



The Hatred of Public Schooling: The school as the mark of democracy

Jan Masschelein & Maarten Simons

To cite this article: Jan Masschelein & Maarten Simons (2010) The Hatred of Public Schooling: The school as the mark of democracy, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 42:5-6, 666-682, DOI: [10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00692.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00692.x)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00692.x>



Published online: 09 Jan 2013.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 220



[View related articles](#)



Citing articles: 16 [View citing articles](#)

The Hatred of Public Schooling: The school as the *mark* of democracy

JAN MASSCHELEIN & MAARTEN SIMONS

*Center for Educational Policy and Innovation, Center for Philosophy of Education,
K.U.Leuven, Belgium*

Abstract

This article takes up a text that Rancière published shortly after The Ignorant School Master appeared in French, 'École, production, égalité' [School, Production, Equality] (1988), in which he sketched the school as being preeminently the place of equality. In this vein, and opposed to the story of the school as the place where inequality is reproduced and therefore in need of reform, the article wants to recount the story of the school as the invention of a site of equality and as primordially a public space. Inspired by Rancière, we indicate first how the actual (international and national) policy story about the school and the organizational technologies that accompany it install and legitimate profound inequalities, which consequently can no longer be questioned (and become 'invisible'). Second, the article recasts and rethinks different manifestations of equality and of 'public-ness' in school education and, finally, indicates various ways in which these manifestations are neutralized or immunized in actual discourses and educational technologies.

Keywords: Rancière, learning environment, school reform, equality, democracy, public role of education

Introduction

The issue of democracy in relation to schools and schooling is generally discussed in two ways. Either it is discussed in terms of the school offering a place to prepare students for democracy, for instance by offering them particular knowledge or competencies or by creating spaces to learn to practice democracy. Or democracy in schools is approached in terms of its contribution to the realization of greater equality between different social/cultural groups or classes in society (and therefore to the emancipation of these groups), by offering equal opportunities to climb the ladder of the social order (hierarchy) by means of education. With regard to this last ambition, however, we can find a plethora of (mostly sociological) studies and reports stating that the school fails (at least to a very large extent) to contribute to more equality (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Duru-Bellat & Suchaut, 2005). Such conclusions have incited educational theorists and educational policy makers time and again either to blame the school (and the teachers) and/or to call for varying degrees of reform and (pedagogical, social, psychological, cultural and even medical) remedies. It is assumed for instance that

the school can reduce inequalities if the factors of inequality and mechanisms of reproduction are made explicit, if the formalism of 'high and middle class culture' is eliminated, and if the weight of different socio-economic conditions and individual needs is taken into account (see Rancière, 2007; see also Säfstrom, and Bingham, in this Issue).

Jacques Rancière's work can be read as an even more radical critique of the contribution of the school and of schooling to democracy. Indeed, Rancière not only declares that emancipation is always an individual and not a collective affair, but he states that neither emancipation nor equality can be institutionalised. And one could read his work, and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in particular, as saying that democratic moments in schools arise despite the school and its 'grammar of schooling' and, further, that it is even inconceivable to reform the school system so that it would realize more equality (Rancière, 1991, 2004; see also Ruitenberg, 2008; and Cornelissen, Derycke, and Biesta in this Issue). In *On the Shores of Politics* (1995), however, as well as in an earlier text, *School, production and equality* [École, production, égalité] (1988), Rancière explicitly states that the school is the 'place of equality pre-eminently' (Rancière, 1988, p. 82) and he relates this to the non-convergence of the school form/logic and the form/logic of production which is 'the mark of democracy on the modern economic and state systems' (Rancière, 1995, p. 54).¹ The school, he writes, is neither masking inequality nor is it the instrument of its reproduction; it is 'the site of the symbolic visibility of equality and its actual negotiation' (Rancière, 1995, p. 55).

In this contribution we want to elaborate on Rancière's idea and to sketch how we can tell the story of the school and of schooling as the story of a democratic invention, an invention of a site of equality and as primordially a public space, which therefore has to be defended as a *mark* of democracy in itself. First, we recall very briefly some elements of the current story that policy makers and educationalists tell about the contribution of the school to equality and we sketch the organizational and educational technologies and the ethos of teaching that accompany this story. Second, we recast and rethink different manifestations of equality in school education in another, perhaps less common, story. We indicate how these manifestations are related to differences in time, space and occupations and can be seen as operations of de-classification, de-privatization and profanation i.e. as operations that exemplify the essentially public character of schooling. Finally, we point to various ways in which these manifestations are neutralized or immunized in current discourses and educational technologies testifying to what we will call, by analogy with Rancière, a deep hatred of public schooling (and therefore of democracy of which it is a *mark*).

1. The School as a Place of Inequality: A Story of Elevators, Cradles, Talents and (Un)Equal Opportunities

The Story

The first story is the one that today is told mainly, but certainly not exclusively, by policy makers. You can find the story in (slightly) different variations all over the world and with regard to various levels of education. In a meeting in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve in April 2009 the ministers responsible for higher education in the 46 countries involved in the

Bologna Process stated that higher education has to make a vital contribution in realising ‘a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative’ and that ‘Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education’ (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, they state that ‘student-centred learning and mobility will help students develop the competences they need in a changing labour market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens’ (ibid., p. 1). The ministers want to strive for excellence in all aspects of higher education, which requires ‘a constant focus on quality’. Moreover, they want to make efforts to achieve equity, and they emphasise the ‘aim to provide equal opportunities to quality education’ to ‘the diversity of Europe’s populations’ in all parts of the educational system fostering the potential of all groups (ibid., p. 2).

