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Case study 8 - Destabilising Methodologies: working toward democratic parent engagement.

Charlotte Haines Lyon

This chapter will detail the methodologies and methods used in a research project aimed to develop a working democratic model of parent engagement in a coastal primary school in England. Building on John Macmurray's (1958/2012) insistence that learning to live and act in relationship with each other is vital to democracy and thus education, the project involved working with a group of parents who explored different ways of working with and relating to the school. Initially the study involved using Community Philosophy (SAPERE 2015) which provided a forum to discuss, problematise, and develop new concepts and forms of, parent engagement. As the research project continued, it was necessary to take a post-structuralist turn and develop a more dissensual approach to both parent engagement and research. This chapter explores the need for such an approach argues for a re-conceptualisation of action research as the rope makers tool, the fid, an approach that ruptures understandings and the status quo. The implications of such an approach are explored, especially the need for a destabilising approach to methodology and research ethics.

Keywords: Action Research; Parent Engagement; Destabilising relationships; Deconstruction; Democracy; Dissensus

In the field of parent engagement, home-school partnership is often reified as the ultimate goal which enables parents to support their children's education (Epstein, 2018; Hornby, 2011). Often this is based on a consensual model, assuming different parties will come to agreement through some form of rational discussion. My doctoral research initially attempted to develop such a consensual model, seeking harmonious relationships between the parents and staff of a primary school, as part of widening democratic parent engagement. However, it soon became clear that harmony was damaging to the concept of democratic parent engagement. The implicit containment of frustrations and the apparent need for consensus became unworkable, presenting an difficult knot for all involved to unpick. The school, the participants and I had to come to terms with what a more *dissensual* model of parent engagement might resemble. A destabilising methodology necessarily destabilises relationships. In practice, this involved working with anger, challenging power dynamics, and coming to terms with more dissensual ways of working.

This chapter will focus on the methodological and ethical ramifications of using a destabilising methodology when working with parents as part of an action research study. I started the study, in 2015, with parents[1] of children at "Kirkgate"[2], a coastal primary school in the North of England. This study attempted to counter the performative mode of parent engagement currently promoted in many English Primary Schools (see (Haines Lyon, 2018) for more detail). The study was also an inquiry that sought to develop understandings of democratic parent engagement. During the study participants, and I, explored and challenged notions of parent engagement and endeavoured to change practices within and without the school.

The need for democratic parent engagement

As teachers, students, and parents are increasingly instrumentalised and muted, it is clear that we are far from Moutsios' (2010, p. 123-124) understanding of

> *education politics* as the explicit activity of citizens—parents, teachers/academics and students—to set into question, reflect and deliberate on the purpose, the contents

> and the pedagogic mode of learning and, if considered necessary, to alter them accordingly.

Moutsios' concept of education politics, underpinned the study and my understanding of democratic parent engagement; parents, along with school staff and students can problematise education policy and practice and take action for change as appropriate. Democracy, in such a conception, is dynamic and continually active rather than confined to the ballot box (Mouffe, 2009, 2013; Rancière, 2014).

To create a space for such education politics, I made an intervention by way of a participatory action research study with a group of parents. Initially, I envisaged that we would run Community Philosophy meetings in a community centre, each half term, over a period of two years. I hoped to facilitate the meetings and then gradually the parents would take over the running of them.

Community Philosophy as a harmonious democratic intervention

Community Philosophy, similar but not identical to philosophical communities, is a descendant of Lipman's Philosophy for Children (Evans, 2012). Lipman (2003, p. 94) drew on Dewey's (1997) injunction that inquiry must be social, developing a group process, that encouraged dialogue, "non adversarial deliberations and shared cognitions" as part of a process that eschewed partisan debate for a collective building of an argument. The development of an idea was a shared process within the group; such cognition could not by its very nature be individual. This group process was to be called a "Community of Inquiry", and he referred to the aim of this Community of Inquiry as "a system of thought in reflective equilibrium" (Lipman, 2003, p. 103).

Lipman's methodology for Philosophy for Children included: a stimulus, setting a philosophical agenda and dialogue. He emphasised that the end-product was not about rational consensus but about "practical results", a change of some kind that may not come about immediately. Tiffany (interview in Evans, 2012) echoes this, asserting that Community Philosophy must be judged on the outcomes and action rather than the quality of reason within the meeting. My sense was that Community Philosophy provided a model that might help challenge the individualised, voiceless, performative form of parent engagement that is prevalent in English schools (Haines Lyon, 2018). The amalgamation of action and philosophical thinking affords a democratic experience in which all are co-learners and co-enquirers; it offers philosophical thinking that is grounded in the community but directed towards practice (Garratt & Piper, 2012).

