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Unpicking the neoliberal noose: working towards democratic parent engagement in a primary school.

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

York St John University

School of Education

June 2019

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This research study was driven by a personal frustration at the lack of democratic parent engagement in English primary schools. Charting the framing of parents as ineptitudes and unworthy of political involvement since state schooling began for all children in 1870, I have demonstrated and problematised how parents are expected to carry out individualised, compliant, performative parent engagement in terms of ensuring their child is brought up to be a successful economic being. I then conceptualised the problem as a neoliberal noose comprising three strands, that strangle democratic parent engagement:

1) Lack of agency regarding parents within education.
2) Lack of space for parents to debate within schools, or nationally, education and education policy.
3) Lack of collective parent engagement due to the pervasive individualisation within the education system.

I aimed to unpick this noose by seeking new understandings: establishing the conditions needed for democratic parent engagement and trialling a democratic parent engagement project. As part of a participatory action research study, I set up a Community Philosophy group with a small group of parents in a primary school on the Yorkshire Coast. The initial attempt to forge harmonious relationships between participants and the school became problematic and I had to reframe the research; the reframing process took a poststructural turn and entailed developing a new conceptualisation of action research to help me further unpick the noose and splice the comprising strands.

Unpicking the noose afforded a much deeper understanding of how the three strands both twisted together and also held each other in tension, forming a ligature. Moreover, with careful problematising, diffractive analysis and 'plugging in of theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012), and a coreflexion process with participants (Cho and Trent 2009), I have re-laid the strands of the rope, and offer a possible lifeline for democratic parent engagement.

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Abbreviations

CP: Community Philosophy

EBacc: English Baccalaureate

FSM: Free School Meals

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFSTED: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PAR: Participatory Action Research

PiPs: Philosophy in Pubs

PISA: Program for International Assessment

PTA: Parent Teacher Association

SATs: Standard Attainment Tests

TEF: Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework

Chapter 1. Introduction

Over a century ago, John Dewey (2013:19) wrote

> What the best and wisest parent wants for [their] 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.

This implies that parents have some knowledge and duty of care over their child's education and that there should be a conversation between parents and society about what parents might want in terms of schooling. The problem is, as David Flinders (2014) points out, the definition of the 'best and wisest parent' is taken for granted. The best parents are often being assumed to mean those whom provide resources and have time to support their children's academic exploits, thus implying that the best and wisest parents are at the more privileged end of the spectrum. Flinders goes on to argue that the best and wisest parent would be, according to Dewey, one that argues for their individual child's needs to be met, but *also* one that sees beyond their own child and questions what is good for the community and world they are part of. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, there is little space, within schools locally or indeed nationally, for parents to share their views on, or question school or education policy, despite society being all too vocal regarding what it wants parents to do for the child.

Whilst parents have been increasingly encouraged to be involved in their children's education since the 1960s, this involvement has been very much prescribed by the school and government. In Chapter 2, I will chart how parents have been framed over the last 150 years and the effects such framing has had on democratic parent engagement. I argue, we have moved away from Dewey's (2004) concept of democratic education and parents have been instrumentalised, commodified and thus in the most part, side-lined; although one might question whether such a democratic ideal ever existed within the English state school system.

In recent years, the place of parents has been a 'hot' topic; their role within the governance of the school has been eroded (Olmedo and Wilkins, 2017; Wilkins, 2014) whilst, at the same time, they have been increasingly blamed for the lack of progress of their individual child (Francis et al., 2009; Hartas, 2012; 2015; Hinds,

2018; Wilshaw, 2013). I will argue that there is a wealth of research into the benefits of parent engagement regarding a child's education in terms of academic achievement, but much of this research and thinking serves to instrumentalise parent engagement. I argue that whilst such parent engagement may be beneficial for a child's attainment, parent voice is essential in the *broader sense* to the schools if we are to have a democratic education system as advocated by Dewey (2004), Michael Fielding and Peter Moss (2010) amongst others. This study strove to develop a more democratic model of parent engagement in which parents might question concepts of education, policy (including that of the local school and national policy), and every day practices.

In this thesis, I do not dispute whether parent engagement is good for children's education, in terms of attainment. Rather, I argue that in the pursuit of such engagement, the notion of democratic engagement and parent voice has been lost. Moreover, the word 'voice' is problematic; Julian Stern (2015) points out, we need to think in terms of *voices* in the plural to capture the myriad perspectives present within a school, rather than see parents as a homogenous entity. It was working with diverse voices and values that provided key moments of challenge to this research study.

1.1 A neoliberal problem

This thesis explores how neoliberal education policy (Angus, 2015; Hill, 2008) is strangling democratic parent engagement in English schools. It details how 'dialogical experimenting', as part of an action research study in an English primary school, attempted to trial a more democratic approach to parent engagement. Through action, reflection and theoretical analysis, the thesis proffers the conditions needed to counter the prevailing performative model of parent engagement in the current neoliberal English education system. In this context, 'performative' signals the normalising of economic performance over other possible value-based practices within education and parenting (Wilkins, 2015). In terms of schooling, this means that schools are judged by the students' academic attainment rather than the type of citizens they may be helping to develop. Similarly, performative parent engagement requires parents to ensure their children achieve well at school, enabling them to become economically successful adults.

In the last 40 years education in England has become increasingly neoliberalised with emphasis placed on creating economically viable, investible human beings. This entails the use of performative education, high stakes testing and accountability measures. Teachers have gradually had their professional status questioned, if not eviscerated. As Thomas Frank (2016) argues, professionalism, generally, has become about adherence to professional codes which are often used to depoliticise the profession rather than catalyse it. As in the United States, which Frank (2016) describes, and other contexts, performance of teachers in England is now judged on test results of the students they teach. The tests are on an increasingly narrow set of subjects and there is little room for creativity, or professional decisions in how to teach or what to teach.

The sole objective of students, as projected by the government, is to become economically viable beings. This involves taking and passing the correct exams[1] and becoming increasingly resilient. This trajectory starts at an ever-younger age, with children as young as two, in England, being judged on whether they are meeting the correct targets or not (Department for Education, 2017). It could be argued, that in some cases students have more voice than other stakeholders, with school councils and some newsworthy, successful protests about uniform [2]. Yet as more schools enforce authoritarian regimes, the reality of being able to question regimes, dissent, and change policy is increasingly questionable (Dishon and Goodman, 2017; Kutz, 2014). Neoliberalism's pervasive suppression of agency through demanding conformity, is discussed in more detail in section 2.2.

As teachers and students have had their voice and therefore agency restricted, parents too have seen their role increasingly prescribed and instrumentalised. This is best described as the "scientification of parenting" (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2011:92), in that parents obeying a specified set of parenting behaviours will apparently lead to particular outcomes for their children. As Stefan Ramaekers and

[1] The Conservative/ Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010-2015) introduced the 'EBacc' which is a suite of GCSEs including Maths, English, Science, a modern foreign language and a humanity. All secondary schools are to offer the Ebacc, which is to ensure that school leavers have the appropriate GCSEs to apply for a distinguished university. There has been much concern since, regarding the implicit downgrading of religious education and the arts. For example see https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/may/08/artists-condemn-exclusion-of-arts-subjects-from-english-baccalaureate [Accessed 22nd May 2019].

[2] For example see https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/22/teenage-boys-wear-skirts-to-school-protest-no-shorts-uniform-policy [Accessed 22nd May 2019].

Judith Suissa (2011) argue, this in turn, removes the moral agency of parents, as they are told exactly how to parent. Furthermore, working class parents are told that their values are harmful, and the cause of their offspring's low achievement (Best, 2017), and that their low aspirations are more dangerous than low incomes (Wilshaw, 2013). This increasingly hegemonic, or dominant view of parenting is based on a valorisation of white middle-class parenting values (Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2006; 2008; Vincent, 2001; Vincent and Martin, 2002).

There is little, if any, space for parents to question or shape the notion of education in England. Even the usual channels of wider parent involvement such as the Parent Teacher Association or governing bodies are problematic. The latter have become increasingly instrumentalised and relegated to funds and risk management whilst democratic representation has diminished as governors have become trained to carry out the wishes of the neoliberal regime (Wilkins, 2016). Indeed, parent engagement has been individualised insofar as it is articulated as a parenting practice that supports and enhances the attainment of a child or children. Parent engagement is not something to be carried out in terms of questioning or contributing to wider education policy. It is not something proffered as a collective activity, other than fundraising which in turn is supportive of the school, rather than a democratic practice. This is illustrated by the frustrations of parents and teachers over the top down introduction of a new rigorous statutory testing regime in primaries in 2016 (Ward, 2016) and forced academisation of so-called failing schools (Chakrabortty, 2019).

As teachers, students and parents are increasingly instrumentalised and muted, it is clear that we are far from Stavros Moutsios' (2010:124) 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 reinforces 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 they deem appropriate. Such educational politics may take place every day in a school between parents, staff, governors and students, or on a more macro level

nationally amongst parent groups or indeed with other parties such as employers, community leaders and politicians. Democracy in such a conception is dynamic and continually active rather than confined to the ballot box (Mouffe, 2005; Mouffe, 2013; Rancière, 2014). It is this concept of education politics that underpins this thesis.

1.2 The research study and aims

To explore the concepts involved in this research study, I will use the imagery of rope as a metaphor. The rope signifies three strands which entwine and hold each other in tension, providing a high tensile strength. Metaphor is used throughout the thesis to help illuminate and unpick problematic knots, by "juxtapos[ing] two different things and then skew[ing] our point of view so unexpected similarities emerge" (Geary, 2012:9). The use of metaphor will also form part of the critical discourse analytics employed (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) as discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

To further the metaphor of the rope, these strands, lack of agency, lack of space, and lack of collectivity, form a neoliberal noose that is strangling democratic parent engagement, as well as binding and restricting parents. To unpick this noose, I developed a form of action research, that acted as a splicing tool (see section 3.3) and worked with a small group of parents in a primary school to achieve the following aims:

1) Seek new understandings of democratic parent engagement.
2) Try a new way of working—i.e. Community Philosophy— as a form of democratic parent engagement.
3) Establish the conditions needed for democratic parent engagement within a school.

Hence, this is a political piece of research, that not only sought to destabilise the current status quo, examined different notions regarding parent engagement but also endeavoured to offer a possible undoing of, or counter to, the neoliberal noose.

To achieve these aims, I employed a variety of research strategies as part of the metaphorical splicing tool. These strategies enabled me to unpick and unlay the

noose and its comprising strands for examination, before reconstituting and relaying the rope, to become a lifeline for democratic parent engagement. The study involved working with a small group of parents, in a coastal primary school ('Kirkgate') to establish a Community Philosophy Group (SAPERE, 2015) that was to meet twice a term over two years. This group used the Community Philosophy methodology (explained in Chapter 2) to explore different aspects of parent engagement, especially those espoused by OFSTED[3] and other authorities at the time. However, the format changed over time due to participants having issues with Community Philosophy as detailed in Chapter 4. Our aim was to try to forge new ways of working with the school that were collective in nature and focus, and not merely about the attainment of individual children assumed to be in competition with one another.

1.3 Theoretical underpinnings

The use of theory to further disrupt and problematise practices and thinking was crucial to the study. This research was originally informed by the philosopher John Macmurray's (1950: 16) argument that

> There is a sense in which freedom is absolute...This freedom is simply our capacity to act—not to behave or to react, but to form an intention and seek to realize it. To act is to be free.

Macmurray's insistence on acting with each other as part of our humanity, underpins my thinking and insistence that there must be democratic parent engagement with our school system in England. In Chapter 2, I demonstrate how I brought Macmurray's work together with that of John Rawls (1971; 1993) in an attempt to develop a relational "reflective equilibrium" in the shape of Community Philosophy (SAPERE, 2015). However, in Chapter 3, I detail how, in the light of issues arising early on in the study, I took a more poststructuralist turn. I started to use the Critical Discourse Analytics Theory of Laclau and Mouffe (2014), particularly as articulated in the work of Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007), not only to explore the political logics at play, but to actively question and contest the hegemonic articulations of parenting and parent engagement.

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[3] English state schools are subject to an inspection regime by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED).

I drew on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2014) and Glynos and Howarth (2007) to unpick the different 'logics' at play, including social, political and fantasmatic logics (as discussed in detail in Chapter 3). Furthermore, I used the work of Jacques Rancière (1999; 2010; 2014) and John Macmurray (1950; 1991; 1995), amongst others, to explore the data regarding agency, space and lack of collectivity. This theoretical analysis helped me to conceptualise different aspects of democratic parent engagement and take empirical findings back to 'trouble the theory'. Such abductive and retroductive approaches (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), which is discussed in Chapter 3, enabled thinking and further unpicking of problematic knots. These 'unravellings' were then taken back to the group of participants, for further discussion and exploration as part of a process of coreflexion (Cho and Trent, 2009). This approach afforded deeper understanding of parent engagement with an underlying ethic of dialogical experimentation, which helped develop the conditions needed for democratic parent engagement. Additionally, the process also destabilised some of the theories, and afforded new thinking and synthesis, for example, the bringing together of Rancière and Macmurray to develop a way of thinking about agency in relation that encouraged dissensus (see Chapter 7).

This destabilising methodology, however, demanded a destabilising ethic within the research. To work ethically and democratically, demanded a reflexive approach; I endeavoured to unpick the variety of ethical knots, especially those caused by destabilising relationships between participants, and between participants and the school. The implications of dissensual ethics are discussed in section 4.4. Furthermore, 'methodological reflections' punctuate the thesis, enabling the reader to see how I engaged with an ethical and reflexive process. A table detailing the different Methodological Reflection 'boxes' can be found at the end of the table of contents, at the beginning of this thesis.

1.4 Findings

As discussed in Chapter 4, the *agency* of the participants, had to be fully embraced, despite initial concerns about taking up too much of their time or giving them too much responsibility for the study. As parents increasingly enjoyed more 'ownership' of the study, (i.e. the ability to set the agenda, rather than simply respond to mine or that of the school or government), increased parents agency became important. This resulted in a change of relationship with the Headteacher

(Mr Shaw) and led to changes in working practices as the study continued (see also Chapters 5 and 6).

The study initially attempted to ensure that *harmonious* relationships were built between the parents and staff of the school. However, it soon became clear that harmony was damaging to any concept of democratic parent engagement. The implicit containment of frustrations, and apparent need for consensus became unworkable, presenting an extraordinarily difficult knot for all involved to unpick. The school, the participants and I, all had to come to terms with what a more dissensual model of parent engagement might look like. We learnt that dissensual *agency* is a condition for democratic parent engagement.

In Chapter 5, I explore how the physical space disrupted our thinking about democratic parent engagement further. The study initially took place off the immediate school site, but later meetings moved onto school premises, including in the Headteacher's office. The participants and I recognised that this move invoked changes in behaviour and relationships for both parents and staff. However, it was not only physical space that was important to participants but the mental space to be able to explore concepts without censure. This necessity for *spaciousness* (Tuan, 1977) within and with-out the school, to afford democratic parent engagement became, increasingly obvious towards the end of the project.

When unpicking the lack of collectivity, as I discuss in Chapter 6, I identified the use of clear binaries in discussion which often invoked not only 'us and them', but also a metaphorical language of war (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). However, as the group reflected on this, there was an attempt to downplay conflict and dissensus and argue that 'we are all on the same side'. This in turn proved problematic, as power dynamics, and recognition of privilege, needed to be unknotted and explored further by participants to make progress.

As a counter to the lack of collectivity, the participants argued that *knowing* each other was very important, especially regarding micro aspects of relationships; it was not a case of parents wanting to be friends with staff but being able to know and understand each other's different perspectives; for this to occur, some form of presence was important. Relationships built through electronic communication were not considered adequate; the ability to simply say hello to a teacher was vital.

The emphasis on knowing was also interesting as it provoked questions regarding power dynamics and relationship building between parents and the school. Questions were raised like: Who was allowed to know whom? Who was allowed to have particular knowledge? It was apparent that there were chosen parents who were granted privileged access. Whilst collectivity became problematic, as I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7, *relationality*, in various guises is essential to afford democratic parent engagement.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I return to the rope metaphor, conceptualising the three conditions (agency, spaciousness and relationality) for democratic parent engagement as comprising three strands, each laid against each other, and twisted in tension. Additionally, all three strands must be present to ensure strength. I explore how each strand is imbricated against the others, as well as the implications for practice and future research.

1.5 Why *I* needed to do this research

To provide an understanding as to what I, as the researcher, bring to the research, it is important to offer a short autobiography highlighting my own key experiences and motivations. It is apposite to begin with a very personal experience that has underpinned a feminist outlook and determination that women's voices should be heard and able to challenge an unjust status quo. As a young youth worker, a male colleague was brought in to 'support me', but it turned out he was paid twice as much as me and provided with a house. I was told soon after, despite promises of permanency, that my employer never had any intention of extending my contract, and that the new colleague was a long-term friend of the new head of the church. When I expressed outrage at the situation, I was quickly demonised, literally; I was told I was possessed by a demon of despair, in front of seven men who were very senior in the church. This very vivid example of demonisation, as a means of shutting down voice, has lived with me for thirty years and made me alert to such behaviour. The experience also contributes to my distrust of authority.

With a background in Youth and Community Work and working in the voluntary sector, the idea that everybody should be able to have a part in shaping the world around them has run deeply through my work. This experience has included: detached youth work with young people in Sheffield involving regular arguments

with the local church as to their understandings and assumptions about the local 'gang'; working with children on a so-called 'sink estate' to explain their lives, thoughts and frustrations to the then Secretary of State for the Environment, John Gummer; working with two young men who had been lost in the 'system' to help them shape the education, work and treatment that they needed, despite assumptions of their parents and schools; and work at an Age Concern day centre with their clients to shape their programme but also their community.