As we can read, this story is about the maximisation of talents and capacities of all and the fostering of potential, which is related to the development of competences and to the provision of equal opportunities. It is a well-known story to be recognized also in, for instance, the *No Child Left Behind Act*² in the United States and the *Every Child Matters*³ program in the United Kingdom. Let us provide more specific detail on this story by looking at the version that policy makers in Belgium (Flemish Community) offer in the name of equality in order to explain what school education, according to them, is about or should be about and how it should be realised. We refer here mainly to the report of the so-called Commission Monard, published in April 2009 and entitled *Quality and opportunities for each pupil [Kwaliteit en kansen voor elke leerling]* (Monard, 2009).⁴

The Flemish report, which sketches the reforms intended for secondary education in the coming five to ten years, states that the overall and common aim should be: ‘To train each boy and each girl according to their talents and capacities ... Nobody should be left behind, everybody should and will find what suits him/her, both in one’s own field and on one’s own level’ (Monard, 2009, p. 7).⁵ Education should provide the opportunities for a well-balanced personal development so that one can become a critical-creative citizen. And secondary education should more particularly provide knowledge, skills and attitudes to either move on to higher education or to be qualified for the labour market. According to the report the current education system however reproduces social inequality (originating from the differences in socio-economic and/or socio-cultural background). Indeed a large number of studies all seem to concur with this conclusion, which is summarized as follows by a recent study in Flanders, with the striking title *The social elevator stuck*: ‘As has been proved for decennia now, the school continues to transform social inequality into inequality in the sphere of education’ (Jacobs *et al.*, 2009, p. 85). In the report of the Commission Monard, this observation reads as: ‘Today the place of your cradle determines partly the place you get in society ... Education should allow everyone to climb the social ladder’ (Monard, 2009, p. 18). According to the report, this does not mean that differences in school performances, in study choices, and in the resulting qualifications have to disappear, but it does mean that these differences should only find their origin in differences in talents and capacities (and efforts) and in well-informed choices. The implication of course is that pupils should become aware of their talents. What is regarded as crucially important is ‘to have as early as possible a picture of the talents and the development potential of pupils’, also taking into account that these

talents and potentials are socially defined: 'Offering quality education and education rich in opportunities to each pupil means *to bring every girl and every boy to the right place* on the basis of their *talent* and their *interests*' (ibid., p. 19, our italics). To achieve this, a particular organisation of education and particular technologies are required as well as 'professional' teachers with particular competences.

Therefore We Need ...

According to the story told by the Flemish report, the educational system has to be reformed or at least improved in order to make it possible for youngsters with different profiles to develop their talents maximally. Besides offering schools a strong degree of autonomy (emphasising the importance of 'school autonomy') this implies mainly that what is needed is:

- a flexible system with real and differentiated opportunities for choice, in which talents are maximally challenged to excel since we have to expect (require) high performances from pupils, for their own benefit and for that of society. Since in such a system (and according to the story) the trajectory is determined by the talents that become manifest in performances in all kinds of tests, then attainment targets, levels of mastery as well as qualification structures, competence profiles etc. have to be developed.
- stimulating learning environments with motivating, transdisciplinary, competence-oriented teaching methods in which the learning outcomes and acquired competencies can be made transparent. It is important to help pupils in their choices, to follow their progress on their chosen trajectories, which should lead to competences being logged in portfolios.
- an improved environment that offers more opportunities and motivation to teachers as well as an increased teacher professionalism, both as experts in their subject/discipline and in supporting learning processes. Regarding the latter, it is stressed that the pupil/learner is the agent of his/her own learning process, and that the teacher is not only a coach, but also offers structure, makes clear demands, directs the learning process and elaborates a stimulating didactic approach that starts from the available talents, capacities and needs.

These measures are required in order to arrive at a timely detection and development of talents, at choices that are as much as possible determined by talent, learning potential and interest, at a reduction of the so-called waterfall system (pupils dropping to a 'lower' level of education when they fail), at an increase of quality in terms of learning pleasure, wellness (wellbeing) and performance, and finally at a reduction of education delay and of the number of unqualified students.

Reading this report (and other similar or parallel ones in Flanders, but also throughout many other countries) we notice a strong concern for promoting equal opportunities in and through education combined with a strong focus on developing talents into useful competencies and increasing overall performance. The problem of inequality appears in this story through the idea '*every girl and every boy directed to the right place on the basis of their talents and their interests*'. However, a characteristic feature of this story is that the assumption of inequality itself is not questioned, neither is the existence of a social

hierarchy itself i.e. a particular configuration of the social order, which binds in a specific way social positions to individuals. This implies that inequality (in talents, intellectual capacities, interests, needs) constitutes not only the assumption to start from, but that this inequality is also constantly verified (different qualifications or learning outcomes verify the inequality in talents, interests, etc.).