Importantly, with regard to this book's theme of learning outside of the school, most group meetings were held off the school site. The meetings involved parents, their preschool children and me; they were only attended by the headteacher[3] when he or she was invited. Community Philosophy meetings were held in the community centre which belonged to the school but wasn't on school premises, some meetings including coreflexion meetings (discussed below) were in a local café and those that involved the headteacher were in his school office. I thought holding meetings off the school site might remove one barrier to parent engagement as parents' views of school can be shaped by their own negative or indeed positive experiences of school (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Waller, 1932).

Coreflexion meetings (Cho & Trent, 2009) were held in the latter half of the study with the "core participants", Dacia, Holly and Pat, as they had attended meetings throughout the study. These meetings involved participants in a deeper form of member checking, where they problematised parts of my analysis and co-constructed new thinking about democratic parent engagement. For example, I took some parts of the transcript which I found problematic—where the participants appeared to be judgemental about other parents. This led to a very fruitful discussion about how they had felt in the original meeting and how they had developed their thinking since. I applied different theories as part of

the analysis (including Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) critical discourse analytics) which helped us understand how we tended to think of the parents being on one side and the school on another. The participants then developed this idea, by applying their experiences and pointed out that sometimes it wasn't that simple and developed a much more complex way of thinking about dissensual relationships, which will be discussed later.

An attraction to Community Philosophy was its methodology advocated by SAPERE P4C (2011), which encourages building on the last person's argument and cogenerating new knowledge. The aim of Community Philosophy is to move towards a form of consensus through deliberation and then to action. This was appreciated in the initial planning meeting with the headteacher Mrs Benson and three parents, who she had invited as possible interested participants. The parents expressed concern that this might become a "moaning shop". Mrs Benson said she liked the fact the study was action orientated as it might preclude moaning.

In the first Community Philosophy Meeting, attended by eight parents and three preschool children, we explored barriers to parent engagement at Kirkgate school. I started by explaining the ethos of Community Philosophy and the study, including working towards harmonious relationships, avoiding moaning and moving toward taking action. As we unpicked barriers to engagement, communication was highlighted by parents as a problematic issue, and a range of ideas was agreed to be taken to discuss with the headteacher. Several of these points including insertions on the website and more staff being in the playground at morning drop off were implemented by the school.

Participants agreed the next meeting's time and place and one said she would bring biscuits to go with the tea and coffee I provided. Whilst I provided the stimulus for the second meeting, as meetings continued, participants shaped the focus. We used the first few meetings to critique the notions of parent engagement being espoused by the government and the school. The school was in a coastal town, and, at the time there was an emphasis on parent engagement in such towns, being the key to closing the gap in attainment between the poorest children and their peers (Mongon, 2013; OFSTED, 2013; Wilshaw, 2013). This led to an exploration of what 'support' really means, what is possible in different family situations and whether there is a wider responsibility for this gap beyond schools and parents. Much of the group discussion was limited to quite performative and practical elements of parental engagement rather than democratic engagement, however what happened after the first meeting was instructive and was regularly reflected upon throughout the two years of the study.

Disharmony in democracy

At the end of this first meeting I asked each participant to review what we had done. Two participants expressed concern about criticising the school, but there was also positive appreciation of the school. Later, that evening, I received a text from a participant, Amy, saying she was pulling out of the study as she was concerned it may develop into a "Slag-off-a-thon" and felt disloyal to the school. This was not how Community Philosophy was supposed to work. Intriguingly, other participants expressed anger at the next group meeting, saying Amy had also told them about her withdrawal. Through various discussions in the meetings, reflecting on participants' experiences of trying to engage with the school, the "problem" of moaning was revisited many times throughout the study. It became increasingly understood by the participants and myself, that "moaning" can be a term used to dismiss women's concerns (Beard, 2015). One father attended one meeting but the rest of the participants, over the two years, were female, which led us to question, how could wider democratic concerns be explored if women's voices were dismissed as moaning, gossip or irrelevant? The everyday affected democracy at a micro level, and this became increasingly important within the study.

After much reflection on the second Community Philosophy meeting, I realised that I had designed the study to facilitate a particular utopian model of parent engagement that I wanted to achieve. This model relied on a specific form of democratic voice and rational thinking (Ellsworth, 1989); I assumed that if everyone could meet and talking rationally through Community Philosophy, we would obtain a rich form of democratic parent engagement. Even my desire for a harmonious parent–school relationship was problematic in that it was quite possibly silencing democratic voice. In defining the type of voice I was hoping parents would develop, I was defining the voice of participants which was far from emancipatory or indeed democratic (Ellsworth, 1989). Whilst angry at the government's positioning of parents as ineptitudes or at best responsible consumers, I was, in fact, colluding with this discourse, by assuming such positioning of the parents with whom I was working. I was defining the participants, as "an object of [my] emancipatory desires" (Lather, 1992, p. 143).