On a wider level, when working with the Methodist Church, I worked with local volunteers across the country, which involved ensuring that their voices were heard in terms of their treatment and the value of their work. I also negotiated directly with the New Labour government (1997-2010) regarding the introduction of the National Minimum Wage, and the very real implications for the voluntary sector and voluntary work. As the New Labour government (1997-2010) introduced 'Citizenship Education' into schools, I used my Masters' thesis (Haines, 2001) to explore the ethics of such an implementation. I used the work of John Rawls (1971; 1993), Joseph Raz (1986) and John Macmurray (1991; 1995) to argue for more voices, especially those deemed to be *too unacceptable* to be involved in shaping the notion of citizenship.

Through my work with the Craft Guerrilla Collective in London and Yorkshire, I worked in pubs, clubs, and cafes using 'pop-up' craft nights to provide spaces for people to craft free from the strictures of often presumed rules for crafting and art. As a freelance writer, much of my work was for Christian Aid and the Department for International Development, examining the impact of Fairtrade and other ethical living projects on farmers and parents. I also had the privilege of interviewing different South Africans as they reflected on their experiences of apartheid after ten years of democratic freedom. More recently, I have taken up a post as a Lecturer in Children, Young People and Families, and try to encourage students to inform my teaching and the work of the university.

As can be seen, democratic engagement in terms of political activity in everyday life, is important to me. Therefore, when my children started school, I was shocked by how little parents seem to be involved in the education system. My eldest

daughter started school in London and moved to a village primary school[4] in North Yorkshire, for the last term of her reception year. I was surprised by how much more religious assemblies were in North Yorkshire. I had no idea that schools could be so different and wondered how, or if, parents had any say in this. I make no specific claims about the actions or ethos of either school, but I was surprised at the lack of information provided to parents about this and thus the inability of parents to shape it.

Soon after moving to Yorkshire, I became a parent governor as a way of expressing my concerns and thoughts as a parent about the system. Moreover, I wanted to articulate the thoughts of other parents who, despite the commonly touted open-door policy, often thought the school door was closed to them. I was taken aback by my ease of walking through the door and talking to the Headteacher about wider education or community issues, when others felt unable to do so for a variety of reasons. I suspected that there might be some of us (namely professional middle-class parents) who were viewed as acceptable sensible voices, and that other parents might at least feel dismissed and sidelined for a variety of reasons including: past experiences with the school, education, race and class.

However, as a governor, and more recently, as chair of governors, I have also become well versed in the 'other side' of the equation; the strategic and operational aspects of the school, coupled with the standards and requirements set by the OFSTED[5] regime. I have grappled with various tensions between my own values about parent voices and the reality of the neoliberal schooling system. Such a system requires the safe and smooth running of a school, supporting and challenging teachers, and making sure we had 'an OFSTED-proof' school. This has involved, to my shame, colluding with the dismissing of certain voices. I have, therefore, included reflections on such tensions within the thesis, as autoethnographic work, which helped me interrogate the data and theory further, and acknowledge my idealism.

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[4] Primary schools in England admit children at the age of four. Children move to secondary school (sometimes termed 'high school') in the September after their eleventh birthday.

[5] English schools are inspected by OFSTED and are evaluated and often disciplined according to the government's priorities, for example results for reading, writing and mathematics in primary schools. For further information on the disciplinary aspect of OFSTED see section 2.1.2 and Perryman (2006).

I must, also, acknowledge my somewhat privileged background of a middle-class white woman, who whilst starting out in the state schooling system, won a scholarship to a private boarding school in her teens. Whilst not a particularly prestigious establishment, I cannot deny the affordances of such an education in which, despite the school's academic performance being poor, my confidence and sense of entitlement to be heard became particularly high. However, through these experiences and also this study, I have recognised that my privilege comes at the cost of other's disadvantage. In turn, this realisation has led me to question the stratified education system and the inequalities within it.

Despite being more privileged than many, it is possible to see that there are alternatives, and to have solidarity with those who are often sidelined and voiceless; moreover, such solidarity I will argue is an imperative. As Clare Woodford (2015:37) argues, it is "necessary to see oneself as 'include-able' *with* everyone, as equals" in order to disrupt the regime and offer a counter-imaginary through biography: 'I have managed this far, so it might be possible.' Thus, this is an overtly political thesis and I do not shy away from that. Rather than 'bracketing out' my experiences and politics I foreground them, work with them and reflect on at least some of the assumptions that I am bringing to my work.

1.6 Naming voices in a democratic thesis

When researching democracy in any field, the challenge must be to write a democratic thesis. This presents challenges regarding naming people in the thesis. I have used the pseudonym Kirkgate for the school I worked with and Skellthorpe for the coastal town that Kirkgate is situated in. Kirkgate means "road to a church" and Skellthorpe is a combination of Viking words meaning flood and outlying farm. These names are to reflect the "northcountry names" common in North Yorkshire, as well as the semi-rural and outlying nature of many of the coastal towns (The Yorkshire Dialect Society, 2014). I specifically wanted to capture the Northern and outlying nature of the place rather than it be readily assumed to be a city or Southern conurbation. Thus, ensuring the pseudonym is in keeping with the place they are reflecting as counselled by Sara Delamont (2002).

I have pseudonymised all participants as well as Mrs Benson, the first headteacher and Mr Shaw, the headteacher who replaced her during the study. Three

participants, Dacia, Holly and Pat attended nearly every meeting over the two years, and, at the end of the project, they specifically requested that their pseudonym began with the same initial as their real name, and then chose their pseudonym. They felt it was important to own their words, and they did not want Mr Shaw or anyone else assuming the wrong person had said something. Carolyn Ellis (1995) highlights the problem of wrongful attribution within her own ethnographic research, therefore I was happy to agree to the participants' request.

Furthermore, I felt that a democratic thesis required ethical citation practice. This entails trying to find the voices who are often erased from the literature (Ahmed, 2017; Tuck et al., 2015). It might entail using literature that is not counted as part of the research canon yet has an important contribution to make. It also requires being accountable for the voices I use. Whilst I am not convinced I have made an adequate attempt to find erased voices within the literature, I have tried to name authors using their first name at least once in each chapter, in order to indicate the gender and ethnicity of the writers. Whilst this is admittedly clumsy, requiring problematic assumptions to be made, in the very least it enables me to keep a private tally of who I am including and who I am missing (Mott and Cockayne, 2017).

1.7 Terms of engagement

Although it is common practice in UK schools to use the terms parents/ carers/ guardians as not everyone is a parent who looks after a child, for simplicity I have used the term parent to denote anyone who has parental responsibility. When analysing the depiction of particular parents, it is notable that the terms 'working class', 'disadvantaged' and 'poor' are often problematically conflated (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014; Reay, 2017). There is no simple distinction, however where I am referring to the historical framing of parents, I will use the term 'poor' in keeping with that time; when specifically, class related, I shall indicate as such. For more contemporary issues, I will use the term 'disadvantaged'; although this term is problematic, this is the term used by the current government and generally indicates parents whose low-income enables their children being offered free school meals, thus attracting the Pupil Premium. The Pupil Premium is provided to a school for each child that; has had Free School Meals (FSM) at any time in the last six years (even if only for a very short time);

has had a parent in the Armed Forces in the last four years; is a 'Looked After Child'; or has been adopted from Care (Department for Education, 2014a). It is this measure that is now included in the Government's Performance Tables and can be most easily used to compare attainment and progress to that of 'other' children (Department for Education, 2014b).

It should be noted that the *Unseen Children* report (OFSTED, 2013), specifically refers to economically disadvantaged children and not necessarily children in care or with parents in the Armed Forces. Furthermore, this measure became problematic, as from September 2014 universal free meals were provided at all state schools for infants (4-7 year-old children). This has led to applications for Free School Meals dropping until the juniors (7-11 year-old children), as their parents have little incentive to fill in the relevant forms (Bird, 2015). For the purposes of this research, the precise term is not as important as the understanding of judgement about particular groups of parents compared to others.

Finally, I use the term parent engagement rather than parental engagement, as grammatically parental engagement implies that the parent is being engaged by someone else. There is a range of literature on how schools can engage or even involve parents (Chavkin, 2017; Day, 2013; Doherty et al., 2009; Epstein et al., 2002; Goodall et al., 2011; Goodall, 2012; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Harris and Goodall, 2008; Torre and Murphy, 2016; Warren et al., 2009), however this research study specifically addressed how parents might engage with the school. It is not about parent involvement which, as Goodall (2014:403) argues, is on the least agentic end of the continuum with "parent-led discussions of teaching and learning" at the more agentic end. It is this far more agentic form of parent engagement that I chose to research.

1.8 Original contributions to knowledge

As I discuss in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7, my conceptualisation of action research as a 'fid', a destabilising methodological model is a useful addition to the action research literature. The fid disrupts what is often a linear approach affording a more radical, political approach which destabilises understandings and relationships, whilst fundamentally working *with* people not on people. The

resultant destabilising ethic challenges the often-proffered harmonious ethic in research, and in education more generally, which I argue can be harmful.

My splicing of Macmurray and Rancière's theories on agency affords an understanding of relationality and agency as both dissensual *and* relational. As I argue in Chapter 7, their ideas of agency and equality temper each other. The study further illuminates how the common demand by schools for harmonious consensus suppresses the agency of parents as well as obstructing relationality and in turn democratic practice.

This study enhances our understanding of how space affects democratic parent engagement, but moreover, it demonstrates how spaciousness is essential if we are to afford agency and relationality. As I unpick the neoliberal noose, I illustrate how the neoliberal predilection fantasy for completion and fixity, confines our thinking but also our individuality. There is little space to relate to our many modes of living which often clash (for example, as governor, mother, and researcher) and to navigate the tensions that are present.

However, it is the playful use of ropemaking metaphors that has enabled me to develop the idea of the neoliberal noose and understand just how much neoliberalism is strangling democratic parent engagement. Moreover, I am able to demonstrate how the strands of agency, spaciousness and relationality are intertwined holding each other to provide a possible lifeline for democratic parent engagement.

1.9 Summary

This chapter, by way of introduction has provided an overview of the thesis and my key arguments. I have outlined my aims of the study but also the strategies I employed to achieve these aims. Through an autobiographical section, it is possible to gain insight to my motivations behind the research, furthermore it can be seen that careful attention to detail such as naming voices in the thesis embodies my democratic ethos.

Whilst I have sketched how the thesis progresses, including the problems facing democratic parent engagement and the possible counters to the problem, I have also indicated that this is a disruptive piece of work. The nature of disruption is that it is not linear and straightforward, therefore, the thesis is iterative in places

and not possible to contain in fixed, linear chapters. Hence, I have tried to signpost the reader to different sections at the appropriate points to make it easier to link ideas together. However, the next chapter, should act as a more fulsome starting point by way of providing a detailed context, and problematisation of parent engagement as it has been and currently is framed.

Chapter 2. Context: the starting point

This chapter acts partly as a literature review but more as a reconnaissance of democratic parent engagement. As John Elliott (1991) argues reconnaissance is a necessary phase of action research, it was important to understand the context in order to formulate a plan of action. As this is an action research study (Anderson, 2017; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2008), it is not a traditional literature review, in terms of providing a discussion of the necessary literature at the beginning of the thesis. Rather, this chapter demonstrates my understanding of parent engagement in England, how neoliberalism has exacerbated the historical discourse of seeing parents as problems, and why I thought I needed to make a democratic intervention, and how such an intervention should be shaped. As will become clear in the following chapters, the study led to changes in my theoretical framing and required substantial further engagement with literature. Therefore, this chapter should be read as a contingent, initial context rather than an all-encompassing literature review.

This chapter draws on a wide range of literature, predominantly relating to the English state school education system, but sometimes looking further afield where useful and appropriate. The English context is partly due to England being the country I live and work in, but moreover, as Nicholas Beattie (1985) argued, other European countries such as Spain, Germany and France, built in more democratic checks and balances after their experience of dictators such as Hitler and Franco, whereas England has seemingly not felt the need for such democratic engagement. A brief history is provided of how successive governments and organisations since the late 19th Century have framed parents in relation to schooling and how this has contributed to our current thinking of parents and their role within schooling. This exploration provides a context for considering how such thinking, combined with neoliberal logics, has precluded parents from democratic parent engagement. I build on this critique by offering a conceptualisation of the neoliberalisation of parent engagement in the shape of a noose which is strangling democratic parent engagement.

The chapter ends with an exploration of the theories that justified my insistence on the need for democratic parent engagement together with my case for Community Philosophy offering a counter to the neoliberal noose. However, due to the nature

of action research studies, my theoretical understandings changed as the study progressed. It is therefore important to understand this chapter as the starting point to the study rather than a final understanding of the field of parent engagement and a fixed conceptual framework underpinning the study.

2.1 The framing of parents: reflecting on parallels with the past

This section reviews how parents have been framed historically by schools, governments and agencies such as OFSTED in England and how this has diminished democratic parent engagement with schools. As I examine how parents were viewed in the late 19th Century, when the English state instituted compulsory schooling for all young children, I argue that there are parallels to now, which help us understand the problems affecting democratic parent engagement. I will demonstrate how the late 1800s marked a significant change regarding how parents were viewed; initiating a trajectory that, good intentions notwithstanding, gradually removed trust in parents, diminished parental agency and excluded parents' voices from education.

2.1.1 Moral panics: parents as ineptitudes

The Elementary Education Act 1870 was the first Act to introduce schooling on a national scale in England and Wales. Children between the ages of five and ten years old in England and Wales were to attend school, although the cost was in some cases prohibitive and the implementation patchy (Findlay, 1932). Up until then, schools had been predominantly church schools and this Act provided for new schools, managed by school boards rather than the Church, although the two types coexisted. The separation of education from the Church was contentious. Whilst many children were educated to some extent within the family, this was a turning point which encouraged children to be educated and socialised outside of the family. Parents were no longer seen as necessarily capable of home educating, whereas previously parents were seen as the main source of socialising children into becoming respectful, moral adults (Bailey, 2012). The family had been used as instrument of government in which the man would ensure the rest of the unit (including servants) were subject to his control and power (Donzelot, 1979). He, as the head of the family could be held accountable for poor behaviour of those under his power. The family acted very much as a miniature feudal system with the man

able to cast favour and punishment, control choices and lives as he saw fit (Donzelot, 1979).

As, the state prepared to intervene within the family, Joseph John Findlay (1932:146) argues, “among the lowlier classes was distrust of compulsory schooling”, although the move was supported by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) as it removed children from the workplace. There was also concern that educating the working classes might be dangerous and cause political upheaval (Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973). Findlay (1932) notes the move to regard childhood as precious and fun rather than part of work, but also a growing acknowledgement by children that school could be distinctly hard work and unpleasant. Simultaneously there was a great push “by leaders of opinion to induce both parents and children to regard education as an affording opportunity” (Findlay, 1932:153). Meanwhile, in the US context, John Dewey argued for education to be outside the home, as he was not convinced that parents could see beyond their own beliefs and educate their children to become citizens (Ruderman and Godwin, 2000).

In the 19th Century, in England, certain animals were afforded state protection for over half a century before “it was thought proper to extend statutory protection to the young child” (Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973:622). The word ‘proper’ is indicative of the state’s problem with intervening. Influenced by Catholic teaching that marriage is a holy sacrament, the family was seen as sacrosanct and not to be interfered with[6]. There was much concern about the rising rates of infant mortalities, particularly where mothers were working in factories, yet whilst the slavery abolitionist Lord Shaftsbury was in favour of protecting children in the work place, he would not contemplate intervening within the family, saying:

> The evils you state are enormous and indisputable, but they are of so private, internal and domestic a character as to be beyond the reach of legislation, and the subject, indeed, would not, I think, be entertained in either House of Parliament. (1871, in Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973:622)

Another reformer Whatley Cooke Taylor proclaimed:

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[6] It should be noted that this is one part of a problematic patriarchal culture in which women did not have rights to property in the same way as men and it was completely acceptable for a husband to rape his wife. There were also unsuccessful campaigns during this time to make marital rape a crime (Phegley, 2012).

> I desire to place it on record...that I would far rather see even a higher rate of infant mortality prevailing than has ever yet been proved against the factory districts or elsewhere...than intrude one iota further on the sanctity of the domestic hearth and the decent seclusion of private life...The unit, the family, is the unit upon which a constitutional Government has been raised which is the admiration and the envy of mankind. Hitherto, whatever the laws have touched, they have not invaded this sacred precinct (1874, in Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973:359).

This echoed John Locke's thinking from two centuries earlier, when he argued that protecting the family from state intervention was so important that it was worth risking some cruelty in order to protect it (Ruderman and Godwin, 2000). Accordingly, the only way for campaigners to argue for intervention within the sacrosanct institution of family was to frame members of the family as unholy or evil, and to prove the scale of this evil was beyond imagination. Within puritan Victorian society, sexual abuse was the perfect horror with which to desacralise the family; defining a need for moral rescue of children by campaigners who were to become the NSPCC and Barnados after the *Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of, Children Act 1889* (Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973; Piper, 2008). This was the first Act to permit the state to intervene within the family, should abuse be suspected, indeed it allowed for the state to remove a child from a family if deemed necessary.

Unsurprisingly, much of the discourse on evil, abusive, parents focussed on the poor. Gary Clapton et al (2013), argue that the 1889 Act was introduced after the creation of moral panic involving deliberate exaggeration, leading a concerned public to conclude every poor child was in danger and needed rescuing. Importantly, they argue that this moral panic obfuscated the real issues of destitution and inequality. Arguably, this was the start of a trajectory, in which parents, especially poor parents, were increasingly seen as inept at parenting; a seed of doubt was planted as to whether parents could be trusted, thus successfully arguing the need for state intervention and control (Piper, 2008).

The use of blame, as a tool for obfuscation of structural inequalities, can still be seen in contemporary discourse. Clapton et al (2013) reflect on the similarities between the moral panic regarding child abuse in the 1800s, and the more recent panic about child abuse on the internet. Parents are now deemed too inept to

monitor their child's internet use thus requiring mass resources and various internet companies to protect the children on their behalf. The same anxieties around parental negligence and ineptitude are still present today.

