite enough to me when I ask him if there's a good place where I might store my coat and bookbag for the next hour or so. I can’t help but notice that when he later asks if he is allowed to have his recess, as he is required by the teacher to do each day, he doesn’t ask in a resentful or timid way but, rather, in a curious way, as if he truly wonders if he is “good” enough to deserve it.

When Tevon’s student teacher eagerly proclaims that the students will be doing their “first creative writing assignment” of the year, I am intrigued. It turns out that students must write letters to a character of their choice from a story in their basal reader. Dear Smarty Jackson, Tevon writes, Will you do my homework for me? I can’t help but let out a quick laugh when I read it. Tevon is well-known for his avoidance of school work – sometimes under the guise of lost pencils and missing papers and usually accompanied by the excuse, “I’m not smart enough.” His eyes widen for a moment at my
reaction to his work, and I hasten to tell him that I think that’s a funny thing to write.

“Do you think a teacher would rather read funny writing, or boring writing?” I ask him with a smile. He seems momentarily pleased, but then he reconsiders. When I return to his desk a few minutes later, I’m startled when I notice that he has erased his entire letter and started a new one. I ask him why, and he tells me matter-of-factly that his teacher will be angry with him if she thinks he is trying to be “too funny.” I think there’s something sad about Tevon’s eraser. I wonder what else he has erased this year.

**Impossible Student #3**

The most apathetic student intern I have encountered in my five years of supervising has – for the first time I can remember – a light in her eyes. To my surprise, she likes my idea of following Javonte, her case study student, around all day to see if she can find one thing he likes to do in school. Consider it a challenge, I tell her. The next time we meet, she tells me that her mentor teachers have nixed the plan. They are referring Javonte to special education, and they need to make sure they don’t find anything “good.”

Although there are countless other examples I might point to here, the key is that *impossible strangers*, as Davies (2009) refers to them, are not “really speaking beings.” In certain scenes of schooling, they either don’t make sense or they have been made invisible or inaudible in some way. Most broadly, the question I want to take up is one of how we might disrupt the hierarchy of intelligences and capabilities that has made it normative to see so many of our students as incompetent and even impossible.
Introducing “Radical Equality”

Following the French philosopher Rancière, with whom we shall have a more proper introduction in the next chapter, I make the argument in this dissertation that the hierarchy of intelligences and capabilities in schooling can best be interrupted by a concept and practice that is, by all accounts, completely foreign to it: *radical equality.* Certainly, “equality” is, like “social justice” and “democracy,” a term that many educators find it hard not to like, even as its meaning also remains largely unexamined (Edelsky, 2004; Zeichner, 2009). But the radical equality put forth by Rancière, as we shall see, is perhaps more difficult to embrace. It is not a progressivist’s or a critical theorist’s or a socioculturalist’s version of equality. It does not refer to equal opportunity, or racial equality, or sameness. It is not about fairness, or a just distribution of resources. It has rather tenuous associations with identity, agency, power – and even context. Most importantly, as I’ll discuss throughout this dissertation, it is not the sort of equality that can be deferred until an ideal future time in which we have gradually been able to achieve the reduction of oppression and inequality. Instead, it is a disruptive force that wants to intervene right now by continually interrupting our ways of seeing, our fields of vision. For now, I’ll suggest simply that what it is, above all else, is a question of who can think and speak from their own intelligence – of who is really a speaking being and who really is unspeakable.

What must be made clear from the beginning is that this potentially disruptive question about equality – of how it might intrude upon a given hierarchical order – is not a question of inclusion, or, in other words, of how “those who are already ‘included’ [might] reach out to those who are not and bring them into the existing order” (Pelletier,
Intruding upon the existing order in the name of equality does not follow an inside-out model in which democracy becomes a process that “emanates from the centre and extends to the margins” (Biesta, 2007, p.8). What Rancière offers us, as we shall see, is a much more antagonistic account of democracy in which those who seek to interrupt any given social order by making a claim of equality do not want to be “included in the existing order; they want to redefine the order in such a way that new identities, new ways of doing and being become possible and can be ‘counted’” (ibid). This is a critical distinction because it means that for Rancière, “democratisation is no longer a process of inclusion of excluded parties into the existing order; it rather is a transformation of that order in the name of equality” (ibid.).

To speak of impossible students and equality, then, is not to ask how we might include them, or how they might come to count within the current order as “good students,” or how their competencies might become visible in the additive sense. Instead, as I will describe in Chapters 3 and 4, it is to begin to look for those moments in schooling – with the help of impossible students, I’ll suggest – where equality might “enter the scene” (Ruitenberg, 2008) and intrude – not from an “outside” that is known – but from anywhere and by anyone (Rancière, 2007a). This is to consider visibility in its transformative sense.

**Searching for Equality**

What follows is a conceptual study in which I want to open up questions about the equality and democracy we are trying to further as educators. My hope is that this pursuit will make a productive difference in two different places: (1) in my own teaching, and (2) in my work with pre-service and practicing teachers. My focus is not on promoting any
sort of new pedagogy in this dissertation but, rather, new understandings of equality, which may impact our ways of doing, seeing, and being in the classroom. I try to position myself throughout this dissertation simply as a “theoretical practitioner” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.191) who is struggling to speak with a rather difficult philosopher, Jacques Rancière, with whom I and many other progressive educators presumably share something in common – namely an interest in disrupting schooling as a regime of the visible that has made sensible and normative our reading of so many students as problematic (cf. Davies, 2000; Davies & Gannon, 2009; Kohl, 1994; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Thus, I want to make clear here my intention throughout this dissertation to engage in a form of “writing that tries to avoid a position of mastery” (Biesta, 2010a, p.41).

Like Ellsworth (1997), I am interested in pursuing “moving questions” – questions that I hope might “set into motion ways of thinking and teaching that have otherwise become rigid, solidified, stuck” (p.12). These initial questions include the following: Who becomes “not really speaking beings” in scenes of schooling? When do such students act out of their own equality, and how do teachers respond? What becomes visible, sayable, and hearable in classrooms when we position teachers and students as political subjects who act upon their own equality? What might it look like to practice equality and democracy as educators?

To pursue these questions about the meaning of equality and democracy in education, I have chosen to engage in a type of inquiry that might best be characterized as a “philosophical ethnography” (Lather, 2007). Patti Lather (personal communication, February 17, 2010) has described philosophical ethnography as a “sort of data based
philosophizing,” in which one approach involves “setting oneself up in field work to explore philosophical issues.” In this dissertation, I want to take up the concepts of equality and democracy and follow them into some surprising and perhaps treacherous places, beginning with postmodern theory and moving into radical democracy – and then ultimately into a first grade classroom where I worked as a research assistant during the years 2007-2009.

To be clear, philosophical ethnography is a far cry from the abstract and often perfunctory theorizing that pervades much of educational scholarship. Consider Michele Fine’s (2009) scathing summary of how theory is so tidily used by education scholars who, as she accuses, are content to “begin our chapters with famous men and women and then wander into our own analyses, glibly ‘authorizing’ our findings by locating them alongside a … theorist in parentheses” and/or “superficially fitting our data into pre-existing theoretical frame[s]” (pp.190-191). By contrast, philosophical ethnography posits a relationship to theory in which we choose to “take the side of the messy” (Alvesson, in Lather 2009a, p.226). This means doing empirical work not to confirm or add onto our philosophical understandings, but rather, to trouble them. In this dissertation, I do not seek merely to tidily “apply” Jacques Rancière’s notion of radical equality to education; instead, I seek to bring him into the messy spaces of classroom life where I hope to work with other educators and theorists to produce an ethical reading of Rancière in which our work “unfolds” along his; “it accompanies it; it rewrites it and continues it without usurping it” (Parvulescu, 2004, p. 54).

Ultimately, Lather (2007) suggests that the work of philosophical ethnography is an exercise in “trying to see how we see” (p.161), or in rethinking “those things we think
we cannot think without” (Lather, 2009c). In other words, to pursue a philosophical
ethnography is to be interested in “imperfect information” (Lather, 2007b) – information
which is not about “add[ing] into” or “correct[ing] our understanding of teaching” and,
thus, does not allow us to “find ourselves and our practices ‘as’ teachers confirmed,
enlightened, emancipated, or made continuous with our interests, understandings, or
desires” (Ellsworth, 1997, p.195).

Opening a Door in Which Democracy and Equality May Enter

_Democracy is never in place but always enters; it enters the scene of inequality, in school-
ing or other institutions it inserts itself, intervenes and interrupts._


To search for moments of equality in school, Rancière might suggest, one should
start not with policy or school reform but with what happens “between master and pupils”
(Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p.515). In what remains of this chapter, following
Rancière, I take pedagogical relations as my starting point in this discussion of education
and equality. Like most educators who claim a commitment to rethinking pedagogical
relations, in particular, with those students who struggle most to be seen or heard as
competent from within the discourse of “teaching-as-usual” (Davies, 2000), I begin from
the premise that pedagogical relations are asymmetrical, oppressive, and “risky” (cf.
Kumashiro, 2004; McDermott, Raley, & Seyer-Ochi, 2009; Varenne & McDermott,
1998). However, my focus is not on shifting the power to students in these asymmetrical
relations, “as in pedagogies where the student supposedly becomes the teacher”
(Ellsworth, 1997, p.140). Nor is my focus on “helping” students to “progress” toward
emancipation, as in pedagogies where power is made visible to students so that students
can address it (Biesta, 2010a). Instead, my goal is one of declassification, that is, to “trouble every definition of teaching and studenting arrived at” (Ellsworth, 1997, p.140).

To search for equality, from this perspective, means straying a bit from the field of education and practicing “knowledges foreign to us … in the name of becoming educated about what the field of education itself prevents us from thinking and seeing” (Ellsworth, 1997, p.195). Thus, in the pages that follow, I begin my search for equality by turning to postmodern scholars who, in their embrace of uncertainty and discontinuity, might help us to think about how, in our pedagogical relations, we might withdraw from the “places” we have been assigned to as teachers and students. I turn to those scholars whose work might help us to imagine how we might disentangle or declassify ourselves from “teaching-as-usual” (Davies, 2000), which enforces the hierarchy of intelligences and capabilities that divides the world into those who know and don’t know, those who are adults and children, those who are “normal” and those who are “special,” and so forth.

Radical equality, I propose, is ultimately an argument over the very words that tend to be taken-for-granted in both traditional and more progressive conceptions of the pedagogical relation: teacher, student, and the political. In what follows, I draw upon the work of theorists such as Elizabeth Ellsworth, Shoshana Felman, Jacques Derrida, and Patti Lather who have begun to pave the way for us to rethink the meanings of these words. Specifically, I begin to look into the ways that these scholars have begun to insert discontinuities into three key storylines of schooling that have contributed to the limited interpretative universe of schooling in which so many students have come to be narrowly viewed as incompetent – storylines that, according to Rancière (1991, 2010), are shared
by both traditional and progressive education. (This is a point I will discuss in more depth in Chapter 2.) These storylines include the following: (1) the teacher-as-one-who knows (Davies, 2000), (2) the student-as-one-who-does-not-know and does not speak, or who must be brought from voicelessness to voice (Bingham & Biesta, 2010), and (3) equality that must be deferred until the end of the pedagogical or political process (Rancière, 1991).

What the scholars below offer us, I suggest, are two new and much more destabilizing starting points that might help us to begin to unsettle pedagogical relations by making unfamiliar some of the taken-for-granted meanings of teaching, “studenting,” and even the political itself in order to open up new (and potentially more equal) relational possibilities. These new starting points include: teaching as the practice of “persistently not knowing something important” and the pedagogical encounter as an “event”. My hope is that exploring these ideas will begin us on our journey of “reconfiguring the territory of the sayable, seeable, thinkable, and possible” (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p.513) in schools and set the stage for equality to enter the scene in subsequent chapters.

Teaching as “Persistently Not Knowing Something Important”

*Teaching is impossible.*

- *Shoshana Felman, in Ellsworth, 1997, p.55*

At the outset of this chapter, I offered the story of Sonjia. Like many other “pedagogical misfires” that have preceded (and are sure to follow) this particular story, Sonjia’s apparent failure in my course is one I don’t understand. Teacher researcher Cynthia Ballenger (2009) calls this a “puzzling moment” – a moment which initially may be unsettling but, when approached with a certain spirit of curiosity and inquiry, will
ultimately help to shed some light on my teaching. Certainly, this reflects the promise of much of the teacher research I have read, which almost always seems to culminate in the reflective practitioner becoming a “better teacher” who has deeper understandings and new insights about her (more critical, more dialogic) practice. Admittedly, I have always wanted to be that teacher with the deeper understandings and new insights. In fact, I returned to graduate school to become that teacher: not to climb yet another rung up the academic ladder but, rather, to try to shed light on the many “puzzling moments” and “puzzling students” that had begun to overwhelm my final years of classroom teaching. In short, I returned to pursue the modest aim of becoming a better teacher.

But Felman’s provocative – if somewhat terrifying – reading of impossible students like Sonjia intrudes upon such fantasies of enlightenment. The pedagogical misfires these students make apparent, Felman suggests, are not merely “momentary” occurrences that can be “understood” – and perhaps overcome – through reflection and inquiry. In short, they are not aberrations. Rather, they are the nature of teaching, the norm. They reflect the simple fact that our teaching, at least to some extent, always misses our students in one way or another. Because our students “are never only or fully who we think they are,” our lessons are constantly missing them; we simply cannot achieve a “match” between what is taught and students’ understanding (Ellsworth, 1997). To acknowledge this “radical indeterminacy of the interaction between teaching and learning” (Biesta, 2009a, p.107) is to concede that the moment we yearn for – the one in which we might say that we have “taught it” and that our students have “gotten it” – never comes (Ellsworth, 1997, p.56). “What is taught is never what is learned” (ibid.).
Felman’s startling – even heretical! – premise that teaching is impossible hurtles us right into what our teacher training and educational research have so deliberately trained us to remedy and control (Britzman, 1991) – that is, the persistent “gap between teaching and learning” (Biesta, 2009a, p.107). Confronted with this gap – which is continually “opened up” by those students who most visibly don’t “get it ... [don’t] want to get it, [don’t ] enjoy getting it, ... [don’t] intend to use it” (Ellsworth, p.46) – our responsibility has been framed as one of eliminating or, at least, bridging this gap. The assumption here is that our obligation to “bad” or impossible students/learners is to understand them, know them, find our common ground (Readings, as cited in Ellsworth, p.162) or to “somehow ... align who the teacher thinks the students are with who they actually are” (Kumashiro, 2002, p.78). But underlying this assumption, Felman warns, is an unchallenged view of education that presumes understanding (Britzman, 1991), a view that perpetuates “teaching-as-usual” in which the teacher can continue to position herself as the “one-who-knows” – or, at least, will know through reflection and inquiry – and proceed untroubled to employ pedagogy that addresses students “perversely” as if it already knows what is best for them (Davies, 2000; Ellsworth, 1997, p.1).

The alternative, seemingly, is to allow the gap to exist, to allow those openings that leave room for puzzling students to emerge. This is to re-vision teaching, to shift it from a practice of knowing to one of not knowing – a shift that, to borrow from the Nobel Prize winning poet Wislawa Syzmborska, turns teaching into the practice of “persistently not knowing something important” (Kostkowska, 2004, p.198). Central to this practice of “not knowing” is what Lather (2007) calls “rigorous confusion” (p. 137) in which we
must learn “to be capable of being in uncertainty” and, perhaps more challenging, to be “capable of being with [students] in indeterminacy” (p.13).

**The Pedagogical Encounter as an Event**

*And so the impossible must be at the heart of the possible.*

- Jacques Derrida, 2007, p.460

While Felman’s insight about the impossibility of teaching may initially seem like a cause for defeatism or despair, with Derrida’s help, we might actually see impossibility more optimistically as a new starting point for politics. Uncertainty, if it has any place at all in education, Ellsworth (1997) suggests, has typically only served as a “tease,” most often associated with the discourse of “teaching for possibility” where the social and human “possibility” we aim for “becomes a thing that can and will eventually be named and pursued” (p.172). If we are to engage in new ways of being together as teachers and students, however, we might entertain the following notion: “possibility” actually needs impossibility. Although I don’t want to become too entangled with Derrida’s work in this dissertation, I do want to borrow his notion that impossibility, in this sense of interrupting what is “possible,” might actually be understood as **affirmative**, an affirmation of the “**wholly other**, beyond what is foreseeable, beyond the horizon of the ‘same’” (Caputo, 1997, p.42).

As Phelan (in Ellsworth, 1997, p.163) puts it, to acknowledge that pedagogical relations are always more “unpredictable, incorrigible, uncontrollable, unmanageable, disobedient” than we think they are (ibid., pp.8-9) is to place our teaching on the “rackety bridge” between self and the other – a bridge where we “cannot reach the other” (Derrida, in Caputo, 1997, p.14). On this bridge where we are “suspended” in a “between
space” – an “abyssal” space where the “who” that we address is never the who that answers back (Ellsworth, 1997) – our task becomes one not of trying to reach one end or the other, which, is not really possible anyway, but of simply staying on the bridge – staying in the gap – and paying more attention to its wobbles. As long as the gap between teaching and learning stays open – as long as we can stay on the rackety bridge where we must acknowledge that the “unruly space between a [teacher’s] address and a student’s response won’t go away” (Ellsworth, 1997, p.41) – there is the potential of something new arriving on the scene; in other words, there is the potential that our pedagogical encounters might turn into what Derrida (2004; 2007) has called events.

In education, events – in particular, literacy events – have typically been framed in terms of cultural practices that reflect cultural and ideological assumptions or accepted ways of doing things (cf. Barton, 1994; Street, 2003). This notion of event is focused on norms and reflects a certain semblance of stability; for example, when we engage in the literacy event of getting out a daily planner to write down notes to organize a special occasion, we are recognized by other parties as beginning a planning process (Barton, 1994). Derrida’s conceptualization of an event is dramatically different. For Derrida, the event is precisely what cannot be predicted or planned. It must come as a surprise, and it must bring something new. It must, he insists, fall on us:

The event as event, as absolute surprise, must fall on me.... [I]f it doesn’t fall on me, it means that I see it coming, that there’s a horizon of expectation.... I see it coming, I fore-see it, I fore-say it, and the event is that which can ... never be predicted. A predicted event is not an event. The event falls on me because I don’t see it coming (ibid., p.451)
Thus, whatever we can see coming – whatever is possible, plannable, programmable, foreseeable – cannot constitute an event. An event “as event” must exceed “calculation, rules, programs, anticipations’” (Derrida, in Biesta, 2009b, p. 395). Put differently, the measure of an “event’s eventfulness” is actually given by its impossibility: “What comes to pass as an event, can only come to pass if it’s impossible” (Derrida, 2007, p.449).

What was not possible becomes possible. Derrida (2007) calls this “impossible possibility.”

The key point is that events are constantly pushing against the possible – they are always suggesting that things could be otherwise and, thus, they have the potential to disrupt and enlarge our field of vision. As Caputo (1997) puts it, our obligation becomes one of being “vigilant about doors that are constantly being shut down by the ‘possible’” and “seek[ing] openings here and there so that something unforeseeable might come rushing in” (p.134). The event, as an opening and an openness toward the unforeseeable and invention, thus, is potentially political because it offers a “form or structure whereby something new can be brought into being, and thereby alter the pre-existing situation” (Blair, 2007, p.149).

“Let Us Begin By the Impossible”

*I can’t get no satisfaction. Especially if my desire is for a student ‘whom’ I can ‘teach.’*

~ *Elizabeth Ellsworth, 1997, p.61*

“Let us begin by the impossible,” Derrida has said, meaning this in the most affirmative sense, that we be “driven by, impelled by, set into motion by” it (Caputo, 1997, p.145). As we go forward, my interest is in what might happen if the impossible students whose ways of doing and being are supplementary to the hierarchical order of
classification are allowed to turn the pedagogical encounter into an event – into the site for something new that is unforeseeable. Thus, I want to move through the openings that Ellsworth, Felman, Lather, and Derrida have offered in the last bit of this chapter. In order to think and perceive differently when it comes to scenes of schooling that have tended to limit our “latitude of interpretation” (Parmentier, 1994), they seem to be asking us to put our faith in something other than “knowing, grasping, understanding”. To put our faith in something other than the promise of bridging the gap, of making our modes of address better match our students. To put our faith in something other than the sort of reflection and inquiry that promise to smooth out “bumps” in the road through more critical or dialogic pedagogies. Ultimately, it seems to me, that they are asking us to put our faith in the unforeseeable. In the event. In what brings discontinuity. In the promise of “something coming.” In what might enter the scene if we allow the gap between teaching and learning to exist. In the next chapter and the chapters to come, I want to suggest that what might enter this opening is a transgressive and disruptive equality.