A poststructural turn

This reflection led to reframing the research study. I increasingly found the critical emancipatory paradigm problematic for many of the reasons discussed above and took a poststructuralist and deconstructive turn. The move to deconstruction drew on Lather's work (1992, p. 96). Rather than working for harmony, she argues that

> the goal of deconstruction is to keep things in process, to disrupt, to keep the system in lay, to set up procedures to continuously demystify the realities we create, to fight the tendency for our categories to congeal.

Deconstruction isn't about breaking something down and replacing something bad with something new and better, as this continues the binary logic (Grosz, 1991). Rather, an approach that transcends such logic by exploring the possibilities caused by playing with the assumptions around the opposing binaries, Grosz (1991) recommends. I started to view the process differently; rather than have an answer to a problem and hope to take people with me, I was now trying to co-deconstruct parent engagement and co-generate ideas of where we might go to find answers.
Emancipation wasn't abandoned but understood differently, the study was about collating stories, deconstructing them together, disrupting the status quo—*together*. This connected deconstruction, according to De Lissovoy (2015), can be a process of emancipation.

Instead of critical research focussing on the oppression of victims, it is possible to use an approach that,

> works with the evident possibility that individuals can be creative and imaginative, even when confronted by oppressive regimes and cultures of regulation, and that the role of feminist action is to move beyond the resistant and defensive. (Weiner, 2004, p. 640)

Thus, the research study had to take into account the multi-situatedness of parents, especially mothers as they comprised the vast majority of the participants. My approach had to embrace their agency, rather than assume they were either wholly oppressed by the performative education system or would have no time or capability for taking part in the research. This included working with dissensus – not least when the participants decided that Community Philosophy was unhelpful and moved to a less structured format.

This approach is fundamentally destabilising as not only were all of us, in the coreflexion, meetings starting to question power structures and speak out more, we were also moving away from the harmonious approach that we originally envisaged. I used Rancière's (2010, 2014) ideas around dissensus to analyse some of the transcripts and took them to a coreflexion meeting. Rancière's (2010,

2014) concept of dissensus involves speaking out against what is considered to the be the 'common sense' (of the society, school, institution); it is this speaking out and demanding to be heard that makes us human. The participants and I found it useful to consider that harmonious relationships might be problematic. Thus, the study became overtly political as we directly questioned and challenged taken for granted norms—such as ideas of supportive parents. This turn of events – a move to a more dissensual research study raised an ethical conundrum for me as the researcher. When I approached the school, to take part in the study, I placed great emphasis on the study developing harmonious relations rather than 'rabble-rousing'. However, as can be seen, this was not the case. It became clear that the aim for harmonious relations was *unethical* rather than an ethical aim. The expectation of harmony, far from aiding democracy, can silence voices.

Action research requires reflection and change where appropriate, although it has also been criticised for being co-opted by institutions seeking to bring people into their way of thinking (Anderson, 2017; Fals Borda, 1995). To avoid such co-option, Anderson (2017) argues that participatory action research is necessarily democratically disruptive. In this study a key disruption was epistemological and ontological change. Whilst often action research is based in the critical emancipatory paradigm, it has the potential to be far more contingent and deconstructive, aligning more coherently with a poststructural epistemology. Action research can be reconceptualised as a splicing tool comprising three interlocking points: collating stories and problematising them; critical discourse analytics; and practical interventions. In doing so, it embodies Glynos and Howarth's (2007, p. 19 original emphasis) call for a tripartite:

> logic of investigation comprising three interlocking moments: the *problematization* of empirical phenomena; the *retroductive explanation* of these phenomena; and the *persuasion* of—and *intervention* into—the relevant community and practices of scholars and lay-actors.

Action research, especially in the Northern Hemisphere, is generally articulated as the researcher and often participants, following a cycle of planning, action and reflection (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014; Koshy, 2010; Opie & Sikes, 2004; Stringer, 2014). As McTaggart (1996, p. 248) argues, it is "a mistake to think that slavishly following the 'action research spiral' constitutes doing action research." These components are all important, but as Koro-Ljungberg (2015) points out, even circular methodologies can be linear, insofar as they go back to the start and follow the same path. This can be problematic since the attempt to follow the line, can be an endeavour to maintain predictability and control, thus squeezing out those opportunities for surprise and discoveries.

