

Starting from "Equality": An Interpretation of Rancière's Critical Educational Thought

Xiaohan Wang^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Education, Capital Normal University, 23 Bai Dui Zi Street, Haidian District, Beijing, China*

a. 2667985687@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Jacques Rancière's philosophy is rooted in the concept of "equality," crucially interpreting his educational viewpoints within his theoretical framework. Rancière places "equality" as the cornerstone of educational discourse, aiming to subvert the traditional educational heritage centered on "explanation" since ancient Greece and the presumed social construction of hierarchical order. In Rancière's educational theory, the teacher is an equalizer, advocating a curriculum centered on "thing in common" and endorsing a learning model guided by "translation" instead of the traditional "explanation"-dominated pedagogy. His goal is to foster intellectual equality and recognition while creating sustainable spaces for debate. This educational discourse offers a new theoretical foundation for critical pedagogy and multicultural education.

Keywords: Rancière, equality, education, critical pedagogy

1. Introduction

During the May '68 movements, Rancière underwent a complete rupture with his mentor Althusser and maintained consistency in his philosophical deliberations, grounded in the presupposition of "equality" as a premise rather than a result. Within the realm of education, Rancière's focus on education is best exemplified in his work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, aligning with Jacotot's intention to unsettle all postures and practices of "educationalism," inducing panic in erudite Europe. Their lesson resonates: education, like freedom, cannot be given but is continually taken away. Rancière's discourse on education not only challenges and disrupts the education founded on "explanation" since ancient Greece but further directs its philosophical coherence towards critiquing the societal construction based on the conception of "hierarchical order." Thus, considering Rancière's educational ideas as a form of critical pedagogy is reasonable and can be seen as a new avenue for the development of critical pedagogy. This article will discuss Rancière's uniqueness in terms of purpose, teacher, curriculum, and pedagogy and highlight how Rancière's educational discourse offers new avenues for critical pedagogy and multicultural education.

2. Anti-"Explanatory" System

Throughout the history of education, there is a perpetual need to answer three questions: what to teach, to whom, and how to teach. Using Rancière's language in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, it involves

explaining what, to whom, and how to explain, where the artistry or skill of education lies in the artistry or skill of explanation. However, the action centered on "explanation" is what Rancière detests. Explanation serves not just as a means to transmit knowledge to young children but also as a means of oppression and subjugation, where the powerful sovereign demonstrates authority to the powerless subjects. Firstly, the "explanatory" system generates and maintains structured inequality between the explainer and the explained. The "skilled" teacher is one who knows how to create and maintain distance, and traditional educational aims to help teachers rapidly acquire this skill. Students follow the route prescribed by teachers to receive explanations and are informed about their eligibility for the next explanation, establishing a principle of infinite regression. Secondly, the process of explanation makes students aware of their ignorance and acknowledges that they cannot overcome it through their efforts. The result is students acknowledging their ignorance and becoming dependent on the explainer, denying their inherent capacity for autonomous learning. Hence, the principle of "explanation" equates to the principle of "blunting," often embodied by erudite, well-intentioned teachers who focus on how to provide explanations and assess whether students have understood.

Rancière's critique doesn't solely target the "explanatory" system within the educational process; it directly points to the hierarchical system that follows, where the students receiving explanations don't obey the explainer but rather adhere to an established intellectual hierarchy. "The first type of intelligence, the accidental acquisition of various perceptions, experientially memorized, understood, and repeated within a small range formed by various habits and needs, is the wisdom of children and ordinary people. The second type of intelligence uses rationality to understand things, progressing in an orderly fashion from simple to complex, from parts to wholes." [1] The first intelligence is considered inferior, that of the explained, the ignorant, while the second intelligence is superior, that of the explainer, the rulers, and the philosophers. The former, due to its accidental, scattered, and superficial nature, needs to adhere to the guidance of the second intelligence, a stance often presented by scholars of critical education.