The school operates therefore by the teacher connecting young people (bodies) individually to talents, to performances and to positions within the order of the school (and this is not happening ‘naturally’, but precisely through the whole technology of the learning environment as positioning machine, see Simons & Masschelein, 2008), which in turn are connected to competences and qualifications, which in their turn are connected to (unequal) positions in the social order. So the aim is to solve the problem of social inequality based on social-cultural/economic origin by way of a policy of equal opportunities. What is lost sight of, however, is that this brings about a new inequality, that is, a ‘school inequality’ based on, as the story itself tells us, differences in talent, interest and potential. In this way, the story and the reshaping of the educational system that accompanies it contribute to the configuration of a new unequal social order (a social hierarchy), which attributes everyone ‘her/his place’ (where he/she has to do what he/she can do best, and nothing else) and where the best pupils of the class, the excellent ones, are on top of the hierarchy. In this way the school itself contributes to the installation of an unequal order while naturalising the inequalities (they are taken as ‘given’—as ‘talents’) and rationalising them (i.e. justifying the different positions that are connected to them). As Rancière (2004) comments, today all ‘natural’ legitimisations of inequality (election, age, descent, ...) seem to have become unacceptable, and the only legitimisation of the existing social inequalities that is left, seems to be precisely the assumed intellectual inequality or the resulting differences in school qualifications and social inequalities.

An Old Story

This story, which says that not everyone is equal in terms of talent and ability, connects the social order and the order of the school. It bears a strong resemblance to the story told by a philosopher some 2500 years ago, when he tried to indicate how to build the ideal and just state and explained that in a well-ordered society (the ideal state) everyone should perform just one role, his or her own trade or skill, that which and for which she or he is good or gifted and which corresponds to the (in)ability with which nature equipped him/her. This story or fable⁶ told by Plato reads as follows:

You in this city are all brothers ... But the god, in fashioning those among you who are competent to rule, mixed gold into them at their birth, whereby they are most precious, and silver into the auxiliaries; and iron and bronze into the farmers and the other craftsman. Now because you are all akin, you will mostly beget children like yourselves, but it is possible that a silver child should be born of gold, or a golden child born of silver, and so all the rest from one another. To those who rule, then, the god first and especially announces that there is nothing of which they shall be such good guardians, or guard so

carefully, as the intermixture of metals in the souls of their offspring. If their own offspring are born alloyed with bronze or iron, they will assign it the grade appropriate to its nature and thrust it out among craftsmen or farmers without pity. And again, if any born from the latter are alloyed with silver or gold, they will honour them and lead them up, some to guardianship, others as auxiliaries, because of a prophecy that the city will be destroyed when guarded by iron or bronze. (Plato, *The Republic*, Book III, 515a–c)

This is the ‘myth of the metals’ or ‘fiction’ of which we have to persuade the rulers, and the rest of the city too: ‘It would make them care more for their city and for each other’ (ibid., 415d). But Plato clearly states that it is ‘one of those needful falsehoods’ (ibid., 414b), which has to be used by the rulers of the city ‘for the benefit of the city’ (ibid., 389b).

It is not difficult to see the formal parallel with the current story about talents and abilities: everybody is gifted in a particular way by nature and/or origin and there is an occupation (to do what one can do best, what one is able to do) and a ‘right’ social place that corresponds with one’s talents/abilities. In a certain way it is even a perfection or radicalisation of Plato’s story: ‘everyone, not as a group, but as an individual, has his/her place’. Plato’s story distinguishes between classes (and ranks), which he values differently thereby installing a clear hierarchy of positions, occupations and functions. Today’s story speaks in terms of talents, potential and needs but does not relate them anymore to social class but to individuals, installing its own configuration as an overarching classification of individuals. Everyone has a right to his/her place, the place fitting to his/her ability and need, whereby the inequality of the school order becomes the norm for society.

According to Rancière, the democratic struggle is precisely the struggle in which the connections (between talents/givens, occupations and positions) within the social order are disturbed that occurs when an individual/group declares itself able to perform an activity that does not fit her place (according to the order) i.e. when an individual/group starts from the assumption of equal capacity and declares openly this equality. At that moment this individual/group emancipates herself i.e. she withdraws herself from the (in)abilities that are ‘hers’ according to the reigning order. This recalls the use of the word emancipation, which stems from Roman law, but was used from the 15th century onwards also to indicate those who broke or violated the boundaries between the classes by claiming a freedom (to do and to say things) for which they were not qualified (Ruhloff, 2004).

To question the story of talents and capacities would mean to question whether individuals have indeed different capacities, interests or talents. Today, nobody seems to be willing to do this anymore. However, this is, also according to Rancière, precisely what is at stake. We think, or we ‘believe’, as do Rancière/Jacotot, that another story is possible, a story which does not start from inequality but from equality, whereby equality refers to the assumption (not the fact) that we are all ‘able’, and, thus, not to equal opportunities or skills or knowledge (or even personal dignity). For Rancière, equality refers to intellectual equality, not as a psychometric notion, but as a ‘being able’ (to speak, to understand). Starting from the assumption that we are all equal means to assume that everybody (regardless of qualifications or indications) is ‘able to’. As a practical hypoth-

esis or axiom, equality is not approached as a ‘given fact’; it is not a fact that can be concluded or be proved or falsified in the usual sense and it is not a goal or destination to be aimed at (Rancière, 1991). The axiom of intellectual equality instead constitutes a starting point: not a cognitive act of concluding something, but a practical hypothesis out of which one acts or speaks. Equality has the status of the ‘as if’ of a hypothesis. Along this line of thought we want to offer a different story, a story in which the school precisely appears as that unique infrastructure in which one can start from the assumption of equality, the equality between pupils and between teacher and pupils, the school, thus, as place of equality. This equality as practical hypothesis cannot be proven, but it can be verified time and again in the school, by teachers (and by pupils). In this story the democratisation of the school is not bound to equal opportunities or access, but to moments of equality related to the space/time structure of the school itself and the ethos of the schoolmaster making the school into a *public* space.