Organization of Dissertation

This chapter began with the story of Sonjia, a student who did not make sense in the view of her classmates and instructors. I offered this story not as a launching point into a “problem” I was poised to solve, not as potential data, and not to introduce a research framework which “sees the ‘other’ as the problem for which [I am] the solution” (Lather, 2010, p.73). Instead, I wrote of Sonjia because I begin this study in confusion, I begin ... lost. In choosing to pursue lost stories – those stories that bring discontinuity into our work as educators – I am proposing a conceptual study that is very different than the knowledge project I initially sought, one in which I lusted after the kind of “lovely
knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p.766) that would allow me to secure claims through data and bring me some semblance of closure about how to teach well. Instead, I intend to focus on what interrupts the normative – in particular, categories such as “good teaching,” “good students,” and teaching “for social justice” – in order to find out what becomes visible, sayable, and hearable when we position teachers and students as political subjects.

This interrupting force, I want to suggest in the chapters that follow, is equality. In Chapter 2, I want to begin an intellectual adventure centering on the search for equality and democracy in schools with the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière whose ideas on politics are becoming more widely known, although they have yet to be taken up by many in education. In Chapter 3, I hope to continue this adventure by bringing Rancière to school where we will look together at various pedagogical events which might be sites for the practice of equality. This work of reconceptualizing equality and democracy in education then sets up Chapter 4, in which I present a philosophical tale in the form of a “dissentual intervention”. Through this tale about an alternative “community of sense” premised on a logic of equality – a fictional travel agency run by first graders – I seek to expand – argue with – rewrite Rancière’s story of The Ignorant Schoolmaster and what it means to practice equality in schools.

1 As Youdell (2006) notes, what it is to be a good student is likely to shift within and across contexts; however, there are general qualities (sometimes in contradiction) which most who work in classrooms would recognize, such as “obedience, politeness, eagerness to learn, inquisitiveness, acquiescence to adult authority, restraint, cleanliness, asexuality, helpfulness, friendliness, good sense and common sense, childishness, maturity” (p.98).

2 I’ll be using theory and philosophy interchangeably in the dissertation.
Certainly, Ellsworth and Felman also point to the generative nature of impossibility. Because I am more interested in the political implications of impossibility, rather than the psychoanalytic aspects of it, I’ve chosen to foreground Derrida’s work in this section.
Chapter 2: “What If … Equality?”
Rethinking Equality and Democracy with Jacques Rancière

“Meeting” Rancière

[How is it that some theories/theorists are intelligible and even seductive while others are not? What makes us ready to engage or inclined to resist? And how do our attachments change as we use and, perhaps, use up some theories and find we need others more adequate to address new questions we become able to hear?

~Elizabeth A. St. Pierre, 2001, p. 141

In this chapter, I want to begin the work of exploring how Rancière’s radical notion of equality might enter the scene of the pedagogical encounter to disrupt teaching-as-usual and the hierarchy of intelligences and capabilities it enforces and also to open up new relational possibilities with students. For equality to enter the scene of schooling, I suggest in this chapter, we must “rethink and “re-practice” democracy and politics in education (Simons & Masschelein, 2010). Thus, begin here the challenging work of grappling with Rancière’s rather difficult theorizations of equality, democracy, and politics – all of which are, for Rancière, antagonistic and contingent terms – to see how useful they might be in disrupting our narrow fields of vision and expanding our interpretive strategies around “incompetent” and “impossible students”. With Rancière’s help, beginning with this chapter and then continuing throughout the rest of the dissertation, I want to think about the practice of equality, and how such a practice might disrupt and enlarge what and how we see and hear and say in the case of such students.
Throughout the chapter, I try to track my own journey through Rancière’s works to do the important – yet often neglected – work of imagining more fully what equality and democracy in schools might look like, sound like, and feel like (Edelsky, 2004; Greene, 1995) have suggested. Before I begin this journey, though, following St. Pierre (2001), I want to demystify any sort of expertise that I might seem to claim along the way by briefly sharing my story of coming to Rancière. The journey I will recount in this chapter of imagining more fully the practice of equality and democracy began nearly two years ago when I first heard the word Rancière in a cultural foundations course taught by Dr. Patti Lather at Ohio State. (Or, to be more accurate, it may have begun when I heard the next word, which was also unfamiliar: post-democracy.) For me, the “romance” that ensued with Rancière was rather unexpected (and heated!). I knew at that time that my dissertation would focus on those students whose competencies seemed to be rendered invisible in scenes of schooling. I assumed that this work would be political in the sense of promoting new “possibilities” and innovative pedagogical approaches that would presumably make schools less oppressive spaces for students at risk of being labeled into one category or another of “failure.” What I did not expect was that my thinking about what constitutes the political would itself become a source of inquiry.

After reading May’s (2008) very accessible introduction to Rancière’s thought – the first thing I could get my hands on relating to Rancière – I was desperate to learn more about his notion of equality. As St. Pierre (2001) suggests, how we read, where we read, in what order we read, and so forth makes a huge difference in our theoretical journeys. Certainly, it mattered for me that the first text I read on Rancière was one that foregrounded equality (and, well, also was one that could make Rancière’s rather difficult
arguments understandable). It mattered that I read this book while I was mired in the all-consuming (at least for me) work of field supervision that, echoing my experiences as a classroom teacher and research apprentice, continually raised questions about students’ and my own competency, sense-making, visibility, categorization, and equality. It mattered that the next book I read was *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which perhaps lays out Rancière’s theorization of equality better than any other. It mattered that in the subsequent two years, more and more work continued to emerge on Rancière’s ideas, including some work connected to the field of education. And it matters that I have not yet read much of Rancière’s work on aesthetics, especially in the later chapters of this dissertation as I find myself meandering more (like Rancière does) towards the arts and their potential to disrupt given hierarchies of intelligences. All of this to say that what follows is just one reading of many readings concerning Rancière – and it is one that is deeply tied to my experiences in the classroom, which continually refuse to allow theory to be “some abstract, impenetrable discourse ‘out there’”; instead it is “a powerful, essential, *personal* tool that I needed to study for my own good” (St. Pierre, 2001, p.142).

As a final note, this journey, I want to make clear, has been – and continues to be – a very difficult one for me. I have struggled fiercely to understand Rancière’s ideas. I have read and reread. I have created countless outlines and filled numerous notepads. I have relied heavily upon others’ readings of his work. I have found some ideas impenetrable thus far. I have rejoiced when new insights have come. In what follows, then, as I seek to provide an introduction to Rancière’s thoughts on equality and why they might be important for education – and, in particular, for disrupting hierarchies of intelligence and capabilities that have rendered so many students incompetent – it is
important to note that I write “not … to achieve the satisfaction of the one who knows, but to set in motion and clarify my intellectual adventure” (Tanke, 2011, p.1). In what follows, then, I simply do what all learners do – I repeat, I imitate, I compare one thing to another driven by my will and determination to learn (Rancière, 1991) – and, alongside the reader, I grope at the possible meanings of equality, arriving at a tentative redefinition of democracy and politics only in the final pages of the chapter.

**Imagining Democracy as the Practice of Equality**

In this chapter, with Rancière’s help, I try to imagine democracy as the practice of equality. To do this, I intend to explore several of Rancière’s key ideas about equality, which I have come to frame in the following way:

- equality as an “opinion” whose verification we pursue;
- equality as a presupposition, in which equality comes at the beginning of the pedagogical and political process, rather than at the end;
- equality as staged, in which equality is an action that disrupts social ordering
- equality as a logic that creates a scene of dissensus, in which equality must intervene at the level of the regime of the visible, as it raises new questions about what can be seen, heard, and said in a given social order

After grappling with each key idea, I then seek to use these ideas to begin to raise questions for myself and for others about what it might mean to engage in teaching that is premised on relations of equality. In this way, I write toward uncertainty, which makes my relationship with Rancière a somewhat unusual one. I turn to him here neither for “answers” to practical problems I am encountering, nor for citational authority in analyzing any data. (If teachers have relationships with philosophers at all, these tend to
be the typical ones). Instead, I turn to Rancière here simply to think with him about ideas that concern us both.

To be clear, then, my goal is to frame this discussion about democracy and equality in education not as explanatory, but, rather, as an effort to speak with Rancière under the “sign of equality”. Speaking under the sign of equality, in Rancière’s (1991, 2007b) sense, is a matter of translating and counter-translating, which put simply, is the process of turning the intellectual adventures of someone else into your own. In this chapter, I attempt a translation of Rancière’s notion of equality, seeking to make his words into my own so that I can begin to imagine more fully what it might look like to practice equality in the classroom. In the next chapters, as I venture further into the classroom with Rancière, I attempt more of a counter-translation, as I seek to turn his story of equality into my own stories and my own intellectual adventures.

Equality or Inequality?

Equality and inequality are not two states. They are two ‘opinions’, that is to say two distinct axioms, by which educational training can operate, two axioms that have nothing in common. All that one can do is verify the axiom one is given.

~ Jacques Rancière, 2010, pp.4-5

The sexy view amongst progressive educators these days seems to be to frame our work as “fundamentally political” (hooks, 1994). Schools are political places, whether they are sites where we seek to practice freedom or sites where we, in our inaction, perpetuate a system of “education that continually reinforces domination” (ibid., p.4). Jacques Rancière, however, takes a very different stance; as he sees it, teaching is rarely political. Fundamentally, this is because teaching almost always takes inequality, rather than equality, as its starting point. Certainly, this is an accusation that has been hurled
often enough at traditional teaching, which continually reinforces inequality through a banking model of education in which teachers deposit knowledge into students, who are reduced to mere recipients of teachers’ knowledge (cf. Freire 1970; Holt, 1982). Surely, Rancière (1991) would agree with such critiques of traditional education, as he has argued powerfully against what he calls the “pedagogical myth” pervasive in schools in which educators operate under the assumption that students cannot learn without our explications. However, Rancière also accuses progressive educators of using a pedagogical logic that is premised on inequality and continually verifies inequality in teacher-student relations.

Lessons in Inequality

Writing in the 1980s in France, at a time when Pierre Bourdieu’s work was having an increasing influence over educational policy, Rancière (2010) calls into question a progressive approach to education that is premised on what he characterizes scornfully as an “equality-to-come” (p.11). For progressivists, he writes, equality supposedly comes at the end of the pedagogical and political process through the gradual reduction of inequality. This pedagogical logic is supported by two fundamental axioms: “First, one must start from inequality in order to reduce it; second, the way to reduce inequality is to conform to it by making of it an object of knowledge” (ibid., p.4). In other words, to reduce inequality, we must first know about how inequality works. From this perspective, emancipatory education becomes, at least in part, a matter of gaining “liberatory knowledge” (hooks, 1994) – that is, knowledge about inequality.

But, “about inequality,” Rancière (2010) writes bluntly, “there is nothing to know” (p.4). Rancière’s point, most simply, is that if you are looking for inequality you
will almost certainly find it (Pelletier, 2009). When we “take inequality as the point of departure and work under its presupposition,” we are doomed, Rancière suggests, to endlessly verify inequality (Rancière, 2010, p.11). Those who begin from inequality, he posits, always teach us a lesson in inequality; that is, by starting from the assumption of inequality, they “continuously prove inequality and by proving it they constantly rediscover it” (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p.511). The result, he writes scathingly, is that progressive scholars have offered us “a never-ending explanation of the reasons why inequality must lead to equality and yet never leads there” (Rancière, 2010, p.12). Thus, to be clear, “when Rancière takes issue with Bourdieu’s sociological analysis of education ... [it is] not because it is descriptively incorrect” – of course, Rancière readily concedes that inequality exists – “but because it is a kind of theory which depresses rather than inspires change for the better” (Davis, 2010b, p.10).

It is also the kind of theory, Rancière argues, that, like traditional educational thought, sets up intellectual hierarchies. Too often, progressive education that posits an “equality-to-come” that never comes (Rancière, 2010, p.5) that sets up intellectuals who have “knowledge of inequality” to “claim to know the ignorance of others” – or “know the real reasons why people are oppressed but of which they themselves are usually ignorant” (Davis, 2010, p.25; Rancière, 2003; Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p.511). When the aim of education is conceived as that of emancipating students from oppressive practices and structures in the name of social justice, the task of the educator often becomes one of explaining the workings of power or of setting up some pedagogical situation in which students will be able to see and understand how power operates so they can begin to address it and perhaps even, at least on some level, work to make it
recirculate (Biesta, 2010a). Either way, the one to be emancipated becomes dependent upon the intervention of the emancipator; “when there is no intervention, there is … no emancipation” (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.31). This notion of progress is based upon what Rancière has described as a “pedagogical fiction,” which places “the educator in the position of always being ahead of the one who needs to be educated in order to be liberated” (ibid, p. 44). Thus, when emancipation and equality are always related to knowledge of inequality, this introduces a fundamental dependency into the “logic of emancipation” in which the teacher typically knows and the students do not know yet (Biesta, 2010a). This, for Rancière, is yet another lesson in inequality.

To sum up, Rancière’s major disagreement with progressive education – defined loosely as those approaches that, following Bourdieu, posit an “equality-to-come that never comes” – is not with its methods or its findings, but with its presuppositions. As Bingham and Biesta (2010) put it, the “ingenuity” of Rancière’s work is that he is able to show that “what is done under and in the name of equality, democracy and emancipation often results in its opposite in that it reproduces inequality and keeps people in their place” (p.45). Certainly, much more could be said about his critiques of progressivist practices and discourses (see especially Rancière, 2003) – and one interesting line of study might be to look into some of the more recent critical work following Bourdieu to examine the ways in which educators do or do not delay equality, do or do not insert a fundamental dependency into the logic of emancipation, do or do not keep students in their social locations. However, in what remains of this chapter, I want to make the opposite move, which is to make Rancière’s axiomatic equality my starting point and my focus of inquiry.
While it has been important to contextualize Rancière’s work a bit by situating it against those approaches that choose inequality as their starting point, it must be quickly pointed out that Rancière believes that a lot of important work happens in the name of reducing inequality – or what he might call working toward a “better police” (Biesta, 2010a). His overarching aim is not to dismiss this work; he simply does not call that politics and he does not believe it has anything to do with equality. What I hope to make clear by placing my focus on axiomatic equality is that Rancière’s contribution is “not merely to critique current practices and discourses” that he believes reinforce lessons in inequality; rather, “the attractiveness of Rancière’s work is that he does try to formulate in a positive way what democracy is about” (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p.510). This positive vision will be my focus for much of the dissertation.

**Making Equality the “Opinion Whose Verification We Pursue”**

As we have seen, Rancière’s main question for education is whether we will start from the assumption of equality or inequality. Largely as a response to Bourdieu’s work, Rancière wrote *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* to offer an alternative vision of education in which equality, not inequality, becomes the “opinion” whose verification we pursue. The central protagonist of this book, French revolutionary and educational philosopher Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840), accompanies Rancière throughout most of his subsequent scholarship and represents perhaps Rancière’s key encounter in terms of formulating his notion of radical egalitarianism. Jacotot’s central insight is quite radical: rather than hoping for equality as the outcome of the pedagogical (and political) process, he makes intellectual equality his starting point and given. The “madness” of his pedagogy relies upon this provocative thesis: *all intelligences are equal*. Because I will be mining
Jacotot’s practice of radical egalitarianism that is based upon this notion of the equality of all intelligences throughout this chapter (and throughout the dissertation), I want to briefly introduce it below.

**The Ignorant Schoolmaster**

In the early 19th century, Jacotot, an exiled French professor, was invited to teach French at the University of Louvain in the Netherlands to a group of Flemish students. However, because Jacotot did not speak the language of his students, he found himself in a somewhat precarious teaching situation where there “was no language in which he could teach them what they sought from him” (Rancière, 1991, p.1). In other words, there was “no language that would allow Jacotot to explain anything to his students” (Biesta, 2010b, p.543). With only a dual-language copy of a single text to share with his students, he asked his students, with the help of a translator, to learn this book. After they had read and reread both the French and Flemish versions – with Jacotot in the authoritative role as a “commander” (Citton, 2010) insisting that they reread and repeat over and over again what they had learned – he asked his students to write a paper on the text in French. Much to his astonishment, he found that they were able to complete the task at a very high level.

What Jacotot realized was that it was possible to teach without explanation, and, based on this, he developed an approach called “universal teaching”. Above all else, this approach represented “the universal verification of the similarity of what all the emancipated can do, all those who have decided to think of themselves as people just like everyone else” (Rancière, 1991, p.41). Certainly, manifestations of intelligence may be unequal – for example, some folks may not have the same opportunities to use their
intelligence as others or may not pay attention with the same focus as others. But the key point of universal teaching is, above all else, one’s philosophy of intelligence – not the method of instruction, whether traditional or progressive, authoritarian or active (Rancière, 2010). (“[S]tultification can and does happen in all kinds of active and modern ways,” says Rancière [ibid., p.6], including when teachers today act as “facilitator”). Significantly, for Jacotot and Rancière, there is only one sort of intelligence at work in all intellectual endeavors. Rancière (2007c) writes:

The human animal learns everything as he has learned his mother tongue, as he has learned to venture through the forest of things and signs that surrounds him, in order to take his place among his fellow humans – by observing, comparing one thing with another thing, one sign with one fact, one sign with another sign, and repeating the experiences he has first encountered by chance. (p.275)

Thus, in contrast to the pedagogical order, which wants to divide the world into two intelligences, the ignorant schoolmaster repudiates such a division between those who know and those who don’t by beginning with the reality of a basic equality, which is the equality of intelligence. This, for Rancière, is what emancipation means: it is the “consciousness of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself” (p.39).

Ultimately, Jacotot’s insight resulted in a “radical reformation of pedagogical methods” that had this basic premise: it is possible to teach what you do not know yourself (Citton, 2010, p.26). Jacotot actually went on to try this approach by teaching subjects, like piano and painting, about which he knew nothing. (And he did so quite successfully, or so we are told, Citton adds.) Jacotot’s role was still very important, but
rather than transmitting content (or giving his knowledge to the “ignorant”), his role
became one of challenging students’ wills through relentless questioning: “What do you
see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it? And so on, to infinity”
(Rancière, 1991, p.23). Ultimately, based upon his experimentation, Jacotot “concluded
that the act of the teacher who obliges another intelligence to exercise itself was
independent of the possession of knowledge, that it was indeed possible that one who is
ignorant might permit another who is ignorant to know something unknown to both”
(Rancière, 2010, p.2). Forced to take his own knowledge out of the picture, Jacotot is
merely “a will that sets the ignorant person down a path, that is to say to instigate a
capacity already possessed” (ibid., pp.2-3). Ultimately, Rancière (2007b) summarizes
the pedagogical encounter this way: “The student learns something as an effect of his
master’s mastery, but he does not learn his master’s knowledge” (n.p.).

An Optimistic Account of Politics

What I want to begin to suggest in the remainder of this chapter is that Jacotot’s
story might set loose for education perhaps the “only optimistic perspective about
politics,” which focuses not on “social equality” – not on large-scale agendas in which
equality must continually be deferred – but, rather, on “intellectual equality” – on those
moments when the equal capacity of anybody emerges most powerfully to disrupt a given
hierarchical order that has made sensible who is qualified for thinking and speaking
(Rancière, 2009a). Jacotot’s lesson for us, in part, is that pedagogical encounters can
always be a site for such moments – that is, they can always be sites for the practical
verification of equality, for the disruption of intellectual hierarchies. This is a hopeful
lesson, not in the sense of anticipating a better future but in terms of our capacity to
cultivate possibility in the present (Ryther, 2009). By shifting our orientation to the here and now of pedagogical relations rather than some larger political project, Jacotot shows us that it is always possible to create new inscriptions of equality in an unequal society, and even in an unequal place like school.

In what remains of this chapter, with Jacotot’s axiomatic equality serving as a theoretical starting point, I want to begin the work of imagining what it might look like, sound like, and feel like to make equality “the opinion whose verification we pursue” (Rancière, 1991, p.36). To do this, I focus on three key acts involved in creating a political sequence that might disrupt the intellectual hierarchies at work in education: (1) presupposing one’s own equality, (2) staging one’s own equality, and (3) using the logic of equality to construct a scene of dissensus. Following each section, I briefly gesture towards some of the ways in which these conceptualizations of equality might matter to the field of education, in particular, in how they might help teachers and students declassify from the roles and places they tend to be assigned both by traditional and progressive accounts of schooling. Although I do not have the space in this chapter to pursue an extended discussion of these ideas, I simply offer them as possible educational entry points – entry points which suggest some of the ways I would like to go about “multiplying the experiments inspired by the ‘opinion’ of equality” (Rancière, 1991, p.36) in the rest of the dissertation.

