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The value of ignorance for teacher training on autism: a reading of Jacques Rancière

In May 2016 it was announced by the Department of Education in England that training on autism is to become a core part of teacher education (Espinoza, 2016). Charities, parents and autistic advocates welcomed such a move, having long argued that the learning experience for children on the autism spectrum has been marked by a lack of understanding among practitioners regarding their different learning needs. This policy undoubtedly represents a progressive step forward for a group of learners who have historically experienced high levels of inequality within the school system; however, I argue that (1) where such a programme of training aligns with the dominant ‘what works’ agenda based on the privileged knowledge of ‘experts’, there is also a danger of silencing other voices, in particular those of autistic learners and trainee teachers themselves; and (2) that ignorance may in fact provide a more ethical approach to such an endeavour. This paper draws on Jacques Rancière’s 1987 book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation* (English translation 1991)¹, in which he argues that the stultifying educational process of explication perpetuates inequality by dividing the world into those authorised to speak and those not. Such a claim will be analysed and applied to the training on autism for teachers with a view to uncovering potential sites of inequality in this process.

Rancière presents his somewhat counter-intuitive position in the form of a narrative based on the nineteenth century writings of Joseph Jacotot, a teacher, soldier in the Republican army and administrator who was exiled from France following the Restoration of Monarchy in 1815 but was granted asylum in the Netherlands as a lecturer in French literature at the University of Louvain. Jacotot’s recognition of the power of ignorance is discovered by chance and necessity when neither he nor his students had a common language in which to communicate; handing them a bilingual version of Fénelon’s masterpiece *Télémaque* he instructed them to learn French through the Flemish translation – to his great surprise the students managed without any form of explanation and so was born Jacotot’s radical ‘universal system’ of learning. Rancière traces Jacotot’s ‘intellectual adventure’ based upon this chance experiment from which he draws a range of claims; his most central is that anyone can learn by themselves without the need of explication from experts and schoolmasters based on ‘the principle of the equality of all speaking beings’ (*IS*, 39). He

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¹ This work will be cited as *IS* for all subsequent references.

argues that rather than creating equality by raising levels of knowledge and understanding, an expert's elucidation in fact perpetuates a pedagogical myth based on a dichotomy of intelligence where individuals are divided into 'knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid' (Ross, 1991:xx). Rancière critiques the pedagogical orthopraxis represented by the 'Old Master'; he indicates the position of power imbued in the act of explication, where 'having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, he appoints himself to the task of lifting it' (*IS*, 6). The result for Jacotot, and so Rancière, is a system of *enforced stultification* based on one intelligence subordinating another.

As the subtitle of Rancière's book suggests, intellectual emancipation is the ultimate goal of his pedagogical endeavours. Emancipation is considered the consciousness of the equality of intelligence – it is something 'seized, even against the scholars, when one teaches oneself' (*IS*, 99) and according to Biesta (2010, p.42) is based on the Kantian conception of enlightenment as release from 'self-incurred tutelage' where one is unable to make use of 'understanding without the direction from another'. The emancipated schoolmaster or expert recognises that 'I have nothing to teach you' and so relinquishes his claim to superiority; at the same time the learner is liberated to use her own '*will served by an intelligence*' (*IS*, 52). Here intelligence is attention and research rather than a body of ideas and the will, 'the power to be moved, to act by its own movement' (*IS*, 54). Crucially, Rancière argues that the schoolmaster is not to be an expert in the subject but ought rather to direct the will of the student to see everything for herself using identified materials, and so just as with the *Télémaque*, the book forms the 'egalitarian intellectual link between master and student'. The ignorant teacher need not verify what the student has found but acknowledge that she has searched and paid attention, responding at all times to a three-part question: 'what do you see? what do you think about it? what do you make of it? And so on, to infinity' (*IS*, 23).

However, Rancière's notion of emancipation also goes beyond the individual, striking at the core of equality in society. He avers that even well-intentioned progressive educationalists who wish to narrow the gap between the classes or serve those most marginalised reaffirm social inequality where they seek to do so through explication. He argues that by lifting the veil 'step by step, *progressively*' using methods tested and compared by way of commissions and reports they seek to prevent the people-child falling prey to 'childish fictions, to routine

and prejudices'; however, what they in fact propose is 'perfect stultification by perfecting explications' (IS, 121). As Citton (2010, p. 29) suggests Rancière's reworking of Jacotot leads us to question the political uses of expertise where the

expert represents a potential threat to democratic politics in so far as his very enunciation divides the citizenry in two: those who have the knowledge (and who are entitled to command), and those who lack the knowledge (and must therefore obey).

Significantly, Rancière does not condemn having teachers or knowledge *per se* but he is highly critical of those who allow their expert knowledge to become a tool for silencing the claims and resistance expressed by 'the ignorant ones'. I suggest that Rancière's subversive text *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* has import in considering the recent announcement of training on autism for teachers, particularly with respect to the equality of intelligences in this discourse.