2. The School of Equality: A Story of (Free) Time, Excitement, Danger, Inspiration/Enthusiasm, Fear and Love

In the story we offer here, the school is not the facilitating ‘learning environment’ but ‘school’; the school is not about the development of talents (learning), something else is at stake. Moreover, in this story being a teacher is different from being a professional or an expert who masters a subject matter and/or supports learning processes. In fact we all know that. To be a teacher in this sense refers to that knowledge that is present in the excitement, but also the fear or anxiety we still feel (at certain moments) on the threshold of the school or the classroom. It is the knowledge that is present also in the moments that we are carried away by something and forget the time. But it is also the knowledge that expresses itself in the disdain, contempt and distrust towards the school and the teacher (which has shown itself in various forms throughout the centuries; see Ricken, 2007). This knowledge is about knowing that the school creates a ‘break/rupture in time’ and induces a ‘play’ in the social order; it is about a teacher who does something with time i.e. makes others forget time and therefore makes and gives time. In this way we can see the school as the preeminent place of emancipation and equality: the school is a site where democratic moments can take place. This may be the (democratic) truth that fascinates and moves us time and again in the many movies that have been made about the school and the teachers/pupils in these schools—however bad or good these movies might be—i.e. the movies in which pupils, due to the teacher, leave ‘their place’ (‘their ability’). It is probably also this knowledge that is present in the distrust of families, fathers and mothers, of states and classes and their representatives towards the school that creates ‘displaced creatures’, creatures that are not aware/conscious anymore of ‘their place’, do not know any more their place, creatures who are alienated from their family and their class and from the received expectations with regard to their future. Different aspects have been introduced here, which we want to clarify briefly.

The School is no Place of Preparation, But of Separation (Scholè: Free Time)

σχολή (Greek: scholè): free time, rest, delay, study, discussion, lecture, school, school building

First, we want to recall that the school came into being as a reconfiguration of time and space, which invalidated and made inoperative the archaic partition of individuals/groups, places, activities, and forms of knowledge and power. This archaic partition implied that certain occupations and forms of knowledge were reserved for particular individuals/groups. It is often too easily taken for granted that the school is a phenomenon that in one form or another is present in all cultures and at all times. On that view, education is regarded as the initiation into the knowledge and culture of a society and the school is approached as only a collective, institutionalized (and more economic and sophisticated) form of such initiation. However, we consider the school to be a very particular invention of the *polis*, which consists of offering 'free time' to those who according to their birth and their place in society could not dispose of such time. The school originates as the infringement of a privilege, the privilege of aristocrats and knights in archaic Greece. The school is the democratisation of 'free time'. As Huizinga remarks, the school does refer to an education and edification which were not acquired as the by-products of the training of citizens 'for useful or profitable occupations' (what we could call the educational system of the craftsman-apprentice, where of course learning is taking place), but as the fruit of 'free time' (Huizinga, 1949, p. 147). And Marrou clarifies how the coming into existence of the school incited a lot of disdain precisely because of the democratisation it entailed: with the coming into existence of the school it was no longer descent, the good race or good nature (i.e. birth) that meant that one belonged to the class of the good and the wise (Marrou, 1965, pp. 78–79). In other words, the school releases being-good and being-wise from a certain 'given' (by nature/birth) and offers 'free time' to those who were not properly born for it (or had no talent for it). It does this, according to Rancière, by its form i.e. as a space/time structure.

In one sense it is certainly true that democratic education is the paradoxical heir of the aristocratic *scholè*, for it equalizes less by virtue of the universality of the knowledge it imparts, or by the virtue of social levelling, than by virtue of its very form, which is that of a separation from productive life ... Out of this once natural separation it creates a contradiction in motion in which a variety of egalitarian policies are overlaid, encountering in frequently unpredictable guises the diverse ideological and social input of the users (that is to say, families) ... [It is] the site of the symbolic visibility of equality and its actual negotiation. (Rancière, 1995, p. 55)

Rancière states, therefore, that the school can be considered primarily as a symbolic form of the separation of spaces, times and activities/occupations (and, as we will add, the school can be regarded as a public place where a particular teacher ethos is at work).⁷ School, he suggests, does not refer to 'learning time', but to 'free time'. It separates in fact two modes of *the use of time*: the use of time of those that are subjugated to the necessities of life, and therefore have to labour and work, and the use of time of those freed from the constraints that accompany labour and work. This school form, as separation, is what relates the school of the Athenians in antiquity to the schools of today (Rancière, 1988). The school is not primarily the space/time where knowledge is passed on in view of the preparation for adult occupations. It is rather a space/time that is outside the necessities of labour or work. It (literally) places labour at a distance. And even where she takes up

something of this labour or work, which is probably most apparent in technical and vocational schools, she transforms it. This school transformation is perhaps expressed most clearly in a negative way by saying that ‘it is not real labour or true work’ or that one can better learn a craft or trade outside school. But we want to take this transformation in a positive way; it is exactly what the school as school does. What happens at school is different from the socialisation or initiation proper to apprenticeship, where the learning of a craft or trade is immediately related to economic productivity. Indeed, as Rancière (1988) stresses, school-children are no apprentices of a craftsman. The school is about knowledge and capability for the sake of knowledge and capability itself, which means that it is the place of study and exercise. The complaints about the school that is good for nothing, which can be commonly heard now, thus point at what the school actually is about: the school is separation from productive life and constitutes for each and all (disregarding social background, descent and talent) time and space for study and exercise (see Huizinga, 1949, p. 161). The school here does not have (social) equality as an aim, for which it would offer the means. It equalizes not through content or through the knowledge or capabilities that would have the effect of a social redistribution, but through its form. If the school changes the social conditions of school children, then it is precisely because it takes them out of the (unequal) world of production (and the unequal world of the family and the social order) and offers them the luxury of an egalitarian time-space. The school redistributes given occupations in society and the family and transforms them by separating them (in time and space).