**Equality as a Presupposition**

*Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise that they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom – or it is nothing.*

~ Jacques Rancière, 2003, p.223
As I have suggested above, for Jacques Rancière, the starting place for any discussion of democracy is with the notion of equality. Equality, he stresses, is not a goal, or endpoint, that needs to be achieved through political or other means. As we have seen, much of his writing on the subject of equality is a reaction against the progressivist logic that is generally associated with democracy, which he believes wrongly places equality at the end of the political process as a distant goal that must be gradually achieved through the reduction of inequality (Rancière, 2000). The radical shift Rancière makes is to ask, “What would it mean to put equality at the beginning of a political process rather than at the end?” (May, 2008, p.30, emphasis added). Equality, from his perspective, is no longer a “debt” or a “matter of obligatory distribution,” but, instead, becomes a “presupposition” (ibid.).

**Active Equality**

This is a critical distinction, May (2008) notes, because it posits a more active notion of equality than is commonly understood. Equality, according to distributive theories of justice, tends to be framed in more passive terms, in which it is “given (or, more often, not given) by those in power” (Davis, 2010a, p.27). This implies a hierarchical order, “which presupposes an inequality between those who distribute and those who receive the distribution and are positioned as recipients, rather than actors” (May, 2008, p.10). When equality is posited as something to be received, it perpetually verifies unequal relations because “to receive equality is already to be less than equal to the one who bestows it” (ibid., p.71). By contrast, Rancière posits a more active equality in which equality is no longer something that people receive as a result of a political process, but, rather, it is a presupposition that they act from. May (2008) has explained
the difference with the example of affirmative action. Certainly, we could concede that affirmative action has made a positive contribution to society and that it is helpful to a great number of people; however, as Rancière sees it, it is not the practice of equality. Instead, it is an example of “what governments do ... not what people do” (ibid., p.47).

The key distinction, then, in moving toward a more active notion of equality is that equality is not the result of a political process but, rather, it is a presupposition that people act from.

**Equality of Intelligence**

To further clarify Rancière’s notion of radical equality, when Ranciere speaks of acting from the presupposition of equality – building from the ignorant schoolmaster – he means *equality of intelligence*. Equality and intelligence are, for him, synonymous terms. This does not mean that everyone has the same ability to score highly on a SAT exam or conceive advanced theoretical physics (May, 2008). Rather, it means simply that everyone has the capacity to speak, think, and act (Simons & Masschelein, 2010). In short, everyone can take initiatives, pursue creative activities, and lead a meaningful life alongside others. As Rancière (1999) puts it, this is the “equality of anyone at all with anyone else” (p.15). The critical point about equality, then, for Rancière (1991) – and this cannot be stressed enough – is not “proving that all intelligence is equal,” but, rather, “it’s seeing what can be done under that presupposition” (p.46). As he continues, “It is true that we don’t know that men [sic] are equal. We are saying that they *might* be. This is our opinion, and we are trying, along with those who think as we do, to verify it” (ibid., p.73).
Ruitenberg (2008) has beautifully summarized this notion of the presupposition of equality as a question: “What if ... equality?” (p.1). What if we begin from the assumption that everyone is capable? What if we assumed that all intelligences are equal in the sense that everyone is able to rise to the tasks that life puts before us, and we worked under this assumption? What if equality became our hypothesis and we set out to verify it? To sum up, Rancière’s notion of radical equality challenges progressive educators to reframe their work “not [as] a struggle for equality but rather out of its presupposition” (May, 2009, p.17).

**The Figure of the Child: Why “Equality as a Presupposition” Might Matter to Education**

One way in which Rancière’s conceptualization of equality as a presupposition might matter to educators, Bingham and Biesta (2010) have suggested, is with the assumptions we make about the children whom our pedagogies seek to emancipate, or what they call the *figure of the child* (student). With regard to the figure of the child, they note, it has become easy for progressive educators to “become so fixated on the injustice of society, and the injustices of schooling, that one forgets the very assumptions that are being made about those who are being emancipated through education” (ibid., p.63). To further this point, they provide a provocative contrast between Rancière’s figure of the child – a child who already speaks and who is already assumed to be an equal being – and the figure of the child posited by one of progressive education’s best spokespeople, Paolo Freire – a child who needs pedagogy in order to speak.

Rancière’s figure of the child as one who already speaks is exemplified in 17-month-old Barbara, they suggest. Barbara knows 7 words and a grunt, including the
word *nana*, which means Barbara’s bottle. Barbara’s use of the word *nana* to signal for her bottle appears to be rather arbitrary. One day when she was upset, she simply said *nana*. Her confused father tried a number of things to calm her down, but nothing worked until he gave her the bottle. She smiled, took the bottle, and said, “nana.” In time, all of those who cared for Barbara came to recognize the word “nana” as a request to be fed. Like nearly all young children learning their mother tongue, Barbara was able to make herself understood. She has inserted *nana* into English and, in the process, attained the status of speaker from the perspective of the adult world.

What progressive educators tend to forget, Bingham and Biesta argue, is that children like Barbara (unless they have severe limitations) have already spoken. To illustrate this point, they make the rather surprising claim that Freire’s figure of the child does not speak. I will discuss this notion of speaking much more in the final section of this chapter, but, for now, what is important about Bingham and Biesta’s argument is that Freire’s child does not speak because it is assumed that she needs pedagogy, in particular, Freire’s (1970) method of problem posing, to speak. The assumption here is that “there is preparatory work to be done before certain children can speak” and that “[o]nly after the child is taught in a certain way will he or she be able to speak” (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.70). Because a particular method must bring a child to speech, how the child will speak has been largely predeterminded, for example, naming one’s own experiences.

The gist of Bingham and Biesta’s argument, then, is this: While Rancière’s child proceeds in an arbitrary manner that cannot be anticipated beforehand (in large part, because he sees language as arbitrary and utterances always contestable), Freire’s child is brought to speech in an “orderly way” through pedagogy in which “it has already been
decided for the child how and when he or she will speak” (ibid.). While Rancière’s figure of the child inserts herself into language, Freire’s child might just be “another conceit fabricated in order to streamline how we bring children from a position of voicelessness to a position of voice” (ibid., p.63). The moment when the oppression experienced by the student is “answered” by the liberating practice of the problem-posing educator is exactly the point where Rancière’s figure of the child is “completely at odds” from Freire’s (ibid., p.71). The big difference is that Rancière’s figure of the child refuses to be a “conceit for streamlining and improving education”; and this child does not need a method to speak. This child has already undergone the most difficult of apprenticeships in learning her mother tongue. “This child already speaks. That is the child’s method” (ibid., pp.71-72).

Certainly, it must be pointed out that Freire has also been positively connected with Rancière’s presupposition of equality, in particular, valuing students’ knowledge and experiences (Davis, 2010a; Davis, 2010b). Nevertheless, Rancière’s notion of equality as a presupposition and, in particular, the figure of the child that it asks us to confront presents a number of challenges and questions for the field of education: Do we remember that children have already spoken and are already capable and competent? Do we see children who must be moved from oppressive conditions to emancipatory ones so they can say, “Now we are equal”? Or do we see children whose acts proclaim, “We have always been equal” (May, 2008, p.72)? Do we see children who say, “One day we will be able to …,” or do we see children who proclaim, “Yes, we already can” (Citton, 2010, p.32)? Although my goal in this chapter is just to gesture at some of the questions that Rancière’s conceptualization of equality as a presupposition might raise for education,
I will continue to come back to Rancière’s figure of the child who *already* speaks throughout the dissertation, in particular, in Chapter 3 when I try to bring Rancière to school. For now, I want to move onto another way that Rancière has conceived equality: equality as staged.

**Equality as Staged**

*The essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with controversial figures of division.*

~*Jacques Rancière, 1995a, pp.32-33*

Significantly, Rancière’s notion of equality as a presupposition – and the question of “what if ... equality” it inspires – is addressed primarily to “those whose lives take place at the various wrong ends of social hierarchies” (May, 2009, p.14). Rancière (2001) calls them “the category of peoples who do not count, those who have no qualifications … for being taken into account” (np). In a given classification, they are unequal to others in that classification. From the perspective of the dominant social order, these are the people who “were not really speaking beings” (Rancière, 2004a, p.5) – those people who do not have the authority to speak and whose voices are heard merely as noise. From the perspective of the dominant social order, they are invisible and inaudible. For Rancière, disrupting this social order means that politics must “rise from below” (May, 2010a, p.4) when the “‘unqualified’ and ‘incompetent’ … demonstrate their equality” (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p.513). The notion that equality exists only in its demonstration is a key one for Rancière, and it is one that begins to lead us toward a more theatrical account of politics.
Disorderly Equality

As Hallward (2006) and Bayly (2009) have suggested, this demonstration takes on a theatrical form as people act outside of their social locations, or “stray away from their ‘natural’ allotment of capacities in order to inhabit new bodies in different times and spaces” (Tanke, 2011, p.49). This disruptive demonstration is best understood as an intervention on the “orderly distribution” of functions and roles described by Plato, who, along with Bourdieu, is one of the theorists whom Rancière most often writes against. Whereas Plato wants to allot to each person a single task and a singular way of speaking – summarized by Bayly (2009) as “everyone in his place and a place for everyone” (p.24) – Rancière wants to move people out of their “proper” places and times (Highmore, 2011). As he describes it, the demonstration of equality becomes a sort of “performing or playing, in the theatrical sense of the word, the gap between a place where the demos [those who have no qualification for being taken into account] exists and a place where it does not” (Rancière, as cited in Hallward, 2006, p.111). In other words, as Bayly (2009) puts it, Rancière’s political actors do not just merely take their “rightful place” in a particular scene but, rather, they also literally “create a stage” and “establish a theatre where none was supposed to exist according to the logic of the established order” (p.24).

In the pages that follow, I provide an extended example of this disorderly equality that comes from Rancière’s aptly titled book, The Nights of Labor (Rancière, 1989) in which those at the wrong end of the political hierarchy seek to disrupt “natural” divisions of time and space that try to keep them in their “place”.

In The Nights of Labor, Rancière’s book about 19th century workers in France during the socialist movement, he foregrounds the stories of proletarian workers who had
never been taught to write but who, after spending their days as manual laborers, use their nights to compose poetry, create newspapers and various associations, and generally engage in rich intellectual life. Significantly, these “writer-intellectuals” were not writing to unify around their working class identity, to consolidate “popular culture,” or to become more aware of their condition as laborers. Instead, they were “trying to be other people” by claiming their legitimate right to participate in activities that, for them, were deemed illegitimate by the status quo which presumed them too tired or ill-equipped to think during their nights (Hewlett, 2007, pp.88-89).

What is key for Rancière about these workers, then, is that they are “doing something else than their social identity” (Pelletier, 2009, p. 275) – or engaging in what Ross has called a “profound gesture of non-identification with one’s supposed being or condition” (Ross, as cited in Ruitenberg, 2008, p.1). Manual laborers are supposed to “work by day and sleep by night and have no time left over for thinking,” but, instead, they “devote their nights to other activities than sleep, to give themselves this time that did not belong to them in order to enter into a world of writing and thinking that was not ‘theirs’” (Rancière, 2000, p.5). Instead of becoming more aware of their conditions as workers, then, the worker-poets actually demonstrate their equality by becoming less aware (Rancière, 2009b). They must be ignorant of inequality – they must be ignorant about the “implicit norms about the spaces in which they could appear, as well as ideas about how they should use their time” (Tanke, 2011, p.25) – in order to act as if they are members of the leisure class. They must be ignorant of inequality as they “force their entry” into the “common world” of thinking beings.
A Struggle over the As If

Ultimately, their demonstration of equality represents a struggle over the as if, as the worker-poet “implements a different as if that overturns the whole logic which allotted him his place” (Rancière, 2009b, p.276). By “act[ing] as if intellectual equality were indeed real and effectual” (Rancière, as cited in Biesta, 2010a, p.52), the worker-poets demonstrate that it is “possible to disentangle in every case the ‘as if’ which is involved in the ‘that’s the way it is’” (Rancière, 2009, p.280). Because they have shown the sheer contingency of the social order by “claiming and practicing a way of thinking, speaking, and of living, which was not or is not ‘theirs’” (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p. 53), the workers who write poems are far more dangerous to the prevailing social order than ones who write revolutionary songs (Hewlett, 2007). By “reusing the nights that are meant for proletarian sleep, by making themselves home in a medium that is not their (poetry, philosophy) and dreaming of a life they weren’t born into,” what they have shown is that things can always be otherwise (Highmore, 2011, p.98). By refusing to know their places as workers and their partitions of time (a time for work and a time for rest), they have revealed politics as “the enacting of a disruption in the parceling out of allocated space, time, and sense” (ibid.).

As Rancière (2010) anticipates, some have lodged the accusation that this enactment of the as if is merely a delusion that does not lead to “true equality”. After all, the worker who writes poems by night continues to suffer in a world of exploitation by day. However, Rancière stresses that he does not “need some sort of reality for the political subject” (Rancière, as cited in Citton, 2009, p.130). In fact, he wants his political actor to actually splinter reality (Rancière, 1999). By refusing to adhere to the
discourse that the existing world is the only one possible (Tanke, 2011), his political actor proposes a “reordering of the real” – a “reordering of social roles, places, and scripts” (O’Shaughnessy, 2009, p.4). Ultimately, his political actor constructs a scene and creates a stage upon which something new can be seen – a subject that has not previously been visible or audible within the given field of experience and whose appearance threatens to reconfigure the field of experience (Rancière, 1999).

What begins to become clear, then, is that in scenes of politics, the “players” are theatrical beings who stage “ways of speaking” that allow them to reject the “identities that have been stamped on bodies, the assumptions made about their capacities, and the spatio-temporal locales to which they have been relegated” (Tanke, 2011, p.67). The “players” are ones who, in the act of disrupting the “configuration in which one has a certain position and can see, say, and do something,” are able to “distance one from oneself” (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p. 513). The “stage of politics” that they set up is a contentious one – one that refuses to be limited to the “real” and one on which political actors can demonstrate that “even if egalitarian assumptions are alien to social logic and aggregation [social “reality”], they can be affirmed [there] transgressively, and … politics consists of this very confrontation” (Rancière, 2000, pp.2-3). To conclude this section of the chapter on equality as staged, I want to begin to look more at this contentious stage on which politics plays out, a conversation that will begin to set up the final part of the chapter: Rancière’s conceptualization of equality as creating dissensus.

**Staging a Wrong**

Ultimately, Rancière is fairly clear that what is most important – or most “true” – about staging one’s equality is the verification to oneself of one’s own equality. He
writes that the staging of equality “can never be merely a demand upon the other, not a pressure put upon him, but always simultaneously a proof given to oneself. This is what ‘emancipation’ means” (Rancière, 1995a, p.48). To take the risk of verifying one’s own equality, he concedes, has, on its own, no effect on the social order (Rancière, 2010, p.15). Put differently, “Proving one is correct has never compelled others to recognize they are wrong” (Rancière, 1995a, p.99). The shift that Rancière makes therefore is to reconceptualize the political demonstration not as a demand but, rather, as a “staging of a wrong” – or a setting up a disagreement over which bodies can have what kinds of capacities (Rancière, 1999), or a “conflict between those who act in the name of their equality (and those in solidarity with them) and the social order that presupposes their inequality” (May, 2010b, p.73). Citton (2009) refers to this shift as one from “politics as a battlefield” to “politics-as-a-stage” (p. 134)

Significantly, it is on this stage that political actors can display for all to see what the social order has all along denied them (May, 2010b). In other words, they can create a stage on which a wrong can be seen. The perfect example of this is the lunch counter sit-ins that occurred in the 1960s during the civil rights movement (May, 2008; May, 2010b). The participants of these sit-ins acted from the transgressive assumption that they could do what whites took for granted; they sat down at lunch counters in the South where African Americans were denied service, they asked for menus, and they tried to order a meal. “In effect, rather than saying, ‘You have wronged us and you need to do something about it,’ their message was, ‘We are equal to you, and now we’re going to see whether or not you recognize that’” (May, 2010, pp.75-76). Ultimately, through their
transgressive staging of equality, they were able to put on display the social order that had failed to recognize their equality.

Staging a wrong, according to Rancière, is what begins the political process (Tanke, 2011). When “those who have no business speaking, speak, and those who have no business taking part, take part” (Rancière, as cited in Hewlett, 2007, p.111), the stage is set for the enactment of politics. In the final section of this chapter, equality as dissensus, I will build on this theatrical notion of politics, moving from the political actors to the stage itself and also to the audience and its ways of seeing.

The Distance Between Teacher and Student: Why “Equality as Staged” Might Matter to Education

One way in which Rancière’s conceptualization of equality as staged might matter to educators, I propose, is in our reframing – and reclaiming – of the distances, or gaps, that are the norm in our pedagogical encounters with students, as I suggested in Chapter 1. If, as Rancière suggests, equality exists only in its demonstration – a demonstration in which those at the wrong ends of hierarchies refuse the identities, spaces, and times that have been assigned to them by a given social order – the question for educators, I believe, is one of how these distances or gaps might open up spaces where children can stage their own equality. In other words, the question I want to gesture at here is one of how we might turn the gaps or distances that are inherent in pedagogical encounters into stages on which students whose competencies have been made invisible and inaudible might, in Rancière’s (2000) words, demonstrate the “competence of the incompetents” (p.21).

In our pedagogical relations with students, Rancière (2007) writes, the distance that is most often evoked is the one between the master’s knowledge and the child’s
ignorance. It is the master’s task to become an expert on this distance, “to know the exact distance between ignorance and knowledge” (ibid., p.275), which is, in short, to possess the “knowledge of ignorance” (p.275). With this knowledge of ignorance, the master – and Rancière is referring here to both traditional and more progressive teachers⁷ – can go about suppressing this distance by knowing “precisely what remains unknown to the ignorant, how to make it knowable, at what time and what place, according to what protocol” (p.275). When the distance students must cover is the distance between the master’s knowledge and their own ignorance, they are kept in their “rightful place” as students who must “get it,” according to the timeframes (e.g., pacing guides), places (e.g., 3rd grade classroom, a science classroom), and capacities (e.g., You are capable of learning this bit but not yet that bit) that have been allotted to them.

But Rancière (2007) hints at a very different sort of distance, a distance that wants to shift bodies away from the times, places, and capacities that have been allotted to them. This is a distance that can never be made into an intellectual or social hierarchy – one that is simply the “distance between what [the student] knows and what he still doesn’t know but can learn by the same process [through which he has learned before]” (ibid.). In this distance, just as he did when he first learned his mother tongue, the “ignorant” one moves through the “forest of things and signs that surrounds him” and “takes his place among his fellow humans – by observing, comparing one thing with another thing, one sign with one fact, one sign with another sign” (ibid.). Everyone, from the scientist to the artist, enters into such a distance – this forest of signs – when they begin an intellectual adventure. Most importantly, in terms of declassifying from one’s supposed “place,” to move into this distance is to demonstrate one’s capacity by acting as
if one is a member of the common world of thinking and speaking beings. In other words, this is to act as one who wishes simply to communicate through the forest of signs, or to become “adventurous” in initiating a process of translation and countertranslation in which my intellectual adventure might make a difference in your intellectual adventure (Rancière, 1991). This is an infinite sort of distance that cannot be suppressed because it is “no longer the master’s secret; it’s the student’s journey” (ibid., p.23).

Ultimately, to reframe and reclaim the distances that define our pedagogical encounters – to wrest them away from the master and return them to the adventurers – is to set the stage for new “ways of speaking” in the classroom. It is to set the stage for teachers and students to speak “under the sign of equality” – to speak as those whose efforts and exploration are always “strained toward this: someone has addressed words to them that they want to recognize and respond to, not as students or as learned men, but as people; in the way you respond to someone speaking to you and not to someone examining you” (ibid., p.11). As I see it, then, Rancière’s conceptualization of equality as staged raises the following questions: How do our notions of the distances and gaps that are inherent in our pedagogical encounters set up intellectual hierarchies? In other words, do these gaps become our “secret” or do they become the student’s journey? How might new interpretations of the gap create the conditions in which students can stage new ways of speaking and stage a declassification from speech that keeps them in their places as those to be evaluated? How might staging such ways of speaking allow students to force their entry into a common world of thinking and speaking beings who all enter distances that cannot be suppressed but must continually expand in the forest of
signs? Who can the teacher be in this distance? And what might it mean to be a translator and countertranslator?