Clearly, the 'Old Master' characterised as means-ends rationality, teleology and convergence of knowledge creation - all revealed by expert explication - is still prevalent in education (Oancea and Pring, 2008). Specific to special and inclusive education, Mitchell (2014, p.3) also argues for a 'what really works' approach where evidence-based teaching strategies can be defined as 'specified teaching methods that have been shown in controlled research to be effective in bringing about desired outcomes in a delineated population of learners'. By overemphasising effectiveness, factual judgement, and instrumental knowledge the central considerations of educational value and ethics are diminished (Biesta, 2007) leaving no epistemic space for voices from the margins. Rancière's system of *enforced stultification*, where one intelligence subordinates another, resonates strongly with the current discourse concerning special education where there is little 'equality of speaking beings' and it is particularly rare to hear the experiences of learners on the autism spectrum (Milton, 2013).

By contrast, the knowing mind of the 'Old Master' has been elevated to a position of authority thus perpetuating self-affirming epistemic communities where people with impairments experience, in Fricker's (2003:164) terms, epistemic injustice through 'prejudicial dysfunction in testimonial practice'. Fricker (2007) outlines two types of epistemic injustice: *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. The former is the wrong that is done when a deflated level of credibility is given to a speaker's word for no other reason than prejudice based on identity (such as gender, race or impairment); whereas the latter relates to the unequal participation in meaning-generating practices in

the social world such that individuals are subordinated in or excluded from those practices. It seems clear that autistic people as knowers frequently encounter both forms of epistemic injustice insofar as their credibility is deflated on account of their perceived social and cognitive deficits and they are often excluded from the development of inclusive practices that affect them most. The epistemic injustices experienced by autistic knowers are all the more marked when contrasted with experts who, as Ho (2011) asserts, hold significant power to assess and pathologise, influence intervention recommendations and resource eligibilities and retain the prerogative to reject autistic claims as lacking credibility according to their own adopted scientific frameworks. Moreover, I argue that through the explicative order of a 'what really works' agenda in education, trainee teachers are also silenced as knowers in their own right. Whilst not at the level of individuals on the autism spectrum, this group are cast as 'ignorant ones' and in need of training from experts.

Is it possible then to adopt the 'universal system' of learning outlined by Rancière – where, though ignorant, one simply 'teaches oneself' – when it comes to improving the educational experience of learners on the autism spectrum? I suggest that just as Jacotot's students made use of Fénelon's *Télémaque* in order to learn French, thus learning without a 'master explicator', trainee teachers if they were to be given access to the first-hand accounts of autistic learners' educational experiences and asked 'what do you see? what do you think about it? what do you make of it? And so on, to infinity' could learn as much as any expert could ever explain to them. Rather than being *told* 'what works' for a delineated population based on evidence drawn from randomised controlled trials, trainee teachers could learn for themselves how best to provide for the diverse range of needs, behaviours and interests of pupils on the autism spectrum. Whilst there is not space here to fully explore the capacity of this approach in practice, there is some initial evidence to show that when applied among higher education practitioners at one university (Vincent, 2015) and used as part of autism training across a further three teacher education programmes, those involved were able to reflect at a high level on the individual experiences of autistic learners and could identify for themselves the most fitting inclusive practice. Such a way of learning reflects a neo-Aristotelian conception of professionalism whereby teachers engage in phronesis: the practical reasoning and deliberation in the exigencies of the moment, all the time revealing 'an intelligence to itself' (IS, 28).

Finally, whilst Rancière promotes universal learning as being founded on ignorance, this ought not to be misunderstood as one simply being uninformed or existing in a state of self-deception. In fact his vision of ignorance has much resonance with how Smith (2016, p.276) conceptualises the virtue of ‘unknowing’; he suggests that the ‘epistemically admirable person’ may sometimes be ‘one who does not know: whose virtues are those of not knowing’ by which he appeals to the mysterious (even mystical) kinds of learning where the goal has not been preordained in advance and it would in fact be stultifying – to use Rancière’s term – for the experts to steer or direct it. To approach the training on autism in this way, where experts cede their privilege to being the only authorised voices in the discourse, reflects what Ho (2011, p.117) terms ‘epistemic humility’, characterised as one’s ‘acknowledgment of the boundary of their expert domain as well as their fallibility... [and] a recognition that knowledge creation is an interdependent and collaborative activity’. Thus, by establishing egalitarian intellectual links between knowers through the use of first-hand autistic accounts of learning, the established epistemic order is disrupted allowing for a more anarchistic vision of education (Biesta, 2010; Suissa, 2010). Such new arrangements have the potential to make learners socio-political agents of change and learning a form of direct action leading to independence and autonomy and thus ultimately freedom.

So as the new academic year gets underway, and government ministers, educators, parents and trainee teachers consider how the recent commitment to making training on autism a core part of teacher education might be realised in practice, I argue that Rancière’s *Ignorant Schoolmaster* offers important insights in relation to both inclusive practice and the credibility of learners on the autism spectrum as valued speaking beings.

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