After a rocky start, losing participants early on, and struggling to maintain the momentum of, and harmony in meetings, this study involved participants collating and deconstructing stories; learning through the process; building on relevant theories; inserting different theoretical strands into our work; and taking a variety of actions to democratise parent engagement. Rather than emphasising a traditional action research cycle, this study, afforded a more creative approach in which theorisation and actions destabilised each other; practices were challenged, new practices were created, new understandings were forged. This chimes more with the more Southern Hemisphere articulation of action research of Fals Borda (1995); participatory action research comprises three strands of research, education and socio-political action.

In rope-making, a conical tool is used to separate the weave or lays of a rope, and to help insert new strands and relay the rope or splice it into different forms. This tool is called a fid. As demonstrated by Figure 2 below, the fid is pushed into the rope between lays to push them apart.

Figure 2 about here

The fid enables the strands to be unlaid, knots to be unpicked and furthermore for new strands to be inserted between the laid strands to form a stronger join. For example, a splice may allow the end of the rope to be formed into a loop and joined (spliced) back into the rope. The use of a fid is deconstructive and reconstructive rather than destructively cutting with a blade. This deconstructive and reconstructive manoeuvre works as a metaphor for the participatory action research model that I used—one that separates the different strands of the metaphorical rope—an action of deconstruction, but also affording reconstruction. Therefore, I have coined the term "fidding" to capture the idea of not merely deconstructing, but reconstructing ideas, new ways of thinking and new ways of working. In terms of our study, we unpicked understandings and practices of parent engagement and developed new ways of thinking and doing.

The action of pushing the fid into the rope (an understanding of something), "fidding", is carried out with an attitude of *dialogical experimenting*. Dialogical experimenting, reminiscent of scientific positivism, captures the sense that action research involves intervening, *taking action*. Subsequently, there is analysis of such actions; thus, it can be said that it is a form of experimentation. However, *dialogical* experimenting emphasises that this action-taking—attempts at problem-solving, intervening to change the status quo—is carried out in dialogue *with* others, rather than *on* others.

The fid is metal thus illustrating the reflective nature of the tool, each time one stops and looks at what the tool is doing, or where it is at, there is a reflection. The curved nature of the metal fid can distort the reflection; emphasising anything we look at is never a true reflection but dependent on the gaze or how one looks at it. It decentres the reflection, and is analogous to Žižek's (2010, p. 3) concept of "looking awry", in which he argues it can be "inherently mystifying" looking straight on, especially at violence or difficult situations. Looking awry can enable us to move from a position of power *or* disempowerment and look afresh at a distance from the situation. We found the coreflexion meetings helpful to look awry, previous assumptions were exposed when viewing in a different light and new directions were followed. For example there had been criticism of parents who didn't read with their children, and when looking at the discussion in the transcript about this, the participants started to question why they said this and how else they might consider reading.

The act of pushing the fid into the rope is a deconstructive intervention; it ruptures the tension that holds the laid strands together. The fid, as a splicing tool, enables the knot to be undone, without damaging the strands and fibres. They can be inspected unlaid, separated, but they are not destroyed by cutting. The fid is then able to help repurpose the rope, into something else—for example, a lifeline. The strands can be re-laid—woven back into each other—for added strength. This process is similar to 'frogging' in knitting, in which each stitch (itself a knot) is undone and the knitted garment unravelled so it can either be re-knitted without the perceived fault or knitted into something entirely different. We did not destroy different elements of parent engagement at the school but rather unpicked it and put it back together in a very different form.

Fidding happened throughout the study; we had regular discussions, participants tried new practices such as requesting group meetings with the headteacher, asking for such meetings to be off site after reflecting they behaved differently in his office. Understandings changed including the idea of 'supportive parents' (supporting a child, some participants argued, might require parents not to do as the school asked). There was regular checking-in from different parties, including participants and the

headteacher, to reflect on how they found such practices, then further discussion and changes as a result. Whilst there was often dissensus, there was still a determination to build relationships between parents and the school, recognising that we were not in competition nor should we be using each other as performative instruments to reach a particular goal. At different points, I would bring in a theory I thought helpful to understand something and participants often explained the flaws they saw in it or suggest how my theory and their practice might bring something together.