In almost direct reflection of the 1870s' moral panic, Louise Casey's (2012) *Listening to Troubled Families Report*, about apparently problematic families in England, used some very problematic sampling[7] to frame her arguments that these families were inept in the least and dangerous at worst. This led to somewhat stark conclusions including:

> Violence appears in many cases to be endemic—not just domestic violence between parents but violence between siblings, between parent and child, outside the house and inside the house. Violence, verbal and physical abuse was described in an almost matter-of-fact way. Unexpectedly, arson was cited in a significant proportion of families, as either evidence of the children having problems or with regard to their homes being destroyed. (Casey, 2012:2)

And furthering the sense of moral panic:

> The prevalence of child sexual and physical abuse was striking and shocking. It became clear that in many of these families the abuse of children by parents, siblings, half siblings and extended family and friends was often a factor in their dysfunction. (Casey, 2012: 52)

These assertions led to the Sun newspaper to report "Child abuse rife in hell families" and ITV to report on "an entrenched culture of child abuse and welfare dependency" (ITV, 2012; Wilson, 2012). As the Joint Public Issues Team (2013) argue, this helped fuel the myth that the poor, whether families, children or indeed future generations, are not only feckless but quite probably dangerous and thus need rescuing and possibly punishing. *The Troubled Families* programme run by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010-15) was based on the premise that there were 120,000 problematic families. As Ruth Levitas (2012:11) unpicks, this figure was based on families who were affected by specific troubles including: "mental health; physical disability; substance misuse; domestic violence; financial stress; neither parent in work; teenage parenthood; poor basic skills; living in poor housing conditions." Gradually, through government

[7] See critiques by Ruth Levitas (2012), Tracy Jensen (2018) which indicate that minor interventions with families, led to them being labelled as "troubled".

pronouncements these troubled families became framed as *troublesome* families in need of interventions rather than support (Jensen, 2018; Joint Public Issues Team, 2013; Levitas, 2012).

When individuals are framed like this during moral panics, Stuart Waiton (2015:49) argues, these individuals that the panic centres on are framed as "diminished subjects". Thus, when moral panics are created, a certain lack of agency is assumed. Tracy Jensen (2018) charts how a moral panic has been manufactured around an apparent parenting crisis whether through the disgust at families on programmes such as *Supernanny* (2004) as well as through successive government policies including the *Troubled Families Programme* (House of Commons Library 2018) and Parenting Orders[8]. Where parents were once seen as having authority over their family, parents now, especially those who are not white and middle class, are judged as either being too authoritarian, too laissez faire, or simply negligent (Bristow, 2014).

It is interesting to compare this to the current discourse of 'closing the attainment gap' in England, in which poorer parents are blamed for their children's low educational attainment. The current Chief of OFSTED, Amanda Spielman (2018) recently said that

> We are having to grapple with the unhappy fact that many local working-class communities have felt the full brunt of economic dislocation in recent years, and, perhaps as a result, can lack the aspiration and drive seen in many migrant communities.

This echoes her predecessor, Michael Wilshaw's (2013:3 original emphasis) assertion that in disadvantaged families "<u>poverty of expectation</u> is a greater problem than material poverty", although Spielman does recognise the economic structural forces at play. The abjection of disadvantaged families or indeed working-class families has been documented by Lynsey Hanley (2017), Tracy Jensen (2018), Lisa McKenzie (2015), Diane Reay (2009; 2017), Bev Skeggs

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[8] Parenting Orders are Court Orders aimed to support parents who are struggling to control their child's behaviour. It may include specific curfew times for children as well as targets for school attendance. There may also be residential aspects to the order. Failure to comply with such an order can lead to a fine or a Community Sentence. Such orders can last up to a year and are managed by youth offending teams. For more information see: https://www.gov.uk/if-my-child-gets-in-trouble-with-police [Accessed 22nd May 2019].

(1997), Imogen Tyler (2013) that disadvantaged parents are all too regularly framed as incompetent and irresponsible. This discourse neatly blames the individuals for not being aspirational or supportive enough or even pushy enough[9]. As both Diane Reay (2013) and Dimitra Hartas (2012;2015) argue the government is promulgating the concept that parenting is able to compensate for inequality thus obfuscating the real issues of such an unequal society.

However, it is not only BAME[10] and non-middle-class parents who are seen as problematic. Nikolas Rose (1999), as do Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa (2011) argues that parenting has moved from something ‘we just did’, to something that is difficult, requiring state input and scientific answers. In the same way, childhood has become a separate and recognised stage of life, whereas according to Phillipe Ariès (1962) it is a social construction. As Ramaekers and Suissa (2011) chart, parenting has been subject to scientification, which in turn has effectively erased the moral agency of parents. It has also created a notion of parenthood that is about behaving in a particular way to ensure that a particular product (an economically viable person) is produced which, as Antonio Olmedo and Andrew Wilkins (2017) argue, is a direct consequence of neoliberalism: all efforts must be made to create homo economicus[11].

2.1.2 The Plowden Report: a move towards parent engagement?

The ability for parents to influence or shape education has been complex for some time. In England at least, there was no real expectation to be able to do so before the 1960s. *The Plowden Report* (Plowden, 1967), broke from the previous regime of keeping parents out of school and encouraged schools to involve parents more. Baroness Plowden advocated the introduction of two parents’ meetings and a school report each year, which is still the common model for schools today. Plowden (1967) influenced government policy by arguing that home-school partnerships improved good performance although she was unsure whether school made for more engaged parents, or that engaged parents made for good performance at school. Either way, Plowden (1967:37) wrote that “Schools exist to

[9] The Children’s Commissioner, Ann Longfield, said that Northern parents needed to be as pushy as their Southern counterparts (Bennett, 2016).
[10] BAME is a UK term for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people.
[11] A term used to signify that we have moved from being homo sapiens (people of wisdom) to being economically orientated. Rancière argues that humans are “homo barbarus” as we are being that are capable of speaking see (Biesta and Bingham 2010: 55).

foster virtuous circles", implying that schools had a role in educating (or disciplining families).

Plowden was also influenced by contemporary ideas that parent support at home had positive impacts on children's attainment. The idea that parent engagement or involvement is closely linked to children's attainment is still central to contemporary understandings (Hornby, 2011; Wilshaw, 2013), with John Hattie's (2009) influential metastudy being often quoted by schools[12] to underscore the importance of parents' involvement and support for their children's studies. It should be noted that this research study is not setting out to agree or disprove Hattie's (2009) and others' theses on the link between parent involvement and attainment. This is not the focus of the research. Rather, I am arguing that this notion of performative parent involvement has colonised the discourse of parent engagement and furthered the individualisation of parent engagement thus diminishing democratic parent engagement.

As Beattie (1985) details, the Plowden report (1967) arrived in a climate in which the *Where* magazine (linked to the Advisory Centre for Education) and the Confederation for the Advancement of State Education (CASE) combined forces to encourage parent participation. However, such participation was very much in the guise of parent choice, preceding the *Good Schools Guide* (Atha and Drummond, 1986) and *Which* magazine. For these parties, "the aims were consensual ('to strive towards a favourable climate') and didactic ('information and advice') (Beattie, 1985). Indeed, CASE, which encouraged parents to establish local groups, specifically warned such groups not to "antagonize the LEA" (Anon, 1961-2 in Beattie,1985:175).

A more democratic role for parents was hinted at during the 1970s during and after the so called 'Tyndale affair' which is not only emblematic for critics of progressive, democratic education but also a turning point for schools, parents and education policy in England. The school in Islington was attempting to embed more democratic and progressive practices including the discontinuation of segregated playgrounds for girls and boys, greater choice and breadth in the

[12] For example: http://www.fieldingprimary.com/news/detail/visible-learning/ [Accessed 22nd May 2019], and https://woodburn.mgfl.net/school-information/visible-learning-2/ [Accessed 22nd May 2019]

curriculum and a less authoritarian discipline structure (Davis, 2002;Ellis et al., 1976). However, it was quickly accused of chaos and poor education by parents, some staff and the Local Education Authority whom were prevented, by the Headteacher, gaining access to the school to inspect it. One member of staff, Mrs Walker worked with parents protest against the changes (Riley, 1998) being implemented by the Headteacher Terry Ellis. As well as highlighting the disagreements in education philosophy, the consequent public inquiry by Robin Auld (1976) found that it could no long be assumed that a headteacher could always be a force for good, and that there needed to be greater accountability. Furthermore, a hegemonic view of education could not be assumed; "Tyndale demonstrated the need for a clearer articulation of what was expected of schools, teachers and headteachers" (Riley, 1998: 52). There became an openness to the idea that different stakeholders including parents should be able to have some say on what happened within a school.

Following Auld's lead, the then Prime Minister**,** James Callaghan (1976), gave the much feted 'Ruskin Speech' raising the concerns of parents about new teaching methods. He argued for a wider debate in society that explored the meaning and shape of education and how different parties -notably industry might be more involved in shaping it. He called on the upcoming Taylor Committee Report (Taylor, 1977) to explore "how the government "could bring together local authority, parents and pupils, teachers and industry more closely" (Callaghan, 1976). It is questionable as to whether this vision succeeded, however as Fiona Millar (2014) notes, the powers of the Secretary of State for Education increased substantially from this point forward; he had three powers post war, and this grew to 2000 by 2014.

The Taylor report (Taylor, 1977) encouraged the move towards parents as stakeholders by encouraging new forms of parent participation by way of governance (Olmedo and Wilkins, 2017) and as Thatcherism took hold in the 1970s and 1980s, parents were encouraged to become more active participants in the realm of education. However, whist parent governors were enshrined in law in the 1986 Education Act along with being able to be on appeal boards, as Beattie (1985) argues this obfuscated democratic participation by parents. Political challenge via the questioning of policy was diverted towards governmentality.

Such governmentality was embedded during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990). As Thatcherism took hold there was a nod to parent involvement becoming more democratic, as parent governors were enshrined in law in the Education Act 1980. However, if we are to follow Stavros Moutsios' (2010) concept of education politics or Amy Gutmann's (1987) notion of democracy in which parents and other citizens can question and debate policy, the role of parent governor does not afford such democratic practice. All governors are expected by the English government to hold schools to account for their performance, indeed if OFSTED deem that they are not carrying out that role effectively, they can carry out a variety of disciplinary measures. Parent governors, far from being democratic citizens "are complicit in the routine embedding of neoliberal practices in schools to the extent that their contribution as 'skilled' volunteers ensures schools are rendered intelligible to the market" (Olmedo and Wilkins, 2017:9). As Stewart Ranson et al (2005) note, the performative role of parent governors has displaced any critical engagement with the "educational needs of the community". Furthermore, with the increasing emphasis on governors' roles as "managers and overseers of the educational and financial performance of the school" (Wilkins, Collett-Sabé, Gobby and Hangartner, 2019: 7), professional skills are sought over representative commitment, those who are not in the professional classes stand less chance of taking part in governance.

This section has demonstrated that over the last 150 years, parents in England, especially disadvantaged and working-class parents, have been demonised and framed as inept and often feckless. Whilst there is a significant attainment gap between children on free school meals and their peers, there is no agreement as to what the cause is (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Connolly, 2006; Department for Education, 2011; Goodman and Burton, 2012; Kerr and West, 2010; Perry and Francis, 2010; Sharples et al., 2011). There is a similar gap in Australia and the United States, although the gap tends to be positioned as a race issue, with children of colour, especially indigenous people's achieving less well than their white peers (Hursh, 2007, Ministerial Council for Education 2010). Parents of the children lacking in the correct attainment are often blamed by the governments in all three countries, diverting attention from structural issues such as poverty, racism and class that impede schooling.

In England disadvantaged and/or working-class parents are blamed by the government and OFSTED for their children's lack of attainment compared to their more well-off peers (Field, 2010; OFSTED, 2013; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). It is the assumed lack of agency, especially of disadvantaged parents that helps frame my research as will be explored in section 3.4.1 and Chapter 4. It is important to note, that I am not dismissing the need to tackle child abuse or problematic parenting, but rather questioning the all too common framing of parents as problematic and unworthy of education politics.

I am questioning the discourse that positions parents as requiring intervention rather than as active educators of future and current citizens. Not only does this English discourse imply a lack of agency on behalf of parents, but it frames the role of parenting purely as one of producing academically successful and economically viable children. Whilst this alludes to the possibility of parents being co-educators with schools to produce such children, the picture is far more complex and problematic as the next section will demonstrate.

2.2 The neoliberal noose: unpicking the present shape of parent engagement

The neoliberalisation of education policy across the world, especially in anglophone countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia has led to an increased focus on performative forms of parent engagement; valorising those parents who support the school endeavour of producing high attaining pupils and consequently demonising those others who do not. This section will examine how the neoliberal discourse of parent engagement does not afford democracy and exacerbates an already problematic English discourse about parents and education; indeed, the neoliberal discourse is strangling any sense of democratic life.

In the 1970s the apparent social democratic consensus started to crack. The United States was recovering from the Vietnam War which, along with Johnson's Great Society, put huge strain on public finances, whilst in Britain, the oil crisis led to the introduction of the three-day week, increasing inflation and, in turn, increasing union discontent and strikes (Hursh, 2007; Jones, 2015). This was the opportunity for the Mont Pelerin Society and its adherents including the Adam Smith Society to

argue for the end of the extended welfare state and the introduction of a more liberal monetary policy (Peck, 2010). Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan began to aggressively implement such neoliberal policies, in the United Kingdom and United States respectively, including deep public services cuts, tax cuts and the privatisation of previously public industries.

Whilst other countries including Australia began to develop more neoliberal regimes, it was Thatcher and Regan who argued most coherently and resolutely for wholesale change (Jones, 2015; Peck, 2010). Indeed, it was Thatcher who successfully promulgated the phrase 'there is no alternative' otherwise known as TINA, which still holds strong today (Hursh, 2007; Jones, 2015; Robinson, 2013). However, the neoliberal consensus may be starting to fracture; Theresa May opined the loss of such clarity about the reign of the free markets:

> As somebody who was heavily involved in the pre-1997 Conservative government, so much work was done to get that message across, of the importance of free markets, of sound management of the economy, of global trade. And sadly, we do see that that message has been lost.
>
> I think in a sense we thought those arguments were done and dusted. That everybody understood it. That we didn't have to go back to them. I think now we see we do have to go back to them. We've got to make that case all over again, because there is a generation who have grown up in a different environment and perhaps haven't seen the problems that can occur when you don't believe in free markets and sound management of the economy. (Howard, 2017)

Neoliberalism is often assumed to comprise a specific set of characteristics, such as individualism and free markets with little state intervention—the antithesis of Keynesianism (Peck, 2010). However, there are still wide variances within neoliberalism across Europe and the Atlantic; wider still if one looks to Chile and the 'Bric' countries, Brazil, Russia, India and China (Hill, 2008, Peck, 2010). Jamie Peck (2010) states that the most simple and accurate way to define neoliberalism is by the paradoxical aim for economic independence that is in fact protected and enabled by the state. The successful and independent individual trumps any social democratic model of living together in society (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Interestingly, far from the state relinquishing control of education during the implementation of neoliberal education policy, the English government removed

control away from local democratic structures and centralised it in Westminster as can be seen in Millar's (2014) statistics about the powers belonging to the Secretary of State for Education as discussed in section 2.1.2.

As neoliberal governments gained ground, Anglophone countries including the United States, Australia and England, developed distinctly neoliberal education policies that embedded "the three pronged program of neoliberalism...accountability, competition and privatisation" (Rancière, 2010:20) within the school system. This involved overarching presumption that competition between schools would raise standards (Hursh, 2007). The markets have become the arbiters of society as government supposedly shrinks. In both the United States and England, we are seeing the gradual shrinking of the state in terms of education policy, with schools being removed from local state control and given to varying forms of private enterprise. English policy has focussed on Academisation of schools and the setting up of Free Schools[13], which it is claimed by successive governments (New Labour 1997-2010, Conservative/ Liberal Democrat Coalition 2010-2015, Conservative Government 2015 - present) will improve school results. This policy has come under increasing scrutiny and there is growing scepticism regarding whether academies or Multi Academy Trusts ensure school improvement any more than local authorities (Education Committee, 2015).

In the Anglophone neoliberalised states, education has become increasingly focussed on creating human capital (Connell, 2013;, Olssen, 2010). That is to say that they have departed from democratic ideals of education espoused by theorists such as John Dewey (2004), Wilfred Carr and Anthony Hartnett (1996) and Amy Guttman (1987). Nearly a century ago, Dewey (2004:91) opined that education was seen as a tool for solving the technical problems of today instead of "the promotion of the best realization of humanity as humanity." In this vein, as

[13] The New Labour government (1997-2010) introduced City Academies to replace inner city failing schools, removing responsibility from Local Authorities and centralising oversight to the government. However, sponsors by way of charities and trusts were directly responsible for individual schools, or groups of schools (Multi Academy Trusts). Some school regulations, including the National Curriculum, and entry requirements were waived for academies. It is commonly seen as the privatisation of the English state school system. The Conservative/ Liberal Coalition Government further diversified the school system by introducing Free Schools which parents or other interested parties could set up their own schools which could have specific foci and curricula that were not possible for Local Authority Schools. For further information see West and Wolfe (2018).

neoliberalism takes hold, schools are "tasked with producing subjects fit for the purposes of the nation state and the capitalist economy" (Fielding and Moss, 2010:15).

Simultaneously any notion of flourishing is replaced by resilience rhetoric focused on coping with the pressures of living as a neoliberal subject. Resilience, often in the form of school resilience classes, is yet another tool used to 'responsibilise' individuals—if someone can't cope with the pressures of precarity, or meeting the standards, they just need to be more resilient. Far from helping humans to flourish, resilience closes down any avenue for voice or complaint (Seghal, 2015). As I shall demonstrate, parents are not "empowered to influence the education that in turn shapes the political values, attitudes, and modes of behaviour of future citizens" (Gutmann, 1987:14). Rather parents are positioned as producers of entrepreneurial subjects (Olmedo and Wilkins, 2017), thus fulfilling Gary Becker's (1965:496) vision of families being the perfect "small factory [that] combines capital goods, raw materials and labour to clean, feed, procreate and otherwise produce useful commodities." Parenting has become an economic project.