Within the hierarchy of intelligence, teachers hold a contradictory dual identity. The educational institution enables the majority to learn course content while allowing the exceptional to acquire skills and become teachers. [1] On one hand, within the relationship with the explained, the teacher becomes the explainer. On the other hand, as an explainer, the teacher, previously a recipient of explanations, now also becomes a recipient within another hierarchical relationship. Almost everyone assumes a dual identity within different hierarchical structures: the knowledgeable and the ignorant, displaying their ignorance to one category while acknowledging it to another. The "explanatory" relationship between teachers and students is a microcosm of the hierarchy of intelligence. Students acknowledge their ignorance to teachers while teachers admit their ignorance to principals, curriculum developers, and experts. "The widespread arrogance of the inferior, combined with the widespread disdain of the superior, leaves no intelligence capable of recognizing itself among equals." Regardless of whether an individual is in one or several intelligence hierarchy relationships simultaneously, the only intelligence ultimately acknowledged is that of the "dictator" and the "ruler," and all intelligence submits to it.

3. As the Commander of Equality

In traditional critical pedagogy, teachers are ascribed a higher social status and moral responsibility. Figures like Michael W. Apple term teachers as "political beings" or Henry A. Giroux advocates for teachers as "transformative intellectuals." Teachers are not just transmitters of knowledge but active political participants, required to contemplate the relationship between education and politics and take responsibility for societal change. However, teachers are still included by critical pedagogues within a hierarchy of "intelligence." The emphasis placed by Freire and Giroux on critical language implies that the teacher's task only shifts from "imposing" to "guiding," without a substantial change

in the essence of the educational process. Thus, guiding students in constructing knowledge and forming a certain way of thinking still falls within the realm of the "explanatory" system.

Rancière's criticism of the teacher's identity within the educational system isn't tantamount to its annulment but rather a rewiring: becoming a teacher means driving the students' will to learn, particularly their will for self-learning. Rancière doesn't always denounce learned individuals but rather condemns those who transform their knowledge into a tool to erase the demands of the "ignorant" and resist their voices. From this perspective, the term "ignorance" holds a secondary, opposing meaning. Within the hierarchy of intelligence, the teacher's ignorance signifies submission to a higher intelligence and the elimination of their own sensibility, transforming an autonomous actor into an incapable recipient. Conversely, under the assumption of intellectual equality, "ignorance" signifies the elimination of the hierarchy, recognizing students as individuals of value, needing to be heard and engaged with in the processes of speech, thought, and action. Acknowledging the sensory value of students marks a dual liberation between the explainer and the explained.

Intellectual equality does not imply equality of status between teachers and students. Firstly, emphasizing intellectual equality doesn't mean that everyone can exhibit the same intellectual performance in all actions but signifies the absence of hierarchy and erasability among different intellects. Secondly, intellectual equality differs from equality of will; the function of a teacher lies in driving the students' will and "empowering" them for self-action. Empowerment is not transmission since the source of power lies within oneself. Teachers need to inform students of their inherent power and reassert this, enabling them to consciously utilize this power for personal or public benefit. Therefore, the teacher's task is to inform students about what to do, allowing them to fully exert their power in relevant activities. From this perspective, an ignorant teacher doesn't mean that the teacher is truly "ignorant" but rather separates knowledge from their control, letting students venture into the forest and maze of knowledge and report their observations and thoughts. Undeniably, Rancière does believe that an ignorant person can also become a teacher, just like Jacotot, who couldn't play the piano, could teach students how to play. The question arises: can a truly ignorant person issue correct commands to students, especially in a school environment filled with controversy, and how does the teacher grasp the meaning of "correct"?

4. Curriculum Centered on "Thing in Common "

In "The Ignorant Schoolmaster," Rancière refers to Jacotot's teaching method as "Universal Teaching" or rephrases it as the "panecastic system." This method presupposes that each individual possesses the capacity for autonomous learning, an extension of learning one's native language, akin to how young children can understand and eventually master language by their own efforts amid the noisy speech of adults. The proposal of the "panecastic system" reflects Rancière's rejection of disciplinary boundaries and the demand for the restoration of autonomy. However, the "panecastic system" isn't akin to the critical social curriculum proposed by traditional critical pedagogy or the "student-centered" progressive curriculum.