Although my goal in this chapter is just to gesture at some of the questions that Rancière’s conceptualization of equality as staged might raise for education, I will continue to come back to Rancière’s notion of distance as a space for declassification throughout the dissertation, in particular, in Chapter 3 when I try to bring Rancière to school. For now, I want to move onto the final way that Rancière has conceived equality (at least that I will discuss in this chapter): equality as a logic that can create dissensus.

**Equality as a Logic that Creates Dissensus**

*Equality is enacted within the social machine through dissensus. And dissensus is not primarily a quarrel, but it is a gap in the very configuration of sensible concepts, a dissociation introduced into the correspondence between ways of being and ways of doing, seeing and speaking.*

~Jacques Rancière, 2010, p.15

As mentioned above, one major accusation about Rancière’s theatrical notion of equality is that politics becomes simply a “state of mind” with no material consequences (Dean, 2011; Hallward, 2006; Hewlett, 2007). If this is so, then it can be cast aside as an inconsequential account of democracy, which encourages us to do little more than “play at politics or equality” (Hallward, 2006, n.p.). However, the staging of equality does have a real social effect – it becomes political – when it intervenes in the space of what Rancière has called the *police* to create *dissensus*.

**The Police as the Enforcer of a Particular Distribution of the Sensible**

As Tanke (2011) makes clear, when Rancière speaks of the police, he does not mean those “truncheon-wielding cops who crack the skulls of striking workers or unruly students” (p.45). Instead, Rancière (1999) defines the police as
an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and that sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular action is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and other as noise” (p.29).

When pressed on the question as to whether there is ever a “concrete actor” that acts as the police, for example FOX News, an individual politician, or Microsoft, Rancière’s (2006c) reply is that this is too easy an answer. While he agrees that FOX News represents an extreme example of the police, he emphasizes that the distribution of places and roles that defines a police order does not merely refer to some institution, some “big machine,” or the media. This “distribution of what is given to our experience ... [or] of what you are and are not able to do“ (ibid. n.p.) can emerge just “as much from the assumed spontaneity of social relations“ (Ranciere, 1999, p.29). Thus, the police refers to “any hierarchical order” (Chambers, 2010, p.61), or any order that structures what can become visible and sayable. In other words, there is no place outside of the police – “a police order, *some* police order, is inevitable” but not all police orders are the same: “there is a worse and a better police,” he says, although he doesn’t offer much clarification as to what he means by this (Chambers, 2010, p. 62). But the key point is that, for Rancière, “politics must always take place from within the conditions of the police” (May, 2009, p.11). In other words, politics consists of confronting hierarchies where they exist and therefore is always “local and occasional” (Rancière, 1999, p.139).

Significantly, the police order is not enforced simply by the police. It is also a matter of “how the sensible gets distributed, partitioned, and shared” (May, 2009, p.18).
In other words, hierarchies “are imposed by people’s coming to see and experience their world in certain ways, ways that sustain and nourish those hierarchies” (ibid.). Politics occurs when there is a disruption in this “framing of the given” – or what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible”. The distribution of the sensible is:

the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.

It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience (Rancière, as cited in Highmore, 2011, p.96).

Significantly, this distribution of the sensible is shared; in other words, it represents a “sharing of the sensible” that creates a “common world” (Tanke, 2011, pp.2-3). The “sensible’s distribution provides to thought its picture of the world, supplying the evidence of what can be conceived, discussed, and disputed” (ibid.). In this way, as it structures our thinking in terms of what is a possibility for future thought and action, it defines the “field of possibility and impossibility” (ibid.).

In essence, what each order of the police as “the means by which a society enforces its distribution of the sensible” (ibid., p.45) wants to do is to “shrink the stage” in terms of what can be seen and heard, or what can be rendered sensible. (Rancière, 2007a, p.93). As Tanke (2011) puts it, “the police monopolizes the interpretations of sense” in order “to strip the sensible of its litigious character” (p.46). For example, the police tell us that salary disputes are private matters between workers and employers; the police tell us that education happens in schools; the police tell us that we are citizens when we are in voting booths. Rather than wielding a baton, the police that Rancière
(2001) speaks of is one who constantly tells us, “Move along! There is nothing to see here!” (n.p.).

**Dissensus as the Confrontation of the Logic of the Police with the Logic of Equality**

Ultimately, then, “political actions and conflicts are conflicts about the distribution of the sensible ... conflicts about what is visible, what can be said about it, who is entitled to speak and act about it” (Rancière, 2009, p.121). To act politically is to reconfigure the sensible by “making visible what had no business being seen and making heard a discourse where once there was only a place for noise” (ibid., p.30). In contrast to the police order that is always trying to shink the stage in terms of what can be seen, Rancière (2006a) has described the political act as one that “enlarges the public sphere” (p.299). In short, “politics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable” (Rancière, 2001, n.p.).

Certainly, Rancière’s account of politics is not the first to emphasize the need to disrupt the distribution of the sensible. However, what makes his account of politics unique is his position that “not every disruption … is worthy of the name ‘politics’” (Tanke, 2011, p.51). For Rancière (1999), politics occurs only when the logic of the police is confronted by the logic of equality. In other words, what disrupts the order does so “in the name of, or with reference to, equality” (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.34). It is “only the supposition of equality [that] allows for speech, action, and organization to break away from the police” (Tanke, 2011, p.51). What distinguishes politics, then, is that it operates based on a *fundamentally different* logic than the police – that is, it operates based on the logic of equality. As Tanke puts it,
‘Doing politics’ consists of placing the two logics in conflict, that is, creating spaces where the two can be opposed and the police hierarchies overturned – however provisionally. The political is this third space of contestation, an indeterminate and always shifting meeting point of the police and politics (ibid.).

Politics in this sense should be thought of not in terms of institutions or spaces but “as a set of relations” in which the staging of a wrong “always occurs in relation to and on the police” (Norval, 2010, p.9). Politics, for Rancière, “cannot be thought of outside of its relation to a specific police distribution of what can be said, thought, and felt” (Chambers, 2011). The name that Rancière gives this confrontation between the logic of equality and the logic of the police is dissensus (Ranciere, 1999) – which is the difference, he says, “between sense and sense” (Rancière, 2011, p.1)

**Dissensus Means Creating a Miscount**

Significantly, dissensus “is not simply a conflict of interests, opinions, or values. It is a conflict over the common itself” (Rancière, 2004a, p.6). Staging one’s equality becomes staging a scene of dissensus when it causes a shift in the distribution of the sensible – or when it leads to a “restaging of common sense”. This restaging takes the form of what Rancière (2007a) calls a “miscount”: democracy always involves a miscount (p.99). What this miscount highlights is that the opposition between the police and politics are “essentially different orientations to the community” (Tanke, 2011, p.51). When staging equality becomes a scene of dissensus, it is because it makes visible the distinction between two very different counts of the community. According the police’s accounting, everyone has been accounted for. Everyone has a place and a role, even if they don’t have much of a say in how the order is run (Bingham & Biesta, 2010). The
assumption here is that political parties are pre-constituted and that there is a given and known subject of discourse, or that everyone can be heard. But, for Rancière, this is precisely the question of politics: Whose speech is heard as discourse, and whose speech is heard as noise? Dissensus is not just a matter of disrupting the sensible at the level of “production,” or in terms of who can do what or whose activities must be narrowly allotted to certain places and times, but, perhaps “more fundamentally,” it has to do with disrupting “implicit divisions in the realm of discourse, between those whose voices were deemed significant, and those whose voices remained inaudible” (Deranty, 2010, p.8).

Rancière (2001) asks pointedly:

[H]ow can one be sure that the human animal mouthing a noise in front of you is actually voicing an utterance rather than merely expressing a state of being? If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths (n.p.).

One extreme example he offers is from Ancient Rome where “the patricians do not see that what is coming from the mouths of the plebeians are articulated words speaking of common things, and not growls of hunger and furor” (Rancière, 2000, p.12).

A more recent example might be of demonstrators protesting budgetary cuts at California universities who were framed as mere “noisemakers” by then governor Arnold Schwartzzenegger who “quipped” that their demonstrations were “just noise coming from another ‘screaming’ interest group” (Butler, in Chambers & O’Rourke, 2009, p.7).

In sum, for Rancière (1999), the disagreement is “not over the object of speech but ‘over what speaking means’” (xi). It must always amount to “counting” those who do
not, who ought not, count. This is not just in terms of some actions becoming visible and some not but also in terms of noisemakers inserting themselves as speakers. Politics happens, for example, when plebes or natives show that what was thought to be the “mere noise” emitted from their mouths is in fact proper speech. “Political activity,” explains Rancière (1999), “makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (pp.29-30).

**Dissensus as Creating a Stage that Has Not Yet Been Built**

Ultimately, it seems that political activity itself must become the question of whether “there exists a common stage where plebeians and patricians can debate anything” (Ballanche, in Norval, 2010, p.3) or, more broadly, where those whose speech is supplementary to the police order can be heard as speakers rather than noisemakers. As Rancière (1999) writes, this means that political activity is primarily concerned with the conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it. It must first establish that the stage exist for the use of an interlocutor who can’t see it and who can’t see it for good reason *because* it doesn’t exist (p.27).

Whether or not one can construct a common stage upon which he or she can speak with somebody or make himself or herself understood as a speaker, thus, is one of the central questions of politics. Rancière (1997) best captures this notion of politics in the passage below:

I think that the very nature of politics is such that the stage has not been
built, that the object has not been recognized, and that the very partners in the
debate have not been legitimized, as such. Politics begins when it becomes
apparent that the debate is about something that has not been noticed, when the
person who says so is a speaker who has not been recognized as such and when,
ultimately, that person’s very status as a speaking being is in question (pp.34-35).

I will leave this section with one example of dissensus that has been offered by
Rancière (2004c, 2006a, 2007a). This example comes from the feminist protest during
the time of the French Revolution. During this time, women were denied the rights of
citizens, relegated to the private, domestic sphere, and excluded from the public life of
civics and work, to which men “belonged”. Against these givens, a revolutionary
woman, Olympe de Gouges, famously proclaimed “that since women were qualified to
go the scaffold, they were equally qualified to mount the platform of the Assembly”
(ibid.). In other words, because women could be tried for treason, the border between the
private sphere and the public sphere was not quite as clearly drawn as it seemed. Their
private life – if they were sentenced to death – could be political. “If, under the guillotine,
y they were as equal, so to speak, ‘as men,’ they had the right to the whole of equality,
including equal participation to political life” (Rancière, 2004c, pp.303-304).

What de Gouges has done, Rancière says, is to construct a scene of dissensus by
putting a division in the “‘common sense’”: a dispute about what is given, about the frame
within which we see something as given (p.304), in this case, the relegation of women to
the private sphere. Through this argument, Olympe de Gouges has confronted police
order with speech that is supplementary to its order. Regardless of whether she has been
“heard,” she has created a “case” for the verification of equality – not by making a
demand but by actually “putting two worlds in one and the same world” (ibid.). Her argument places her both in a world of exclusion – a world where women “did not have the rights that they had” – and simultaneously a world of inclusion – a world in which women act as if they “had the rights that they had not” (ibid.). In putting together the world where women's rights are valid and the world where those rights are not valid – a world where the logic of politics confronts the logic of the police – de Gouges has rejected the "apportionments of the already ordained community in which some are held not to exist by creating a new common world wherein one demonstrates [her] ability to understand, speak, and critique the oppressor's language," thus allowing us to "contrast this political world with the everyday world of the police" (Tanke, 2011, p.64).

This creation of a common world represents the "second moment" in the political process (Tanke, 2011). The first moment, discussed in the previous section on "equality as staged," involves refusing the places, times, and capacities that have been allotted to one by a hierarchical order. And this second moment is one of "design[ing] a rival conception of the world in conflict with the existing one" (ibid., p.65). This is a "politics of world opening" (ibid.). Much like the example of Rosa Parks (Rancière, 2006a) and the Critical Mass movement where bicyclists take over the road (May, 2009), through this creation of a common world, political actors demonstrate a different way of being together, a move that Rancière (2009c) makes clear is at the heart of his politics as a redistribution of the sensible: “[H]uman beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their ways of being together; and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of ‘being together’” (p.56)
In conclusion, dissensus can be summarized in a number of ways. First, it creates a disruption of the division of the sensible, a disruption that takes equality as its reference point as the logic of equality confronts the logic of the police. This disruption must result in a miscount, in which those whose ways of speaking are supplementary to a given order stage a wrong, or disagreement, over what speaking means. Ultimately, dissensus is the construction of a stage where the question of who speaks and who is really a speaking being becomes visible and, at least potentially, threatens to cause a redistribution of the sensible through the creation of a “common world”. By constructing a scene of dissensus – a stage and a counterworld – political actors can do more than merely “play at politics”; they can make possible new ways of seeing, doing, and being together.

**The Inventive Reader: Why “Equality as a Logic that Creates a Scene of Dissensus” Might Matter to Education**

What does dissensus mean in terms of those who tend to be at the middle and top of hierarchies, May (2008?) asks. And, in particular, what might it mean for educators who tend to be at the at the middle and top of intellectual hierarchies in classrooms? Although May (2009) notes that Rancière’s politics is not addressed to them, he also argues that the presupposition of equality acts from within a situation of dissensus as a challenge to those who uphold a particular police order (p.16). In effect, this presupposition forces them to decide whether or not they believe in equality. We can choose to verify the presupposition of equality or we can admit we don’t believe in equality. For educators, I believe this brings us back to the question of “impossible students,” or students whose ways of speaking and doing don’t make sense and don’t “count” in school. As those who uphold a police order – in this case, an order that
“monopolizes interpretations of sense” around what it means to be a “good student” and sets up intellectual hierarchies between teachers as knowers and students as those in need of pedagogical and political interventions to be “equal” – the question is one of how we might work with students to construct “cases” for the verification of equality. And, more specifically, the question is one of how we can construct cases that cause a “redistribution of the sensible that underlies educational relations between masters and pupils” (Lewis, 2009, p.285).

Rancière, frankly, is not much help in this task. He offers few details as to how dissensus might actually be constructed. (“I am trying to look at the notions that make politics possible. How politics becomes concretely possible is another matter,” he has said [Rancière, 1997, p.33].) He leaves us to wonder, as Tanke (2011) puts it, “[W]hen springs dissensus? How, given the overwhelming tendency of the world to naturalize its distinctions, distributions, silences, and prejudices, do people manage to conceive the world otherwise?” (p.150). This is a particularly difficult question in school, Bingham and Biesta (2010) add. They summarize this difficulty in a single statement: the “world is not a school” (p.148). Unlike the world that is “everywhere” and “allows for a multitude of roles, identities, and encounters,” the school is only a building where teachers and students tend to encounter each other almost exclusively “in their role as teachers and students” (ibid.). Given these constraints, the challenge of creating a stage on which students can invent a demonstration of equality seems all the more challenging.

Citton (2009) offers a potential educational entry point when he argues that Rancière’s notion of the distribution of sensible allows us to “locate political agency in the figure of the inventive reader” (p.139). It is this interpreter who “selects, from among
the superabundant potential meanings conveyed by the text [considered broadly here as anything in an author’s toolbox that can be used as a resource for meaning-making], which ones are to be counted as relevant, which ones are to be discounted, and which ones he will take no account of” (ibid., p.138). In other words, in terms of the stage that is set up to redistribute the sensible, Rancière does not merely assume that in the “moment of expression,” the author is the only “real agent” in this work. In fact, there is another agent here – the spectator. In his book, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Rancière, 2009c) – considered by Rancière to be somewhat of a sequel to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in terms of further developing his notion of intellectual equality – Rancière seeks to blur the line between the active and passive through this figure of the spectator. Specifically, he wants to take the spectator out of his place as a passive onlooker and, in the process, ask whether the spectator is treated as an intelligent person. In terms of the distribution of sensible, he wants to suggest that the spectator’s role is quite important. How one perceives and sees is, for Rancière, active and political work that can reorder the distribution of the sensible. Rancière (2007b) writes that

looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution [of the sensible], and that ‘interpreting the world’ is already a means of transforming it. The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets (p.277).

For educators, this raises a question as to how we might engage in more inventive readings when it comes to those children whose speech is supplementary to police order. These are children who, like Barbara with her insertion of “nana” into language to mean “thirsty,” might become political actors who show us that “utterances are always
contestable” and that, because this is so, there is always a “chance for human beings to insert themselves differently into the sensible’s distribution” (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.117). Foregrounding the active role of the reader, then, makes teachers into emancipated spectators in the critical moment of the pedagogical encounter when we confront students’ speech and texts. In such moments, the question then becomes one of how we might engage in more inventive interpretations of speech that is supplementary to that of the “good student”. Can we interpret from outside the discourse of teaching-as-usual? Can we become more attentive to disturbances (Masschelein, 2010)? Can we rethink what and how we hear and learn to verify in everything competence? Can we hear children who speak in the political sense, like Barbara, in terms of inserting themselves from noise into language as speaking beings who belong to a common world of thinkers and speakers? And, finally, as Tanke (2011) pushes us to consider, is there a “richer and more complex tapestry” than Rancière has given us “from which to create resources for dissensus” so that we might, in our inventive readings, create new worlds that allow for different relationships “between sense and sense” and different ways of being together with our students?

“Democracy Means Equality”

*Democracy [is] the world where everything is upside down because of the reign of equality.*

~ Jacques Rancière, 2009a, p.119

In this chapter I have attempted to cover a lot of ground, tracking my own journey through Ranciere’s work on equality and seeking to begin the work of translating how these ideas might matter to the field of education. Beginning from Rancière’s radical premise that teaching is rarely political, I recounted the story of the ignorant schoolmaster
whose key insight for education is that “equality is an origin for political and other action, not the other way around” (Dillon, 2005, p.230). Beginning from the premise that any political sequence must begin with this axiomatic equality, I proposed the following framework as one possibility of re-visioning democracy as the practice of equality: equality as a presupposition, equality as staged, and equality as constructing a scene of dissensus. Underlying this framework is an understanding of equality as the “primary means of contesting hierarchical and exclusionary distributions of the sensible,” making it possible for us to “imagine other forms of arrangements” (Tanke, 2011, p.4).

Because Rancière’s insistence on a different starting point other than inequality is so outside the dominant discourse of politics – including those discourses of progressive education that continually presuppose and verify inequality – it has led Davis (2010a) to ask, “[W]hat else could politics be but the exercise of power?” (p.74). As we have seen, Rancière’s response comes in the form of a theatrical account of politics, which focuses on the “unintelligible” – those who don’t make sense or are heard as mere noise in a given social order – who stage their own equality and, in the process raise questions about what can be seen, heard, and said in a given distribution of the sensible. For Rancière, then, to become a political subject is “to be heard and seen, and politics is the process of reconfiguring the ways in which subjects are heard and seen” (ibid., p.91). This reconfiguration of the sensible, Rancière suggests, takes place through the creation of a stage where there had previously been none before and on which those whose ways of speaking are supplementary to a given social order can be “taken seriously, as valid partners in a dialogue, as people who make sense” (Deranty, 2010, p.11). The underlying assumptions of this theatrical and transgressive notion of politics — paraphrased by
Rancière (2009a) as “power without power” – are that anyone can occupy a different position than the one they are in and that things can always be otherwise.

Throughout the chapter, I have tried to make Rancière’s (and Jacotot’s) story of equality into my own, suggesting that the practice of radical equality might matter to education by introducing three potential “entry points” that I will continue to pursue in Chapters 3 and 4:

- the figure of the child as one who already speaks
- the gap or distance between teaching and learning as a space of declassification in which students and teachers can stage new ways of speaking
- the teacher as an inventive reader who disrupts the order of schooling’s “monopolization of sense”

Rather than presenting these entry points as a recipe to be followed, I hope to use them in the following chapters as tools that might dislodge “sensible” ways of being together as teachers and students, or as a “deviation from a natural order of things,” thus reflecting the fleeting, sporadic, and interruptive character of democracy that I have tried to present in this chapter. Although as St. Pierre (2001) might say, I have only just begun to read when it comes to Rancière, my hope is that, in this struggle to grope at his ideas and to tell my own stories about this story that is in front of me, I have laid out here a rich enough forest of signs – signs that, as Tanke (2011) points out, Ranciere has been scattering about for nearly forty years – to launch us into a rich intellectual adventure in the remainder of this dissertation as we move into schools and classrooms.
I will use the terms democracy and politics interchangeably in this chapter, although scholars have suggested that this relationship is more complicated than what I am able to discuss here (cf. Norval, 2010). Because I go along with Rancière’s idea that equality does not come about through politics but is actually what must initiate the political sequence, I do not use the words equality and politics as equivalents.

