

Chapter 10

When the Wrong People Speak: On Bullying as a Political Problem for Democratisation in Schools

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Introduction

A central starting point for this chapter is what Biesta (2011) has formulated in his book ‘Learning Democracy in School and Society’ as ‘learning democracy’. Not only was this the name of a project I directed in Sweden a couple of years ago and which was inspired by one of our many conversations over the years but also the term learning democracy tends to signify a certain outlook on democracy, education, learning and citizenship that I very much share with Biesta. Biesta formulates this view as an attention to ‘the ways in which they [we] learn and enact their [our] democratic citizenship’ (Biesta 2011, p. 2). The ways in which Biesta conceives of citizenship, then, are as straightforward as it is distinct and unique since it is open to the consideration of citizenship as related to how people actually are living their lives in school and society rather than being tied only to the formal conditions of their lives. In Biesta’s words, it shifts our attention away from the predominant ‘socialisation conception of civic learning and citizenship education’ to what I in accordance with Biesta consider to be a more fruitful conception ‘the subjectification conception of civic learning and citizenship education’ (Biesta 2011, p. 2). It is more fruitful because such a conception re-politicises citizenship, something which is in urgent need of doing.

In the following, then, I will discuss a particular aspect of subjectification as it takes shape within schools. Drawing on the work of political philosopher Jacques Rancière, I will discuss the possibility of equality, democracy and emancipation in schools. I want to discuss these matters against the backdrop of bullying, since bullying is an extreme form of inequality, as well as being violent and destructive. The impetus for this discussion comes from the stories about bullying told by youths

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interviewed within the context of the research project ‘Learning Democracy’ (Ekerwald and Säfström 2012). Moreover, more often than not, bullying is taken to be alien to schooling as something wrong. I will indeed in what follows also understand bullying as wrong, not as a commonsensical ‘moral’ wrong, but as a wrong inscribed within the normality of a social order of inequality, which is also the order of schooling. Against this order, or as a break with it, I stress the possibility of education and emancipation as possible when the ‘wrong people’ speak, the people who already assume equality. In the first section, I make a distinction between society as a particular order of inequality and equality as something that always can be assumed between people. I also give an empirical example of a situation of equality in teaching. In the second section, I establish the distinction between education and schooling, arguing that schooling is an expression of inequality whereas education is about emancipation. In the subsequent sections, I explore the foundation of inequality in schooling through the idea of superior and inferior intelligence and show how the implied inequality becomes expressed in absolute terms in bullying. In a final section, I emphasise what happens when the wrong people speak, that is, when the taken-for-granted inequalities are challenged by claims of equality. Bullying, as I understand it, is a political act of reproducing an order of absolute inequality. In order for democracy at all to be possible in schools, inequality has to be challenged in every instance of its appearance.

Equality Needs No Foregrounding

Rancière (1999b) claims that the social is to be understood as always already organised, administered and unequally constructed in what he refers to as the police order. This order can be better or worse but can never in itself be an expression of equality without limits (as in utopian models of political thought). Society is a fiction, one based on inequality. Society cannot *be* equal.

We aren’t saying that the citizen is the ideal man, the inhabitant of an egalitarian political heaven that masks the reality of the inequality between concrete individuals. We are saying the opposite: that there is no equality except between men, that is to say, between individuals who regard each other only as reasonable beings. The citizen, on the contrary, the inhabitant of the political fiction, is man fallen into the land of inequality. (Rancière 1999a, p. 90)

Rather, what can be equal are men and women of flesh and blood, or more specifically, equality is a particular quality of a relationship between those who have discovered that equality needs no foregrounding. This equality is, for Rancière, an assumption we must start with, not to ground it in any other way than to live it. It is verified, never made, and is aesthetical in character since when equality is verified in a social situation of inequality, it reorganises, like art, the very condition of sense perception.

