**Community Philosophy as Democracy in Action**

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In this paper I discuss some of the implications for democratic working in schools, raised by my doctoral research carried out with a small group of parents in a coastal primary school. (A pseudonym, Greenleaf, will be used.)

Fielding and Moss, raise the concern that schools are “at risk of being a place of regulation and normalization, tasked with producing subjects fit for the purposes of the nation state and the capitalist economy” (2010: 15). I argue that similarly, parental engagement is being typified as an economic function – to create successful economic beings – rather than seeing parent voice and engagement as a necessary part of a democratic schooling.

Dewey maintained that schools needed to reflect the thoughts of parents and what was best for their child or risk schools becoming “narrow and unlovely” and “[destroying] our democracy” (1916: 19). In this paper I will illustrate how the voice of parents can help to unmask how ‘common sense’ is often problematic and how this is vital to democratic schooling.

Firstly, however I will briefly explore how the current discourse on parent engagement tends to place parents as supplicant, support acts to the school. I will then explain how my action research attempted to provide a counter to this model of parental engagement by underlining the agency of parents and the importance of their voice through the use of Community Philosophy (SAPERE, 2015){SAPERE, 2015 #760;Ranson, 2004 #150}. Finally, I will argue that a more rhizomatic and dissensual approach to parent voice and engagement is needed in a democratic school.

## Context

### Parental Engagement

The last Coalition government and the current Conservative government have touted parental engagement as the panacea for the achievement gap between the poorest children in England and their contemporaries. In particular, the raising of aspirations is commonly purported to be key (Baker et al., 2014; OFSTED, 2013; Sharples et al., 2011; Sodha and Margo, 2010; Vasagar, 2011). Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector of Schools in England, stated that “poverty of expectation is a greater problem than material poverty” (2013).

This assertion is heavily criticised by some researchers who argue that there is no evidence for a lack of aspiration but rather there is a problem with the lack of resources and often barriers to achieving such aspirations (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Kintrea et al., 2011; Perry and Francis, 2010). This discourse individualises the problem of poverty and blame through the pathologising of economically poorer parents, rather than questioning the vast structural inequities in the UK (Hartas, 2012; Hills, 2015; Perry and Francis, 2010).

Sixteen years ago, Carol Vincent characterised apparent engaged parents as performing three distinct roles: consumers, partners and citizens (2000: 1ff). Vincent argued that parents were expected to be wise consumers, choosing the best schools and opportunities for their children; partners who actively support learning (e.g. help with homework) and/ or be good citizens who may act as governors or fundraisers. In line with recent government pronouncements, each position places parents in a supportive, supplicant position. There is little room for parents to question school practice, let alone offer any element of expertise unless as a controlled part of the curriculum. (For example, I have been invited into school to talk about South Africa because of my family ties.) I would also argue that opportunities as a school governor are limited, not least because of the self-policing and pressures to meet the grade for OFSTED. (As a governor I sometimes find my duties to meet OFSTED requirements, at odds with my beliefs in democracy.)

Contrary to Dewey’s idea of parents having a role in shaping education, the current government expectations of parental engagement can be seen as a self-policing exercise, that requires a compliant subject who supports an economic enterprise. As Reay has pointed out (1998), parental engagement and the expectations of parental engagement, is largely women focussed. Therefore, it is pertinent to note Gill and Scharff’s identification of women as being “constructed as [neoliberalism’s] ideal subjects” due to the much greater pressure historically on women to adapt, self-police and regulate (2011: 7).

### Doctoral Research Project

Through my doctoral research, I set out to provide a counter to the prevailing discourse that parental engagement is about compliantly supporting the school. I wanted to challenge the implied notion that parents have little agency and need corrective help from the education system or government. I chose Community Philosophy as an intervention, in the hope that it might foster a more democratic approach to parental engagement. (It should be noted that I made the intervention as an outsider, but as a fellow parent, not as a teacher.)

Community Philosophy (CP) is related to Philosophy for Children (P4C) which is increasingly practiced in schools across the UK (SAPERE, 2013b). CP is used in a variety of situations such as pubs as a leisure activity, Housing Associations to increase client voice and within communities to resolve particular tensions (Tiffany, 2009). Drawing on the work of Matthew Lipman (2003) a deliberative approach, through which an argument in developed through dialogue, is at the heart of the CP methodology promoted by SAPERE and its related training (SAPERE, 2013a).

I originally hoped that CP would provide a space for critical engagement of parents, whilst fostering harmonious relations with the school; a problem could be identified by parents, explored, new ways of thinking developed and a solution taken to the school. Such an approach initially calmed fears of participants and the then headteacher, that the project might simply encourage moaning and hostility towards the school.

The first meeting went to plan, with seven parents including mothers, a father and a legal guardian identifying a key barrier to parental involvement as communication. Different aspects of communication were explored and discussed, simple strategies for improvement were identified and suggested to the headteacher and subsequently implemented. The hope was to meet every half term over a year, with the aim that some parents would continue to run it in the future.