Throughout the dissertation, I try to make it clear that it is the storyline of equality-to-come that Rancière’s work wants to intervene upon. Rather than engaging in a critique of specific theorists – although I do highlight Bourdieu, Freire, and Plato a bit – the main emphasis is on this storyline itself that has served as a backdrop of interpretation for much work in the field of progressive education.

This point is often made in terms of Rancière’s assertion that there is a better and a worse police, and that work done to reduce inequality often contributes toward making a “better” police order (see Bingham & Biesta, 2010 and Tanke, 2011 for a further discussion).

More specifically, they make clear that Freire’s child does not speak in the political sense. I will make this argument more clear in the “equality as dissensus” section.

Although I do not have space or time in this project to pursue this point in more depth, I believe it would be an interesting project to analyze some of the empirical work that is based on a Freirian framework and examine how Freire’s child is typically able to speak. For example, I would point the reader to Bartlett’s (2005) look at how Brazilian educators have taken up Freire’s work in ways that has, at times, instituted an intellectual hierarchy and limited the way children can speak. See especially her anecdotes on pp.357-358 regarding teachers’ efforts to bring in students’ knowledge and how this limited the ways in which they were able to speak.

Rancière (1999) calls this process subjectification, which is the “production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus a part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience” (p.35). For a much richer discussion of Rancière’s notion of subjectification than I am able to present here, please see May (2010b), Rancière (1995b), and Tanke (2011, pp.65-70).

It should be noted here that in today’s more “student-centered” classrooms, this distance is merely suppressed in more perfected – yet still stultifying ways – argue both Cornelissen (2010) and Rancière (1991, 2010). In her close reading of The Ignorant Schoolmaster, Cornelissen (2010) acknowledges that that today’s students are much more often positioned as active constructors of knowledge who build upon their existing knowledge and prior experience. However, the teacher’s intervention is still needed, even if it is not so much an explanation as it is setting up the environment and experiences that will bring students to discover and construct knowledge. Her underlying argument is that “the facilitator seems to replace the assumption of inequality at the level of knowledge with the assumption of inequality at the level of the capacity to learn” (p.531). This certainly is an interesting point that might also be developed further at a later time.
Chapter 3: Restaging Rancière:
Pursuing a Method of Equality in Education

Bringing Rancière to School

[T]here is no social emancipation, and no emancipatory school.... Only individuals can be emancipated. And all emancipation can promise is to teach people to be equal in a society ruled by inequality

~ Jacques Rancière, 2010, p.9

Scholars have just begun to recognize the potential of Jacques Rancière’s work to contribute to the field of education and, in particular, to challenge what has become normative in the field of social justice education (cf. Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Ruitenberg, 2010; Ryther, 2009). However, as several scholars have pointed out, there continues to be a lack of “contemporary” and “concrete” examples of what Rancière’s conception of the political might look like (cf. Davis, 2010a; Ryther, 2009; Tanke, 2011), and, certainly, this lack of examples extends to the field of education. Building from the previous chapter, I seek to put Rancière’s account of radical equality and theatrical politics to work in education by restaging selected scenes from classrooms that help us to imagine what it might mean to practice equality as a presupposition, as staged, and as dissensus. With Rancière, I want to enter the messy spaces of classrooms to see if we might find moments where “politics rises from below” – or moments, building from my tentative definition of politics in the last chapter, where the “unintelligible” presuppose and stage their own equality, and where this equality interrupts the school order of
classification as dissensus. In Rancière’s (2009a) words, I want to document those “moments when the power of anybody emerges most significantly” (p.118).

Through these examples, my hope is to continue the conversation I started with Rancière in the previous chapter, setting myself up to use the empirical – in this case, published accounts of classroom scenes that threaten to become “events” (Derrida, 2007) – so that I can think more about what happens in a moment of equality or dissensus. The point of this conversation, I hope to make clear, is not to propose a new pedagogy – or, in some way, to “school Rancière” (Bingham & Biesta, 2010). Bringing Rancière to school is not a project that will allow me to “claim a ‘better’ vantage point”; instead it is a project that must be “put at risk” from the beginning (Lather, 2010. P.78). As Bingham and Biesta (2010) have warned, Rancière’s notions of equality and politics do not need or necessarily want to go to school. The most obvious reason is that Rancière’s view of equality and politics as sporadic, episodic, “and one is tempted to say, anarchic” (Hewlett, 2007, p.102) asks that we give up on any political fantasies of the school as an institution for social emancipation, at least insofar as schools aim to bring about emancipation by reducing inequality (Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Rancière, 1991; Ruitenberg, 2008). Even if we can find moments of equality in an unequal place such as school, we must treat them as necessarily fleeting and ephemeral. From a Rancièrian (1991) perspective, equality can never be institutionalized; it can only be verified in those situations where it has been transgressively assumed and where it confronts the hierarchical order of the police.

What is the usefulness, Hewlett (2007) asks, of such a “local and occasional” politics that seemingly wants only to jolt a given hierarchical order? A politics that
Rancière might add in which “not any jolt will do” but must make equality its reference point, which itself can never be in place. What if the best we can hope for is to work for a “better” police order – an order “that all the breaking and entering perpetrated by egalitarian logic has most jolted out of its ‘natural’ logic” (Rancière, as cited in Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.37)? What sort of conversation does that leave us to pursue in the pages that follow?

What Rancière is asking, I propose, is that we enter into a very different kind of conversation: a conversation with a trajectory that, to borrow from Bingham and Biesta (who remain unconvinced, by the way, that we need to take Rancière to school), follows a new and uncertain path where “instead of knowing where it wants to go, it knows where it wants to start” (2010, p.73, emphasis added). Where it wants to start, of course, is with the opinion of equality. But, for those of us working in the field of education and, in particular, those of us who are interested in matters of social change, making equality our point of departure, rather than our endpoint, is a reversal that forces us into a very different route of reading (Ellsworth, 1997). How do we not start with inequality? How do we “begin not with concrete inequalities in education, of which there are almost too many to enumerate” (Power, 2009, n.p.)? How do we not tell a story about school and democracy that ends with a call for “reform and (pedagogical, social, psychological, cultural and even medical) remedies” (Masschelein & Simons, 2010, p.666)? And, finally, how do we begin not as scholars who have been to school, who know how to school others with our thoughts, who know how to explain the inequalities we see to those who do not see, and who know how to arrive at truth (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.148)?
Pursuing a Method of Equality

Anyone who starts from distrust, who assumes inequality and proposes to reduce it, can only succeed in setting up a hierarchy of inequalities, a hierarchy of priorities, a hierarchy of intelligences – and will reproduce inequality infinitum.

Jacques Rancière, 1995a, p.52

In this “methodology” chapter, then, the method itself must become an object of our inquiry (St. Pierre, 1997). Can we start with equality? How might we read and interpret classroom texts and events from an assumption of equality? Can we change our reading routes – can we bypass the route we have repeatedly taken, a route that starts with inequality and moves gradually toward its supposed reduction, to a deauthorized route that begins with equality and goes where we cannot anticipate? Throughout this chapter, these are some of the questions I take up, as I seek not only to search for moments of equality and dissensus but also to pay attention to how these moments might cause trouble for the field of education, in particular, for our ways of seeing and doing as educators and scholars. As I try to show what teaching looks like to me when I attempt to change my reading route, I also seek to make visible my struggles – my insights, my inevitable failures – to view teaching from an assumption of equality.

In the section that follows, I begin my quest to read differently by making Rancière’s “method of equality” my starting point, in particular, his insistence on positioning himself as a storyteller who tells discontinuous stories (Ellsworth, 1997), or what he calls philosophical tales, which I’ll define loosely as those tales that seek to create a stage on which something new might be seen and on which people can appear differently than what is determined by their social locations. Following this section, I return to the notions of equality as a presupposition and as staged that I presented in the
previous chapter, as I offer three short philosophical tales of my own. In the final section, I go back and mine these tales to suggest that storytelling, performance, and drama might be important resources for dissensus (Tanke, 2011).

**Rancière as “Emancipated Storyteller”**

Rather than ―explaining‖ the classroom examples I present in this chapter – thus setting myself up as the “‘expert’ who ‘sees’ the world as it really is” while positioning my readers as those who “must be made to see” – I seek instead to write these empirical examples as *equality and dissensus stories*. Like Rancière, I try to pursue a *method of equality* (Rancière, 2009a; Rancière, 2009b) by positioning myself more as a storyteller than a “truth teller” or “superior mind.” Key for Rancière is that storytelling is an “egalitarian act” that “presumes in its interlocuter an equality of intelligence” (Ross, 1991, p.69) – that is, a capacity to counter-translate the stories they read and make their own “intellectual adventures” of them. In other words, he trusts his readers and believes that because they are his intellectual equals, they are up to the challenge of taking his stories and doing with them what makes sense to them. Significantly, then, Rancière’s “method” turns out not to be a method at all – at least not in the traditional sense of the word as it is usually in by empirical research (Cornelissen, n.d.) – but, rather, it is a story (Bingham & Biesta, 2010). It is a commitment to telling a particular kind of story that entails the following: “starting from equality – asserting equality, assuming equality as a given, working out from equality, trying to work out how productive it can be” (Rancière, 1995a, pp.51-52).

This method asks the storyteller to “become ignorant of domination” and instead “offer knowledge of equality” (Pelletier, 2009, p.273). This is not a matter of dismissing
or ignoring inequality, Pelletier (ibid.) clarifies; rather it is a matter of learning to interpret and represent the words of others differently. Specifically, it is a matter of reading their words not as an “expression of a sociological condition (e.g., the condition of being female in a patriarchal system), since all one will ever see is confirmation of inequality” (ibid.). What becomes valorized, then, is not someone “doing/being politics”: “[E]mpirical’ workers are not shown to be moving towards particular progressive goals. The workers are not illustrated as ‘resisting’ or exercising ‘agency’; neither are they displayed as victims, as exemplars of misery” (ibid., p.275). To ascribe our “empirical workers” one role – that is, to show them as always “progressing,” resisting, or demonstrating “agency” – is to risk making them a cog in the “philosopher’s explanatory machine” (Hewlett, 2007; Rancière, 2003). It is to “dig an abyss under our own feet” (Rancière, 1991, p.129), making the scholar’s knowledge of domination necessary and dividing the world into two: people who are ignorant and people who know. It is to grant ourselves a power that comes only from others’ incapacity and ignorance – or, perhaps more harshly, to set up the intellectual and the “social critic win every round by showing that democracy loses every round” (Rancière, 1995, p.52).

By contrast, a method of equality suggests a different sort of reading in which the task is to “seiz[e] in every sentence, in every act, the side of equality” (Rancière, 1991, p.138). This is a truant sort of reading that allows for the possibility of social disorder in which people can do anything else other than that which has already been ordered (Pelletier, 2009). Surprisingly – and perhaps scandalously – this means that the one who works from a method of equality is not particularly interested in “‘respecting’ the words of others,” “trusting their rationality,” “celebrating their existence,” or even “being
faithful to their content” (ibid., p.273). Instead, as suggested earlier, the storyteller is interested in “declassifying words,” or “reading/producing words against the guarantees, or modes of legitimation, offered by the social location of the speaker” (ibid.). This means, in part, valorizing certain actions in which people transgress the boundaries of the categories that have been assigned to them (ibid.).

Rancière demonstrates this truant sort of reading best in The Nights of Labor (as described in the previous chapter) when he valorizes the poetry, writing, and other intellectual work of the joiners and workers who act other than their social identity. Valorizing, in this sense, refers to Rancière’s (2004b) focus on showing us how “language can act to cause something to be seen and heard” and, thus, condition a very different distribution of the sensible (p.14). Instead of engaging in a Marxist reading that would keep the workers in their “place” by reading their words exclusively as an expression of “workers’ culture” or “resistance,” Rancière takes these words out of their proper time and place. He brings their words into the present to make them appear as statements on and shifts in the distribution of the sensible that says that workers have no time to do anything other than work or restore themselves for the next day’s work (Rancière, 2009b, p.281). His main move, then, is to read the joiners’ text as evidence of the authors “not as workers seeking equality but as thinkers expressing a fundamental equality they already possess” (ibid.). In effect, as storyteller, it seems that he wants to put forth a very different kind of protagonist, or “spokesperson”:

In traditional logic, the ‘spokesperson’ is the one who expresses the thought, feeling, and way of life of a group. I showed, on the contrary, that a spokesperson is first of all the person who breaks this logic of expression, the one who puts
words into circulation – that is, who uproots words from their assigned mode of speaking or of being…. The basic problem was to show that many efforts that believe they ‘respect others' differences’ by entering into ‘their’ language and ‘their’ ways of thinking, only repeat Plato's adage that one should stay in his/her place and do his/her own thing (Rancière, 2000, p.5).

In sum, storytellers working from a method of equality want their writing to become a redistribution of the sensible. They want to untangle words from their social places. They want to choose spokespeople who “free words from a given relation between signs and bodies” (Rancière, 2009b, p.278). In short, they want to wager that in every human work – in every situation of inequality – they can search for and find a trace of equality\(^1\).

**Philosophical Tales**

Often, this redistribution of the sensible takes the form of what Rancière (2009b) calls a *philosophical tale*. Referring to the example from *The Nights of Labor*, Rancière (2009a) characterizes a philosophical tale as one in which the storyteller’s job is that of “pull[ing] the words of the joiner … to make them meet the words of the philosopher” so that the philosophers “concepts [can] take their meaning” (p.117). The words of the joiners “still resound in their concrete place and time of enunciation,” but Rancière also “draws a line of escape” in which it is possible for the joiners to meet both Plato and Rancière because they “have something in common” and “speak about the same thing,” in this case, the time one properly has or does not have (Rancière, 2009b, p.283).

Rather than engage in the “show-and-tell exposition” that dominates much of scholarly writing (Van Maanen, 1988) and, in effect, creates a hierarchy of discourses –
“the metadiscourse of the theorist explicating the truth of a lower level of discourse” [i.e., the narrative of the worker]” – Rancière (2009c) seeks to “blur this hierarchy between levels of discourses” (p.280). Through the philosophical tale, Rancière manages to slip into the texts of his protagonists, “winding around or worming in” to animate such concepts as equality, dissensus, and the partition of the sensible (Ross, 1991, p.68) rather than leaving them in the abstract. Often, this makes it difficult to tell where Rancière stops and his characters start (Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Simons & Masschelein, 2010), as his commentary “contextualizes, rehearses, reiterates, dramatizes, elaborates, continues” their stories (Ross, 1991, p.68). Significantly, this blurring of discourses, Rancière (2009b) argues, is a work of translation where “empirical stories and philosophical discourses translate each other” (p.280). Instead of doing “the easiest thing of all – [which is] to explain the speech of another” (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.147), Rancière uses the philosophical tale to confront his various “spokespersons” as one speaker to another – “not to give his voice to the silent aspirations of the dominated, but to add his voice to theirs, to hear their voices, rather than [analyze] them, to help them resound, to make them circulate” (Deranty, 2003, n.p.). It is through this power of translation that makes one speaker confront another, not in the “derisive power to unveil things,” that Rancière seeks to make his stories understood.

**A Method of Equality as a Series of Questions**

In sum, a method of equality is not a recipe or procedure to follow, but a story that has as its central question: Can we make the assumption of equality our point of departure in our storytelling and in our scholarly work? From this question, Rancière puts forth a series of other questions that challenge us to tell new stories: How do we
choose our protagonists, or spokespeople? Do we assign to them certain types of behavior, certain speech, and certain places? How do we speak with them? Are they qualified for thinking at all, or must we overwrite their speech by explaining what it “really” means? Can we add our voice to theirs while making theirs still resound in their time and place of enunciation to make a “plausible space where new connections and developments become visible and thinkable” (Deranty, 2003, p.43). In short, can we create a stage on which something new might be seen?

**Pursuing New Scenes of Equality in Education**

*Rancière’s educational work is not a recipe for any kind of pedagogy. It is a story. It is not a method. It waits not for implementation. It waits instead for another story to be told in return.*

~ Charles Bingham & Gert Biesta, 2010, p.152

In what remains of this chapter, I attempt to bring Rancière – along with the ignorant schoolmaster – into contemporary classrooms to see what moments of equality we might find there and, most importantly, what new stories about educational emancipation – stories that strive to be philosophical tales – we might tell in return to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. I would like to briefly preface these stories by making explicit some of the reading routes I have chosen to take in constructing them. I want first to reiterate that few, if any, scholars have attempted this particular form of counter-translation in responding to Rancière’s work. That is to say, few have attempted to *speak with* Rancière through story or even concrete examples. This task I take up, based upon Rancière’s method of equality, is thus a novel one of “pulling” words from the students and teachers I have chosen as spokespeople and making them meet Rancière’s so that his concepts of equality as a presupposition, as staged, and as a logic that creates dissensus
can begin to take their meaning in my counter-translation. In this way, my tales, like his, are meant to blur the boundaries between the conceptual and the material (Davis, 2010a). Rather than engaging in “analysis” in which my words follow those of the students and teachers to explain or express what things really “meant,” I instead spend the rest of this dissertation trying to stage a series of new scenes of educational emancipation.

**Reading Route 1: Seizing the Side of Equality**

As I began the process of crafting the three equality stories, I had only a vague notion of one of the three spokespeople with whom I wanted to speak, a kindergartner named Wally (who appears in the first philosophical tale). In retrospect, I can say that I was immediately drawn to Wally because his supplementary ways of speaking – in his case, supplementary to the intellectual hierarchy that divides the world into adult’s and children’s thinking – seemed most “truant” (Bingham & Biesta, 2010). In contrast to the rather compliant pupils of the ignorant schoolmaster, Wally’s presupposition of equality – taking on the form more of a challenge – more closely resembled my own experiences.

With my first spokesperson in mind, I then began the process that I would follow for each of the subsequent philosophical tales: a process of rereading the original published texts in which my protagonists first appeared and trying to “seize” upon every sentence and every act in which the protagonist seemed to take the side of equality. My reading was selective and my note-taking became rather tedious, as I highlighted and/or rewrote any lines from the central text in which I thought a student or teacher might speak with Rancière about equality. I added onto these notes by reading additional texts by the author of the original text and also an outside author. After I had generated my initial set of notes on the students’ and teachers’ words and actions related to equality, I
began to write my tale. However, in each case, I quickly found myself needing to do a close rereading of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Thus, I followed the same process described above of locating key passages where I thought Rancière and Jacotot might speak with one of the spokespeople I had selected. In some cases I borrowed exact lines or exact paragraph structures from *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* to create somewhat of a mash-up in my tales.

When I began the actual writing, I knew only that each story must begin with someone who was *already* speaking or whose speech acts were already making visible a given hierarchy of intelligences. I did this, in large part, to resist showing “progression” in the story. I did not want to show anyone “progressing” toward equality, or moving from exclusion to inclusion, from voicelessness to voice, from incompetence to competence. This was the only thing I “knew” as I moved into this work. Through the close readings I did to construct the stories, however, new insights – requiring new reading routes – quickly emerged that profoundly shaped my storytelling. I share each of those below.

**Reading Route 2: Equality That Can Only “Appear” in Its Verification**

One of the key insights I found as I moved farther along in my work of collecting and telling the stories that appear below was to resist the temptation of presenting equality as a “ready-made concept” or suggesting that educational emancipation is somehow a matter of “conceptual preparedness” on the part of the teacher who has been made to “understand” something new about equality (Bingham & Biesta, 2010). In short, I needed to find a way of telling the stories that would ensure that equality retained its “empty quality” (Rancière, 1999, p.35), meaning that it is “never anything … but the
result of [itself]” (Rancière, 2010, p.11). To do this, I realized that I needed to pursue an account of equality that is based upon one of Rancière’s key claims that equality must “rely upon its demonstration” (Tanke, 2011) – or it must take on its meaning only in those particular situations where particular hierarchies can be found and people act from its presupposition to create a “dissentual intervention” (Chambers, in Bowman & Stamp, 2011, p.xv).