Let me take an example most teachers can relate to: Charlotte refuses to participate during maths class. Adrian, her teacher, is concerned and talks to Charlotte

whenever he sees her in the corridor, but not about maths but about whatever is contextually appropriate at the time he meets her. He talks to her as a person not to the student she ought to be in the school order. In other words he speaks from an interest outside the more narrowly defined role of a teacher, from what is unmistakably him and no one else. And he listens to Charlotte and no one else. One day later Charlotte enters into the class; Adrian notices her but makes no extra fuss, just gently introduces her along with the rest of the class to the task ahead. Charlotte is eventually able to finish the course with good grades in maths. When asked what happened, Adrian says that he needed to build confidence and he needed to show that he had a wider human interest in the success of Charlotte beyond the more instrumental aim of getting her into the class. And when asked by the researcher (Frelin 2010), Adrian says that he acted in a way that was not directly connected to thinking, reflection, but ‘under the surface of consciousness’.

So how do I understand this example as a political act of subjectification rather than as a psychological act of ‘manipulation’? When Adrian was building confidence, he had to show Charlotte that his interest was not only in her doing math but in the capacity of speaking. He had to show her that he was able to speak in ways that come from him and no one else and that he both expected and verified that Charlotte can indeed speak from herself and no one else. Once the verification of the ability to speak is established, equality is asserted in a situation of inequality. Adrian still knows more about maths than Charlotte, but that is what is given in the already established order of the school. What shifts is how Charlotte is perceived, from one who has no voice in the established order of things to a speaking being among other speaking beings. It is also interesting, even if not decisive, that Adrian describes his teaching as being located just under the surface of consciousness, at the level of the sensible, at the level of art and politics. What is important is that the police order of the school as such is not overturned, but what seems to be established is what can be called intellectual emancipation. That is, when Charlotte speaks beyond the established role as a student who cannot do math, she breaks the inequality of being included in the school order as excluded (from the ability of doing math) in a way that moves her from a maker of noise to a maker of discourse. Charlotte is perceived by the teacher as a speaking being; Adrian does not make her speak but verifies that she is speaking already, and what he is able to do is to shift the condition for what is commonly perceptible in the given order of the school so as to make it possible to see what was not seen before: the equality of Charlotte as a speaking being beyond the particular police order of the school. And that that equality has nothing to do with how much math you know.

Verifying equality, as I understand it, is a form of living or rather living in a form of action based on an assumption of equality. It is also a form, if not *the* form of action, in which teaching can take place. It is a form of action in which the learner is not forced to subordinate herself or himself to the teacher but is instead verified at the very outset as equal in a situation of inequality. It is not epistemological equality/sameness however. The teacher knows more about many things, even if not all things. But what is verified at the outset is the ability to speak in ways that bring new meaning to the world, to speak from what unmistakably comes from the

subject. Speech can bring new meaning to the world because it is based in the poetic condition of all language, and it is also precisely because of this that speech differs from rhetoric. Rhetoric is speech reduced to mastering someone else. Speech instead comes from or is made possible because of the assumption of equality.

Such equality without ground, Rancière (2007a, b) claims, is a product of the language we live. It is expressed in the poetic condition (contingent) of all spoken language. If that is the case, then the poetic life of equal men and women is in direct conflict with any police order, better or worse. At the same time, it is only through such conflict that the order can be anything else than itself, through which, in this moment, it can be creatively changed.

The police order, though, not only determines a place for each and everyone but also gives that place both meaning and perception. That is, if not already understood as part of the police order, a singular being is not just excluded but is *unintelligible* from the vantage point of the system; it is made invisible; it cannot be perceived. From this it follows that if bullying, as an example, is perceived as something alien to the function of the police order it cannot be perceived, the one bullied is fundamentally unintelligible. Bullying is made invisible and non-perceptible. It does not belong to what can be seen or understood. Therefore bullying can go on unnoticed also in schools that understand themselves as good schools with good teachers (Ekerwald and Säfström 2012). In Sweden there are 1.5 % of the students in primary school that are severely bullied and bullied right through their school years, and some of those cases, in our material, come from so-called good schools. With good we mean that those schools in the eye of the public are the 'right' schools to choose for success in life but also that those schools understand themselves as fair, democratic and fostering for equality and solidarity, giving the conditions for a good Swedish way of life. So how is it that bullying can go on unseen also in those types of schools in which teachers see themselves as professional teachers doing something profoundly necessary for a democratic society: educating the Swedish democratic citizen?