2.2.1 Silent compliance: negating agency

Neoliberal education policy is an instrumentalist endeavour to create a compliant and efficient workforce; commodifying children, parents and education. Particular knowledge is elevated as a commodity and seen as the key to success (Hirsch, 2007) and obedience is valorised whilst democratic practice is diminished if not eviscerated. This is exemplified by the writings of staff from the Michaela Community School[14] who argue that young black children need to learn a classical range of prescribed knowledge at a matter of "social justice" (Kirby, 2016:16) and attend school as responsible, impeccably behaved students:

> Top of the Pyramid people—there aren't many of us. We're special. We make the right choices...We don't drop litter. We don't swear. We don't swarm at the bus stop...We don't have two haircuts on one head and we don't wear trainers with our uniform. We are Michaela. (Smith, 2016:203)

[14] Michael Community School, Brent, London was founded in 2014 and is renowned for being one of 'England's strictest schools' (Carr 2018). It is noticeable for being a subject of praise by the UK government and OFSTED.

Questioning the structural problems and racism faced by disadvantaged black children in London is not encouraged at Michaela; learning the right knowledge and behaving correctly is promoted as the answer to success. Moreover, parents of these children must also behave *properly*; they are not to question the school and they must be "100% competen[t]" and provide "100% support" for the school (Birbalsingh, 2016a:216). *Support*, the Headteacher Kathrine Birbalsingh (2016a:216) explains, means "backing the school's decisions even when they don't seem to make sense. It means never criticising the school in front of one's child. It means keeping an open mind." Although arguably the open mind is to only be open to the 'fact' that the school is right. Whilst this is only one book and one school, it is notable for the ringing endorsements by then senior politicians, OFSTED leaders and key education opinion formers on the back cover and front pages, suggesting an influence on and resonance with official policy.

More widely, parents rather than positioned as citizens, are expected to be partners in this neoliberal endeavour of helping raise academic results. Furthermore, parents are "expected to uphold school values [...but] parental involvement in identifying the values which the school will embody is rare" (Munn, 1993:1). This demand to uphold school values is becoming increasing totalitarian in orientation, with parents expected to agree with everything the school says or does, as highlighted by the Birbalsingh quotation (2016) above. This is not uncommon with parents who disagree with an element of school (e.g. uniform policy[15]) sometimes being told to choose a different school. Many schools insist that a "reasonable parent" would question let alone disagree with them. For example, this comment on a school website is not unusual "Teachers must behave as would a "reasonable" parent. Children who see that their parent disagrees with their teacher misbehave in the same way as when they see two parents arguing" (Greasley Beauvale Primary School, 2018). As Jacky Lumby (2007), and Carol Vincent (2000) point out, much of the literature promoting parent involvement *expects* supportive behaviour, whether helping teachers address specific children's needs, inculcating good educational behaviour or fundraising for the school. Lumby (2007:222) takes this further by saying any "'partnership' is generally on

[15] One of many examples: "A headteacher in Kent has defended sending pupils home from school because their skirts were too short, saying parents who did not like the strict uniform rules could choose to have their daughters educated elsewhere" (Weale, 2017).

the terms of the professional”. Thus, a strong implication is that parents should always support the school silently and compliantly.

Over the last thirty years ‘home- school’ partnerships have been much critiqued (Crozier, 2000, Reay, 2006;2008; Vincent, 1996; Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997; Westergård and Galloway, 2010). The key criticism is that ‘partnership’ disguises the positioning of parents as support acts to the school and this is often demonstrated by ‘home-school agreements’. Such agreements often demand that parents ensure that homework is completed, behaviour is good, correct uniform is worn and in the case of one I have signed, the correct breakfast is eaten. Home-school agreements state such ideals with little if any dialogue with parents (Crozier, 1999). These partnerships are much more like a business contract as opposed to democratic living advocated by Dewey (2004:83) in which “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”

As Kathryn Riley (1998) notes, seeing parents as co-educators, opens a world of possibilities. However, the reality is “the assumption that parents and pupils need to be controlled, [hence] they are always having to looking for new and tougher sanctions” (Riley, 1998:135). Co-education is understood as both parents and the school working for the same instrumental, economic outcome, rather than students, parents and schools shaping education together. This is evidenced by the increasing normalisation of more authoritarian school regimes, exemplified by the widespread government support for the Michaela Community School as discussed above. Schools often welcome parents into the school, espousing *partnership* saying that parent engagement is vital for the school’s and the children’s success. However, the notion of parent engagement is extremely narrow and belies the undercurrents of control.

Far from partnerships comprising equality and trust as Ann Turnbull et al (2006) advocate, Gill Crozier (1998) argues that the home-school partnership

> serves as a device for monitoring parents and engendering what Foucault describes as 'disciplinary power' which is ensuring that parents learn to be 'good' parents as defined by the teachers and adopt a set of values that match those of the school (Crozier, 1998:125).

The neoliberal performative discourse of parent engagement, in turn reifies and normalises a specific way to parent and to engage with schools. A hegemonic view of acceptable parenting behaviour at home and with the school has developed and this is based on a reification of white middle-class parenting values (Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2006; 2008; 2017; Vincent, 2001; 2002). Margy McClain (2010) criticises schools for *privileging* those parents whose values are akin to those of professional teachers. Moreover, the "growing out-sourcing of educational work to the home" disproportionately affects the working-class families who are likely to have less time to work with their children and lower levels of education as well as confidence to be able to educate their children at home (Reay, 2017:66). There is further concern that such privileging is actually creating a climate in which parent engagement becomes a mechanism for *conversion* of problem parents to acceptable ones (Lumby, 2007; Reay, 2008).

This is not new policy, the Parents National Education Union (PNEU) was the forerunner of parent associations, was created by Charlotte Mason in 1887, with the view that parents, especially, needed educating to help schools succeed. As Jane Martin (2000:20) describes "the organisation existed to convert less well educated parents to the cause of education." This is part of the responsibilising of women in particular, who have been positioned as maintaining the welfare of the nation, and blamed for any disruption (Skeggs, 1997).

As Kelly Oliver emphasises,

> "Blaming the mother for everything from maladjustment and disease to drugs and violence is nothing new. Literature, medicine and popular culture are full of images of bad mothers. Whether they are blamed for loving too much or too little, mothers are held responsible when something goes wrong. (Oliver, 2004:106)

Therefore, educating women in how to parent correctly has been a key part of this disciplinary process supporting good and useful education. A more benevolent view is taken by Hornby (2011) in which the "transmission model" of parent engagement, educates the parent so that they can most help their child achieve. However, as Ann Edwards and Jo Warin (1999:332) point out this is akin to "the long arm of the schools reach[ing] into the homes" of families.

This disciplinary notion of partnership aligns with the market logic of choice within education. A key change in the Education Reform Act 1988 was the expansion of parental choice of school in England. This ushered in what Philip Brown (1990:66) calls “parentocracy” in which there was a move away from a meritocracy based on children’s intelligence and enterprise, to children conforming “to the *wealth* and *wishes* of parents”. As Brown goes on to argue parentocracy furthered rather than diminished inequalities in education. Far from giving parents power, parentocracy engendered individualisation and responsibilisation of parents; disciplining parents into becoming responsible consumers of education (Ball, 2013a; Gewirtz, 2002; Lumby, 2007; Reay, 2008; Vincent, 1996; 1997). Moreover, we can compare this disciplinary process, to Foucault’s (2006:271) argument that psychiatry “looks for pathological events at the level of the patient’s family”; we locate children’s achievement and failures as part of pathological events within the family, rather than questioning wider structural issues, or the agency of the child (Ball, 2013b).

2.2.2 ‘Choice’: the removal of disagreement from the public space

John Coons and Stephen Sugarman (1971) argue that parent choice of school is the epitome of a democratic pluralistic society, however Vincent (1996) points to *choosing* to join or withdraw from a school as being equated to participative power. Participative power has traditionally been seen in the UK as a male power, with women being relegated to decisions within the home (Pateman, 1970). The choice of school can be considered a private decision but input to the schooling regime would be out of bounds for women’s participative power. It is important to note this when it is generally accepted that most parent engagement is carried out by mothers rather than fathers (Vincent, 2017). Furthermore Reay (2008:645) states that “there is a logic of empowerment that masks a ‘responsibilisation’ of the parent” thus implying irresponsible parenthood if the correct school is not chosen. As Lawrence Angus (2015:396) argues, parents are no longer charged with raising citizens, but rather they must raise “choosing subjects”. Not only does choice discipline the parent into behaving as a consumer it ironically erases parents’ voice. Furthermore, disagreement is confined to the private space of home, and is not allowed to feature in public.

Economist Alberto Hirschman (1970) argued that choice to leave or "exit" was fundamental to businesses maintaining quality. With a slightly circular argument he maintained that if customers were able to voice concerns effectively, they would be less likely to leave, and if customers had the choice to leave they would be less likely to complain. Nearly forty years later, Deborah Wilson (2008:3) specifically assessed Hirschman's work in the light of English schooling. She argues that whilst choice and voice are popular with successive governments as a quality assurance mechanism, it only works for a "subset of consumers" (Wilson, 2008:3). Wilson questions the practical realities for parents to be able to voice concerns about school. As noted above, this is difficult for all parents, as they may want to leave but can't for various reasons. Moreover, it ignores the developing reality in England, that as Multi Academy Trusts take over numerous schools in one geographical location it becomes difficult to change schools in order to change ethos and management.

Whilst Hirschman (1970) argues that *loyalty* can counteract the need for *voice* and *exit*, there are more factors at play including loyalty to one's village or community rather than the school itself. Indeed, Hornby (2011) writes that rural communities tend to have stronger relationships with their schools than urban ones. Susie Weller (2012) takes this further by arguing the ideology of choice has been chosen at the expense of social cohesion. Moreover, choice positions people as competitors thereby individualising them. This relates to Ferdinand Tönnies' (1934) concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellshaft. Gemeinschaft denotes rural agricultural lifestyles where there is a shared community which is locale based. Gesellshaft conversely describes the more urban association which is more choice based in terms of people finding each other through shared work or interests. It is important to recognise these differences, but understanding them as more nuanced than two homogenous groups of town versus country parents (Moser, 2004). For example, Marion Walker and Gordon Clark's research (Walker, 2010, Walker and Clark, 2010) highlighted that with regard to school choice in rural communities, locals as opposed to newcomers, were far more likely to feel the imperative to support the village school and thus the community surrounding it. It is also important to note these nuances, as Reay (2017) strongly argues that working-class areas have very strong concepts of community. Thus, the idea of exit

and choice as a tool for improvement is even more problematic as it erases any concept of voice or disagreement. It only allows for supportive practices. It negates parent engagement with school practices, or wider education policy, as one must either be loyal and support the school, which includes behaving as required, or exit.

The idea of choice and indeed exit, removes any concept of parents shaping school policy or doing "education politics" (Moutsios, 2010:123) in the public space. There is no collective deliberation, rather if one is to disagree with the school they are to make the private decision to choose not to apply for it or to exit it.

2.2.3 Testing to divide: fracturing relationships

To enable parents to 'correctly' choose a school they are provided with data from high stakes testing. High stakes testing is a key component to neoliberal education policy at it produces data as a tool to hold the schools to account. The use of data as a price mechanism, in turn, encourages competition by allowing parents to choose the 'best' school and forcing schools to improve their product to stay in the market place. England's state schools are supposedly chosen by parents through reference to their published SATs[16] and GCSE[17]S scores, universities (chosen by parents and young people) via the *Teaching Excellence Framework* (TEF) ratings[18], while countries' education systems are rated by the PISA[19] rankings (OECD, 2015). Thus, it could also be argued that parents are now in the position of holding schools and their staff to account which does little to promote partnership between the parties.

As high stakes testing has become compulsory at regular stages in English schools, (in reception, Year 1, Year 2, Year 6 and Year 11), particular subjects and competencies, namely Maths and Literacy, have been valorised over others, for example, the arts (Henshaw, 2017). The data from such tests are published to

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[16] SATs are taken by children in England at the end of Key Stage 1 (6-7 years old) and Key Stage 2 (10-11 years old).

[17] GCSEs are taken by pupils aged 15-16 years old in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

[18] The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) rates English universities (and others in the UK if they choose to partake). Universities are graded Bronze, Silver and Gold dependent on successfully meeting a range of criteria. Ratings can affect the fees a university is able to charge. For further information see https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/what-is-the-tef/ [Accessed 22nd May 2019].

[19] The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests 15 year-olds, in mathematics, science and reading in countries across the world, on a three-year cycle. Countries are then ranked according to the results. The ranking is supposed to inform education policy for each country. For further information see http://www.oecd.org/pisa/ [Accessed 22nd May 2019].

enable choice, either through government websites such as *MySchool* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2018) in Australia and the School Performance Tables in the UK (Department for Education, 2014b) and various USA websites including *SchoolDigger* (2006-2019).

This is a disciplinary discourse (Foucault, 1979); schools must act within the discourse and not challenge it as they will be dismantled or taken over if they do. Whilst testing and the subsequent performance tables allow for 'transparency' and 'accountability', Hursh (2007) has questioned whether part of this discourse is to actually name, and shame failing schools and further encourage the route towards privatisation. If a school fails to achieve the required standards in England they are forced to become an academy, following the similar Charter Schools route in the United States (Burns, 2015; Hursh, 2007). Australia is considering a similar policy (Riddle, 2017;Zyngier, 2015). The ultimate aim[20], as Hursh (2007) argues, is for schooling to be provided on an individual voucher basis, which means parents are given vouchers for the schooling of their child which they can use at any school including private schools, although they may need to top up the fees. This removes direct central state funding and positions parents firmly as consumers. It can be seen such privatisation of education and removal of direct state involvement, ties into the neoliberal logic as does the market logic of choice which promotes the concept that "market arrangements will always produce better outcomes than government regulation" (Angus, 2015:396). However, it is not only a discourse that disciplines schools, it also disciplines parents into embodying particular practices.

Raewyn Connell (2013:105) explains that "to create a market you have to restrict the service in some way" thus creating at least two groups; those who are privileged to receive the service and those who are not. Connell (2013) goes on to argue that the range of different types of schools in Australia privileges some students over others, due to the different quality (according to test measurements) of education provided. The same can be said for England, with a plethora of different types of schools, associated regulations and accountability procedures. Moreover, due to specific metrics (academic attainment) having ever-greater

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[20] This aim of vouchers is overtly expounded in the United States, but less so in England, although the issue has been raised see: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-39479034 [Accessed 22nd May 2019]

importance we are seeing more children being excluded whether formally or informally from state schools in England than ever before (Lepper, 2018). The process of 'off-rolling' can include schools encouraging parents to deregister their children to home educate because the school cannot cope with the behaviour or it can occur because the child's attainment levels will adversely affect the overall attainment scores. It may be more informal, where the rules become so strict that a parent feels forced to deregister. The Parents Union Facebook group has catalogued numerous situations in which the home-school relationship has broken down and parents have felt there is no other option than to home educate. It is most common in years 10 and 11 in the run up to GCSEs and affects children with Special Education Needs (SEN) more than others (Weale, 2018).

Standardised testing creates a divide between those who pass and those who don't. Rancière (1991) argues that such testing simply favours those who are good at that type of test, rather than indicating anything about their ability to live in the world and hence testing simply encourages a view of superiority. It is this superiority, Rancière argues, that, encourages the divide between those who feel entitled to rule (as part of the wider establishment or 'police') and those who see themselves dependent on them (Galloway, 2012). Moreover, as David Beer (2016) points out, we are shaping our world by what we can measure; it is difficult to measure democratic living, but we can measure spelling skills. Therefore, we are measuring what we can measure, rather than necessarily what we should, and we are creating competitive environments that suit some more than others. As noted above, the divide is not simply between those who can and can't attain in particular subjects; it is framed around those children and families who cannot live up to certain ideals.

Furthermore, despite some collective parent engagement forums such as Parent Teacher Associations, Vincent and Martin (2000:474) accuse many of these groups of comprising "elite participationists" who run the groups to their own middleclass agenda. Thus, a performative agenda may be followed rather than taking on board the opinions or needs of other more hidden voices, thus excluding anybody who does not 'fit'. Whilst I would question this construction of a deliberately self - serving elite, there can be reification of particular values and behaviours as natural and good which excludes others (Reay, 2008).

However, where middle-class parents are self-serving, I would argue that they are embodying the neoliberal performative model of parent engagement, "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 1989) rather than acting as democratic citizens within the education system. Echoing Richard Pring's (2012) argument that neoliberal education has objectified learners who are valued by their ability to place a school further up a league table, I would argue that parents are also objectified for their ability to ensure their children are successful and serve the school. The ability or will to parent to the test divides parents again.

2.2.4 Individualisation

A result of this neoliberal trajectory of parent voice is the atomisation of parents and the diminishment of the "practice of citizen participation and deliberative action with regard to public institutions" (Martin and Vincent, 1999:134). The overwhelming focus of parenting as "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 1989), and silently supporting the school of our choice, has sidelined a more collective notion of voice. From a Foucauldian (1979) perspective it could be argued that the discourses around responsible parenthood create disciplinary power relations. Parents must embody such a model of parenthood to be assumed to have a legitimate voice, despite that legitimate voice being silenced. Therefore, it is not the 'done thing' to work collectively not least because parents are effectively in competition with each other to achieve a good education for their children. As Anne Phillips (2005a) warns the 'high stakes' of pupils' results can push even the most community minded or altruistic parents to manipulate various fora to their own advantage.

It has become accepted parent engagement practice to only concern oneself with the progress and attainment of our child. Even arch neoliberal Michelle Rhee (2013:237), complains that parents do not work together to address common issues. Vincent and Martin's (1999) research charted frustrations at the lack of space to debate the purpose of school, and ways of working. This in turn creates a democratic deficit in which there is no sphere for civil debate, that is free from hierarchy based on whose knowledge counts most (Habermas, 1996).