This meant that my search for equality could not become a “search for the ignorant schoolmaster.” It could not become a search for pedagogy or an “ideal” that we might put into practice. This insight required a significant shift during the course of this project. Although I had quickly generated a long list of examples from educational scholarship that I believed offered lessons of equality, I ultimately selected those that forced me to grapple most with equality’s contingency – a contingency that is unsettling to many of Ranciere’s readers (Bowman & Stamp, 2011). Significantly, in education, this contingency insists that emancipation cannot occur through the conceptual preparedness of the educator but only “through the efforts of the student to verify his or her equality through intellectual apprehension” (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p.24). Because the concept of equality is “continually in need of verification” (Tanke, 2011, p.55), my initial search for the ignorant schoolmaster instead became a search for the “power of anybody,” “the capacity of no matter who,” the “qualification of those who have no specific qualification” (Rancière, 2006b, n.p.). Equality, I came to realize, could only appear in its verification (Rancière, 1991) – a verification of the “capacity of anyone” (Rancière, 2006b). To reflect this contingency, I chose to end each story not with a more prepared teacher or a more equal pedagogical relation but instead with a
series of questions raised by each protagonist – questions that can never be settled but, rather, must be continually answered in order to create new demonstrations of equality.

**Reading Route 3: Wagering on Intellectual Equality**

*Stories are what we believe in.*

~ Gian Pagnucci, 2004, p.55

The shift that I have described above is one that, I want to stress here, meant that, during my adventures in storytelling, I was forced again and again to confront the question of whether or not I wanted to place a wager on *intellectual equality* over social equality. Although it might be tantamount to “choosing fantasy over reality” (Dean, 2011, p.88), this wager meant that, given the disjuncture between intellectual and social equality – a disjuncture that Rancière has repeatedly made clear with his contingent view of politics, his suspicion of institutions, and his insistence that “there is no jacobin pedagogy” (Rancière, 2010, p.14) – I had to actively try *not* to make social equality my endpoint. I know there is much to fear about such a decision – in particular, the risk that placing my focus on the “possibility of anything at all” might be tantamount to turning my back on the “reality of the constraints in producing it” (Dean, 2011, p.88), especially in those cases of material inequality where there are limited resources from which to craft cases for the verification of equality (Rancière, 1997) – but I had to continually push those thoughts away in order to tell the stories that follow. Ultimately, I chose to do this not because Rancière asks me to, but because – to return to the ideas of Chapter 2 – every time I found myself reaching for social equality as a goal, I ended up forgetting that children already speak and I ended up forgetting that the distances that they must cover are not the ones between their ignorance and my knowledge.
Thus, the stories I choose to believe in are those that wager on intellectual equality – but not, as Rancière (1991) reminds us, to observe or prove it; we can never really “prove” or say that all intelligence is equal. The equality of intelligence is, after all, just an “opinion.” This means that my problem in the pages that follow is not one of “proving that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be done under that supposition” (ibid., p.46). This is to make equality our “practical hypothesis” and, although, it “cannot be proven … it can be verified time and again in the school, by teachers (and by pupils)” (Masschelein & Simons, 2010, p.672). It is this verification – and all the many “experiments” that might be conducted that make possible the verification that children have used their intelligence – that I search for in the pages that follow.

**Equality as a Presupposition:**

**How Will You Verify that I Speak through My Intelligence?**

*Intelligence is not a power of understanding based on comparing knowledge with its object. It is the power to make oneself understood through another’s verification. And only an equal understands an equal.*


In the previous chapter, I suggested that Rancière’s notion of equality as a presupposition intervenes upon the normative in pedagogical and political approaches that make inequality their starting point by raising questions about what kind of figure of the child these approaches posit. In the stories that follow, I try to change my route of reading by starting not with children who need pedagogy to speak but, rather, I try to take as my starting point children who *already* speak and who are *already* capable and competent. The first spokesperson I introduce is Wally, a kindergartner whom I first met
as an undergraduate student over ten years ago when his story was given to me as a graduation gift from a teacher in whose classroom I spent two years as an AmeriCorps literacy tutor and who taught me my first, and most important, lessons in equality. I knew if his story was important to her, it must become important to me, and it has been, as it is a story I have come back to throughout my years in the classroom.

The story Wally helps me to tell, “The Child Who Has Already Invented the World,” represents a critical starting point in my journey to search for equality because it asks us right from the beginning to dismiss any romantic notions of equality we may have as an ideal that can be applied to our practice. It is much more comfortable to make the teacher the protagonist in the following story and certainly Wally’s teacher fits the bill – after all, she is well-renowned for listening to children, bringing to her work a profound optimism about children’s capacity for thinking, and addressing exclusion. But I try not to let her be this. By making Wally the protagonist – or at least struggling to try to make him the protagonist – what has begun to come into focus for me is that the presupposition of equality must be an ongoing challenge; it cannot be a “practice”. It must be a challenge to hear those questions that, in moments of disagreement, most jolt the sensible that has divided the world into two intelligences: Who speaks? Who is qualified to think? Who is it that I see before me? Is it someone who is mouthing noises or someone who has already spoken and, quite likely, has already invented the world?

**Philosophical Tale 1: The Child Who Has Already Invented the World**

Rulers are not real.

Stones melt.

Robbers stole the lima beans from the window (and that’s why they didn’t grow).
Supermice with superpowers can lift giant turnips.

And I am a mother lion.

These are some of Wally’s stories. For Wally’s teacher, these stories and many others – the trap door that magically appears to during clean-up to make sure no one can escape their chores, the ladder that so quickly becomes a beanstalk – overwhelm her sense of reality on a daily basis. Her explanations – her faith in the ruler, her preference for clean-up “rules,” her giant turnip that comes up simply because it is ready to come up – are often futile in this kindergarten classroom where the children overwhelmingly prefer Wally’s magical thinking to her “adult facts”. In this classroom, children have not yet been told they cannot invent the world. If they can imagine something, it exists.

And so, like the ignorant schoolmaster, Wally’s teacher finds it impossible to teach in the ways that most teachers do. She cannot explain. She cannot bring the students in an orderly fashion to her own level of expertise. She cannot move them from simplicity and the chance detours that inferior minds so often take before they have mastered more adult, more rational thinking. Unlike the ignorant schoolmaster, this is not because her students speak another language. It is because her students simply choose not to believe her explanations.

Quite by chance, Wally’s teacher makes an important discovery on the day that Wally must sit on the timeout chair twice. It is from this time-out chair that Wally tells his first story. It is about a dinosaur who must go to jail. (More precisely, it is about a dinosaur who goes to jail but who promises to be good and gets to go home. We find this out because his teacher asks him.) Feeling sorry that Wally has had to sit on the timeout chair two times and wanting to make him happy, Wally’s teacher asks him if he would
like to act out his dinosaur story for everyone. Yes, Wally says. And so he becomes her first storyteller and first story actor. Thus begins an experiment in which children’s story writing and story acting come to take center stage in the kindergarten classroom. This is the stage where children’s play becomes visible in its narrative form. It is a stage on which children become known and come to know others. It is a stage where more often than not, children make themselves understood. (After all, rarely does anyone stop to ask when they’re playing, “Do you understand?”)

And so the teacher and the kindergartners find a thing in common. In this activity of storytelling and story acting, their purposes are closer than in any other: they both want to talk about the story. Serious discussions emerge because these are the topics that children care enough about to tell what they really think. Can you trick the tooth fairy? What causes wishes to come true? Can a witch be invisible? Can Wally become a mother lion? Is there a black Santa? It is during this last discussion that Wally’s teacher finds that her experiment exceeds her expectations. A white Santa and a black Santa have just been spotted by Rose at the mall, a fact which must be accounted for by the children who thought Santa was white. Their solution is unexpected: a dual magical Santa who can become white if someone needs him to be white and who can become black if someone needs him to be black.

This latest invention of the children’s unleashes a small revolution in Wally’s teacher’s mind. Children’s magical thinking is no longer the “noise” she cannot hear. It is no longer the fantasy that must stay confined to the private (mostly invisible) world of play. It is not the manifestation of an inferior intelligence that has yet to develop the capacity for logical thinking. Instead, it is thinking that reveals possibilities that she
herself cannot see – possibilities that can only be generated by those who, like everyone, belong to a common world of thinking and speaking beings. The kindergartners have forced their entry into this world. With each invention they insert into classroom – the magical Santa, Supermouse, the trap door at clean up – they claim the status of fully thinking and speaking beings who have the capacity to make sense of the world and speak through their own intelligence. They claim the capacity of anybody.

Until then, Wally’s teacher thought as most teachers thought. Children’s competence must come at the end of her teaching. Her task must be one of moving children toward competence, of beefing up their qualifications for thinking and speaking. But with each invention, they proclaim, We are already competent. Can you verify our competence? We already think and speak through our intelligence. Can you verify that we think and speak through our intelligence? With each invention, they challenge their teacher: Do you presuppose an intelligence at work? Do you hear noise or discourse? With each invention, they challenge: Who is qualified to speak and think in this space, who is really a speaking being and who is unspeakable?

And so Wally’s teacher learns to affirm the equality of intelligence by becoming a teacher of stories, a teacher who listens to stories and is curious about stories, a teacher who asks “true questions” about stories. Children already think, the teacher says to herself, and everyday my job is to find out how children think, to search for their perspective. Children already speak – often, in ways I cannot anticipate or predetermine – and my job is to use each day’s priorities and attachments to further an environment in which children tell what they think.
Staging Equality (Student’s Version):

What is the Distance That You Teach?

*Man [sic] is neither a political nor a speaking animal, but first and foremost a poetic animal.*

~ Jacques Rancière, 1995a, p.51

In the next story, I try to go where Rancière seldom does – that is, beyond the moment of interruption. The next story asks, Given children that already speak, how do we speak with them “under the sign of equality” (Rancière, 1991)? In particular, how do we speak with those whose speech is supplementary to a given hierarchy of capacities (Bingham & Biesta, 2010)? And, how can we rethink that persistent and eruptive distance between our teaching’s address and students’ responses (Ellsworth, 1997) in ways that might lead to declassifying ways of speaking as teachers and students that are tied up with evaluation and “getting it”?

Writing the next story represents my attempt to return to Rancière’s notion of distance that I introduced in Chapter 2, the distance that is the forest of signs. The protagonist of the next story, the “singing scientist” wants to reclaim this distance in his refusal to accept his role or place as an “emergent” writer in a Writers Workshop in which his texts are supposed to be addressed to someone who will evaluate or “help” me, rather than someone who will speak to me. In his efforts to stage different ways of speaking, he asks us to imagine an *as if* world in which teachers and peers become translators and countertranslators – ones who can make new stories from my story, who can make new poems from my poem.
The singing scientist’s story became important to me several years ago when I first became interested in Vygotsky’s (1978) insight that all thinking is done through the use of tools and signs and then Holland and Lachicotte’s (1998; 2007) insight in their translation of Vygotsky’s work that tools and signs might help us to declassify from the roles in which we are perennially cast. In my work as a supervisor and as a research apprentice, I became curious about children’s work that never actually becomes a sign because it is never interpreted as a sign (Peirce). Thus, building from Wally’s story that, in part, wants to posit an equality that is always putting us in relation to signs in common, such as books, texts, and stories (Cornelissen, 2010), my question is how might students’ signs—waiting-to-be-read-as-signs and not objects for evaluation allow us to reclaim a different sort of distance in which there might be more possibilities for the verification of equality?

Philosophical Tale 2: The Poet’s Distance

In another classroom much like Wally’s, on a stage where children also come to share their stories each day, there stands another storyteller and speaker, Jameel, whose stories make the classroom stage shake and wobble in ways that Wally did not. Jameel’s ways of speaking are not like Wally’s. He speaks most often in the genres of chants and dialogues and jokes and songs, not the straightforward narratives that Wally spoke in most often. And his preference is for what he calls “funny stories,” not magical ones. He can tell the more straightforward sorts of stories, if need be, but these are not the stories that he imagines will entertain his audience of kindergartners, first graders, his teacher or his adult friend in the class. His choice of artful and playful language and his dramatic constructions of funny stories – always performed with great exuberance and humor – are
aimed at this audience, an audience whom he expects will be responsive and appreciative of his efforts.

But his unexpected ways of speaking – the themes he introduces, his stylistic language – are not always met with the responsiveness or appreciation he expects. Let’s join him now as he dramatically performs his latest story:

Sat on Cat. Sat on Hat.

Hat Sat on CAT.

Cat GoN. 911 for Cat.

“It’s almost like poetry,” says one appreciative peer.

“It’s sort of about a car crash,” Jameel explains, holding the drawing that also tells the story.

“It doesn’t make sense,” objects Mollie with what Jameel’s adult friend and literacy researcher cannot help but note is “the key line of primary-grade literacy pedagogy.”

The argument that ensues between Mollie and Jameel is too lengthy to be recounted here. Let us just say that it ends with Jameel’s loud explosion, “It DOES MAKE SENSE.” And let us also add the key point that, at its heart, the argument is about this: Jameel has been trying to perform his story for his audience, and Mollie has been trying to help a needy peer.

Technically speaking, based on the rules of the Writers Workshop, Mollie is the correct party in this dispute. Sharing time is a time to get “help” from classmates and teachers. It is a time to improve one’s “draft,” to make better sense. Mollie, whose own mastery of straightforward narratives (mostly about her pets) makes her particularly
qualified to help in this case, correctly assumes her role as that of “helper” who can help Jameel write a narrative, one that will make the literal sense that she – and, perhaps more importantly, school – demands.

Nevertheless, Jameel remains steadfast in his refusal to accept help from his *audience* (although he will sometimes accept help from his teachers and classmates when they are not his audience). If anyone needs help, he presumes, certainly it must be Mollie. Is there anything else you don’t understand? Can’t you read? he demands. As far as he is concerned, a member of his audience has no business seeking to teach him about his own story. Mollie is not according him, as performer, the proper respect. She is trying to drag out of him a story he simply does not want to tell.

And so what we have here is not merely a difference of opinions, but a disagreement over two very different senses of distances and what is assumed about the children who must cover them. This disagreement is one that puzzles Jameel’s teacher, who must side with Mollie, although she meets with the same protests from Jameel in her own attempts to become his “helper” and “editor”. Is she not responsible for knowing the distance between her knowledge and Jameel’s and helping him to suppress this gap? What is the distance she must teach?

Of course, the distance that Mollie has initiated is the explicator’s distance, and the gap it reveals is an evil that must be abolished. It is the gap between Jameel’s ignorance and the explicator’s knowledge. It calls for an expert in the art of suppressing it, one who knows the exact distance between the material that must be taught and the person who must be instructed. Mollie may not yet know this exact distance, but there are other explicators who do. A first grade writer must be able to compose three
complete thoughts, says one. He must learn to avoid those important gaps in sequences of information, says another. He must stay on topic. And certainly, as Mollie would surely agree, he must provide more details about why that cat is gone! Surely the methods for reducing this distance between Jameel’s ignorance and the master’s knowledge have become perfected – the master may no longer tell but instead set up a situation in which the student can discover the master’s knowledge – but the master’s knowledge remains the same: it is knowledge of ignorance. There is nothing wrong about this; it may, in fact, lead to learning, but it will not lead to emancipation.

The distance that Jameel has insisted upon is the poet’s distance, an idea of distance that is very much opposed to this stultifying one. The poet’s distance is the distance that belongs to all human beings who try to communicate through the forest of signs. It is the distance that the ignorant schoolmaster teaches. It is the normal condition of communication, and it does not call for an expert in the art of suppressing it. It only calls for poetic beings who are capable of embracing a distance between words and things, between signs and their referents. These are beings who are capable of embracing the “unreality of representation,” who do not expect words to correspond to the world as it is, who acknowledge the “impossibility of saying the truth even when we feel it”. The ignorant schoolmaster’s most scandalous proposition is that this distance between words and things, signs and their referents, makes us all speak as poets – it makes us all try as best we can to tell the story of our mind’s adventures and verify that they are understood by other adventurers.

Consider, the ignorant schoolmaster asks us, the example of the affectionate mother who sees her son come back from a long war. “The shock she feels robs her of
speech. But ‘the long embraces, the hugs of a love anxious at the very moment of happiness, a love that seems to fear a new separation; the eyes in which joy shines in the middle of tears; the mouth that smiles in order to serve as the interpreter of the equivocal language of tears; the kisses, the looks, the attitude, the sighs, even the silence,’ – all that improvisation in short – is this not the most eloquent of poems?”

Has Jameel not written a poem just as eloquent? Has he not made a similar voyage into the wilds of words and sentences – of images and sounds – where the way to do that has not been invented? Like everyone, he is a poet to the extent that he does not merely journey through the forest of signs but wants to make his work into a means of expression and he is not content to feel something but tries to impart it to others. We learn from his adult friend – his most attentive and appreciative audience, at least to begin with – that beneath his text lay multiple stories he wishes to translate: a morning car accident near the playground, an injured woman on the street, and the subsequent 911 call; his own beloved cat Panther, now lost, whom he fears has been killed by a car; a story he likes, The Cat in the Hat; and zooming robbers from TV. And so because he thinks and wants to communicate his thoughts and feelings about these things, he speaks through his intelligence and begins the poetic work of translation. And his poem “testifies to a fundamental equality: the human capacity to make things in language” and in sign. In the act of speaking, man doesn’t transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same.

Jameel offers his poem not as an object to be evaluated or explicated. (“Don’t ask me. Ask the story!” is his typical response to those who question his sense-making.) Instead he offers his poem as an expression of an intellectual adventurer that asks only to
be understood by other adventurers. His words like all words, written or spoken, are a
translation that waits for and only takes on meaning in its counter-translation. And so
Jameel’s challenge to his audience (who are not his helpers who continually position him
as needing help) is this: Can you speak with me under the sign of equality? Can you see
my every effort – and can you make your every effort – strained toward this: someone
has addressed words to us that we want to recognize and respond to, not as students or as
superior minds, but as people; in the way you respond to someone speaking to you and
not to someone examining you? Must the distance between us be always your secret – or
can it be my journey?

As the ignorant schoolmaster says, the poet needs equality like the explicator
needs inequality.

**Staging Equality (Teacher’s Version):**

**Can We Make It a Denser Forest?**

Who can teachers be in this distance? This is the question that I take up in my
final philosophical tale. The distance that Ranciere speaks of has been proposed in
education already – and made richer, I believe, by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s
(1978) highly influential conceptualization of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) –
and it holds the promise of opening up a space of declassification in which students can
stage the “competence of the incompetents”. While others have provided much more
complex descriptions of Vygotsky’s ZPD than I can provide here (cf. Holland et al.,
1998; Moll, 1990), I just want to briefly gesture at the declassificatory and emancipatory
potential of the ZPD. To do this, I want to keep my focus simply on some of the ways in
which Vygotsky’s ZPD – in his own words, “the distance between independent and
collaborative problem-solving” (p.86) – has been interpreted and taken up by educators and what these interpretations might mean in terms of making the distance a space for verifying students’ equality.

In practice, while the ZPD has most often interpreted from a standpoint of inequality in which it becomes the stultifier’s distance requiring the teacher to lift the student “up” to her level through scaffolding and various forms of “aid” (Moll, 1990), many scholars have pointed to the ZPD’s declassificatory potential, in particular, in terms of how it gets students out of the locked-in developmental stages made popular by Vygotsky’s contemporary, Jean Piaget. What is key is that in a ZPD, children are always “viewed as capable of doing more than they are typically permitted” (New, 1998, p. 274).

In essence, rather than waiting for children to “mature,” rather than looking at children in only in terms of the knowledge that has already been “fossilized,” Vygotsky’s particular insight was his way of looking at the child as one who is always capable of doing more. Like Rancière, Vygotsky’s figure of the child appears to be one who is already capable and who already speaks (New, 1998), but, unlike Rancière, his emphasis on the social dimensions of knowledge construction – what the child can do with someone more capable – actually goes further in declassification from Rancière in that it also takes children out of their “rightful places” as isolated minds. Moreover, it also views teachers as capable of using their intelligence in ways that do not merely stultify, as Vygotsky offers an insight that perhaps Rancière cannot: teachers and more capable peers make a difference not because children can do less but because they can do more. In this distance, they do not teach their knowledge but, rather, they use their knowledge to create a denser forest of signs. They are not stuck in their place at the edge of the forest, where
Rancière (1991) wants to leave them. They are not left only to remind children that they already speak through their endless questioning (What do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it? ) – or pushing them to venture into the forest where the way has not yet been cleared – but they can stage new ways of speaking by becoming translators and counter-translators of signs – by pointing to new territory and becoming fellow adventurers.

**Philosophical Tale 3: A Denser Forest**

“What would you like to do a play about today?”

Children often look at her with a twinge of disbelief when they hear this first question of hers. You see, teachers simply don’t ask these sorts of questions. Or, if they do, they certainly don’t mean them. But she does. And she doesn’t just ask these questions, she insists upon hearing the answers. “C’mon,” she prods the reluctant children, “let’s have a few ideas then.” Slowly, but with growing excitement, the children begin to speak up:

The middle ages!

