# Relational Democracy

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In his book School and Society, Dewey wrote “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (2013: 19). In this paper by way of context, I will argue that the definition of the “best and wisest parent” is being increasingly instrumentalised, effectively side-lining and silencing parents’ voices in education. If we are to strive towards a more socially just education system, then parent’s voices must not just be heard, but have agency as Couldry argues (2010).

In considering the relational society that John Macmurray envisaged, I will explore the danger that when relationships are emphasised, it is often assumed these relationships should be harmonious and based on common sense. Jacques Rancière, I believe helps us to rethink relationships and welcome dissensus as a crucial part of democratic living and has implications for parental engagement in schools.

## Context

Pring, drawing on the work of John Macmurray, proposes to “put persons back in to education” (2012: 747). He says that we have objectified learners and value them for their ability to affect “the place of the school in the league table, the successful attainment of targets, the supply of skilled workers.” (2012: 749). I argue that the same objectification has also occurred to parents.

Parent involvement or engagement, is often hailed as essential to children’s achievement (Hornby, 2003; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; OFSTED, 2013), however it is rarely clear as to what parental involvement means. Furthermore, elements of middleclass parenting have been valorised; those which support and uphold a neoliberal system including the correct school choice, possessing the appropriate aspirations and as I am about to describe; being able to speak appropriately. Our job as parents is apparently to ensure children become effective economic beings (Gewirtz 2001; Reay 2008).

More recently in conjunction with the gradual removal of parent governors, even middle class parents have been criticised. Consequently, parent voice and parent engagement has overtly been relegated to supplicant support.

Reporting of the parents’ strike on the 3rd May this year, highlighted problematic attitudes to parent voice. Some parents in England, removed their children from primary schools for the day in protest against the new SATs tests for Year 2 and Year 6 children. A particularly technical grammar test provoked significant consternation. Nick Gibb, the schools minister, claimed that the tests were necessary because “if you do not come from a home where your parents speak in a grammatically correct form and if you do not have a home surrounded by books where reading is the daily occurrence, they (those children) need that structural instruction,” (TES, 2016 ).

Free school founder and columnist Toby Young, echoed Gibb’s sentiments:

“moronic, selfish middle-class warriors [are] entrenching class divisions. . . it’s kids from disadvantaged backgrounds who are penalised by this therapeutic approach. The children of the middle-class protestors will be fine if they spend all day finger-painting because they’ll pick up the basics at home; it’s their less affluent peers who will suffer.” (2016)

Consequently, middle class parents became selfish enemies of promise and poorer parents too inept to speak well enough for their children to be successful at school. Parents’ voices were dismissed by these characterisations. Neither ‘type’ of parent was acting as a good supplicant support act to the school system. Rancière’s definition of ‘police’ is not the state but rather “an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying. . .” (1999: 29). One may consider the framing of parents by Gibb and Young as policing – adding to the order of apparent ‘common sense’ regarding instrumentalist supplicant parenting. As Rancière argues, in Dissensus, some people are deemed capable of being part of the police order and those who are not, have their voice rendered as simply noise (2010).

But let us take a step back for a minute and consider briefly the relationship between schools and parents. Recently, I attended the induction evening for my daughter who has just started high school. The school welcomes and needs parent involvement, the head told us, after assuring us that we all shared the same values as him. We are to support homework, sign planners, buy the correct uniform, download all the relevant apps for communication and attend the meetings that we were invited to. If we have a problem, we can email someone. The message was clear, ‘we love parents, as long as you do what you are told and stay at arm’s length and only enter our presence when formally invited.’

In 1958, Macmurray reflected on how Plato wished to remove all children to educate them without interference and on how Macmurray found people around him wished they could do the same (2012). It is not too dissimilar from Gibb and Young’s statements I have just discussed. ‘If only parents could but out or behave better, everything would be ok.’

If we want to move beyond the instrumentalisation of both education and parent voice, it is necessary to consider how schools and parents relate. In the very least, if all parties consider each other and the impact of their actions upon each other, there may be breakdown, as Dewey argues of “those barriers of class, race, and national territory which keep men [and women] from perceiving the full import of their activity” (1916: 93). In arguing that children must not simply be educated to be functional citizens but more importantly they need to ‘learn to be human’, Macmurray states that in order to learn to be human, children need to relate to others within a complex community such as a school (2012: 667ff). To take this further and to do this effectively, I would argue they need to be able to learn to relate to others in a community in which people are modelling such relating to each other, including parents and staff. As Macmurray points out parents are an inescapable part of schooling.