For a school to be functioning effectively as an organisation or community, all parties—including children, staff, parents and local employers—need to be part of

shaping it. For example, parents might collectively deliberate on why a school might provide homework rather than simply respond to a question about how much homework should be set. Collective critical engagement as a group may provide a new understanding and an improved, workable way forward. Seyla Benhabib (1996:69) argues institutions must enable public deliberation of its "standpoints" especially when like schools, they are considered to be impartial and "in the interests of all". Likewise, Anna Yeatman (1994) maintains that active critique of those in authority whether in large social organisations or smaller communities is essential for people to be self-determining citizens. Yet as we have already seen in section 2.2.2, critique is a private not public affair.

The different experiences due to gender, class and other structures make deliberation and critique imperative. Different voices enable critique of the common or dominant understanding of 'good' and bring different lenses to such concepts, enabling change to occur where needed. I am arguing for a far more public and collective practice of problematising the educational world and addressing problems together. This however is difficult when parents are being disciplined into becoming consumers. Parents are not able to be partners in the educational enterprise when they are positioned as customers or clients for a service that is provided by someone else. It marks the triumph of the *individualistic* ethos of competition for personal self-interest over the *collectivist* ethos of collaboration in the interests of general welfare (Bridges, 2010). Michael Apple (2011) and Nikolas Rose (1999; 2000), amongst others, have both argued that democracy has become individualised. I am arguing that it is imperative that we keep trying to challenge such individualisation. Do we (as society or schools) accept such individualism or try to develop a more collective voice by creating space for more collective democratic forms of parent engagement?

However recent research into democratic parent engagement is rare, as Mar Benyeto et al (2018) note, most research regards parent engagement from the performative perspective. Even Daniela Torre and Joseph Murphy (2016:203ff) who argue for "communities of parent engagement" still see the role of such communities to discuss and support the performative role of the school rather than question it. Whilst Benyeto et al (2018) challenged this perspective by researching a more critical approach to the home-school partnership, they looked

to teachers to critically analyse how to improve their relations with parents. This continues the tradition that research into parent engagement is often from the point of view of teachers rather than parents (Lumby, 2007). Moreover, this continues the discourse that positions schools as *leading* parents, and parents *responding* to schools rather than having a more agentic role. Anna Lascelles (2012) whose thesis title was *Parents as Agents of Change*, started out embracing the agency of parents, then put the parents' suggestions for change in the staff room, for school staff to decide what to do with, thus still keeping staff in authority over change.

This is similar positioning as that of Parent Teachers Associations, Friends Associations and their predecessors the Parents National Education Union. The associations are positioned as supporting individual schools. As Beattie (1985:170) points out PTAs and Friends Associations are framed around the "idea that parents and teachers are sharers of a common task, rather than separate interest groups whose opinions need to be reconciled in some quasi-political process." Again, the assumption is there is one task to be carried out in one particular way rather than a plurality of understandings that need to be contested. As Beattie details the stated aims of the PTAs according to the Home and School Council of Great Britain in 1930s were to:

> foster and support the welfare of the school by all legitimate means, but [...] at no time interfere with the discipline of the school, nor with the work of the Headmaster and Staff. (Anon, 1938 cited by Beattie, 1985: 170-1)

Moreover, this common task is still accepted to be the neoliberal task of economic performance. The national association of PTAs—now called Parentkind quotes Hattie (2009) to emphasise the importance of parent involvement in education to ensure school readiness and good results. Although it should be noted that good results do not necessarily follow from parent involvement (Hartas, 2012; Hartas, 2015; Kintrea et al., 2011). Whilst Parentkind (no date) now say they are encouraging more parent voice in education—and are enabling parents to take part in government consultations, this is a very small part of their work, and still framed within the neoliberal logic and responding to authorities rather than active participation.

Parents responding to the school rather than contributing to the setting of the educational agenda, is how the vast majority of research into parent engagement is framed. Gary Hornby (2011) and Joyce Epstein (2002; 2004; 2011) both provide useful home-school partnership models, but both still imply the hierarchy that parents are supporting the school, and the school is supporting the parent in how to be better. Again, there is little space for contestation of values and practices.

The relationships between parents and teachers have been considered in depth by Joanne Buntin (2014) whose doctoral research problematised the relationships with a group of teachers and parents. Buntin argues for more democratic participation through more mutual relationships. Dolores Burke (2004) also carried out action research exploring the relationships between parents and teachers. My research study builds upon these studies pushing for more mutual working, but I also emphasise a view of the political participation of parents in which it is possible to problematise and participate in "educational strategizing" (McClain, 2010:3075).

In this section I have demonstrated how the neoliberalisation of parent engagement, with its emphasis on a hegemonic performative discourse removes agency of parents. Such neoliberalisation intensifies the already problematic English discourse on parent engagement. Parents are disciplined into not disagreeing, but rather silently complying with supporting the education narrative. There is no space in schools for deliberation of education politics; any disagreement should be confined to choice regarding attendance of a school. However, there are interesting signs that this is happening to some extent via social media (for instance, The Parents Union (2016-19), Let Our Kids Be Kids (no date)), which all have active Facebook groups). Despite, these social media groups, within individual schools a key concern, for me, is the individualisation of parent engagement and the lack of collective action. There is, as demonstrated, a democratic deficit. To use the metaphor of hawser rope, a rope of three strands (Budworth, 2005): the lack of agency, lack of space and lack of collectivity. Each strand is held in tension against the other adding strength. Moreover, this rope is tied in a noose; the hangman's knot which tightens the more it is resisted.

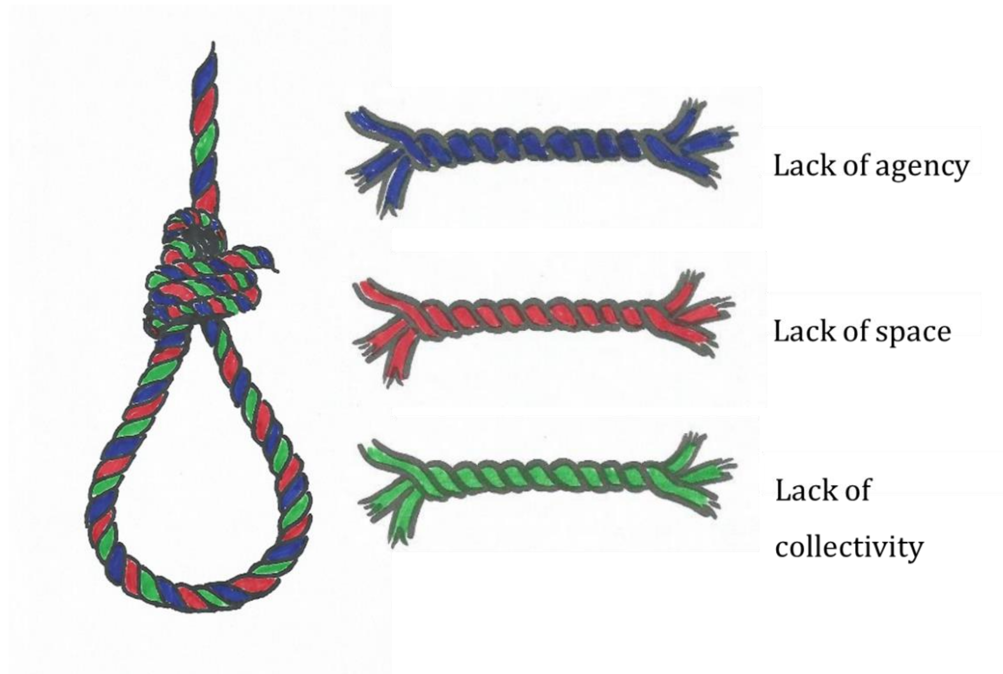

Figure 1: Neoliberal noose and comprising strands. Copyright Charlotte Haines Lyon 2019

The disciplinary nature of this neoliberal discourse is strangling any resistance, as argued above. Therefore, a counter discourse needs to be proffered. This is the task of this research study.

2.3 Rawls, Macmurray and Community Philosophy: a counter to the noose?

To carry out such a task, it is important to think through the theoretical underpinnings of the study. My initial theoretical standpoint, which motivated the research, was both a belief that a modified version of Rawls' "Reflective Equilibrium" (1971, 1993) is a useful tool in plural democratic society, and also an alignment with Macmurray's (1950:16) proclamation that:

> There is a sense in which freedom is absolute...This freedom is simply our capacity to act—not to behave or to react, but to form an intention and seek to realize it. To act is to be free.

Criticising Descartes' (2003) idea 'I think therefore I am' as dualistic, Macmurray (1995) advocates a far more embodied approach in which one's actions construct, and prove one's being; the ultimate action being friendship. Macmurray (1991) argues that it is imperative to understand a human being *in relation* to others; the smallest unit is 'you and me' rather than a solitary individual. An early opponent to the increasing marketisation of society and the individualisation that entailed

(1950;2012), Macmurray's (1950) ultimate goal was 'universal' fellowship, characterised by shared values, co-operation and friendship. Despite my reservations about this seemingly impossible and hegemonic ideal, Macmurray's relational ethic has underpinned my work; the development of my thinking in this regard as a result of the research will be discussed in section 7.2.

Macmurray (1991) recognised that we cannot separate individuals from the context and others around them; there are dialectical relationships which affect all parties and entities, thus providing an attractive proposition when attempting to counter the individualistic performative parent engagement. The very fact that one might oppose another brings us into relationship with the other, despite the complexities and contradictions. Macmurray's philosophy is overly simple and requires complexifying; Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) radical contingency incorporates such complexity, acknowledging that each party and structure rubs against the other affecting change continually. There is a plurality of modalities, ways of being and acting, within ourselves, not just one other, to contemplate, although this was not considered until much later in the study, see section 7.5.

As established in section 2.1, parents are positioned by the English education system as a homogenous group that needs to be told what to do. It is assumed that rational parents will conform to a particular performative model as discussed earlier in this chapter. This echoes the position held by the philosopher Rousseau (1968:63); members of society form a "blind multitude" that need educating by a more enlightened authority. The neoliberal education regime demands a particular rationality of parents, one that Flyvbjerg (2014:53) calls "instrumental", in which one is concerned with the task of achieving economic success. Drawing on Aristotle, Flyvbjerg (2014:4) argues that social and political science needs to address "value-rationality", in which we explore and develop the ability to address values within society. Furthermore, it is important that knowledge and systems for creating knowledge are co-constructed as part of democratic living, rather than having other people constructing knowledge *about* us and *for* us (Gaventa, 1991). Therefore, this research study sought to challenge the historical problem identified by Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland (2002:13) that the "power to produce authoritative knowledge is not open to all". To address this challenge, I initially

wanted to create an adapted version of Rawls' reflective equilibrium (1971; 1993) through the use of Community Philosophy.

As explored earlier, I am working with the assumption that education is a joint venture between different actors including parents, teachers, children but also the government and employers amongst others. This provides for a knotty understanding of what education should be due to the plurality of actors. Furthermore, if education is a public good (Olssen, 2010), it is pertinent to look to Rawls. Whilst not advocating a particular vision of the good, Rawls (1971) thought people should be able to achieve their understanding of the good. To do so, there needed to be just distribution of the tools and structures needed to achieve that good. It could then be argued that we need to have an appropriate system for delivering the good education that people desire. Problematically due to the plurality of actors, there are myriad understandings of what a good education might be. The challenge is to devise a way that enables these different parties to develop their concepts of good and to further devise ways of implementing them. As part of his theory of *Political Liberalism*, Rawls (1993) developed a concept of the "veil of ignorance" in which people would debate how to achieve the good life, but without knowing what their position in society is, thus ensuring that they did not just protect their own way of life.

Rawls' (1971) *Reflective Equilibrium* is not without its problems. Michael Sandel (1998) argues that it is impossible for such workings in reality; people live embodied lives and cannot separate themselves from their position. Elizabeth Kiss (1998) criticises Rawls for ignoring the structures that cause inequalities as well as power relations. More seriously she is concerned that a reflective equilibrium is just a front, implying discussion and critique but maintaining the status quo. This is why I bring in Macmurray (1950; 1991) alongside Rawls, to demand a relational ethic that expects action as a result of contemplating each other's situations. However problematic, Rawls' reflective equilibrium is helpful and Community Philosophy (SAPERE, 2015) as discussed in the next section (2.3.1) provides a space to create a practical reflective equilibrium in which people can relate to each other and act accordingly.

There are further problems with Rawls, as Mouffe (1996:18) points out. Rawls recognises that plurality exists and suggests mechanisms to work with it but does

not recognise the "profound transformation in the symbolic ordering of social relations" that occurred with the development of liberal democracy which implies a plurality of individuals; there was "an end of the idea of a substantive idea of the good life" (Mouffe, 1996:246). Laclau and Mouffe's Critical Discourse Theory (2014) as discussed later, provides a way of understanding these social relations within the various discourses that struggle for hegemony. Such social relations cannot be ignored and are vital to flourishing and democracy as Macmurray (1950) points out. Thus, in order to attend to the social relations involved, I attempted to set up Community Philosophy groups to create a Macmurrayian sense fellowship, in which we:

> retain the essential link with democracy, not just as a plural means of forming intentions, agreeing action and holding each other to account, but also as a deliberative, appreciative and creative form of a personal and communal encounter...a shared commitment to a richly conceived, constantly developing search for and enactment of good lives lived in a just and diverse commonality. (Fielding, 2015:38)

This form of democratic fellowship I thought, might be found in Community Philosophy, thus providing an antidote to the individualistic, performative model of parent engagement.

2.3.1 Community Philosophy

Community Philosophy, similar but not identical to philosophical communities, is a descendent of Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children (Evans, 2012). Lipman (2003:94) drew on John Dewey's 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, 2003:103).

Hence, Community Philosophy provides a practical model for social education and recognition of the social self. In a similar vein, Macmurray (1991) argues that it was imperative to understand a human being as being in relation to another,

rather than as a solitary individual. It is the relatedness that proves their being, but also necessitates co-operation in society and communication to enable democracy rather than a tyranny.

Lipman (2003:94) developed Peirce's (1877) argument that to pursue truth was to embrace doubt and form an inquiry rather than simply evidencing one's beliefs by demanding "recognition that one's situation contains troubling difficulties and is somehow problematic". This relates to Freirean problematising (Freire, 1972), which demands that people take every-day concepts and issues in their environment and question them. This requires moving out of the confines of the private and questioning of and in a public space.

Frustrated by adults' seeming inability to articulate and apply reason to their troubles regarding the Vietnam War, Lipman insisted children need to be taught to think philosophically. This in the long term, would create adults capable of reasoning. Hence, he developed Philosophy for Children (P4C) (Evans, 2012; Martin, 2011; SAPERE, 2013b). Christopher Phillips (2013), a student of Lipman, established Socrates Cafes in the United States. This employed the methodology of P4C but also built upon the work of Marc Sautet, who developed Café Philo (Evans 2012: 159). Various forms of philosophy in the community have since been established, including the Philosophy in Pubs (PiPs) movement in the UK. The founders of PiPs and Graeme Tiffany were involved in designing the Community Philosophy course with SAPERE, with the first facilitators course being held in May 2016, which I attended.

It is the Freirian demand to engage critically with the world, the immediate community and to work towards some form of action that differentiates Community Philosophy from the other philosophical groups. As Tiffany (2009; 2010; 2013) argues, the term 'Community Philosophy' emphasises that it is based in the community and focusing on the community. In describing the conscious decision to call it Community Philosophy, rather than Philosophy for Communities, Tiffany (2009) argues that the latter implied philosophy was acting on passive Communities whereas Community Philosophy emphasises the community as the actor and uses philosophy for the good of the community. Hence Community Philosophy has been used in a variety of settings such as housing associations, councils and universities to provide a forum for participants to discuss issues

important to the setting and to make decisions about the workings of that setting. Community Philosophy therefore can be used in such a way that embraces the community and the agency of those involved. An exemplar of a plan for a Community Philosophy meeting can be found in Appendices E; this demonstrates the general format of a meeting but is also the format of my first meeting.

My sense was that Community Philosophy provided for a practical version of Rawls (1971; 1993) reflective equilibrium, offering a model that might be used to challenge the individualised, voiceless, performative form of parent engagement I have described. The amalgamation of action and philosophical thinking affords a democratic experience in which all are co-learners and co-enquirers; it offers a philosophical thinking that is grounded in the community but directed towards practice (Garratt and Piper, 2012).

2.4 Summary

In this chapter I have demonstrated how parents have been framed, since the late 19th Century, as problematic and in need of tutelage, especially if they are not white and middleclass. I have argued that neoliberalism has created a performative model of parent engagement. Through my discussions on compliance, choice and individualisation, I have demonstrated how parent engagement with English schooling is currently expected to be compliant and supportive. Disagreement is confined to private choice regarding which school to attend or to exit. Furthermore, neoliberal policies have continually individualised parents through competitive market logics. Thus, I have conceptualised this problem as a neoliberal noose acting as a ligature that is strangling any notion of democratic engagement. The strands:

- Lack of agency
- Lack of space for education politics for parents
- Lack of collective parent engagement.

are twisted together in tension affording a formidable strength to the rope.

This noose needed not just loosening but unpicking to understand more about the different threads. This involved making a democratic intervention as a counter to the noose but also exploring the conditions required for a different, more

democratic way of working. I have demonstrated, in this chapter, how I thought the work of John Macmurray and John Rawls pointed to a more democratic way of working. I also discussed how I thought Community Philosophy provided a Rawlsian form of "reflective equilibrium" (Rawls, 1971) which would could be used a tool for democratic parent engagement which afforded agency, and space for collective education politics. However, as I have already alluded to, Community Philosophy did not suffice and provide the answer I wanted (see section 4.1.1). A far more complex approach was needed which is detailed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Methodology: a reflexive, contingent discussion

In the last chapter, I argued that there is a neoliberal noose strangling democratic parent engagement. The three strands of the rope forming this neoliberal noose are:

- Lack of agency
- Lack of space for education politics for parents
- Lack of collective parent engagement.