Pirates!

Prison camps!

Africa!

She repeats their ideas aloud – as she will do many times on this day – always slowly, thoughtfully, with care. She gives students’ words a significance they no longer expect in classrooms that demand only their compliance.

“Well, then, which of these ideas will be your winner today?” she asks. This decision, like many others to come, will be theirs. To the outside observer, there may be
a feeling of “anything goes”, but soon it will become clear enough: there is nothing casual or carefree about this teacher or her work. “I don’t go in with definite ideas of what’s going to happen,” she explains later, “because I feel like I must use their ideas. I want them to see their ideas coming into marvelous action.” And so she begins the poetic process of translating and countertranslating, of creating a more dense forest of signs in which children can begin to move with her into the distance that asks them only to put their experience into words and signs and their words and signs to the test; of translating their intellectual adventures for others and counter-translating the translations of their own adventures which they present to her.

For this to happen, there are some important decisions that she must be the one to make. The students cannot do everything having to do with prison camps (the “winner” on this day). And so she must focus quickly. She must take this general idea and turn it into something specific. Through her questioning and negotiating, she will try to find which aspect of the topic the students are most interested in and then put them in a tight corner and let them work their way out of it. She must turn their ideas into something dramatic.

Within minutes of meeting with her prisoners, she has the group’s full attention. Everything she does now is selective. Her gestures, the way she moves, the way she barks out a command, the musing tone she takes as she wonders aloud about the traitor in their midst – everything that happens in this world is meaningful. She asks the “prisoners” to pick up their guns. “Find out how you pick it up and lay it down. It matters. This is all that is between you and the Germans.” The young boys squat to find their weapons, carefully holding them close. And they start to believe. In this world that
they are creating, she’ll be there to show them the next hill – to give them a possibility – and she will verify that they have ventured forth over it.

Is this not the real problem of the ignorant schoolteacher, she asks? Not merely ignoring the difference between my own knowledge and the knowledge of the ignorant, but also recognizing the difference between knowing something myself and trying to use it in such a way that other people are inducted into using their own intelligence? Must my knowledge always create distances? Why can it not create denser forests in which I do not tell the way but in which I can be an explorer, too? Why can’t the ignorant schoolmaster learn to play the piano and paint alongside her student?

The “Storyteller Who Never Runs Out of Stories”

Come and we will make our poetry.


In this chapter, I have tried to put Rancière’s notions of equality as a presupposition and equality as staged to work in education. To do this, I have taken up Rancière’s method of equality, which often takes the form of a restaging of a selected number of scenes (Rancière, 2009a; Rancière, 2009b). This work, for me, has meant struggling to become a different kind of storyteller. Rather than persisting in routes of reading that begin and end with inequality and “perpetually rediscover inequality,” I have struggled in this chapter to change my routes of reading and go down deAUTHORIZED paths that wager on a new starting point for emancipatory education: an intellectual equality that must be continually demonstrated and verified.

As I have tried to tell each of these “little narratives” (that strive to be philosophical tales), inequality has continually tried to enter the scene. It has tempted me
to make teachers into knowers and emancipators, to bring students from voicelessness to voice, to keep my protagonists in their singular role as those who must always be “progressing” toward equality. Inequality has told me that I have looked in the wrong places for my stories – that I must focus more on material hardships than on those whose ways of doing and being have been largely predetermined by a rigid hierarchy of intelligences and capabilities. Inequality has asked me to reach for the goal of social equality that, too often, has made it easy for me to forget that children already speak and that the distances they must cover are not between their ignorance and my knowledge. Inequality has asked me to lend my eyes to readers. It has expected me to name my protagonists and to better contextualize my stories, or, in other words, to act as though everyone has been properly accounted for.

But this knowledge about inequality – and the durable interpretive frame it asks me to see and hear with (Enciso, 2007) – would not have let me hear or believe in the three “small narratives” I have managed to tell here—nor the story that is to follow on dissensus in Chapter 4. It would not ask me to confront my own theorization of intelligence, as I have had to do here. It would not let me create exemplars that help me to remember that children have already spoken and invented the world – or that we travel through the same distances that belong to all human beings who try to speak through their intelligence – or that in making the forest of signs denser and entering into it with students as a translator and countertranslator we can speak under the sign of equality. Although inequality wants to enter the scene again right now – it wants to tell me such a method of “choosing to marvel at intermittent moments of equality” is “far too blithely affirmatory in the face of a multitude of materially and economically entrenched
inequities” (Davis, 2010a, p.190) – I must ignore it. Rather than reaching toward a more “significant” – and perhaps more “consequential” – conclusion to this chapter, I instead embrace intellectual equality that, as my eternal beginning point and “practical hypothesis,” assures me only that I will never run out of stories to tell. Ultimately, this is what a method of equality has meant me – seeking out a more expansive world in which our work is that of multiplying those experiments in which the equality of intelligences can be verified.

In this way, the work of the storyteller is not only to stage new scenes of educational emancipation but also to mine them for “concrete” dissentual resources (Tanke, 2011). In other words, through telling these stories, I have tried to create a richer tapestry than what Rancière has offered in The Ignorant Schoolmaster in order to think through more concretely about what it might mean to construct cases of intellectual equality. Although the ignorant schoolmaster certainly gives us a rich conceptual starting point with his notion of axiomatic equality, I could not help wondering as I wrote these stories: Are students’ wills, our own wills, and something in common (e.g., a book) the only “concrete” dissentual resources available to us as we seek to construct cases of intellectual equality? How might the additional conceptual entry points I discussed in the previous chapter – the figure of the child, the distance that is not the master’s “secret” but, rather, a common “forest of signs”, and the teacher as an inventive reader – translate into a richer tapestry? Because I could not approach my work of staging new scenes of equality and emancipation as the gifted storyteller that Ranciere is, I approached it instead as a teacher-philosopher who needed to use this exploratory and experimental writing as a form of inquiry. In this chapter, I have tried to suggest imagination,
storytelling, and drama as potential resources. In the chapter that follows, I offer a final story in which these resources worked to create a counterworld in which the verification of equality gained momentum.

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1 It is important to note that this storyteller-translator could be – as has been – accused of verifying inequality: of assuming too much authority, giving himself full reign to pick and choose who is worthy of study and who is not (e.g., those who wrote poems and not those who wrote revolutionary songs), privileging his own intellectual adventures, and granting himself the heroic status of one who can alter the sensible with his words (Hewlett, 2007; Pelletier, 2009).

2 Some of the stories that I was initially (and remain) drawn to included: Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way (Schultz, 2008); the work of Reggio Emilia educators (cf. Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006); Herb Kohl’s (1995) account of not-learners; Lankshear & Knobel’s (2006) conceptualization of new literacies as an intervention on the “textual order”; Bronwyn Davies’ (2000) work with a classroom teacher to reread classroom scenes through a postmodern lens; Gerald Campano’s (2007) creation of the “second classroom”; and Schultz’s (2009) inventive interpretation of silence. It is a long and varied list that I hope will keep me busy for some time and perhaps encourage new ways of speaking with Rancière.

3 In Chapter 4, I will follow Rancière’s lead and actually dispute this partition between intellectual and social equality, although I still want to disagree with social equality as an endpoint.

4 I have constructed this philosophical tale using the following sources: Cooper (2009); Paley (1981); Paley (1986); and Paley (1990).

5 I have constructed this philosophical tale using the following sources: Dyson (1993) and Dyson (1994).

6 I have constructed this philosophical tale using the following sources: Cornelissen (2010); Edmiston (personal communication, May 20, 2011; Heathcote (1984); Smedley (1971); and Wagner (1999).
Chapter 4: Scenes of Dissensus

*Those who are venturing into this labyrinth should be honestly forewarned that no answers will be provided to them.*

~ Jacques Rancière, in Bowman & Stamp, 2011, p.xi

**An Imagined Conversation**

MW: Well, Jacques, now that we’ve made it to Chapter 4, there’s another story that I’ve really wanted to share with you. This one is a little different than the ones I dug up for the last chapter and also from the ones I know that you like to dig out of the historical archives. It’s a story I actually saw firsthand.

JR: Oh, wonderful, Meredith, you know how much I love stories. And one from education – even better! I certainly haven’t gotten many of those over the years and you know it’s been twenty years now since *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was translated into English. Not that I addressed it only to educators, mind you, but my stories can only take meaning in their translation –

MW: Yes, I know. And perhaps you’ll think it’s fitting that, as I tell the story, I find myself in a place where I really ought not be – a place that should offer few lessons on equality and politics, at least according to those who might try to police what counts as the political in education these days. It’s not the 19th century and it’s not a bunch of Flemish folks, but, trust me, talking about politics through a story about a suburban first grade classroom with little diversity and
teaching and curriculum that’s not even overtly critical or emancipatory? That’s almost as odd.

JR: Ah, well done, Meredith. You’re making politics itself a site of conflict.

MW: You’ve certainly given me enough tools with which to rethink the political. But, trust me, you really don’t tell us how hard it will be to actually invent politics and open up new worlds and new ways of being together. Or how dangerous, really. I mean, I’m a teacher educator, for heaven’s sake! I’m trained to look for scenes of “good teaching”, not how to construct a scene of dissensus! I’m supposed to know what’s sensible – not to challenge it! Thank heavens dissertations aren’t widely read! I can’t have it getting out that you’re an acquaintance of mine.

JR: Well, you can only imagine what my philosopher friends might think about me consorting with an educator. It’s a good thing for you that my central theoretical concept is equality. At any rate, you know you shouldn’t believe all the rumors about me being an anarchist.

MW: I must say, I have been pleasantly surprised to hear that you’re a bit more optimistic about schools than most of your readers let on. I’m still trying to grapple over something I’ve just found out about a little known article you wrote just after *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Is it true that you’ve written of schools as “preeminently the place of equality” (Masschelein & Simons, 2010, p.666)? I think I understand what you’re trying to say about the notion of school as a form in itself that might create a break/rupture in time and space\(^1\). I love the notion of the teacher who “makes people forget time” and of the school as a “place of play” (ibid.). I couldn’t have heard such a story a few years ago – and it’s rather hard
now not to dismiss it as fantasy. But perhaps the story I want to tell you now is just as much in return to this lost story of yours – the story of the school as a preeminent site of equality – as it is a story back to the ignorant schoolmaster. Because I’ve witnessed something I shouldn’t have –

JR: No further explanation is necessary, Meredith. Let’s just have the story.

MW: Yes, of course, I should know that by now! Still, I can’t resist – there is something else I need to let you know, Jacques. I’ve decided to tell the story in three acts –

A Three-Act Play²

ACT I

In which the imagined world of a fictional travel agency³ becomes a “community of sense” in a first grade classroom

ACT II

In which two logics collide

ACT III

In which equality gains momentum, and a teacher becomes an inventive reader

Place: Schooner K-1 School⁴ (1st Grade classroom); offices of the Extreme Adventures Travel Agency; African grasslands; Hawaiian Islands; Antarctica; Pacific Ocean; Rwanda

Main Characters⁵ (in order of appearance): Dr./Mr. Brian (University professor/first grade teacher/jaguar/adventurer/travel agent); Colin (first grader/travel agent/designer/historian); Nash (first grader/antelope/travel agent/scuba diver/designer); Jamie (first grade teacher/travel agent); Jacob (first grader/travel agent); “hotel girls” (first grade students/travel agents/designers)

Time: Winter/Spring 2008
Figure 1: The Witness

Dr. Lather, thanks for coming! Boy, do I need your help telling the story. First, let me introduce you to Jacques...

Jacques, your work on politics has the smell of something fresh!!!

Ahem... Not to interrupt but, you guys, I'm trying to tell a story of disensus--an extended example, actually, but I don't know how to make the story understood...

Patti, thanks ever so much--for the compliment... and the donut!

You do need to situate yourself as knowing something--but not everything. Nobody else knows what you know--so just try to communicate what you do know.

I've set it up as a series of short flashbacks, which I've organized into a three act play. But I'm going to have to take on a bigger part in the play than I had intended. I really don't want to become a narrator...

Your knowing doesn't need to create distance, Meredith. Tell us about your adventure--and see if you can give us one.

So I guess I have to be a character in this play after all--the witness who must speak, the spectator whose ways of interpreting the world might be a means of transforming it...

...although I knew you two have met before...
Act One: A New Community of Sense

The key question with respect to any distribution of the sensible is to know ... what type of world it defines, and whether or not equality is there present.

~ Joseph J. Tanke, 2011, pp.2-3

WITNESS: I want to tell you a story of everything I can remember seeing that year that I should not have seen in school. This is how I want to start. I want to start with a teacher who turned into a rock climber, another teacher who turned into a jaguar, and another teacher who drove a submarine. I want to start with a stick. It should not have been important but it was. I want to start with a clock that should have been important but was not. I want to start on the first day of a brand new unit of study in which students were already seen as “experts.” I want to tell you about every scene that year I saw that I never saw in the nearly 100 other classrooms I have visited over the past five years as a supervisor. That is why I know I should not have seen these scenes.

There is no “hidden” meaning that you cannot understand in this story; there is nothing I need to “unveil” to you here. There are no secrets between us. I speak to you now not because I want you to see this thing, feel this feeling, understand this lesson, or get into this action in consequence of what you have seen, felt and understood. I speak to you now only because it matters that, of all the ways I might begin to tell you this story, I start with what I should not have seen. Not just that, though. I have chosen to start with a story about how all the things that I should not
have seen – all the things that should not have made sense – *did* come to make sense. It is a story about a travel agency that became a “community of sense” in a first grade classroom. It is a story about dissensus that I must tell as the creation of a rival conception of the world – a world in which you will meet children who have already invented the world, you will see students and teachers who speak as translators and counter-translators, and you will find yourself in a forest growing ever denser.

**Scene One: The Adventure Begins**

It must have been during the 30-minute drive out to the school that morning that we first discussed the plans for that day. I don’t remember the plans. I just remember that joining us for her very first driving-to-school brainstorm/discussing/planning session was a new member of our research team, Mary. The kids had never met her before so the plan seemed perfect. I remember Dr. Brian talking her through her part. Let’s imagine that you’re a rock climber, he says. Let’s tell the children that you’re thinking about going on an extreme rock-climbing adventure. And we’ll tell them that you will need some help planning the trip. Surely, the children would like to imagine helping to plan an extreme adventure, says Dr. Brian (who will soon become “Mr. Brian” to the adoring first graders who shriek and whisper and smile that it is “drama time” every time I have seen him enter the classroom).

So Mary will be the rock climber. And I, as always, will be the silent one with the camera, hunkering down somewhere on the edges of the classroom, disappearing from view, and trying to find something significant to capture.
Scene Two: The First Graders Go on Safari

It’s a stick, he says, and he places it in her hands.

I remember my surprise at seeing Colin standing in the line of children who, it turns out, are indeed very willing to help the rock climber (Mary) plan her adventure. They have just begun to distribute the supplies that she will need for her trip – very sensible items like bandages, belts, and even specially-made waterproof boots. I can’t remember Colin ever sharing an idea before in our previous three trips to the classroom. Like me, he is most frequently on the edges of the classroom. In most of my photos, he fades into the background, head cupped in hands and looking rather suspiciously like someone who is not listening.

The rock climber (Mary) takes the stick from Colin. She pauses – I remember thinking that I wouldn’t know what to say if someone handed me a stick either – and then she begins to reach for the next piece of equipment from the next person in line.

“What does the stick look like?” Mr. Brian interjects. He begins to move his hands. Colin’s hands slowly move alongside Mr. Brian’s to reveal a medium-sized stick. It has a sharp end, he adds. He draws it for us – then erases it – and draws it again. Colin tells us that it will protect us from the dangerous animals that might want to –

Another boy, Nash, interrupts. He has seen a show on Animal Planet and he wants to tell us something else about the stick, too – and about the jaguars and the antelopes and the grasslands. And, within a matter of minutes it seems, Colin is holding his protective stick in the African grasslands as a jaguar (Mr. Brian) prepares to attack his prey, the antelope (Nash).
Soon everyone wants to be a jaguar – and there will be time for that Mr. Brian says – but, for the moment, there is a more pressing matter. No longer a jaguar but now imagining that he is a client who wants to go to see the jaguars, he has become very worried: “How will I know that I’ll feel safe on this jaguar adventure?”

**Scene Three: Three Minutes**

“How much time have we got?” Mr. Brian asks Jamie, the classroom teacher, who takes a quick glance over at the clock, which hangs prominently on the wall in between two curtained windows. Like the other adults in the room, I have drifted off to the periphery of the room, assuming that the morning drama session with Jamie’s class is over.
“You have three minutes,” she smiles back, exchanging a nervous glance with the other first grade teacher in the room. They are both well-aware of how a few minutes can stretch on indefinitely when Mr. Brian is leading the class. It is nearly time for her first graders to leave for lunch, and classroom teachers have to worry about angry lunch ladies and backed-up cafeteria lines in ways that university professors do not.

With the focus now on lunch, Nash is intent upon shoving his papers into the two-pocket folder that holds much of his schoolwork. He continues to tidy up, even as Mr. Brian makes a move to regain the attention of the class. "Do you want to do something else?" he asks the children, his three minutes already beginning to tick away. Moving toward the Smartboard, where the students have just created an original map of their fictional Hawaiian island with the help of a local artist, Mr. Brian points to the sketched island filled with all the fun things they wanted it to have for their extreme adventures: a volcano, picturesque waterfalls and exotic fish, sailboats and huge tidal waves to surf, and a petting farm (among other things). He tells them, “This is where we’re going in imagination. See if you can put yourself somewhere on the map. Move your body and, in your imagination, you’re on the map –”
Nash plunges into the ocean before Brian can finish his sentence, his arms in constant motion, his mouth filled with scuba gear. He dives further and further down into the ocean depths. “I’m in the ocean and I’m snorkeling! I can see lots of molten lava on the ocean floor!” he exclaims. Triumphantly emerging from the water, a piece of hardened lava in hand, he holds it up high to show the other travel agents, many of whom dive in after him to see what treasures they might discover below the sea.

Several boys have raced to get straws, just as Nash has done, putting them in their mouths and bending them up slightly to represent snorkeling gear. They huddle near Nash, chatting eagerly about the lava rocks that Mr. Brian has brought in from Mount Etna. “Should we stop?” Mr. Brian asks Jamie, exactly three minutes and thirty-four seconds after he started.

Scene Four: “Do We Just Say We’re the Travel Company and Go Off?”

How do we start a travel agency in our first grade classrooms? the four teachers ask. It is our first planning meeting for the travel agency, and we are sitting in the
basement of another school to plan with two teachers who already know something about using drama. These teachers plan with curriculum guides and pacing guides, too – and only sometimes in the car and only rarely in the middle of a safari or on a tropical island like Dr. Brian. One has taught for twenty years. The other one has taught for nine. They reassure the new group about this new way. They speak of middle ground. They say OK to the nervous teacher, Let’s get out the curriculum guide if you need it. They say OK to the anxious teacher, Let’s get our webs out and think of some activities. When Dr. Brian begins the meeting with a question I have never heard in five years of planning seminars with student teachers – So, what are you passionate about? – they have answers. Long ones. And so before we talk as teachers, we talk as people and intellectuals. (As I write at the time in my 18-page summary of the meeting, there’s actually an “assumption that teachers ARE in fact “intellectual” people who have a variety interests and who CAN [and should!] bring these interests into their work with children”. It’s a revelation!)

As we leave the meeting, it seems that everyone is excited – save for one teacher. We lost her at the “I Swam with the Dolphins” t-shirt designs actually connecting to standards. “My heart is racing,” she says.

**Scene Five: Planning Sessions 2-15 (Why Can’t the School be a World?)**

talking on the phone as if with clients * as if we could go see the polar bears in Antarctica * as if we need to worry about the erupting volcanoes * as if we need to learn to greet the Rwandan villagers respectfully * as if there are questions that clients may ask that we need to be able to answer * as if there were “times when we nearly had a disaster but people helped each other” * as if we were an award-winning travel agency …
Scene Six: First Day (The Competence of the Incompetents)

On the first day of the travel agency, the first “activity” is an awards ceremony.

There is delicious food, several toasts, and even celebrities. The agents reminisce about successful extreme adventures they have led in the past.

It’s not just an activity, Dr. Brian makes clear in the plans. It’s a question, or a series of questions that first graders will spend the next six months thinking about: What sort of a collaborative are we? How are we going to have fun and keep people safe at the same time? What do we care about in our travel agency?