Firstly, the "panecastic system" differs from a critical curriculum. Basil Bernstein distinguishes curriculum into strong and weak structure models based on the execution mode of teaching, indicating that even in weak structure curricula, which emphasize student experiences and progressivism, there still exist power relations embedded in ideology. Rancière further points out in "Moments Politiques" that ideology is a multi-meaning existence, implying that the power relations conveyed in structured curricula are not monopolized by a single ideology. The answer to "whose knowledge is most valuable" conceals the confrontation and contestation among different ideologies. Critical pedagogy, as a part of this, transmits ideologies associated with critical pedagogy, guiding students as explainers and even shepherds. However, critical curricula still belong to structured curricula. The uniqueness of the "panecastic system" lies in its demand to break free from structural constraints, becoming a

"non-structural" curriculum. Instead of transmitting whose knowledge, it queries what knowledge different individuals possess and encourages their participation in exploring knowledge, acknowledging the validity and value of the knowledge they acquire. For Rancière, "What brings about liberation or blunting isn't the difference in procedures, steps, or methods, but the difference in principles; the principle of inequality always leads to blunting." [1]

The execution of universal teaching demands the identification of suitable "thing in common," acting as a bridge for communication between two minds while maintaining distance. "Thing in common" themselves signify equality, embodying distance and skepticism. Distance isn't a limitation but a necessary condition for communication. The "panecastic system" seems like a "student-centered" curriculum, but this isn't the case. When Jacotot taught French to Dutch students who didn't understand French, all he did was let them self-learn based on a bilingual version of "Telemachus's Adventures." The sole consideration for the students' experience and situation was that "these students are completely unfamiliar with French." Rather, Rancière's curriculum is centered on "thing in common," aiming to relinquish the teacher's authoritative position over their knowledge, ensuring individual research around "thing in common," enabling everyone to realize their capacity for learning and acquire all knowledge through their own learning.

5. From "Explanation" to "Translation"

Contrasting with the concealed "explanation" systems in traditional and critical pedagogy, Rancière advocates for "translation" as a path to liberation, where students' study of "Telemachus" under Jacotot's command represents the students' "translation" process. In "The Emancipated Spectator," Rancière explicitly incorporates "translation" into the field of education. "The poetic work of translation is the primary condition for any apprentice period. Intellectual emancipation means awareness and exhibition of the equal power of translation and reverse translation." [2]

Rancière's philosophy always intertwines literary and aesthetic domains. He believes that contemporary art's aesthetic system and literary revolution demand liberation for audiences, transforming them from passive receivers to active translators. Students are required to generate their own experiences based on texts. Schiller's interpretation of the Juno statue in "Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung" serves as an important reference for Rancière: "There's no strength of the multitude symbol, no gap for time to intrude." (这里没有众力象征的力, 没有时间能够侵入的空隙) [3] The Juno statue's face renders understanding her intentions and thoughts impossible, "There is no consistency distinguished from the sculptor or some consistent idea or some rule of reproduction to which it owes its existence as a work of art. It no longer belongs to any particular center of sensation." (没有从雕刻师与某个充分观念或某个再现规则的一致性中区分出它作为一个艺术作品的特殊属性。它让自身不再从属于某种专门的感觉中枢) [4] The inability of anyone to comprehend Juno's ideas implies that anyone possesses the same intellect to interpret Juno. Juno becomes a representative of modern art's aesthetic system, inviting people to translate rather than intending or narrating any story.

Freire and Rancière's spirits align as both deny an absolute division between the knowledgeable and the ignorant. "Everyone has the ability to perceive reality, understand knowledge, even if this knowledge is merely an opinion. There is no absolute ignorance or absolute omniscience in the world, just as no one knows everything, nor does anyone know nothing." (任何人都有能力感知现实、理解知识, 即便这些知识仅仅是观点。世上不存在绝对的无知与绝对的全知, 正如没有人无所不知一样, 也没有人一无所知) [5] While Freire affirms the value of anyone's perception of reality, he also maintains the existence of truth, distinguishing between knowledge and opinions. Knowledge is valid, while opinions, although they express voices, may not necessarily be true or correct. Thus, while Freire listens to children's voices, he imparts a "higher intellect" interpretation to their

expressions. Freire's approach is precisely what Rancière opposes with the help of "Telemachus": the idea that a student's expression is meaningful without needing someone of presumed higher intellect to restate it for them and place themselves in the position of being explained. On one hand, "Telemachus' Adventures" is an unfamiliar story for both teacher and student; the teacher lacks relevant knowledge about the book, preventing the formation of an intellectual hierarchy. On the other hand, "Telemachus' Adventures" is not a textbook written according to educational logic used in schools. As a fable, it awaits students to read, translate, and generate their own texts, rather than serving as a guide for systematic learning under an instructor.