The School is no Place of Initiation, but of ‘Play’ (Ludus: Study Time and Play/Exercise Time)

School (Latin): ‘Ludus’, ‘scola’, ‘studiorum domicilium’

In Latin the first word for school is *ludus*, which also means ‘play’. Huizinga remarks that also in some other languages (such as in Japanese) the word for ‘play’ is related or similar to the word for ‘studying somewhere’ or for ‘schooling’. According to him this is due to the fact that both are a ‘place of exercise’ and ‘a sphere in which something is in play’ (Huizinga, 1949, pp. 34–36). Following this line of thought, we want to elaborate the idea that the school is the place where our world (our knowledge, capabilities and occupations) is brought into play and is made into play. The school, as *ludus*, is the space of play i.e. the place where there is the possibility for movement within a constricted space. The school is, then, the playground of society, it is the place where knowledge and practices can be released and ‘set free’. They are released from their regular usage (at home or in society) and offered for their own sake: knowledge for the sake of knowledge (aimed at in study), or occupations for the sake of the occupations (which is connected to exercising). Let us elaborate on this idea of the school as time for study and play/exercise.

As we indicated earlier, in the Greek world the school was not a place and time organised to reproduce the social order, or the way of life of its elites. Separated from both the *oikos* and the *polis*, and hence freed from daily occupations, the school was a real space with a real inner place and time, where people were exposed to real matter (school material and occupations). A typical feature of the separateness of the school, then, is

suspension. Economic, social, cultural, political or private time is suspended, as are the tasks and roles connected to specific places. Suspension here could be regarded as an act of de-privatization, de-socialisation or de-appropriation; it sets something free. The term 'free', however, not only has the negative meaning of suspension (free from), but also a positive meaning, that is, free to. Drawing upon the terminology of Agamben, we can introduce the term *profanation* to describe this kind of freedom. According to Agamben '[p]ure, profane, freed from sacred names is that thing that is being replaced in view of the common use by people' (Agamben, 2005, p. 96). A condition of profane time, space and matter is not a place of emptiness, therefore, but a condition in which time, space and things are disconnected from their regular use (in the family, society ...) and hence it refers to a condition in which something of the world is open for common use.

At this point we can argue that the school separation not only installs equality, but also constitutes a public space. The structure of *suspension* and *profanation* regarding time, space and matter is what makes the school a public institution; it is a place/time where words are not (yet) part of a shared language, where things are not a property and to be used according to familiar guidelines, where acts and movements are not yet habits of a culture, where thinking is not yet a system of thought. As a profane space, the school offers time and space where things are 'put on the table' (we will return to this idea shortly), transforming them into 'common things', things that are at everyone's disposal for 'free use'. At school, things are of 'free use', and are thus disconnected from the established usages of the older generation in society but not yet appropriated by students as representatives of the new generation. The profane school functions as a kind of common place where nothing is shared but everything can be shared. In other words, schools are not public because of how they are financed or how they are run for instance, but due to their form, that is, the acts of separation, suspension and profanation constitute a public time, space and matter.

In order to clarify these abstract ideas, and to make use of an Arendtian vocabulary, the public school could be regarded as a table. Someone becomes a school teacher by, as she sits in front of someone else, putting something on 'the table'. The act of putting it on the table transforms something into a common matter, and transforms someone into a teacher and another person into a student. What the person does when she puts something on the table—what transforms her into a teacher—is that she says 'that's how *we* (as adults) do it' or 'that's how it is done *today*'. To put this in more straightforward terms, someone who puts, for instance, a book on the table accompanied by even a minimal sentence such as 'this is interesting', becomes a teacher (or a representative of the world in which the book circulated and was used) Placing the book on the table disconnects it from its usage in society—it becomes a 'school' book or common matter that becomes free for study and exercise. And being confronted by something that is of free use at once transforms others into students; they can renew its use through study and exercise, they can make new use of it.

More often when someone puts something on the table, and says that it is interesting, they immediately start to explain why it is interesting and how students should look at it, how they should use it, what they have to do with it, and so on. This teacher controls access to the world, she prevent things from becoming common and, hence, she neutralises immediately the act of separation and de-privatization. The same happens in less teacher-

centred approaches. In these cases, the teacher does not put anything on the table or puts several things on the table, and then says that students have to find out for themselves what is of interest and of value, and teaches that students cannot learn from the old generation but have to direct their own learning. So again, the teacher brings nothing ‘into play’, there is no act of profanation and no separation; what happens is a neutralisation to be understood as an immunisation against ‘bringing into play’. Students here are not exposed to common matter (but to learning resources), and they are not placed in a position of study or exercise. Unlike these acts of neutralisation and immunisation, the profane school offers a time and place where things are put on the table. The profane act of the school is to transform them into things that are at everyone’s disposal for ‘free use’ (study, exercise). We want to stress at this point that it is the school-as-public-place that allows us to think about the specific status of the teacher and the student, to think of oldness and newness—and not the other way around. The school-as-public-space we have in mind *is* the time and space that opens up an experience of new beginning in confrontation with something free for use—even if it turns out that students or the new generation embraces old, common usages (see Masschelein & Simons, 2010).