In Macmurray’s explorations of living and working together, he argues for the need of a habit of social cooperation, that is based upon the cooperation we have experienced and thus learned within our families (Macmurray, 1961). Taking this to his logical conclusion, in Conditions of Freedom, Macmurray argues for a ‘universal fellowship’ united in values and friendship (Macmurray, 1950). It is at this point, I am concerned.

Returning to Rancière’s concept of the police, it could be argued that the school order has allotted parents their place, as supplicant and agreeable to the common values that my daughter’s headmaster thinks we all share. As Rancière argues, this common sense, is a sense of place and role (1999); that is to say as a parent, my place is at home to support my child and not to assume that I have the expertise of the teacher or indeed a schools’ minister. I must not speak out about things that should not concern me.

Rancière criticises this approach, and says that the political act is when those outside the ‘common sense’, rupture the consensus. This is not about clashes of opinions, but rather dissensus, as Rancière argues, “is a division inserted in 'common sense': a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given” (1999: 77). In the case of schools, the dissensus maybe that the very parents who are disapproved of by the common sense, may actually claim that they have something to contribute as a good and wise parent.

As I argued earlier, parental engagement has been instrumentalised with parents being expected to behave in particular ways to support their children in achieving economic competence. Parent engagement is measured, by way of improved reading ability, closure of the achievement gap, or indeed a good score on Parent View, the OFSTED questionnaire for parents. Under the neoliberal education system, voice has been relegated to an object to be counted, measured and declared; for example, how many parents agree with the homework policy or read with their children. Rancière argues that presenting such counts as public or indeed parent opinion removes “the appearance of the people” (1999: 103)

As Couldry argues, in order to stand against neoliberalism, a different understanding to voice is essential (2010). Rather than voice simply being a response to questionnaires, for example, there needs to be a narrative. That is to say that not only does one need to tell their story, “to give account” but that account needs to be heard. This enables, the contemplation of each other that Macmurray advocates (1950; 1961), which leads to the taking in to account of our impact upon each other that Dewey promoted (1916).

However, narrative is not enough, Couldry cautions; there needs to be agency, that is 6the ability for voice to have some effect and the freedom to have the capability to exercise our voice (2010). But this is where we come to the crux of the matter; too often we talk about encouraging parental engagement, or trying to create initiatives to increase parental voice. (My doctoral research, which tried to implement Community Philosophy to encourage critical parental engagement is one such example.) Opportunities may be provided to hear parents’ narrative, but whether they have agency to change things is debatable.

I would argue that the focus is wrong, it is not about how we can improve parent engagement, or what parenting classes we can offer, but recognising that parents are already engaging in myriad forms; whether it is storming through the door (Ranson et al., 2004), being part of the PTA, governing, attending Community Philosophy sessions, or indeed simply curling up with an exhausted child at the end of the day. It may be challenging the status quo, and challenging the assumption that parents should simply support. As the parents in my research project argued, support is sometimes holding back; challenging the narrative that homework is all important. It is not about endeavours by the school promoting parent voice but rather for parents to “poetry of their own futures” (Harvey 2014).

Furthermore, I argue that it is imperative for a school to not only forge relationships with parents but that dissensus is essential to the democratic life of that school. Parents need to be able to recognise that not only are they capable of having a voice but that their arguments count.

This obviously paves the way towards conflict, however Rosanvallon recognises that conflict is valuable and not to be avoided.

Conflict is inevitable in such a project, because debate brings to light the actual transfer of resources that takes place among individuals, groups, and regions, reveals hidden legacies of the past, and discloses implicit regulations. Such a debate has nothing in common with the calm, almost technical kind of discussion envisioned by certain theorists of deliberative democracy. However difficult the exercise, it is nevertheless essential as a way of gaining *practical experience of the general will*. (Rosanvallon, 2008: 313, original emphasis).

He argues that democracy needs to be kept in check; it is necessary for people to disagree, for people to question the order of things; “a counter policy” (2008).

In conclusion, I am arguing that we do indeed need to contemplate each other and build relationships between parents, children, teachers and others. But this must not come with the hefty price tag of common sense. The concept of the best and wisest parent, cannot be reserved for those who compliantly serve neoliberalism. Indeed, the notion of ‘best and wisest’ parent is problematic and may take many different shapes, contrary to apparent common sense. Not only is conflict inevitable but actually desirable and a necessary part of democratic living.

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