6. Rancière's Critical Pedagogy: Constructing Sustainable Spaces for Debate

In the 1960s, critical pedagogy emerged as a reflective, critical force, shifting the educational field from Spencer's question of "What knowledge is most valuable?" to "Whose knowledge is most valuable." Education subsequently became an active participant in politics, aiming to transform society and achieve democratic ideals. Critical pedagogues identified pervasive power and class oppression in contemporary society, linking education with various inequalities in society such as ecology, race, gender, etc. Their aim was to transform society through education to achieve human liberation. Thus, Apple asserted that "education must be seen as a political act... Some different questions need to be asked. They include: whose knowledge is this, how does it become 'official'? What is the relationship between these official knowledges and those who possess social, political, economic, and cultural capital?" [6] The initiatives and objectives of critical pedagogues undoubtedly aligned with the marginalized and the weak in society, leading to their exclusion and disfavor by mainstream society. For these pedagogues, it became an indisputable responsibility to reveal the reasons that perpetuated the unfair situations faced by the marginalized, propose solutions, and lead people in resisting.

However, Rancière's ideas do not align entirely with other critical sociologists; they even become objects of his critique. The majority of critical scholars, integral to this critique, find themselves within his crosshairs. Critical pedagogues believe that once people fully understand the power relations constituting the educational domain and comprehend why they are in a position of exclusion, under the guidance of critical educators as intellectuals, they possess the power of resistance and eventually achieve their liberation. This is precisely why the concept of "demystification" is so crucial. Rancière contends that "demystification" represents how critical pedagogues view oppression and inequality issues in society as mysterious phenomena awaiting their revelation and interpretation. This masks the preconceived assumptions about "educational distance." "Educational distance" implies "intellectual distance," separating the mystified from the demystifiers—the foolish masses from the critical pedagogues—while implying that social oppression and inequality can only be realized through liberation, contingent upon the truth of our objective conditions, a truth that can only be discovered by those unaffected by ideological influences. The logic behind "educational distance" legitimizes intervention, establishes inequality between liberators and the liberated, and regards equality as a future eventuality after liberation. Rancière believes that this concept, while acknowledging the existence of inequality in society, introduces a second inequality - that of intelligence. The danger posed by the latter is greater than the former and will never achieve the pursuit of equality. Therefore, Rancière likens critical sociologists to "shepherds," while critical pedagogues become the "shepherds" within the field of education. In contrast, the people preconceived as "ignorant" become a flock awaiting guidance, considered intellectually inferior, in need of a wise shepherd to lead them to liberation. Rancière believes that the real task is to "restore" the effectiveness of the voices of marginalized groups in society. No one needs a teacher or leader to guide them in thinking and expressing themselves. The plight of marginalized groups at the margins is not due to intellectual deficiency but rather the elimination of their voices and achievements within

the hierarchical social system. The solution to this problem cannot be achieved through the practice of critical pedagogy that presupposes "intellectual equality," "helps," and "leads" the marginalized groups. The possibility of liberation lies in considering the voices of marginalized and underprivileged groups as valid and valuable ideas.