In order to explore in more detail what happens at the public school—through the acts of separation, suspension and profanation, we have to focus in more detail on its ‘playfulness’. It is worthwhile to recall at this point some of the characteristics that Huizinga relates to play (Huizinga, 1949). A game, he says, is played for the sake of itself and remains outside the process of the immediate satisfaction of needs. A game is not the common life but this does not mean that it would not involve seriousness or rules. The game is played within clear limits of time and space; it is *separated and excepted* but nobody can ‘own’ or appropriate the space of play. Furthermore, it is played on the basis of equality. And it is well known how the play (for instance the play of question and response), together with the experience of being equal in this play, actually *brings* the real social hierarchies and the real social authority *into play* and can become a danger for this hierarchy and authority. As a time and place of play, the school can appear as ‘dangerous’ indeed.

The school is not just about free time and free space (of play), but also about ‘free matter’ as well as knowledge (or school subjects). Knowledge is very important in the school of course, but at school, as we understand it here, the knowledge is always something that is put at stake, brought into play. Verschaffel (2009) recalls that in all traditional and archaic societies knowledge is protected and shielded and even kept secret. Knowing and being curious is perceived as dangerous in these societies. Knowledge is no public affair, but partitioned and conserved according to positions, with access to it being regulated through selection and initiation. In Ancient Greece, however, knowledge has been detached or released from these positions and brought onto the street (Socrates) and into the school: knowledge is no longer the business of some wise men who, being close to the powerful, manage and conserve knowledge, or of aristocrats and shamans. Instead, knowledge becomes an affair of all and in principle does not presuppose any exceptional gift, particular talent, election or privilege. Of course, knowledge was in fact not really equally available and public (and we are aware of the position of slaves and women in Greek society), but in principle, it was. Again, to bring something (a text, for instance) into play and to set it free (from regular usage) is always dangerous

or risky—the ‘old generation’ or ‘the aristocrats’ can lose their grasp on things. Without this risk, however, and without offering the new generation time, space and material for play—be it in study, playful conversation or exercise—there is no school.

The school form we wish to describe here is clearly not a ‘learning environment’ (as it appears today in the discourse of those who want to keep up with the knowledge society) and not ‘a space of initiation’ (as is maintained by those defending traditional schooling). The school form is a place and time of play, a public space, and a place where knowledge is put at our disposal and is set free. Of course, the school form discussed here maintains something of a site of initiation where meaning, knowledge, and values important for and to a community are passed on with authority to a new generation. It maintains something of this archaic function: to conserve and pass on what the older generation knows about how to live together, about nature, and about the world. But the specificity, and the real ‘school form’ of this transmission or passing, lies in what is transmitted being detached and released from any ‘community’ and ‘position’ (the older generation, the wise, etc.). This happens through a public time and place of play that brings knowledge (culture, habits, customs ...) into play in a radical way. At school everything can always be put under discussion or be questioned; for instance, reasons can be asked for the most diverse phenomena: Why is the sun shining? Where does rain come from? Why are there poor people? etc.

The idea of the school as a space in which something is at stake and is at play can be read in the following lines from Marguerite Duras’ novel about a boy who does not want to go to school because there he learns what he does not know (which is of course a reference to Meno’s slave learning what he did know).

The mother: You notice how he is, schoolmaster?

The schoolmaster: I see.

The schoolmaster smiles.

The schoolmaster: So you refuse to learn, sir?

Ernesto looks long at the schoolmaster before he answers. He is so amiable.

Ernesto: No Sir, that is not the point. I refuse to attend school, sir.

The schoolmaster: Why?

Ernesto: Let us say that it makes no sense.

The schoolmaster: What has no sense?

Ernesto: To attend school (*pause*). It is useless (*pause*). Kids at schools are abandoned. The mother brings the kids to school so that they learn that they are abandoned. In this way she is released from them for the rest of her life.
Silence.

The schoolmaster: You, Master Ernesto, didn’t you need to go to school to learn?

Ernesto: Oh yes sir, I did. It is only there that I understood everything. At home I believed in the litanies of my idiot mother. It was only at school that I met the truth.

The schoolmaster: And that is ...?

Ernesto: That God does not exist.

Long and deep silence. (Duras, 1990, pp. 79–80)

School as the Place of the Teacher as Ignorant Master and Amateur/Lover (Present Time)

Lastly we want to point to the figure of a teacher in the school form that we have explored in the previous sections. We understand this teacher to be one that we all know, but that today is out of sight. This figure escapes the continuum between student-centred and teacher-centred education in her dedication to ‘the subject’ or ‘the matter’. This is not the teacher as professional (regarding subjects and learning), but as an amateur or lover. The figure of the teacher as amateur is not only someone who knows something about the matter (and who in fact wants to know everything about that matter), but also someone who cares about that matter and is concerned about it. She is characterized by what we call passion. The amateur teacher is not only an expert in maths, but passionate about maths, with a passion that shows itself in the small gestures that express her knowledge, but above all in her concern for and presence in relation to the matter. The teacher’s passion can make the matter (maths, literature, etc.) speak. The passionate teacher does not only inform us about the matter, but also brings it to life: she makes it speak to us. In this way, the teacher can bring the students in to contact with the matter, she can make them ‘touch’ and be touched/inspired by it (so she brings it literally near to them). And, most importantly, the amateur teacher can make them forget time.