In this chapter, I will build on this metaphor and explore how it might be possible to unpick or unravel such a noose. I designed this research study with an attitude of 'radical pragmatism' (Levitas, 2013; Unger, 2007), involving a determination to change some things, rather than bring about a wholesale regime change. Such an approach demanded "recognizing our partial and contingent knowledge and devising ways of changing the institutional order bit by bit so that more experimentation is possible" (Levitas, 2013:137). In order to afford such experimentation to the current institutional order, this study was designed to counter the neoliberal noose. To achieve this end, I conceptualised action research in a unique way, which ensures a political and theoretical approach through an entanglement of action research and critical discourse analytics (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

The study was thus designed to counter the prevailing discourse of parent engagement which: undermines agency of parents, diminishes democratic space for educational politics and individualises parent engagement. This entailed action, but also understanding of *how* actions change the institutional order as well as relationships.

To address the lack of *agency* in the performative discourse of parent engagement, as identified in the last chapter, it was congruent and important to embrace the agency of parents to theorise democratic parent engagement. Thus, the study's starting point was to be parent—rather than school—orientated. The research demanded a participatory methodology to afford opportunities to problematise and devise new ways of parent engagement *within* a school, rather than responding or reacting to the school or government demands. Not only did I want

to effect change locally and personally, but I wanted to be able to change the macrostructures, by offering at least a challenge by the possibility of change.

The *space* strand was countered by providing not only a forum but a physical space to challenge the hegemonic performative discourse of parent engagement. This initially involved setting up a Community Philosophy Group (SAPERE, 2015) in a community centre to problematise key issues in education and carry out education politics. I recognise with a certain irony, that whilst trying not to react to the school or government agenda, participants would then critique such agendas. In mitigation, the point was to problematise *and* develop new thinking and practices, not to simply respond.

Addressing the third strand of *lack of collectivity* in parent engagement involved ensuring the study was participatory, group-based and problematised *systemic* issues rather than the issues pertaining to *individual* children's progress. Therefore, participatory action research (Glassman and Erdem, 2014), was chosen as the main research approach. The intervention of Community Philosophy was designed to foster a more collective parent engagement to counter the more common individualised performative engagement.

Whilst traditionally a methodology chapter might detail the precise paradigm and theoretical framework used to underpin the research and to help analyse the data, this chapter is more complex. Svend Brinkmann (2014) criticises research projects built on unbending theoretical frameworks, to which the data must fit. Rather, he advocates that there is more openness to "stumble data", or instances which cause some form of breakdown in understanding to occur (Brinkmann, 2014:724). Such breakdowns "may appear problematic initially, but they also create spaces where imagination can be put to work" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011:18). My research study was riven with such breakdowns, which at times seemed problematic but with reflection and active puzzlement—often involving engaging with different theoretical literature—turned to a richer understanding and in turn change in thinking and practice. As Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman (2011:21) argue,

> a breakdown is a lack of fit between one's encounter with tradition and the schema—guided expectations by which one organises experience. One then modifies the schemas or constructs new ones and tries again.

Therefore, in this chapter, I will discuss the original guiding framework but also some of the methodological breakdowns that occurred along the way; particularly the deconstruction of the ideas and the rebuilding of new ideas, which ultimately resulted in a new conceptualisation of action research as a 'fid', a rope splicing tool.

To facilitate such a discussion, I have drawn on concept of research chronotopes developed by George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis (2005). These chronotopes, I will argue, are more useful than paradigms, especially within a complex study such as this. The chapter will include examples of actions taken and their consequences that led to further reflection and change in both chronotopes and approaches to the research.

The actions taken were informed by theory, but through iterative practice theories are also informed by actions. This process is an abductive bridging of the traditional dichotomy of theory and practice and draws on Charles Peirce's concept of pragmatic experimentalism (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Such praxis afforded meaning-making through action, and action through meaning-making; a destabilisation of both theory and practice providing for new thinking and ways of working. This experimentation is not to be confused with scientific positivism but rather, as Roberto Unger (2007:43) argues, "it is about changing the context of established arrangement and assumed belief, little by little and step by step, as we go about our business".

The second part of the chapter will explore the practical research strategies that I undertook, including gaining access to Kirkgate, data generation and analytic strategies. These will provide an understanding of how I undertook the study, although due to the nature of the study, more specific details will be given at the appropriate points throughout chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Any study that is political and participatory requires in-depth ethical consideration. Therefore, attention will be paid to ethical knots that both restricted, and held together the study; although some of these discussions are take place throughout the following chapters. To explain my thinking and research design, this chapter provides a reflexive discussion of the research, especially the methodological theories, approaches and strategies used within the study. I also

chart the consequent changes in my methodological thinking, after reflection on the approaches taken at the beginning of the study.

3.1 Research Chronotopes: an introduction

Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005:24, 27) introduced the concept of "chronotopes of inquiry" which "describe the lines of force that locate, distribute, and connect specific sets of practices, effects, goals, and groups of actors." To draw on the rope metaphor further: a chronotope can be understood as a net, in which practices, qualities, attitudes and understandings are held. However, due to the net's holes, the chronotope is permeable and there may be slippage between the different chronotopes. More specifically each chronotope holds together "a different set of assumptions about the world, knowledge, the human subject, language, and meaning" (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005:26). Once these assumptions are understood it is easier to identify the appropriate research approaches and strategies to achieve the research aims.

Chronotopes—an amalgam of 'chrono', meaning time, and 'topos', meaning space, are understood to develop over time—i.e. the second is an expansion and improvement of the first, the third on the second and so on, hold different understandings of knowledge, truth, subjects and language. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis' (2005) typology is set out below, with a brief summary of Chronotopes 1 and 2 and longer explanations of 3 and 4 in which my research is located.

Chronotope 1: Objectivism and Representation, assumes a world with pre-existing truths that can be found and observed by agents who are distinct from the world around them. Subjects and objects do not constitute each other in any way and due to such clear separation between the subject and object—the agent and the world—language is understood as neutral.

Chronotope 2: Reading and Interpretation, recognises that there may be existing truths, but that they are interpreted by individuals, so the truths are not objective. Subjects can interpret truth through rational dialogue. Language, whilst neutral in terms of power and values, is constitutive and shapes understandings and understandings shape language.

3.1.1 Chronotope 3

Chronotope 3: Scepticism, Conscientisation and Praxis, recognises that there are different power dynamics at play within situations, which in turn shape our socially constructed understanding and interpretations of truth. As within Chronotope 2, “subjects and objects are separate but mutually constitutive” (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005:28). Language is an articulation of different power relations, as those in power try different means to persuade others of their ‘truth’. The subject is created in relation with another, and different subjects may possess power dependent on their place in society, or the discourse. Research in this chronotope attempts to uncover the power structures that prevent us from seeing the truth and questioning who has authoritative knowledge and what counts as such knowledge. To mitigate such power Habermas (1979), who developed the concept of communicative action, demanded four conditions: a shared language, sincerity, truth, and norms (that are held as appropriate for the cultural norm). More recently, Habermas (1996:360ff) has added a fifth condition: “open communicative space”, which describes the space provided for the dialogue itself.

Communicative action is not merely about conversation but a deliberate action in which the *intention* is a collaborative critique and furthering of common understanding, rather than winning a particular argument (Habermas, 1979,; Wallace and Wolf, 2006). The five conditions that Habermas places on such dialogue supposedly ensure people are in the best position possible to mutually further their understanding. Whilst these conditions might be idealistic, I thought that Community Philosophy, with its emphasis on respect and argument building, would provide such a communicative space in which the conditions for communicative action might be met. I thought that Community Philosophy would enable rational dialogue which in turn would. create ‘communicative power’. As parents unpicked taken-for-granted notions of performative parent engagement, they might experience “the power of mutual understanding and consensus” (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2008:311). However, this was not the case.

I assumed Community Philosophy would provide a space for emancipatory, rational debate, and a form of Rawls’ (1971) reflective equilibrium as discussed in section 2.3. My assumption was that within this space, parents might be able to

understand how they were being prevented from democratic parent engagement and determine to rectify their oppression. However, my assumption implied that participants needed saving from some form of false consciousness, I incorrectly assumed "participants [...] may themselves identify problems [...] and be encouraged to develop their own solutions, the parameters of 'enlightenment' are likely to be drawn by the research and funder" (Gillies and Alldred, 2002:43).

Very early on in the study, when carrying out reconnaissance work, and working with participants to set up the study, I realised that this approach was problematic. (For more detail see section 4.1 and (Haines Lyon, 2015)) Significant reflexive work enabled me to see how I was limiting parents/ participants through a view that they were not able to fully engage in critical thinking—not because they were not intellectually capable—but rather because of the assumption that they would not have the time or inclination. Further exploration led me to realise that I could not deny the agency of participants, if they wanted to be involved, they could be, and they quickly proved capable and interested in research methodology as much as parent engagement. I began to realise this was a process of co-deconstruction and co-reconstruction as we developed new knowledge together.

Moreover, as will be discussed in sections 3.1.2 and 4.1, it soon became clear that my assumption that rational dialogue would lead to consensus, and moreover, the implicit assumption that such consensus was based on an overarching 'correct knowledge' was problematic. The idea that power relations were simple and mitigated by communicative action conditions was flawed, as the power relations were far more fluid and entangled than I had understood. Thus, this research study became situated within the Chronotope 4: Power/ Knowledge and Defamiliarization.

3.1.2 Chronotope 4

A central tenet of Chronotope 4, is defamiliarisation. The researcher and, in this study, participants question the taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings of phenomena. This process involves, not just taking first thoughts and explanations for granted, but, unpicking them further, through reframing the situation or opening it up to new ways of thinking. The *usual* is decentred, by changing the focus, providing an additional perspective. Simply by changing the

position—turning the metaphorical picture askew, making it less familiar—making it strange—one might be able to see something different and develop new understandings (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

As Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005, 2015) argue, this defamiliarisation demands a different understanding of language. They argue that language is not merely a tool for expressing personal feelings, which is co-constitutive between language and subject, but also involve multiple forces at play which require examination. Language and the subject are co-constitutive. These forces, not just the speaker, need examination. Therefore, the defamiliarisation process involves decentring the speaker— or simply their utterances—and examines the forces and logics at play within their utterances. Hence it is useful to apply some level of discourse analysis to examine what is happening.

In Chronotope 4, the research process deconstructs the hegemonic discourse articulations at play during a study and, whilst attempting some reconstruction, proffers only a contingent possibility, whilst recognising this is inevitably framed by a variety of discourse articulations at play. Such contingency mandates the Buberian (2002) demand for true dialogue which embodies the element of surprise. I, as a researcher, needed to be open to different possibilities without fixed or predicted outcomes. However, this dialogical experimenting, that ruptured understandings, was also, as De Lissovoy (2014) defines it, the process of resistance, momentary, and contingent emancipation.

Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) use of chronotopes help provide a framework for the research. This allowed for flexibility in choosing methodology, theories and strategies to address research problem. A chronotope (or indeed chronotopes as Kamberelis and Dimitriadis recognise research maybe located in more than one) hold "analytic strata" (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2015:13) with which researchers

> should work hard to develop principled alignments between and among epistemological positions, relevant and theoretical frameworks, approaches to research, and strategies for collecting, analysing, and interpreting data.

It is to the theories, approaches, and strategies I used, that I will now turn.

3.2 A two-story approach

Traditionally research carried out in Chronotopes 1 and 2, has used inductive and deductive approaches. Induction involves observing patterns in empirical data, then theory making whereas deductive approaches encompass making a hypothesis and then a process of falsification is attempted by way of empirical observation, to disprove or prove the hypothesis (Blaikie, 2013). In cases of more complex power dynamics, and where social construction is at play in, like in Chronotopes 3 and 4, it is useful to use abductive and retroductive strategies for theory making.

As Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans (2014:2) argue, good research

> needs a double story: one part empirical observations of a social world, the other part of a set of theoretical propositions. In good research, these parts of the story not only intertwine but amplify each other.

Whereas the authors argue for the necessity of an abductive approach, I would argue that it requires a retroductive *and* abductive approach. The abductive approach seeks to describe the social life, develop theory from observation, and the engagement with different actors' understandings and experiences. The retroductive approach seeks to explore the unseen; the logics at play that make the social life possible (Blaikie, 2007). A retroductive approach requires radical contingency; recognition that any entity is contingent on others. Therefore, not only will the two parts of the story amplify each other but destabilise each other. This destabilisation causes fractures in apparent certainty, and these fractures afford an opening, a space, for analysis, action and learning.

Whilst such an approach is generative, thus sharing characteristics with grounded theory, both abduction and retroduction require continual engagement with theory as the research process progresses in order to understand and challenge understandings. This continual 'plugging in of theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012), as action is taken, opposes the insistence in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) that theoretical engagement is for later in the study. In this study, it is the surprises that have led to the riches and provided greater theoretical development. Far from Popper's (1974) resistance to theorisation as a dreamer's hobby, abduction as

described by Peirce, cited in Tavory and Timmermans, (2014), fully embraced the imagination, and desire for something different.

Dewey and Peirce, both combined theory and action; they advocated hypothesising as part of puzzlement, followed by attempting to solve the puzzle (Brinkmann, 2017; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Ruth Levitas (2013:139) argues that it is such dreaming, "imagining alternatives [that] helps counter conformity by contradicting the taken-for-granted character of the real". To imagine and make a new action necessitates a form of action research, for as Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen (2008:167 original emphasis) argue it is the action researcher's "task to realize *visions of what the world can become*". Importantly, for this study, I argue that such imagining is facilitated by intense working with theory to help explore what has happened, why it is happening and what might happen.

Due to the political nature of this study and as I moved to Chronotope 4, I decided that combining participatory action research and critical discourse analytics afforded a two-story approach in which both the action research and the critical discourse analytics could destabilise each other, challenge understandings and provide for a richer understanding of democratic parent engagement. I will explore these two different approaches in following sections.

3.2.1 Participatory action research

Action research, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, is seen as stemming from the work of Kurt Lewin in the USA in the 1940s (Bradbury et al., 2008; Chandler and Torbert, 2003; Elliott, 1991; Hammersley, 2004). However, it is also possible to trace the pragmatic roots, in which actions enable development of knowledge, back to John Dewey and Charles Peirce whose insistence on the combination of theory and practice underpinned their ideas on pragmatic experimenting as already discussed (Adelman, 1993; Hammersley, 2004; Johansson and Lindhult, 2008; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Building on Dewey's work on democracy, Kurt Lewin (who regularly met with Dewey), is often deemed to be the father of action research for his development of the term. Lewin used "discussion, decision, action evaluation and revision" (Adelman, 1993:15) to form the basis for his participatory research in the workplace. Challenging Taylorism (science and efficiency orientated managerialism) in the workplace, Lewin started small groups who

worked together to improve practice and explore more democratic ways of working within the factory (Adelman, 1993). The emphasis, within Lewin's concept of action research, was to improve practice within the workplace and to ensure that this was done democratically with the involvement of workers rather than via diktats from on high (Bradbury et al., 2008; Johansson and Lindhult, 2008). However, Lewin is criticised by Susan Knoffke (1997) for concentrating on the use of democratic working for efficiency and management rather than social justice. As Lewin (1948) said:

> social research should be one of the top priorities for the practice job of improving group relations...The research needed for social practice can be best characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action.

He was not encouraging workers to dispute managers where needed but believed that within the groups, reason would bring consensus, and there would not be a need for dictatorial management. This process would afford smoother company workings and has echoes of the cynical consultation processes in which the outcome is already decided, but people are allowed to have their say.

At the beginning of this research study, it could be argued that my original emphasis on creating a process that would build harmonious relationships between staff and parents, aligned with Lewin's (1948) action research approach. It was without intention, however, as my background is in youth and community work, my personal philosophy is more aligned with the work of Paulo Freire (1982) who worked with people to problematise their situations, identify power structures and act to change the situation. Indeed, Graeme Tiffany (2009) argues that Freire is one of the key influences behind Community Philosophy. This political and critical form of participatory action research (PAR) developed, partly as a result of Freire's work in the 1970s; yet, too often it is argued that PAR stems from Lewin's psychosocial work in the 1940's (Chandler and Torbert, 2003; Hammersley, 2004; Johansson and Lindhult, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014a).

As Orlando Fals Borda maintains (2006; 1995), PAR did not descend from Lewin's work; various research studies and methodologies had been occurring all over the world. However, Fals Borda (2006) acknowledged that the PAR in the South might

have convergences with that of the North. To assume that action research belongs to the West is problematic, in the apparent prizing of western academia over radical grassroots work.

Seemingly frustrated at the lack of acknowledgement given to the instigators of such practice in the Southern Hemisphere, Fals Borda (1991) also points out that 'Participatory Action Research' is an English language term, slightly differing from other traditions which use terms such as 'Vivencia'—Spanish for experience, referring to "a full experience of an event with all its opportunities, lived through direct participation" (Glassman and Erdem, 2014:212). Nevertheless, Budd Hall (2005) contends that Fals Borda developed the term 'Participatory Action Research', to which this study is aligned more so than other interpretations.

Despite being firmly based in the UK, this research study, from the outset, drew on research approaches from the South; it is 'ground up' not 'top down'; political, if not militant; radically challenging the status quo; and radically challenging notions of authority. This Southern approach aligns with Boaventura de Sousa Santos definition of the South, not as a

> geographical concept...[but] is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimising such suffering. It is, therefore, an anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the geographic North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia, racism and islamophobia. (Santos, 2016:19-20)

This Southern "genre of participatory action research (PAR)...can be seen as emerging through historical and ongoing struggles", as Michael Glassman and Gizem Erdam (2014:206) argue, whereas the Lewin genre, whilst aiming to be democratic, can be characterised as about improving life within the institution and gaining consensus. This research study's goal of democratic parent engagement evolved from attempting to reach a level of harmonious connection with schools, into fundamentally challenging key political discourses as detailed in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Firmly rooted in a more Southern participatory action research

conceptualisation, the study transformed into a political struggle, albeit in a far more privileged place than many of those in the geographical South.