Congratulations!
We are proud to present

Extreme Adventures Travel Agency

The Travel award for:
Highest Safety Rating in 2007
This award is given to the travel agency with the greatest care for their customers throughout their entire travel experience. Customers have voted you number 1 when it comes to having fun and feeling safe!

President of Travel Anywhere, Inc.   date
Director of Customer Service   date

December 31, 2007

Figure 4: Highest Safety Rating Award
Scene Seven: “She’s Seeing the Real World All the Time”

Jamie (the classroom teacher) wants to go on safaris and scuba dives, too. “I need to get out of my little box,” she tells Dr. Brian. “I remember how you did it once and I tried to do it but I can’t figure it out – you know like the jaguar – how to get them there. But then today, you were like, ‘OK, we have 3 minutes. We’ll act it out. I’m like, ‘Oh, we won’t have time’. You were like, ‘Oh, let’s do this really quick’. And you literally just said, ‘Pretend you’re here and in one of these places. Now show me what you’re doing’. Really fast –”

And Dr. Brian says, “That was it!”

Scene Eight: The First Graders Go in a Submarine

One of the travel agents for the Extreme Adventures Travel Agency, Jamie, has an idea that promises to bring in new clients for the upcoming extreme adventure in Hawaii. Snorkeling and surfing in the Pacific Ocean would be great fun – but lots of travel agencies already offered that, too. Let’s do a truly extreme adventure, she proposes to her fellow agents. What if we took our clients to the bottom of the ocean … in a submarine? Everyone (except for Jacob who does not like extreme adventures as much as the others) quickly agrees that it’s a terrific idea, and they scatter about to locate the equipment they will need to do a test run. During their descent deep down to the bottom of the ocean (as Jacob holds the radio above), they look out the window to see all kinds of interesting treasures. But it is when Nash discovers the sunken remains of a ship from Pearl Harbor that the travel agents excitedly realize that the fun of submarine adventure will most definitely include a hunt for sunken ships. As they head back to their office, photographs of bones and the bow of a ship, they prepare to get started on their research.
Scene Nine: “Community”

The first time Dr. Brian asks Jamie to show what her classroom community looks like with photos, she makes a perfect circle. Everyone has been accounted for. Dr. Brian asks her to try again. No classroom is a perfect circle, he says. Jamie quickly moves a few photos away from the center – some further away than others.

![Figure 5: Sociogram](image)

Act Two: A Confrontation of Logics

*The supposition of the community of equals shadows the social order, indicating another way of being together. It can be used to disrupt social arrangements sanctioning the unequal distributions of capacities; however, the community defined by equality must be continually reactivated and placed in a polemical relationship with the existing distributions of community.*

~ Joseph J. Tanke, 2011, p.57

WITNESS: I have told you the story of one world, as I remember it. But this is not the story of one world. It is not just the story of a travel agency. It is also the
story of a classroom. It is the story of two worlds in one – an imagined world and an everyday world. It is the story of the day that the two worlds did not just exist simultaneously; it is the story of the day that they collided. It was the day Nash acted as if he had the rights he did not have. It was the day he put a division in common sense. It was the day when he challenged our framing of sense. That’s how I’m going to tell you this story – the story of sense and sense.

Scene One: The Boy Who Walked Away

On the day Nash gets up and leaves the rest of the group as Mr. Brian is talking – without permission – he quickly finds a piece of paper and begins to draw. The other children still seated properly in their pretzels with their eyes on the speaker do not seem
to notice, much to the relief of Jamie. Without knowing it, Nash has created a
disagreement and, on the pages that follow, he will ask you to respond to his challenge:
(Continued from page 117)

Scene Two: Disagreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imagined World of Classroom</th>
<th>Everyday World of Classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Extreme Adventures Travel Agency has just called an urgent meeting to discuss the latest problem that has arisen in their planning for an upcoming safari adventure. Jaguars have just been spotted, along with remains of several antelopes in the area where they were to take their clients. They wonder, How will we keep our clients safe from the jaguars? As the travel agents brainstorm possible ideas, one agent rushes away from the group to work out a new plan.</td>
<td>You see Nash abruptly walk away from the group of children that is sitting on the carpet with Mr. Brian. Did he ask for permission to do that paper? Is he goofing off yet again? Perhaps you should tell him to go sit down on the rug with the other children. After all, he knows the rules. He knows that you should look at people when they’re talking to you. The counselor has even come in and said, ‘When someone’s talking you’re not doing anything else but sitting on your pretzel and looking at them’. So he’s over there, and you’re thinking, ‘OK I hope someone asked him to do this, or he’s being rude. I don’t want him to be rude and disrespectful’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- If you decide to speak with the travel agent about his plan, turn to page 119.
- If you decide to ask Nash to sit down with the other students, turn to page 120.
Scene Three: Cage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imagined World of the Travel Agency</th>
<th>Everyday World of the Classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As you walk into the travel agency, you notice a sketch of a cage strewn about the desk of the travel agent who continues to work busily on his plan to keep his clients safe from the jaguars. This is a special cage, he eagerly proclaims. It’s an observation center that locks humans—not jaguars—on the inside. Check out the indestructible metal bars that can never be broken through, he adds, as he merrily proceeds to generate a list of rules that clients will need to follow inside the cage.</td>
<td>As you look periodically over to the table where Nash continues to work on the paper, you are relieved to see that he appears to be staying on-task and isn’t interfering with anyone else. He wants to share his story, but you worry about drawing attention to his work. What if the other children will want to get up without permission during listening times to start working on their own drawings? Nash may be able to handle this responsibility during drama time, but what if someone like Jacob thinks it is OK?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- If you decide to approach the other travel agents about how we can get these safety measures in place before the next meeting with our worried clients, turn to page 121.
- If you decide to let Nash share his story with the other children, turn to page 122.
Scene Four: Firing Nash from the Travel Agency

You ask Nash to sit back down on the carpet. Almost immediately he begins to do what he does everyday. He interrupts and jumps up and lays down on the floor and won’t listen to any of his ‘friends’. You try to keep going with the drama time, hoping you can get through goals of talking about different adventures and getting out a map and thinking about how you’ll get to those places and also the travel company’s logo and motto. But he continues to interrupt.

Finally, you ask the class, ‘What happens if you don’t listen to your boss or your colleagues? Do you think they want you to stay there?’ The class says, ‘Nooooo. You have to work together.’

So you say, ‘In the real world they fire you and they ask you to leave and find another job and they find somebody to do the job you were supposed to be doing.’

Although you regret it instantly, you turn to Nash and ask, ‘Do you want to be fired?’

‘No’, he says.

So you don’t fire him, but you send him to another room for the rest of drama time.

The End
Scene Five: When His Story Became Our Story

The travel agents reconvene to discuss Nash’s idea for an observation center. There is a general agreement on the plan, and teams quickly form to brainstorm additional rules. No yelling. No touching the jaguar. Bring a first aid kit. No playing. Stay on the ground inside the cage at all times. Take a friend. Use a flashlight in the dark. Various test-runs are conducted.

When the clients hear the plan, they feel very reassured about their safety on the jaguar extreme adventure. They decide to go ahead with the adventure and fun is had by all.

The End
(Continued from page 119)

Scene Six: “I Was Focusing on the Loudness of His Voice Coming at Me …”

It is not Nash’s turn at sharing time. But as with every sharing time – and almost every part of the day – his physical and mental energy to share ideas, opinions, feelings and stories soon takes over. As he interrupts yet another child’s turn with some fact that only he could know, you feel helpless to stop his speaking over-top, his drowning out of everyone else. You feel yourself getting more and more frustrated with each blurt. And you are not the only one. As he continues to speak, you hear a couple of girls who are like, ‘Oh, he’s still talking’. There are several unmistakable eye-rolls as well.

When sharing time ends, you have not been able to finish your lesson, ask other children for answers, or hear anyone else’s thoughts or ideas on the subject.

The End
Scene Seven: “Good Students”

Jamie, on Nash:

I had a ‘friend’ in my classroom last year that really had a hard time sitting, keeping his eyes on the teacher, hands off his friends, and voice to himself during instruction time. To be honest I felt as though I was always correcting his behavior and telling him what a good listener looks like, and what a ‘good student’ acts like. I was almost at a point where I thought teaching was not for me. I thought I just could not get through to all children and that I was letting him and some of my other students down because I could not get them to do what ‘good students’ do.

Scene Eight: “Techniques and Rewards”

- Permanent seat in front of teacher ✓
- Made to turn his behavior cards to the maximum ✓
- Missed recess for 2 weeks straight ✓
- Parents called ✓
- Apology letters to friends and teachers ✓
- Discussions about behavior ✓
- Meetings with counselors and parents ✓
- Sitting out ✓
- Stress balls ✓
- Being a teacher’s “helper” ✓
- Coin reward system ✓
Scene Nine: The Boy Who Walked Away (Part 2)

On the day that Logan’s drawing of an underwater volcano ignites a heated – but unresolved – class discussion of what underwater explosions might actually look like, Nash gets up with the other children who are supposed to be working on unfinished work. Without permission, he walks over to the computer to begin a search on Google. Typing in “Hawaii,” he soon finds several images of underwater explosions with steam coming out of the water and little waves rippling through the water. “Look, Mrs. Pike!” he cries out across the room to Jamie. “This is what it looks like when a volcano erupts underground!” He cannot remember who wants to see these pictures, so she reminds him that it is Logan.

“Logan! Look!” Nash shouts. The two sit together looking and talking about the pictures, and soon Jamie stops everyone to share the pictures Nash has found.

It is my greatest day, Jamie emails Dr. Brian later that night.

Scene Ten: The Class That Walked Away, or Community (Part 2)

Like most of the children who sit at his table, Nash is scrambling to retrieve the stray pencils and markers that have been scattered throughout the room. The pencils and markers, along with an assortment of drawings and signs that feature volcanoes oozing with red-hot lava are the only indications left to suggest that this is a room that has just been bustling with energy and activity.

In fact, it had been another busy morning for the Extreme Adventures Travel Agency. The task of planning its newest “extreme adventure vacation” – this time, to a
little-known volcanic island in Hawaii – was proving to be more difficult than anticipated. Concern about the safety of their clients had swept through the travel agents’ office, following the volcanologist's early morning report that the volcano had recently shown some rather ominous signs of activity. Nash had dashed out of the conference call in search of paper to collect information on the volcano’s underground magma chamber. Other travel agents had quickly followed suit, abruptly exiting the meeting space in pursuit of materials to sketch what they remembered of the scene on the island ten years ago, when there had last been an eruption. The question lingered, Would they be able to keep their clients safe?

Jamie tells us later that day how unsettling the experience has been for her:

“They all – you know – a couple of others saw Nash get up and they were leaving and I was getting like, ‘Ahhh’ – like one of those moments when your chest starts to --. Like, ‘Oh my gosh, are they all going to go away and we’re going to be talking to 2 kids now, or are they listening?’”

“When was this?” Dr. Brian asks, apparently unaware that children leaving the carpet without first receiving “directions” or permission – especially while their teacher was still on the “phone” trying to talk with them – had been quite outside the norm.

There had been no reprimand or long talk about “listening”. “If you’ve done a drawing, bring it for us to look at,” he had told the students. “And if you can draw and listen at the same time, you can keep drawing.” And then the meeting resumed.
Figure 7: The Class that Walked Away
Scene Eleven: The Hotel Girls and the Counter-Translators, or Community (part 3)

At a meeting to brief the rest of the agency before the upcoming adventure to Hawaii, three travel agents working on the hotel share their most recent designs. They show the beautiful walkway connecting the hotels and the some of the restaurants. They share about the advertising campaign, the ideas for the commercial and even a little jingle.

“What do you need help with?” Mr. Brian asks (not because the girls are “needy” but because other travel agents are eager to add on with their ideas and have not been allowed to previously by the “popular” girls). There is an awkward silence, as the girls give one another looks. It’s clear they were not expecting this question. Mr. Brian asks them to walk around the circle, holding out their designs very slowly so everyone else can have a close look. The only other thing I remember about the hotel is that soon it has surfboard tables. And an area to swim with the dolphins. And, right in the middle, a hot lava fountain that everyone (including the hotel girls) must agree is the coolest thing about the hotel.

Act Three: The Inventive Reader

So political conflict is an aesthetic matter from the very beginning, to the extent it deals with the very interpretation of what people do with their mouth.

~ Jacques Rancière, 2009a, p.121

WITNESS: Now I need to tell you why it matters that I saw a travel agency come to make sense in a first grade classroom. I need to tell you why I choose equality not merely as a disruption but as an inscription.
Scene One: Rockets in Rwanda

It is time for the travel agency to make its annual humanitarian trip to Rwanda. Teams of travel agents have formed to prepare for their initial welcome meeting with the Rwandan villagers. It is important to learn some of the cultural norms so that they can greet the villagers respectfully. Some agents work on crafting original music that can be shared. Others prepare a dance. Colin works on a story that he wants to give as a gift. Others research the local animals to familiarize themselves with the country. And, somewhere in the midst of all these preparations, Jacob is making a rocket.

Oh, tell me more about the camera on your rocket, Mr. Brian says. It seems to be the sort of camera that could see things that are very far away.

Yes, says Jacob, it’s a very special camera. It can see things very, very far away.

You know, we could really use a camera like that in Rwanda, Mr. Brian thinks aloud. Perhaps it might help us to catch those poachers who have been trapping the mountain gorillas. Could you set it up for us and let us know if you see anything suspicious? Yes, Jacob agrees.

Shortly thereafter, much to the surprise of the other agents, Jacob’s rocket camera captures footage of the poachers in action.

Says Jamie of Jacob later:

I remember him standing on the chair and pretending he had the camera looking down. Everyone in the room stopped doing what they were doing. He was the king for a moment, and he was hardly ever the king. It’s just so fun to see people take everyone seriously.
Scene Two: “We’re Not in That Cage All the Time”

Midway through the travel agency we go to dinner with Jamie and show her a presentation we recently did at a conference. It is the first time we have tried to tell the story of the travel agency. We look at the photo of Nash holding up his cage.

BRIAN: Looking back, we thought this was a really significant moment.

JAMIE: It was significant moment for me as a teacher. We’re not in a box. We’re not in that cage all the time, which is where they were. I mean, ‘Sit on your pretzel. Sit, look at me. Focus. If you’re not looking, you’re not listening. Do this, do this, do this.’ But that was a significant moment …
Scene Three: The Historian

At our dinner, when we ask what Colin has been up to lately, Jamie isn’t quite sure. She mentions something about a big stack of papers. The next time we go to his classroom, we find Colin is in a separate backroom space still working on those mysterious papers that no one else has seen. Mr. Brian asks if he will bring them out onto the carpet area so everyone can take a look at them. As Colin brings his creation to the carpet area, the other children quickly turn their attention to the long trail of papers – more than 35 of them all taped together – that run from one end of the classroom to the other. They run alongside of it, many pointing and counting.

Figure 9: The Historian
It turns out that Colin has saved the notes, signs, pictures, and various artifacts from all of the class’s trips to Africa, Antarctica, Hawaii, and Rwanda. Jamie admits she isn’t sure what to make of his invention. Actually, she tells us, she is a bit put off by it. Many of the scraps of paper are ones that Colin has either picked out of the garbage or has found discarded by other students.

Let’s look at Colin’s work, Mr. Brian says. It’s kind of a brochure of everywhere we’ve been. All the pages are written on, all colorful, all meaningful to our agency. Colin’s sort of like our historian, he says. He’s kept a record of everything we’ve done.

* * *

After a tragic helicopter accident over a volcano in Hawaii, a young girl is in need of urgent medical care. Teams quickly form to care for her. As so often is his way, Colin wanders around the room aimlessly. Jamie is anxious to get him to work. Would you like to interview the doctors? No. Would you like to join the surgical team? Or the burn unit? No, no.

Thinking back to his role as the historian, she mentions that no one has documented the story of the little girl for the travel agency’s files. Would you be willing to write down her story for us, she asks. Yes, Colin says, I’ll do that.

After he takes the assignment, he starts writing. Sometimes he stops and comes over to Jamie to ask questions about the little girl. She directs him to the doctor or to the burn unit or the person who can best answer the questions he has. He keeps writing and getting up, writing and getting up. When he finishes, he reads his account to the class. It is, says Jamie, a beautifully crafted story with “bits and pieces of everyone in it”.

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Scene Four: Yes … But Are They Doing What They Are Supposed To Be Doing?

It is our last day of work with the travel agency. Today we are in Rwanda. Our car-ride plan is long forgotten because Aaron is interested in making a drum and so is everyone else. Mr. Brian wonders how we can show the villagers in Rwanda respect when our plane first touches down there. Travel agents immediately get to work on researching dances, songs, proper greetings, and so forth. A visiting teacher is impressed with the level of engagement as she looks around to see the groups dancing, crafting, reading stories, and researching online. But she can’t help wondering, “Yes … but are they doing what they are supposed to be doing?”
Closing

Figure 10: A Story of the Story
In the travel agency’s last days, it had some very different visitors. They were not clients who dreamed of safaris and cuddling with penguins and scuba diving in Hawaii. They were teachers who dreamed of having some adventures in their classrooms, too – maybe not extreme ones, mind you, but adventures nonetheless. From the quiet corners of the classroom, I was one of those teachers. I dreamed of being adventurous, too.

But, like my fellow would-be adventurers – before I had even a chance to prepare for my journey – I was quickly greeted by unexpected arrivants. These arrivants spoke as sharks, and I, like the teachers, did not know how to speak with sharks. These arrivants spoke as surgeons and musicians and I, like these teachers, did not know how to speak with surgeons and musicians. Welcoming these arrivants was beyond my capacity to
welcome (Derrida, 2007). I was prepared to walk down the path of learning. I could not walk down the path of emancipation (Rancière, 1991). I could not become an adventurer.

First, I had to become a witness. This did not mean becoming a witness who could see differently, as I once thought. It meant becoming a witness of impossibility (Lather, 2010) – seeing what I should not see, what did not make sense. It required traveling down a different path – the “extravagant path” on which I found out it was always possible to walk on the side of equality (Rancière, 1991). It was on this path, much to my surprise, that I first met the ignorant schoolmaster. His tomb was my first waypost along the way, marking always the crossroads between equality and inequality.

I hope the travel agency might be a waypost for you as well, as you begin your journey. I can point you to the landmark – it is that vacant building in the distance, closed down since 2008, but with the motto of intellectual emancipation still visible on its walls: CHOOSE ADVENTURE. Along your way, I can tell you only that there will be many questions: What is that noise you hear over there? What is the distance you seek to cover? How far will knowledge take you? Is it the only route you know? Will you let the equality of all intelligences take you on a much longer winding road – into denser forests – with your fellow explorers and adventurers? Will you test the forest’s parameters? Will you seek out its magical kingdoms? What will you do when the event of the arrivant falls on you?

1 Rancière thinks of disruption of time/space much differently than what I present here. He is primarily concerned the “non-convergence of the school form/logic and the form/logic of production” (Masschelein & Simons, 2010, p.667).
2 The framing of this chapter is based upon Rancière (2009d) and Tanke (2011, pp.61-65; 103-108).
The creation of a fictional travel agency was based on an innovative approach to education developed by Dorothy Heathcote, which she calls the mantle of the expert approach. I do not foreground the pedagogy here, but interested readers might read Bolton & Heathcote (1995) and Taylor & Edmiston (2008).

I am using a fictional name for the school.

I use pseudonyms for all the protagonists in these stories with the exception of Dr./Mr. Brian, who is Dr. Brian Edmiston, the lead researcher for this project. This project, which has IRB approval, began when Dr. Brian was invited to work with a group of four first grade teachers who had volunteered to pilot an initiative in their school to integrate the arts into the curriculum. Throughout the 2007-2008 school year, Dr. Brian led day-long teaching and planning sessions every other week in each of the four classrooms. During the 2008-2009 school year, Dr. Brian returned to the school for biweekly sessions almost exclusively in Jamie’s class. The stories in this chapter come from selected transcripts, field notes, emails, and an end-of-the-year journal completed by Jamie that were collected during this study.

I have borrowed the idea of using the different typesets to foreground what was being imagined (presented in italics) and what was really happening in the everyday world of the classroom (presented in Roman script) from Edmiston (2008).

These questions represent a particular kind of drama work, dramatic inquiry. Again, I do not foreground the pedagogy here, but interested readers might see Edmiston (2011).

While the imagined and everyday spaces appear to be “separated” here, I would refer readers to Edmiston’s (2011) discussion of imagined-and-real spaces.
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