Schooling Inequality

One obvious precondition for bullying to take place seems to be a high degree of inequality. The one bullied is treated like no one else in the group. He or she stands at the lower end of a hierarchical order. Maybe it is even the case that the one bullied does not even exist within the hierarchy itself but rather outside of it. A common way of trying to find out the norms and rules of a social group is to try to find it borders by exceeding them. The bullied is in a way a position outside the borders that are excluded from the norms and rules defining the inside of the group. The bullied one is then the other of the hierarchical order, the one that makes the order look like an order, a community of a particular kind. He or she stands outside the norms and rules that define the inside of the community. But since no living being in an absolute way can be said to be standing outside society,

it means that the bullied one is included in the order of the community as excluded. He or she lives in society, not outside of it, but their function in this society is to be excluded. Such a position is indeed a consequence of an unequal society, of a certain police order (Rancière 1999b).

If the task of schooling is to be to bring new generations into the existing social order, then it becomes reduced to inculcating individuals into this already existing inequality. Therefore it is important to make a distinction between what ‘education’ might be and what schooling is, the latter bound to inculcate, subordinate and pacify the individual into living in any given police order, any given society as a socialised citizen. Of course we must learn how to live in the society we are living in. But a society is not a thing but formed by the image of human beings who create different types of communities (Castoriadis 1995). And if the function of schooling, as a social institution, is to inculcate individuals into an already existing order, then the task of education is to change this order. To change existing orders has been the task for education at least since the Enlightenment. That is, education is a way through which individuals or groups win their freedom (Biesta and Säfström 2012). If we are indeed currently reducing education only to be increasing institutional schooling, we found ourselves immediately in trouble. Not only because we then need to hold a position that seems to go counter to Enlightenment ideals of freeing the individual from the chains of ignorance but also that we then seem to be forced to conclude that the only thing that can take place in schools is a slotting of people into an existing order of inequality, which is simply false. We know that going to school can be liberating for many people, even though it also can be harmful for others (Frelin 2010; Ekerwald and Säfström 2012).

So in the following, I am going to dig deeper into how it is possible that schools seem to produce bullying as a normal outcome of its way of functioning – normal, even though not acceptable. What will be scrutinised in particular is what I will call ‘the myth of schooling’. It is a myth which makes possible an understanding of the major task of schooling as a form of fitting students into an already unequal society, which turns, in my view, bullying into a necessary component of schooling as such. And since schooling is an institution through which society reproduces itself, school and society reflect each other.

Absolute Inequality

It would not be difficult for anyone to claim that most if not all societies we live in are built on an unequal distribution of money, power and status. Inequality can be described in terms of patriarchy or class, or ethnic divisions and more. It can even be claimed that the very way in which societies organise themselves is always expressions of inequality (Rancière 1999a, b). When it comes to schooling, a critical response to an unequal society seems to be of two types. Either the critique focuses on the way in which inequality is reproduced in the present or on the possible equality to be had in the future. The problem with both positions is that they

take inequality as a given either by pointing to its reproduction or by accepting inequality as a starting point for what needs to be overcome. But in order for us to at all be able to talk about equality, we have to take it as a starting point. Equality can only be verified. Reproduction theories reproduce inequality by taking it as given, as do normative theories of equality claiming that we need to move toward equality somewhere down the line. Equality, to be at all intelligible, needs to come first, as an assumption to be verified (Rancière 1999b).