According to Rancière's instructions, the current challenge lies in breaking the established intellectual hierarchy and sensory allocation within the formed social structure. Faced with the established sensory allocation, some critical pedagogues represented by Paul Willis seek to create an identity that strengthens their understanding of their circumstances through "resistance," hoping to compete for power and social resources by creating a subculture that struggles against mainstream culture. Rancière also calls for a reconfiguration, not by creating different subcultures to compete and confront mainstream culture but by hoping to redefine the established sensory allocation patterns within mainstream society. This involves replacing suppression, negation, and conflict with "dialogue" and "debate." The French term "partage" (distribution) includes contradictory meanings of sharing and distribution. On the one hand, people need to share social resources collectively, and on the other hand, they need to allocate social resources according to different criteria. Rancière divides "partage" into two types: one divides reality rigidly into high-ranking intellectual laborers and low-ranking physical laborers, knowledgeable teachers and ignorant students, critical educators and waiting-to-be-saved citizens. The other division keeps reality "controversial," "divergent," and full of vitality. In Rancière's view, there is no perfect distribution. Perfect distribution is a redistribution under constant change. The aim of the former distribution is to maintain the structure of the existing social system, a political action termed "la police." The latter, opposite to "la police," involves rupture, division, and desires to break evident balance, allowing for the accidental eruption of "new spaces." Politics revolves around debates and needs to be sustained and maintained, with the premise being the involvement of everyone; "no one holds a priority position in explaining social phenomena." (没有一个解释社会现象的优先位置) [7] The purpose of education is neither to maintain sensory allocations in the existing social system nor to create and intensify confrontations between different cultures but to establish a social space where everyone can engage in continual debate. The essence of education is to enable people to "learn to be equally human in an unequal society." (学习在一个不平等的社会里成为互相平等的人) [1]

Rancière's thoughts are crucial in today's multicultural world. His envisioned political moment is a chaotic democratic moment, not a moment of strife or a final endpoint. This moment can only be achieved by recognizing the intellectual equality of all individuals. The purpose of education, then, is to empower students, create a disputable space for them to engage, maintain open and continuous communication between different cultures in a mutually acknowledged state, and prevent any form of oppression or submission towards one another. However, the rejection of "explanation" cannot evade the production of the event itself. Rancière, by defaulting all knowledge as equally valuable, merely puts everyone's voice up for debate. Yet, regardless of disputes within society, school management, or between teachers and students, there is always a decisive moment to conclude disputes. Rancière advocates for the continuous process of sensory distribution, opening new rounds of debate while ending ongoing disputes. However, the inevitability remains that each round of dispute results in continuous explanations of the outcome and the continual division of social order, ensuring only a perpetuation of unrest.

7. Conclusion

Rancière's educational critique is not merely a critique of traditional pedagogy but also a re-critique of critical pedagogy that presupposes "educational distance." This article doesn't seek to negate the contributions of critical pedagogues but rather points out Rancière's proposition of an alternative path

towards liberation.

Firstly, Rancière's liberation starts from individual liberation, challenging epistemological breakthroughs built upon the arbitrariness of literary language detached from intelligence in the premise of "intellectual equality" in educational attempts. "Equality" does not imply an equal distribution of educational resources or the promotion of a universal essence for everyone. It's a virtual epistemological assumption resonating constantly with education: the belief that individuals, through language and action, can oppose the school's knowledge priority within a hierarchical system and still validate the existence of equality as a fact. As Joris Vlieghe argues, "liberation should not only be seen as an external, objective thing in contact with the world in the educational environment; liberation is also part of contact itself." [8]

Secondly, as Gert Biesta points out, in people's understanding of education, the term "liberation" always places "dependency" at the core of the educational issue. Rancière advocates abandoning the notion of education as achieving "liberation" through "dependency." Students inherently possess the power of liberation without the guidance of teachers; they have the capacity to own all knowledge placed both within and outside their boundaries. Teachers don't need to assess students' knowledge; they need only ensure the alignment of will between themselves and the students to drive them toward self-liberation. The uniqueness of knowledge ensures comparison and the ignorance of students, while the detachment of knowledge aids in intellectual liberation. The act of "translation" erodes the close association between knowledge and power.

Finally, educational epistemology categorizes knowledge systems into systematic school knowledge and arbitrary non-school knowledge, dividing educated and uneducated individuals accordingly. Conversely, Rancière proposes that students become emancipated spectators within the aesthetic system. The intellectual liberation within education does not require interpretation by others; individuals can effectively comprehend various phenomena in the world as texts through their own practice. Rancière's acknowledgment of the validity of everyone's knowledge also breaks another assumption in educational epistemology: that the educational process is a quest for truth, and truth does indeed exist. In this sense, Rancière denies the uniqueness of truth, rejects the "schooled society," and the expert identity representing "progress" and "truth." Experts, through rationalizing the hierarchical order of intelligence and sanctifying expert knowledge, strangle the democratic process, allowing inequality to prevail.

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