Whilst 'fidding' enables splicing of the rope which builds a new structure, the point is that though harder to undo than a knot, the splice is not permanent and can be undone again. As the fid is pushed in between the strands of the rope—the apparent overarching narrative—an opening appears between the previously tightly entwined strands. Building on poststructuralist philosophers including Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) and Friedrich Nietzsche (2005), Jenny Cameron and Katherine Gibson (2005, p. 8) argue, poststructuralist research requires recognition of contingent knowledge and lack of fixity of grand narratives. Attempts of grand narratives can be disrupted, to create openings or ruptures "in which new identities and…subjectivities could be enacted" (Cameron & Gibson, 2005, p. 320). It was this rupturing of accepted knowledge and practice within the school system and parent engagement, that enabled the participants, and I, to change our practices and, as part of that process, challenge our identities. Where we had originally hoped to achieve a new model of working by way of Community Philosophy or similar we realised that our "result" had been to fundamentally rupture the idea of harmonious working between the school and parents and develop dissensual but relational working practices.

Destabilising Ethics

Such a rupturing practice, of course, has ethical ramifications. How does one act ethically whilst embracing the inevitable conflict? Furthermore, can destabilising a school or any other setting be an ethical act? It is helpful to build on Mouffe's (2009, 2013, 2018) work on agonistic democracy, as she maintains that we should not see each other as enemies and be *antagonistic* but rather robustly stand for what we believe at the same time as facing those who believe something else. "Critical-dissensual collaboration" (Heimans & Singh, 2018, p. 186) is put forward as a way of researching with a dissensual but simultaneously collaborative ethic. Echoing Mouffe (2013), Heimans and Singh (2018) advocate a critical relationship in which we recognise the other person as a fellow human being, try to develop new knowledge but do not expect consensus. It is the dissensus that not only opens up new understandings but also helps to challenge power dynamics rather than reproduce them through consensus (Heimans & Singh 2018).

In the research study, this dissensual ethic, allowed participants and the headteacher to robustly defend their positions, and to recognise their anger at certain injustices. There was no expectation that people would come together to agree. However, with a firm intention to relate to the "other side", even if it was extremely uncomfortable. On occasion, participants left the headteacher's office furious and demanded to regroup in the café to unpick what had happened. However, despite the fury, there was a determination to go back even if that meant unpicking the power relationships first and returning with a different plan. After one meeting with the headteacher, it was pointed out by one participant, Dacia, that Mr Shaw always sat in the same seat and it was like he was holding court. Pat and Holly agreed, saying this made them feel like they had to be "good" when they visited him. They determined to meet together in the café before the next meeting with the headteacher to plan how they could challenge the power dynamics. This resulted in the participants saying they were going to start the study again (this was my last meeting) in the academic year but on the condition, it was parent led and if they invited the headteacher, he would have to leave the school building and meet on their terms.

These pre-meetings display a recognition of different power dynamics yet also a determination to strategically work with each other in some form of relationship albeit agonistic. Despite recognition of power dynamics and their entanglement with the space of the school and office, the participants were still willing to look at the headteacher in the face. The same can be said for Mr Shaw, who was always prepared to meet with us and listen and debate issues. He also overturned a previous policy of keeping 'difficult' and 'aggressive' parents out of the school, instead meeting with them and hearing what they had to say. Creating an atmosphere in which dissent is acceptable (although sometimes the dissent may by its very nature not be viewed by all as acceptable) was important. This involved changing locations to disrupt some of the power dynamics, whilst recognising that it is not always possible to convert someone to our view but that we might learn something from listening to them. At the end of my time as a researcher with the school, the participants and headteacher had agreed to regular meetings offsite in the local community centre.

Relationships are critical to out-of-school learning, but they do not need to be harmonious. Ensuring positive relationships is not necessarily an *ethical* ambition as this study found. Too much emphasis on harmonious working and consensus, by way of Community Philosophy, became constrictive and undemocratic. However, a poststructural turn afforded a "fidding approach" in which we could rupture practice and ways of relating. The collating of stories and collaborative deconstruction enabled us to dialogically experiment and destabilise the status quo. Nevertheless, a disruptive destabilising ethic does not need to be *destructive*. Building on Mouffe's (2009, 2013, 2018) agonistic ideals, it is possible to view the other, recognise their humanity, yet fundamentally disagree with them. Out-of-school learning offers the necessary places that can become the valuable space for diffractive reflection, allowing us to see each other askew.

To be boxed:

Methodology highlights

This chapter highlights the potential complexity of existing relationships in out-of-school learning contexts. It draws attention to the ethics of stepping into such a context, especially where existing relationships are not harmonious.

The chapter also emphasises the need to proactively consider methods and means to deal with conflict in research.

End notes:

[1] The term 'parent' is used to reflect the parental responsibility. Special guardians took part in research but for reasons of confidentiality I have used the same term to cover all participants.
[2] All names have been changed to pseudonyms.
[3] Mrs Benson was the headteacher who agreed to the study. However she left six months into the study and Mr Shaw replaced her.