An expression of inequality is what I will call ‘the myth of schooling’ with its reduction of education to subordination under the given order. In its mildest form, the myth consists of the idea that the student is not yet equal with others but that she or he can become so through different socialisation processes within the school and her or his successive development and maturing. It is the idea that the students not yet are democratic citizens but that they will become one through gaining school knowledge through which they become authorised to take part in the common business of society. He or she only first needs to get the society explained. A problem with this, as Rancière (1999a) points out, is that within the structure of explanation itself lies a preconception that the student cannot find it out for himself or herself. The explanations as such take for granted the subordination and passivity of the student.

In order for such a subordination to work, we need first to divide the world into two, or to be more precise when it comes to schooling, we need to divide intelligence in two. And here I follow Jacques Rancière’s (1999a) argument as I read it. The myth of schooling takes as a starting point that there exists a superior and an inferior intelligence. The inferior intelligence registers the world by chance and interprets its surrounding world mechanically in relation to its desires. The superior intelligence, on the other hand, knows things through reasoning and moves from the simple to the complex, from the part to the whole. It is a superior intelligence allowing the teacher to transmit knowledge through connecting, within the structure of the explanation, his or her superior intelligence with the inferior intelligence of the student. It is also such a relation that enables the teacher to control whether the student has learnt something. The act of explanation establishes inescapable inequality. How far one should go in the explanation is entirely decided by the one explaining. The teacher becomes a master always and forever beyond the horizon of the students’ capabilities. So what is established is an inequality that simply cannot be overcome, an absolute inequality between superior and inferior ‘intelligence’.

A society of inequality is thereby reproduced by schooling and by comparisons between persons and groups through tests and grades. The main function of those grades and tests is to establish superiority and inferiority from the vantage point of the absolute inequality of the master. In other words, the way in which someone can be superior is to be the same as the master, to take such a position, and tests then become an exact measure on the distance from such a position (Säfström 2002). Rancière (1999a) calls this ‘stultification’. The student needs not only declare himself or herself as ignorant of the subject unless the master explains how things hang together. Rancière says that such stultification is codified by schooling and other social institutions (and their experts) and is consolidated in our brains by those

experts who explain the world for us. What thereby is 'taken' from us is our will to know, our own attention and work. The will that is charging itself with maintaining the game of inequality has not stopped to use its intelligence, says Rancière, but their intelligence is based on a profound diversion of attention. It is a profound diversion from recognising the equality of all men and women and involves a disciplining of oneself to see only that which verifies superiority in order to be able to overlook the intelligence of the other. Rancière (1999a) says:

The universe of social irrationality is made up of wills served by intelligences. But each of these wills charges itself with destroying another will by preventing another intelligence from seeing. (p. 82)

Or in other words, the myth of schooling hinders people from seeing their intelligence as equal with everyone else.

In order to be absolutely clear on this point, what Rancière calls the equality of intelligence is an assumption that cannot be proved. It is an assumption in order to understand what happens when we do the opposite, that is, when we start with what Rancière calls the perverted will and assume their superior intelligences rule over inferior ones.

Bullying can now be understood as an obvious expression of such a perverted will, which diverts attention from the equality of all men and women. Bullying is to be understood as an expression of what I call 'the myth of schooling' and as such the very confirmation of the inequality of society. As such bullying is not alien to the normality of schooling, even if it is claimed unacceptable. Bullying is rather, in the final analyses, the very expression of an irrational normality of the school. It is irrational since the myth of schooling establishes a timeline in which the fully explained society is supposed to take place in a distant future. With such a logic, it is not only possible to have a final explanation of society somewhere down the line, it also means that we cannot live in the here and now of the school and 'society' at the same time. But it is also irrational because the society that is anticipated becomes an abstract, dispersed conception that always will be in the hands of the master. The bully, as I understand it, thereby becomes an expression of the absolute but irrational explanatory 'master', the one who sets the norms and the rules in such a way as to hinder us from seeing the equality of all men and women. The bully is a master in ignoring the intelligence of the other and in attempting to destroy his or her will.