I carried out the research from an activist stance, as, Michelle Fine (1992b) argues, feminist researchers cannot just stand on the side and collect information. Such a stance requires, at times, rage and militancy. Despite this recognition, 'playing nice and harmoniously' was originally desired as a quality of the research study, by myself, the Headteacher and participants. Relatively quickly, however, it became clear this was problematic, which I explore more in depth in section 4.1. The 'participatory' side of the action research, in this case, denotes not only the participants taking part in the research process, but also my participation in the political process. This adheres to the seventh principle of 'Participatory Research' as defined in the 1978 inaugural meeting of the International Participatory Research Network, "the researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process of research, i.e., a militant rather than a detached observer" (Hall, 2001:173). As part of this militant role, I undertook critical discourse analytics, which I then in presented to participants for further exploration. This enabled a fuller understanding of the different dynamics occurring within home-school relationship at Kirkgate School and in turn contributed to a deeper understanding of democratic parent engagement.

3.2.2 The case for critical discourse analytics

Saussure (2016) argued that a 'sign' comprises the signifier and the signified. The object, combined with our articulation of what it is, makes up the sign. In speech, a word is a sign that comes from our understanding or articulation of what we believe the object to be. Through discourse we often share an interpretation, but it does not necessitate an *exact identical* understanding by all parties. The signifier, therefore, signifies the signified, and we build chains of signifiers which comprise our collective sense making through the discourse. Meaning arises from the differences between these chains; if it is not *that*—it is *this*. Another example is when we look at an object which we call a chair, each person might have a slightly different understanding as to what a chair is and what can be done with it. The interconnectedness of signs helps us derive meaning form objects, like a seated person helps us to ascribe meaning to the chair. As poststructuralism has developed, theorists including Laclau (1990) have argued, fixed meanings are

impossible; our understanding of signs, therefore are contingent on us gaining further information.

In the same way, as you and I talk with each other, we give meaning to the object of our discussion but also interpellate[21] meaning into each other; our subjectivity is always partially constructed through others. Moreover, discourse implies the recognition that each utterance and practice is made with the intention of impacting the world around us, whether impacting the person or persons we are talking to, the wider world, or indeed our own understanding. This intention is indicative of agency—the speaking to the wider world—entwining with the subjectivity of the person who is also shaped by the discourse around them. Such an attempt to impact the world around them can be seen as part of a continual hegemonic struggle, (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) as parties through discourse attempt to make something the right or 'natural' way.

A discourse comprises different practices and utterances that have interpellative or constitutive force, which try to fix meaning. In this research context, I am taking discourse to mean a system or,

> systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects...concrete systems of social relations and practices that are intrinsically political, as their formation is an act of radical institution, which involves the constructions of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. (Howarth et al., 2009)

In other words, I examined the practices within the context of democratic parent engagement, recognising that practices are not neutral or benign but political. I paid specific attention as to how the discourse of performative engagement created 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.

Exploring how apparent hegemonies are established via discursive articulations is not only knowledge building but also enables an exploration of sites of potential contestation. Furthermore, it affords a dis-identification with particular discourse

[21] The concept of "interpellation" has a complex history with the term being used by Louis Althusser (2001) to indicate how ideology affects and shapes the subject. Foucault (1979) argued that we are subject to disciplinary forces and not entirely free to avoid the interpellation from such forces, thus we become docile bodies. There are debates as to how much agency the subject has in accepting such ideological formation which for reasons of space I have not entered. For the purposes of my usage, I am conveying the idea that our subjectivity is subject to interpellation by other people and discourses.

articulations once they have been identified, which may involve making a new articulation; albeit one contingent on being subject to numerous new discourses encountered at the time (Mills, 2004). This is where Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) work comes in useful.

Laclau and Mouffe (2014) promote exploration of, not just the parts of a discourse but rather, how the struggles over hegemony occur, through examination of discourse articulations. Building on Saussure's (2016) concept of the signifier, they argue that the empty signifier is devoid of a signified, emptied of meaning through a process of overfilling it with ascribed meaning. That is to say it is such an overused word the meaning becomes emptied and used to "unif[y] a discursive terrain" (Torfing, 1999:98). An empty signifier is used to convey an apparently universally accepted meaning, for example, "democracy", which has so many different meanings attached to it, it is effectively meaningless without being linked to a clear chain of other signifiers.

Empty signifiers are held together in chains coalescing around a nodal point which is called a 'master signifier', which has "a 'universal; structuring function within a certain discursive field" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:xi). The new nodal point brings a dislocation—a reorientation of understanding as to the meaning of the signifier. These nodal points are constructed by privileging certain meanings (Howarth et al., 2009). As Jacob Torfing (1999:98) explains "the nodal point creates and sustains the identity of a certain discourse by constructing a knot of definite meanings". For example, the notion of parent engagement as a performative role that aids individual achievement has been privileged over more democratic understandings of parent engagement. As I have argued this 'scaffold knot' of meanings is strangling democratic parent engagement.

The ideas of Laclau and Mouffe (2014) on discourse are an important component of my research and are attuned to its politically active nature; their ideas afford the exploration and questioning of the hegemonic articulations at play but *also* seeking to develop new practices that challenge the articulations. Whilst Laclau and Mouffe do not set out with a fixed concept of right and wrong, they attempt to understand how we build our concepts of right and wrong, in the political realm, by way of making the views become normative by becoming hegemonic. Through this work it is possible to draw contingent understandings of what parents and schools

consider 'right' and 'wrong' in parent engagement, and to further question them and develop such understandings.

I did not want to simply map out different articulations about parent engagement but to recognise how such articulations contribute to power dynamics, and more importantly, how they attempt to shut down voice or democracy. The poststructuralist turn implies the assumption there is no actual truth but only myriad versions of truth. This assumption is heavily criticised by Rosalind Gill (1995) who argues that the move to relativism precludes moral value, specifically concerning identifying and challenging oppressive practice, which she argues is essential to feminist practice. I share this concern; when using critical discourse analytics methodology. Moreover, I wanted to open the *possibilities* for voice and democracy. Therefore, it was important to ensure that this research was also action based, thus involving action on the information gained and subsequent changes in understandings, practices and possibly relationships.

Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) theorisation of discourse answers Gill's (1995) concerns regarding relativity and the possible consequence in terms of political paralysis. Their theorisation is fundamentally political; critical discourse analytics is not just a mapping exercise but an exploration of the attempts to establish hegemony and the struggles for power (Howarth et al., 2009). By exploring such dynamics, the participants and I were contesting and destabilising the hegemony. If the "major aim of hegemonic projects is to construct and stabilise the *nodal*[22] *points*" (Howarth et al., 2009: 15 original emphasis) then the aim of Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) discourse theory is to destabilise the status quo, the dominant hegemony. In this regard, my research study attempted to destabilise the assumed hegemony of parent engagement. Not only did I seek to destabilise the performative discourse of parent engagement, but I hoped to provide a method for parents to challenge and question the discourse and to unpick *how* the current hegemonic struggle was playing out.

Laclau and Mouffe (2014) explain 'social antagonism' as one party preventing the fixity of identity or hegemony, by casting light on the lack of doubt on the surety of

[22] Nodal points are key points in a discourse, around which different chains of signifiers coalesce and condense to form a particular meaning see (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, Howarth et al., 2009).

such identity. The inability to fix identity is perceived, by those trying to push a particular truth, as the fault of the 'other' who is disputes or disrupts meaning or indeed the promulgated 'truth'. The antagonism is thus caused by the failure to achieve hegemony. Attempts are made to suppress dissent to ensure fixity. The fantasy continues: if only those infidels, those disrupting our truth, could be cast out, life would be perfect as our view and way of life can be maintained and perfection achieved. The fantasy blames the 'infidels' not the problem with the nodal point or idea in the first place. Importantly, it should be noted that there may be many antagonisms: "the more unstable the social relations, the less successful will be any definite system of differences and the more the points of antagonism will proliferate" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:117). Hence, the ability to build agreement or hegemony becomes increasingly difficult.

My research study, therefore, explored different discursive tactics used by each other and each party—parents, staff, schools, the government—within the realm of parent engagement. For example, individuals as parents, but also the school or government, to both shut down and reclaim, agency, voice and democracy, as discussed in Chapter 4. As Gill (1995) points out, discourse analysis itself is not political, nevertheless, it is in its application. The application of discourse analysis is fundamentally destabilising as it questions what is taken for granted, assumed norms and established truths; and seeks to rupture such hegemonic ideas in order to articulate new contingent understandings. It is in those new understandings that such an application cannot be see, as simply deconstruction, but also reconstruction, which, in itself, must be open to further deconstruction.

3.2.3 Deconstruction as 'frogging'

The process of deconstruction and reconstruction is reminiscent of seemingly innocuous knitting term 'frogging'. 'Frogging' is used when unravelling a garment due to a mistake or even at the end of the garments usage in a bid to 'upcycle'. 'Frogging' refers to the knitters' refrain of "rip it, rip it, rip it" (ribbit, ribbit, ribbit). The yarn has been made into an object, but it is unpicked, unravelled, and can be used again to knit a new garment (yarn harvesting). The knots, or stitches, could be considered to combine to form artefacts, such as a jumper, only to be unravelled.

The process of deconstruction in research can be quite destructive, in contrast to the commonly perpetuated belief that research should be neutral and not affect the participants or situation (Gray, 2004). However, the apparent destruction is compensated for by the ability to reconstruct and construct something out of the "ruins" (MacLure, 2011:997ff). Therefore, as part of my destabilising methodology, elements of critical discourse analytics were used regarding an overt deconstruction of those things that are taken for granted; seen as the norm in parent engagement. However, this was be a finite process in terms of providing a fixed understanding but rather capturing a part of an ongoing process to present a contingent understanding. As Gill (1995) argues, the political side of the research is overt, in that through this critical discourse analysis, I was trying to afford change. In turn, this demanded a scrutiny of the ethics involved in such an apparently destructive study. Whilst I gained initial ethics approval from York St John, found in the Appendix A, the ethical conundrums faced during the study were far more complex. As Lincoln (2001) argues

> Such formalistic protocols do not go nearly far enough tin the intimate, face-to-face, democratic work of action research...in meeting the ethical needs of either researchers or researched.

Hence ethical knots will be unpicked carefully throughout the rest of this thesis at the appropriate points.

3.2.4 Examining logics and dimensions of social relations

To deepen the understanding of the hegemonic struggles at play in parent engagement, it was helpful to look to Glynos and Howarth (2007) who drawing on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2014), propose three heuristic logics: social logics, political logics and fantasmatic logics. Social logics encompass how the social practices function, including the rules and their purpose. The social logics afford a synoptic characterisation of the status quo (Laclau, 2007), are more readily observable to the researcher as empirical data, thus providing a starting point for investigation. Political logics, "enable us to understand the way a social practice or regime *was* instituted or *is being* contested or instituted" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 106 original emphasis). They therefore offer a dynamic perspective to complement the synoptic perspective of social logics. The third type of logic, Fantasmatic logics, create the fantasy that if certain logics and practices were

adhered to, then all would be well—for example if Brexit occurs, Britain will be Great again. These are simplifying narratives, which to work necessitates some relation to the popular image or popular world view; it is something that the public or audience can 'go along with' without too much stretch to their imagination. Regarding the fantasmatic logic of Brexit, for example, we have long had a narrative in the UK that the European Union membership has been problematic and troublesome, holding us back through their rules (Henley, 2016), so it is easy to sell the idea that without the EU, Britain will be Great again.

The examination of these logics provides for a much richer understanding of democratic parent engagement and theory development. Offering these lenses, took the study beyond trialling Community Philosophy, or simply trying new democratic actions with parents. As part of the retroductive strategy used, Community Philosophy was a springboard rather than a central plank of the experiment.

Through their commitment to radical contingency, Glynos and Howarth (2007) recognise that not only are subject's identities contingent, but so are the structures that they reside in; both, at least potentially, destabilise each other. It is the relationships embroiled in this contingency that becomes particularly interesting and that form the object of this research. Practically speaking, part of the research study was to identify the dislocations and indeed the "responses to the dislocation" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 111) which challenge the status quo and mobilise participants to question established practices and beliefs.

Glynos and Howarth's four dimensions of social relations informs the analysis:

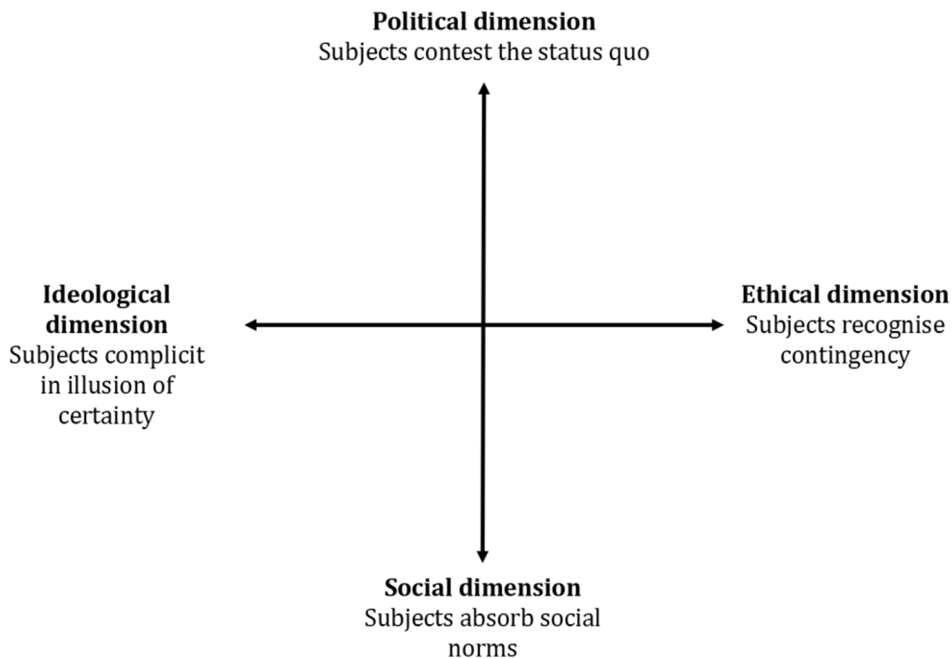

Figure 2: Adapted from Glynos and Howarth (2007:112 Figure 3)

As social practices and relations work, they exist in one of the above quadrants with a particular dimension in the foreground. For instance, ideological/ social quadrant with an emphasis on the ideological dimension. For example, in 2013, the English government tightened school rules so that parents could and should be fined and possibly prosecuted, for taking their children, out of a state school, to go on holiday. The government has repeatedly argued that this policy is necessitated because it is (apparently) proven that 'every day in school counts'; even a short break from school, purportedly, damages a child's educational attainment (Department for Education and Morgan, 2015). Despite evidence to the contrary (Education Standards Analysis and Research Division, 2011), the government's promulgation of 'attendance always affects outcomes' continues, which has trickled down to headteachers whom are referring parents for fines or prosecution using the same mantra. This promulgation of 'every day counts' can be said to be foregrounding the *ideological dimension* as both parties are complicit in the illusion of the certainty that every day counts.

Some parents, whilst still taking their children out of school, are doing so with the acceptance that they will pay the fine when it arrives. This behaviour is part of the *social dimension*, as they are accepting the status quo and paying the fine. Some parents are starting to question the veracity of the statement 'every day counts'

more publicly and campaign against the government. It could be said this questioning is in the *political dimension* as the parents are contesting the reality promulgated by the government, but they are also pushing that missing school does not harm the child. It could be said these parents are located within the *political and ideological dimension*. Other parents are questioning the reality, recognising that the situation is far more complex than either 'side' is admitting; the issue is far wider ranging than holidays. They are publicly campaigning that this issue is about: well-being; parental authority; government control; and are starting to draw a diverse range of people into the campaign[23]. These parents are acting in the *ethical/political* dimension as they recognise the contingency of the 'every day counts' concept, as well as actively campaigning against it.

As can be seen from this brief sketch, the two axes and four resulting quadrants, are helpful to unpick the dimensions within which people are acting, and more specifically, how parents engage with schools. Noting a difference in approach by people along a continuum between ideological and ethical behaviour, one can question whether there is a discourse which is merely descriptive or more ethical in terms of questioning and challenging apparent truths. The addition of the Social/Political axis provides a tool to analyse whether people are simply moaning about a situation or taking action to change the situation. The combination of these axes allows deeper analyses where we can see if ethical thinking might be occurring, but the action goes no further than complaining to each other rather than political action taken. This afforded analysis of the conversations and actions within the research study. Furthermore, did the group just talk about the issues (social dimension) or did they then take action regarding the issues (political dimension) which was part of the Community Philosophy methodology.

In summary, after moving to Chronotope 4, this study moved away from the more traditional Northern action research in which practice and improvement of practice is often focussed upon (Elliott, 1991; Lewin, 1948; Stringer, 2014). Rather, as part of a more destabilising and defamiliarising approach, I deliberately played with theory, and used critical discourse analytics (Glynos and Howarth, 2007;

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[23] All these types of arguments can be seen to occur in the Parents Union Facebook group and their sister Facebook group "Against School Fines".

Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) to further understand what was happening, why it was happening and what might happen.

3.3 Action research as a 'fid': a new conceptualisation

Whilst participatory action research can be emancipatory and located in Chronotope 3, it has the potential to be far more contingent and deconstructive, aligning more coherently with a poststructural epistemology. This section argues action research can be reconceptualised as a splicing tool comprising these three interlocking points: collating stories and problematising them; critical discourse analytics; and practical interventions. In doing so, it embodies Glynos and Howarth's call for a tripartite logic of research:

> 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 (2007:19 original emphasis).

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 et al.; 2014, Koshy, 2009; Opie and Sike; 2004; Stringer, 2014). However, completing these tasks does not make action research, as Robin McTaggart (1996:248) argues, it is "a mistake to think that slavishly following the 'action research spiral' constitutes doing action research." While planning, conducting and reflecting on research undertaken, in a participatory or cooperative manner, all essential components are important, they are meant to be used as a guide not a check list. As Mirko 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 attempt to maintain predictability and control, thus squeezing out those opportunities for surprise and discoveries.