Making people forget time means that the teacher can take them out of regular time and bring them to the lesson; she makes sure that they are ‘there’, that they are present and not absent. In his recent book *Chagrin d’école* [School Ache], Daniel Pennac (2007) describes in detail the pain and distress of the bad students, the repeaters, the ones who are tired of the school. He portrays the teacher as follows: he draws them in the present time, in the present, which, according to Pennac, means to detach them from the past (the past which labels them, which binds them to particular abilities and mainly inabilities) and from the future (which they don’t have). Teaching, he writes, is making sure that in each lesson the alarm goes off so that students come to their senses. That is, to put an end to their ‘magical thought’, the thought that keeps them imprisoned in fairytales and makes them say: ‘I can do nothing, it will not work, there is no point even trying’. It is the magic that makes them say that they are unable. He notes:

Oh, I know very well how irritating this kind of utterance can be for those teachers that take care of the most difficult classes from the ghettos of our time. The lightness of these words confronted with the weight of sociological, political, economical factors and factors related to family and culture, for sure ... Nevertheless, this magic thought plays a role that should not be neglected in the obstinacy with which bad students remain crouched on the bottom of their worthlessness. (Pennac, 2007, pp. 174–175)

To make the alarm go off, to make sure that they come to their senses, and to draw them into the present time therefore means that the teacher must start from the assumption that everyone is able. And as in the school movies we mentioned earlier, Pennac’s book is full of examples where precisely this assumption and its verification are at stake. It is a verification (a drawing in the presence) that happens by addressing students ‘in the language of the matter that is taught ... Don’t feel like reading? Then lets read’ (ibid., pp. 125–126). To become personal (and express our private feelings) and to talk about

ourselves or to put the individual needs of pupils in the centre is unacceptable, according to Pennac: in the school all this (my personal or intimate feelings as teacher, or the individual needs of pupils) falls outside of (is beside) the point. We have to limit ourselves to the matter, in his case 'French grammar'. This hour of grammar, he writes, is an 'air bubble in time' (ibid., p. 132). And the lesson can only start at the moment that the burden of inability falls away: 'It is difficult to explain, but one glance, a word of trust ... can make the pain disappear, can draw them in to the pure present time' (ibid., p. 70).

The amateur teacher, then, is someone who loves the world, or at least something in the world, for instance a subject matter. It is out of love—to use Arendt's (1958) terminology once again—that she puts something on the table, and she cannot do this without adding that it is interesting and valuable for her and in her world. But it is out of love for the new generation that she does not or, perhaps more strongly, cannot add how it should be used. The teacher feels that it is her task to make it free for common use, and hence, to offer students the experience of free use and potentiality in the face of/in relation to what is put on the table. Perhaps for that reason, the teacher who loves her subject and the new generation assumes that all students are equal; not equal in the sense of having equal intellectual skills, but equal in the sense that she believes that everyone is able to make sense of what she puts on the table. At that point, the amateur teacher is a public figure. Or to reformulate this in another way, perhaps her love for her subject matter and for young people forces the amateur teacher to give all students new chances over and over again. Additionally, the teacher who loves the world and the new generation does not leave the students to their own devices, and certainly does not want to get rid of all forms of discipline. The amateur teacher is not the teacher that is often assumed in student-centred approaches. She clearly and decisively asks for attention from students; not for her, and 'the old generation' she represents, but for the things she puts on the table. It is the kind of discipline that is needed to sit around the table, to become attentive to what is on the table and to make the experience of a new use possible at all. Perhaps for that reason, the main characteristic of the 'teacher form' in the profane school form is always in the first place its amateurism, that is, love for the world and the new generation (Arendt, 1958), and not professionalism or expertise.

Conclusion: The Mark of Democracy and its Hatred

According to us, the school in its distinctive form is about *separation* from a position, from a place in the order of inequality (for example, the order that explains that children from the *bidonvilles* or suburbs are not interested in mathematics or in paintings) and, therefore, it is about an *ex-position* that starts from the assumption of equality (an exposure to the world for the sake of the world, to the matter for the sake of the matter). The school of equality is not an egalitarian school or a meritocratic school; it is neither a school that aims at equal outcome, nor a school that offers equal opportunities. The school form includes an assumption or opinion of equality in placing students anew time and again in an equal position to begin with. It is the school where what we could call 'democratic' moments can arise, where teachers and students are exposed to each other

as equals in relation to a book, a text, a thing (see also Cornelissen in this Issue). And from that perspective we can state that the developments we can observe today (in a combination of policy, story and science) neutralise or maybe even cancel out these democratic moments and the democratic operation of the school (in her form, in what is done within this form and in the ethos of the teacher). There is no space ... no time ... no matter.

The banalisation of the form of the school, which happens in the identification of the time of the school with the 'natural time' of growth, maturation or development or with the (artificial) time of learning, masks/disguises the separation between 'useful, economic time' and 'free time' as study and play time. The banalisation of the discussion and argumentation about a matter that takes place by reducing it to an exchange of private opinions (what is your opinion?) and a debate on individual preferences and perspectives masks the fact that in the school the (common) world is put into play (and not individual stakes or shares). The banalisation of the teacher that takes place by identifying her with the professional, masks the possibility that she is an amateur who can 'make' time. Both the traditional school and the school as learning environment want to avert the school of equality, in the same way as the expert teacher (and her competence profiles) wants to avert the teacher as amateur.