The Order of Society and Common Sense

I want to repeat, at this point, the sharp distinction between schooling (as the process of reproducing an unequal society) and education. In education it is possible to claim equality and it is here that equality can take shape. To claim equality in a situation of inequality is an event in which emancipation can take place. Education is therefore also a place for democracy. Democracy, or rather democratisation, is a process between people who choose to act together, a particular way of organising

a life together with others. For Rancière, democracy is not something we have but what can happen under certain conditions. Democracy, like politics, can only take place when the idea of a natural unity in one (unequal) society is divided, that is, when the idea of a natural inequality within a natural whole is fundamentally divided between those who have access to power and wealth and those who have not, when the division is shown not to be a natural inequality based on 'intelligence' and explained, but an expression of a fundamental domination of the rich over the poor. Most importantly, this means that when the ones who are dominated speak as if they were equal, the domination breaks apart. The very way in which the breaking up of domination takes place defines the content of that instant of democracy.

Democracy takes place sporadically in schools in the very moment in which the order of inequality is confronted by claims of equality. This means that education cannot teach democracy in this particular sense, but education is internally related to democracy that is its very soul. That is, as long as education is about freeing the intellect, then it is about claiming equality with everyone else. It is a claim to be able to speak, even in situations depriving one of that right, and maybe particularly in those situations. But what has been said also means that neither democracy nor education, in this sense, is already part of 'common sense' but a break with it, particularly since common sense tends to be based on unequal society as the normal natural state of things. Therefore, education, like democracy, is not primarily about increasing common sense but about changing it. In the next section, I will draw an even sharper distinction between schooling as it is formed through the 'myth of schooling' and education as emancipation and relate it to the analysis of bullying.

The Bully as the Guard of Absolute Inequality

That education easily gets reduced to schooling becomes clear if we consider the paradoxical impossibility of being 'too much' within such a discourse. The empirical research, upon which this chapter is based, reveals that students experience their identities as 'fixed' in schools (Edling 2009; Grannäs 2011). In other words, the students could be 'nothing' that was not already meaningful within the existing order, defining also set relations between different 'identities'. This order of set identities is the police order of the school. The whole idea with the police order in Rancière's (1999b) terms is that it is no surprise to anyone within it. The police order is known, administered and organised on the level of the sensible (Rancière 2007a); it is an overarching representation of the whole population in which each and everyone has his or her place and his or her identity connected to this place. It is the order that makes it possible for us to experience that we self-evidently live in a society of a particular kind, as if it always has been the case. It is the very basis from which we understand particular events and give them meaning. To be socialised through schooling means to be confirmed in that which already is recognisable as an identity. No more or less can then take place in schooling, which does not confirm already given identities, nothing sticks out, nothing is added and there is no surplus.

If there is a surplus, something that sticks out, socialisation has failed: it is not completed but has gone wrong. From this also follows that schooling is needed indefinitely, as lifelong learning, since there is so much that needs to be fixed and corrected, so many deficits that need to be attended to in order to (re)create the perfect identity for the school.