However, numbers quickly dropped and it was difficult to maintain the interest and/ or availability of many participants, despite new people turning up and making significant contributions to individual meetings. Three women became the core participants who attended all meetings and increasingly took responsibility for the direction of the group. An audio recording was made of initial meetings, until participants suggested that the recordings might be putting off potential newcomers. I took notes during and made reflective notes after each meeting. The core participants and I, have also met to read through segments of transcripts and engage in a “coreflexive process” (Cho and Trent, 2009). It is the transcripts, notes and group reflections that have provided interesting insights into parental voice but also into how Community Philosophy might be used as a tool for democratic voice for parents.

### Community Philosophy as Democracy in Action?

The aforementioned difficulty in maintaining numbers, was said by participants to be possibly due to the expectation to *do* something in the meetings. Through continual reflection and negotiation, formal Community Philosophy was gradually dropped although the group still maintained an attitude of enquiry with a stronger emphasis on support for parents.

There was regular frustration that more people did not want to debate issues; we were not, contrary to our initial hopes, providing a global answer to parental engagement within the school. However, I started to view the meetings, not as an overarching narrative but a worthy rhizomatic form of parental voice. That is to say rather than being an intervention that fitted into the hierarchy of the school, it was one of “multiple entryways” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 12) for parent voice. Rather than the school providing an entrance, parents are finding ways in.

The new headteacher echoed this, by arguing that whilst the group had made and was making an important contribution to the school; he was trying to encourage myriad pockets of parent voice. For example, he had reversed the previous office practice of keeping angry (and at times aggressive) parents out of school and away from him. He had found this had led to more inclusive practices and he had learnt from the parents who had previously been excluded.

One of the repeated requests in our meetings from a range of different parents, was not for more meetings but for easier routes to communicate and relate to the school. There were formal mechanisms such as parent meetings and complaints procedures, but everyday communication was difficult. By way of example H had told the teacher during a parents evening that her partner would collect their child the next day. The teacher told H she needed to send a note to the office for them to give it to the teacher. H expressed frustration that there was so much bureaucracy for a simple message but was also unsure as to whether the teacher didn’t want to take the message or wasn’t allowed to. One idea was for a member of staff to be available in the playground in the morning (whilst recognising not all parents were able to drop children off and see such a person). In fact, the new Head told us that he was hoping to implement this next year, he was also looking to remove both the physical barriers in the playground that kept parents away from teachers, but also to make the school more open to parents generally.

Without diminishing the work that the group did last year, it appears that a school needs to be more porous to parents; being prepared for more informal conversations rather than restricting parental voice to more technical exercises such as questionnaires and meetings.

### Enquiring voices.

In the light of my argument for more informal opportunities, it could be assumed that Community Philosophy has no role in democratic action. However, I would argue that while the format was not necessarily appropriate or successful, there is a role for parental philosophical thinking, within the school community. I had originally chosen CP for its emphasis on deliberative democracy and the formality mitigated against someone dominating the meeting with a bugbear. Intriguingly as the project progressed, participants started to move away from wanting safe meetings, devoid of conflict. Some participants suggested that was too much consensus and actually disagreement might help expose us to other realities and help our thinking, thus echoing the comments of the head about welcoming angry voices. As Dewey argued, it is through considering each other, that barriers may be broken and a more just society created (Dewey, 1916).

Yet, this is difficult at a time when schools (and arguably parents) need to maintain and meet ever changing standards in order to be “Good” or “Outstanding” rather than “Requiring Improvement” or “Inadequate”. Brown argues that neoliberalism has led to people (and I would argue schools) needing to behave in investible ways, rather than moral or democratic ways (2015: 22). Schools need to be seen as succeeding in the high-stakes testing and accountability measures but are also expected to have parental support and consensus by way of Parent View (a questionnaire that OFSTED uses as part of its judgment).

It is therefore understandable that schools may wish to hear parents’ voices by way of questionnaires or the carefully orchestrated parents’ evenings that MacLure and Walker deconstruct (MacLure and Walker, 2003). However, it is through moments of dissensus, as Rancière argues that what is perceived to be common sense is exposed as being problematic; the sensible is ruptured (1999; 2010). As Rosanvallon argues, conflict can expose hidden power dynamics and realities that have been convenient to ignore or accept (2008).

The participants returned to homework several times within meetings and a range of important issues have been highlighted. Some parents said they were sad that there were parents who didn’t read with their children or help with homework. Shortly after, two parents said that sometimes support meant “holding back” when their child was too tired after school to read. This led to two of the participants re-evaluating their assumptions about non supportive parents.

Through further discussion, parents started to recognise that it is difficult to meet the demands of homework support between shift work, dealing with complex housing situations or simply working with three different siblings. It was recognised that there was a difference between the will to support a child with their homework and the everyday realities within the home.

Questionnaires, may have discovered there was some disagreement regarding homework. However, an enquiring discussion afforded dissent against the ‘common sense’ that a parent not reading to their child was a bad parent, and exposed the everyday realities faced by families.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I am arguing that instead of the school trying to provide and police opportunities for parent voice and engagement, we need to look for where the parents are already trying to enter. Community Philosophy may have its uses as a democratic tool, but not as yet another educational initiative. Philosophical thinking as one approach of parental engagement however is to be welcomed.

Returning to Dewey’s counsel that parents should be part of shaping a democratic school community, we need to be more imaginative regarding parent voice. If we can dare to move away from the restrictive neoliberal discourse of credit management; schools operating a more porous structure and welcoming dissensus rather than trying to prove consensus may be able to expose inequalities and injustices and work in more democratic ways.

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