The public role of the profane school is related to making things public for common and free use, and hence, anything can happen here. As a consequence, there is a deep egalitarian or even democratic structure in schools. Indeed, leaving the private sphere of the family and entering the school building implies entering a space and time where particular roles, positions, customs and backgrounds are suspended and where all people are equally exposed to common things in view of new and free use. Drawing upon Rancière (1988), the profane school then is a radical democratic institution. The profane school is democratic in the sense that all sit as equals around the same table, and confronted with what lies on the table anything can happen and no-one can claim an authority to say what should be done based on a qualification the other does not have. But if the profane school is indeed a democratic school, perhaps we could follow Rancière (2007) further in his description of the fear for and even hatred towards democracy. Democracy, as Rancière explains, was a term invented by its opponents, that is, those who claimed that one is only entitled to exercise power based on specific qualifications, like wealth, wisdom, expertise or birth. According to Rancière, in Ancient Greece, but also still today, there is a deep fear for or even a kind of hatred of democracy, and perhaps, this holds true as well for the democratic, public school.

Notes

1. We changed the English translation to stay much closer to the French version, which reads: 'la marque de la démocratie sur les systèmes économiques et étatiques modernes' (Rancière, 1988, p. 74). In the available English translation ('This is precisely the distinguishing feature of modern democracy') the idea of marking (stamping) is more or less lost. Also in some other places we will use our own translation, since the available one, according to us, misses some of the meanings of the original which are important to our argument.
2. <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>
3. <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/>

4. An almost identical version of the story can be found in the text of the ‘quality agenda’ published by the Dutch government in July 2008 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, 2008).
5. All translations from Dutch and French texts are the authors’.
6. This is also one of the many fables (‘The myth of the metals’) which Rancière recapitulates time and again throughout his work.
7. Elsewhere we have related these characteristics to the ‘essence’ of the school (Masschelein & Simons, 2010).

References

- Agamben, G. (2005) *Profanations* (Paris, Payot & Rivages).
- Arendt, H. (1958) [1977] *The Crisis in Education*, in: H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight exercises in political thought* (New York, Penguin).
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. C. (1970) *La reproduction. Eléments pour une théorie du système d’enseignement* (Paris, Editions de Minuit).
- Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America* (London, Routledge).
- Duras, M. (1990) *La pluie d’été* (Paris, P.O.L.).
- Duru-Bellat, M. & Suchaut, B. (2005) Organization and Context, Efficiency and Equity of Educational Systems: What PISA tells us, *European Educational Research Journal*, 4:3, pp. 181–194.
- Huizinga, J. (1949) *Homo Ludens. A study of the play-element in culture* (translation s.n.) (London, Routledge).
- Jacobs, D. et al. (2009) *De sociale lift blijft steken. De prestaties van allochtone leerlingen in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap en de Franse Gemeenschap* (Brussels, Koning Boudewijnstichting).
- Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009) *The Bologna Process 2020—The European Higher Education Area in the new decade. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education*, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28–29 April 2009.
- Marrou, H. I. (1965) *Histoire de l’éducation dans l’antiquité* (Paris, Seuil).
- Masschelein, J. & Simons, M. (2010) Schools as Architecture for Newcomers and Strangers. The perfect school as public school?, *Teachers College Record*, 112:2, pp. 533–555.
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences [Ministerie van OCW] (2008) *Onderwijs met ambitie: Samen werken aan kwaliteit in het Voortgezet onderwijs* (Den Haag, Ministerie van OCW).
- Monard (2009) *Kwaliteit en kansen voor elke leerling. Een visie op de vernieuwing van het secundair onderwijs. Voorstel van de Commissie Monard*. Brussel, retrieved from <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/nieuws/2009/bijlagen/0424-visienota-SO.pdf>
- Pennac, D. (2007) *Chagrin d’école* (Paris, Gallimard).
- Plato (2008) *The Republic*, R. E. Allen, trans. (New Haven, CT and London, Yale University Press).
- Rancière, J. (1988) École, production, égalité, in: X. Renou (ed.) *L’école contre la démocratie* (Paris, Ediligr), pp. 79–96.
- Rancière, J. (1991) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*, K. Ross, trans. and introduction (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press).
- Rancière, J. (1995) *On the Shores of Politics* (London, Verso).
- Rancière, J. (2004) Sur ‘Le maître ignorant’, *Multitudes*. Retrieved from <http://multitudes.samizdat.net:article1714.html>
- Rancière, J. (2007) *Hatred of Democracy*, S. Corcoran, trans. (London and New York, Verso).
- Ricken, N. (ed.) (2007) *Über die Verachtung der Pädagogik. Analysen—Materialien—Perspektiven* (Wiesbaden, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften).
- Ruhloff, J. (2004) Emanzipation, in: D. Benner & J. Oelkers (eds), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Pädagogik* (Weinheim, Belz), pp. 279–287.
- Ruitenberg, C. (2008) What if Democracy Really Matters, *Journal of Educational Controversy*, 3:1. Retrieved from <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/v003n001/a005.shtml>

- Simons, M. & J. Masschelein (2008) From Schools to Learning Environments: The dark side of being exceptional, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 42:3–4, pp. 687–704.
- Verschaffel, B. (2009) *Onderwijs als 'overdracht': culturele 'ontmoeting' of politiek/samenspel?* Unpublished manuscript.