The bully can now, in accordance with the above analyses, be said to guard the borders of the normal. He or she is a product for a particular police order, brutal and violent in his or her defence of absolute inequality. The one bullied becomes something like the waste of the social order (Bauman 2004). He or she becomes a 'nothing' and is not known within the normality of the social order. The one bullied becomes an absurdity in relation to the conception of the normal school. Within the myth of schooling, it seems to be impossible to perceive or see someone bullied (as absolute unequal) since he or she is 'nothing' within the myth ordering the school. The one bullied can by definition not exist within schooling or even be included as excluded. Bullying is, in other words, the very consequence of the myth of schooling. The violent act confirms absolute inequality, and stultification works in order to safeguard that the explanation of society by the master cannot be questioned. The myth of schooling is in all matters essentially an indivisible whole. To recognise the bullied as someone else than bullied breaks with this wholeness, with this particular order. And it is also in the break that it is possible to point to the wrong, which has kept inequality in place. It is also here that we can see that bullying is not primarily a psychological phenomena but a political one. To claim equality in such an event by pointing to the wrong through which bullying can continue is to demand education, emancipation and democracy. It is to confront the inequality of the police order with equality. In order to fight bullying, it is not enough to do so by making corrections within the myth of schooling. It can only take place by confronting this myth with claims of equality. I do not believe it is possible to create an absolute equally school, but it is always possible to claim equality. It is human beings that can be equal, not the social order. So when individuals claim equality in a way that attaches itself to and confronts an inequality bigger than the individual, the conditions for the order in place change: 'I am equal with you and everyone else! I speak'. Such a claim is bigger than the individual since it claims the ability for all to speak from an insight of the equality of intelligence and in a situation of absolute inequality. Such a break is also a break with common sense as it is ordered through the myth of schooling. It changes the police order even though it does not dissolve it. There are always better or worse police orders, which give different conditions for claiming equality. Democracy is, in line with Rancière, the possibility to confront the police order with its claim of being a natural order for the individual to adjust to. Democracy happens in schools in the moment in which the inequality of the police order is confronted with claims of equality. When the bullied speaks as if he or she has the same right to be included rather than excluded, he or she speaks about a confrontation bigger than her own dilemma. When the bullied confronts the wrong of the myth of schooling by claiming equality, he or she is acting politically and if perceived as such can change the order of the school to something better. Better in this case means an order in which claims of equality are perceived as such, as a claim of

the ability to speak. To break with bullying as a normal condition for schooling is to break with the schooling order of inequality and the master explicator as a model for schools.

When the Wrong People Speak

My aim with this chapter has not been to suggest yet another programme against bullying but to contribute with a way of perceiving and seeing bullying as a problem for democracy and for politics. Bullying is a wrong within the myth of schooling and not only a problem for the individual. I say that while recognising the suffering endorsed by individual students. However I also want to point to the wrong that is bigger than the school insofar as it is a wrong inherent to a social order of inequality. It is an inequality that only can be overcome by humans who verify equality, and such verification is always a possibility, no matter how policed the order is. When equality indeed is claimed, not only politics and democracy take place but education does through emancipation.

Equality, as I understand it, is not sameness. Equality is rather to be understood against the backdrop of recognising difference, that I am not you. And this existential difference cannot be taken to justify stopping someone else from speaking. In one way, what I am suggesting is simple but also difficult. It is simple because what it requires is to meet someone who is not the same as me, to accept that I am not you, to accept difference and to hear the other also when he or she is not just confirming the expected. At the same time, it is hard, because it requires that we can find discourse in what essentially is understood as noise, as beyond what we normally make sense of. It demands of us to see beyond what we think we see. It demands attention in the strongest sense of that word. It also demands of us a will to see beyond the normal order of things and to strive for emancipation rather than destroying the will of another person.

To see inequality, then, means that one already has to assume equality, and by that assumption, one is already unintelligible within the police order. That means that if one sees what is not to be seen within the police order itself, it means that one is already part of another community of men and women who assume equality (like Adrian and Charlotte above). Also, seeing thereby becomes an act through which one attaches oneself to the fundamental wrong of a divided society. In other words, one belongs to 'the wrong people' whenever equality is verified.

The claim of equality is not a claim to exist: it is a claim to be perceived. It is an act of subjectification that not only concerns learning about citizenship, but actually is about performing it (Biesta 2011). It is therefore also a break with epistemology, which connects certain meanings to perception, that is, what is confronted by the verification of equality is that which makes certain people audible, perceptible and understandable. Therefore bringing more democracy to the school is not possible by learning more about democracy within the existing police order but only by confronting the sense on which the existing police order is based. Such confrontation

happens when ‘the wrong people’ speak as if they have the right to do so, even in situations depriving them of that right. Speaking as the wrong people is not easy, even risky both individually and socially, but it is also only through such speech that democracy can happen and indeed does happen in schools.

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