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 the cycle, by embracing both retroduction and abduction, the study was afforded a more creative approach in which

theorisation and actions destabilised each other; practices were challenged, new practices were created, new understandings were forged. The evolution of this study chimes more with the more Southern Hemisphere articulation of action research presented by Orlando Fals Borda (1991) who suggested 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 3 below, the fid is pushed into the rope between lays to force them apart.

Figure 3: Fid and rope Copyright Roger Haines 2018

The fid enables the strands to be unlaid, knots to be unpicked and furthermore for other strands to be inserted between the strands to form stronger links, for example, a loop. The use of a fid can function in a deconstructive and reconstructive manner contrary to the blade which is destructive through its severing or cutting of a rope. The fid's ability to deconstruct and reconstruct, works as a metaphor for the participatory action research model that I used—where ideas, practices, actions and norms are deconstructed and reconstructed. 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.

The action of pushing the fid into the rope, or 'fidding', is carried out with an attitude of *dialogical experimenting*. Dialogical experimenting, reminiscent of scientific positivism, captures action research's intent to intervene, take action, and

offer analysis of said actions. Subsequently, there is analysis of such actions. Thus, action research can be seen as a form of experimentation. However, *dialogical experimenting* emphasises that this action-taking—attempts at problem-solving or intervening to change the status quo—is carried out in dialogue *with* others, rather than *on* others. Arguably, it builds on Macmurray's (1995:15) injunction that "all meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship". At this point, I am translating friendship as working with one another rather than being in competition with one another or using each other instrumentally as the neoliberal regime would encourage.

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 Slavoj Žižek's (2010:3) concept of "looking awry", in which he argues it can be "inherently mystifying" when looking straight on, especially at violent or difficult situations. Looking awry can enable us to move from a position of power *or* disempowerment, and look at the situation, afresh, from a distance.

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.

'Fidding' enables splicing of the rope, which builds a new structure. Whilst a splice is 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)

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 and Gibson, 2005:320). It was this rupturing of accepted knowledge and practice within the school system and parent engagement, that enabled the participants and myself to change our practices and, as part of that process, challenge our identities.

This form of participatory action research draws on the emancipatory tradition of Paulo Freire (1972;1989), Michelle Fine (1992a), Rajesh Tandon (1981), Fals Borda (1991), and others. However, it is carried out with a careful conceptualisation of emancipation. It was not about me being the all-knowing researcher who comes to emancipate the poor parents who are unaware of how oppressed they should be, although there were elements of this at the very start of the work—see (Haines Lyon, 2015). Rather, I take Noah de Lissovoy's (2014) concept of emancipation which overtly recognises that we are all affected – restricted and sometimes strangled—by the neoliberal education discourse. Emancipation occurs when humans act—creating "a human moment "which acts as a breach" (de Lissovoy, 2014:84). This breach is a rupture of the apparent hegemony, and destabilises the status quo, thus liberating us from that stricture in that point in time.

As Freire (1972) and Macmurray (1991; 1995) both imply it is through the dialogue, the relationship and resultant action taken that we become human. Furthermore, it is through speaking out and demanding that we be recognised as human, that we act politically. It is through these acts separately and together that we (the participants and myself) are emancipated, rather than the all-knowing researcher revealing the one true enlightened way. Through our reflection, deconstruction and entanglement with theory we can conceive that things might be different, and act accordingly; challenging the process of hegemonic strangulation. This resistance, as de Lissovoy (2007) argues, is the process of emancipation.

The rupturing, emancipatory approach of fidding also ruptures the more traditional approach to methodology in which methods must be reproducible and easy to follow. As Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005:139), articulate:

> the actual practice of qualitative work is often less monolithic than hybrid, marked as much, if not more than by breaks and ruptures form the rules of specific approaches as by adherence to them. Importantly, this impulse has always been at the heart of qualitative inquiry—resistance against any and all forms of instrumental rationality and engagement in multiple forms of informed bricolage.

Thus, this study moved away from the traditional action research cycle (Elliott, 1991; Lewin, 1948; Stringer, 2014) and moved towards a more complex process of unpicking knots, and acts of splicing which may include using theory to open up understandings or micro actions such as participants requesting to meet outside of the Headteacher's office after identifying how they were affected by being in the office (see section 5.3). Having discussed my fidding approach, I will now explore the strategies that I used to rupture and resist the neoliberal stranglehold on democratic parent engagement.

3.4 Research strategies of the study

Research strategies as defined by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005:18) are "the specific practices and procedures that researchers deploy to collect and analyze data and to report their findings." These strategies, I would argue, also include practices and procedures to ensure rigour and ethics in the generation and analysing of data. As "activist research projects seek to unearth, interrupt, and open new frames for intellectual and political theory and practice" (Fine, 1994:23) the task of the data collection and analysis is different to that of a typical study, which sought to prove or disprove a hypothesis. Therefore, it is not just spoken or written words that are collected and analysed, but interruptions and breakdowns are examined, along with the moves taken by participants regarding developing democratic parent engagement. Thus, it is useful to use Glynos and Howarth's (2007) four dimensions of social relations to analyse the ethical and political moves that took place.

As an action research study, it is impossible to chart every decision and action made, however, this section discusses the entry process, the different strategies taken to generate and analyse data as well as discuss relationality and accountability. This should establish confidence, that this is quality qualitative research.

3.4.1 Accessing the school and setting up the study, recruiting participants

It is essential, with this being an action research study, to examine the process of gaining entry (Stringer, 2014). As discussed in section 2.3.1, I wanted to set up a study which involved using Community Philosophy with parents to both explore notions of parent engagement and trial a more democratic form of parent engagement. This involved finding a school that wished to take part in such a study. I used a purposive sampling strategy (Blaikie, 2013; Patton, 2002), rather than choosing a sample that would afford control of variables in an inquiry to prove a hypothesis. I, therefore, chose a school that was willing to provide an opportunity for me to make an intervention. More importantly, not only was it useful to me—as Blaikie (2013) points out a useful sampling strategy requires the possibility of a response from participants –more importantly, it was of interest and use to the school and parents involved (Brown and Strega, 2015).

As discussed in the 1.8, research studies (Department for Children, 2008; Department for Education, 2012; Lewis et al., 2007; Mongon, 2013; Suldo et al., 2018) have shown the apparent importance of performative parent involvement in the early and primary years regarding achievement at high school. Hence, I decided to locate the research within the primary sector where support for engagement was high. Additionally, when seeking schools to work with, the government and OFSTED were focusing their attention on coastal schools, whose students' attainment was lower than that elsewhere in the country. This was partly blamed on disadvantage in coastal areas and in turn low valuing of education and expectations of parents in coastal towns (OFSTED, 2013; The Centre for Social Justice, 2013; The Future Leaders Trust, 2015). As I was seeking to problematise and counter this performative parent engagement discourse, which frequently framed parents as ineptitudes (see section 2.1) I decided to run the study in a coastal town.

The *Unseen Children* report (OFSTED, 2013:59) identified 34 out of 150 Local Authorities "where 60% or fewer pupils eligible for free school meals at the end of Key Stage 2 achieved the national benchmark". Six of these authorities were in the Yorkshire and Humberside region (OFSTED 2013:59). The *Unseen Children* report (OFSTED, 2013) specifically highlighted the large 'achievement gaps' in coastal towns. As a result, I chose the Yorkshire coastal borough 'Skellthorpe' (a

pseudonym), the area to carry out research. These choices were not taken to prove any causal link between location, demographics and parent engagement, but rather to try and work with parents who are often told they are lacking and need to behave or engage in a particular way (Reay, 2017). My choice was based on the hope the school and the parents would benefit from the research.

I did not ask for demographic information of parents so as not to reinforce any unhelpful stereotypes, although this may be seen as problematic as the reader may make assumptions about participants. The participants had varied backgrounds and experiences of education, however due to the small sample, it was not appropriate to provide possible identifying characteristics. As the participants pointed out, if people related to the school read this thesis it would be easy to identify those involved. They did not want demographic information, such as guardianship, problematic relationships with the school or family 'issues' to be identifiable. It is vital that I honour such concerns.

To find a school that might benefit from the study, I approached the Local Education Advisor for the borough and a lead in the area. These professionals argued that I must not choose schools by statistical outcomes, but by those who were a) in a position to take part in the research (e.g. not in Special Measures) and b) would benefit from developing more interesting ways of working with parents. The lead practitioner invited me to two sing-alongs at a nursery, to meet parents and to talk to them about the possibilities of setting up a Community Philosophy Group. I attended these groups to gauge interest and to find out where might be an appropriate place to carry out the research. These did not go particularly well.

I prepared for the sing-alongs by writing extensively about my assumptions, positioning and thoughts about the study. This writing was an attempt at a bracketing exercise, in which I would bring to the fore my assumptions and thoughts, to better prepare myself for the meeting and "focus on the meanings inherent in the world of participants" (Stringer, 2014:139). I endeavoured to bracket my politics, concerning 'closing the gap' and parent engagement, not wanting to come across as pushing a particular political line. However, during my journey to the sing-alongs, I realised I had spent so much time worrying about what *not* to say, I had not prepared to introduce myself or my research.

Methodological Reflection 1: False assumptions

I realised that by not wanting to share my views on the Government's 'closing the gap' agenda, for fear of influencing people, I was positioning parents as victims of false consciousness, who needed me to awaken them to the truth. As I spoke to various parents and grandparents, this realisation led me to stumble over my words and fail to explain the study adequately. There was puzzlement from some. Two women asked why people would want to come for coffee and discussion: "We do that with each other in our homes".

To explore this further, I carried out Gilly Bolton's (2014) reflective writing exercise involving writing letters, to myself, from some of the people I had met. This process enabled me to distance myself from what had happened and engage reflexively with my practice. This exercise helped reveal hidden assumptions of my own about my and the parent's, different positions. Namely, that I was in a different position to them, and that they could not relate to me as a researcher, they would not have the time or even the inclination. Worst of all, I was assuming a lack of agency on behalf of the possible participants in the same way as many of the government proclamations regarding parents (see 1.8).

After this exercise fell somewhat short, I spoke to the local professionals and they suggested a school to work with. Kirkgate Primary School had recently amalgamated from separate infant and junior schools to one primary school with a roll of over 800 pupils. The school was still working to become unified after having been two very distinct schools with different headships. The Headteacher (Mrs Benson) of the new school had previously been the head of the infant school. With all this in mind, the local professionals felt that Kirkgate would benefit from such an intervention and suggested that I write[24] to the Headteacher and Chair of Governors about the study (see appendix G). Both the Chair and the Headteacher, Mrs Benson, thought that Kirkgate would benefit from such an intervention. My choice of Community Philosophy was partly due to its methodology which encouraged participants to both problematise an issue and take action. This proposition was attractive to the Headteacher, as Community Philosophy offered a proactive approach that moved beyond moaning that she wanted to avoid (see section 4.1.1). Mrs Benson agreed to approach some parents whom she thought would be able to help me set up the Community Philosophy Group. I emphasised

[24] The letter notes that I was looking for two schools; I had originally hoped to work with two schools and possibly bring the groups together. However due to OFSTED pressures in other schools this became impossible and Kirkgate quickly became my primary focus.

the hope that they might be people who were not ordinarily involved in traditional school roles such as the Parent Teacher Association or governors. She gave them letters, from me, inviting them to a meeting to discuss the possibility of setting up a Community Philosophy group.

Ideally, a participatory action research study *should* ensure participants are active in the recruitment and start-up process (Dick, 1993; Hall, 2001). However, in the state school system, there are strict permission routes (dependent on the school, authority or academy chain) that must be followed. In hindsight asking the gatekeeper to give letters whilst pragmatic and quite possibly the only way to start the study, was problematic, as during the study it was acknowledged that Mrs Benson chose certain people and not others (See a problematisation of this in section 6.4.2). As Kara (2018:105) points out, gatekeepers are a mainly Western concept reflecting a paternal, hierarchical system, with clear lines of authority. In some indigenous communities, direct help from a gatekeeper is not acceptable practice, and wider consultation of the community is required. I tried to mitigate this problem by asking the parents contacted by the Headteacher, to help me plan the study. As the study continued, however, I was able hand over more responsibility to participants.

I ran the study at Kirkgate for two years. Eleven parents attended a range of meetings (not all at the same time) as detailed in the table below. I refer to these participants as parents, although at least one was a special guardian but for reasons of confidentiality[25] I have not mentioned this elsewhere in the text. I have used the term "core participants" to indicate those who attended nearly every meeting. Pseudonyms have been used as discussed in 1.6. Mrs Benson was replaced as Headteacher, by Mr Shaw, after a four-month hand-over process between September 2015 and January 2016.

Kirkgate School Participants	
'Core Participants' (Came to nearly all meetings)	Dacia, Holly (and preschool son), Pat

[25] The British Educational Research Association [BERA} Ethical Guideline 41 states, "Researchers need to be aware of the possible consequences to participants should it prove possible for them to be identified by association or inference" (2018).

Participants (came to at least one meeting)	Amy, Beth, Cat, Christine, Jenni, Lindsay, Stacy, Tom
Gatekeepers	Headteacher 1: Mrs Benson (March—December 2015) Headteacher 2: Mr Shaw (September 2015-present)

Table 1: Participants

A range of meetings took place over the two-year study and these are summarised, alongside the participants present and location below.

Date	Type of Meeting	Participants	Location
March 2015	Negotiation of access	Headteacher 1 Mrs Benson	Kirkgate School, Headteacher's office
April 2015	Set up meeting	Amy, Christine, Pat (and 3 preschool children)	Community centre
May 2015	Community Philosophy 1	Amy, Christine (and 2 preschool children) Dacia, Holly (and preschool son Oliver), Lindsay, Pat, Stacy, Tom.	Community centre
June 2015	Interview with Headteacher	Mrs Benson	Kirkgate School, Headteacher's office
July 2015	Community Philosophy 2	Dacia, Holly (and son Oliver), Pat	Community centre
October 2015	Discussion Group	Beth, Dacia, Holly (and son Oliver), Pat	Community centre

Date	Type of Meeting	Participants	Location
November 2015	Discussion Group	Cat, Dacia, Holly (and son Oliver), Jenni, Pat	Community centre
November 2015	Informal Meeting with new Headteacher Mr Shaw	Mr Shaw	Kirkgate School, Headteacher's office
January 2016	Discussion Group	Dacia, Holly, Pat	Community Centre
February 2016	Coreflexion meeting	Dacia, Holly (and son Oliver), Pat	Kirkgate school
March 2016	Meeting between participants and Headteacher, Mr Shaw	Dacia, Holly, Pat, Mr Shaw	Kirkgate School, Headteacher's office
	Coreflexion meeting	Dacia, Holly, Pat	Café
November 2016	Meeting between participants and Headteacher, Mr Shaw	Dacia, Holly, Pat, Mr Shaw	Kirkgate School, Headteacher's office
February 2017	Meeting between participants and Headteacher, Mr Shaw	Dacia, Holly, Pat, Mr Shaw	Kirkgate School, Headteacher's office
	Coreflexion meeting	Dacia, Holly, Pat	Café
June 2017	Meeting to plan future of project after my withdrawal	Dacia, Holly	Café
June 2017	Meeting to plan future of the project and my final meeting	Amy, Dacia, Holly, Pat, Mr Shaw	Kirkgate School, Headteacher's office

Table 2: Meetings during study

As can be seen, from the table above, meetings were held in a variety of locations: the school, the local community centre and a local café. The community centre belongs to the school but is not on the school site, although it is within walking distance. I wanted us to meet offsite as I thought it possible that some parents may not want to cross the boundaries of the school for a variety of reasons. Both Gary Hornby (2011) and Willard Waller (1965) argue that parents' views of school can be shaped by their own negative or indeed positive experiences of school and I thought to move to a different site might at least remove one barrier to parent engagement. Later meetings at the café, were due to the bureaucracy involved in booking the centre (see section 5.1.1).

After the sing-alongs, where my plans were not particularly well received, I was concerned that my interest in democratic engagement might not be of interest to other parents. Nevertheless, I thought it was worth pursuing further. I was not compelling other people but just wanting to try something different. Therefore, before the planning meeting arranged by the Headteacher with parents whom she thought might be interested, I carried out a written exercise; I articulated what I wanted to say and what my fears for the meeting were. I decided to be frank and open about the problem with the government's 'closing the gap' discourse. I stated that I hoped that the participants would help me explore this discourse and possibly identify different forms of parent engagement in the light of the discourse and the situation of the school. Thus, I sought to be upfront and authentic about my political intentions (Gergen and Gergen, 2008), assuming that people were interested and capable of participating in the study.

It was after this planning meeting that I fully embraced the agency of the parents, realising that there was no need to be apologetic for using their time, that if they were interested, they would join me in the endeavour. This was a defining moment of the study, as I located myself more in Chronotope 4 Power/ Knowledge and Defamiliarisation (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005) and moved away from Chronotope 3, or traditional emancipatory research, as discussed in section 4.1. (For more information see (Haines Lyon, 2015)).

Three mothers, Pat, Amy and Christine, and their preschool children attended this planning meeting with the Headteacher and myself. They all showed interest in the study and we arranged the time and location of our first Community Philosophy

meeting. I suggested meeting elsewhere, such as a café, but the parents argued strongly for meetings to be held at the community centre as it was more child-friendly; they would be able to talk freely without feeling people were judging them for the behaviour of their children. I had taken refreshments, and pens and paper for children who might be brought to the meeting. I wanted parents to feel comfortable bringing their children to any meeting. Interspersed through the thesis are some drawings[26] by Oliver, Holly's son, who accompanied us at many meetings. These pages are a reminder of his presence and contribution to the study; Oliver sometimes joined in our discussions to ask things like "why are there pens missing?". It was always important for me to respond to him, as I wanted Oliver to feel welcome.

[26] Oliver's mother, Holly, consented to my use of these drawings on Oliver's behalf and said she hoped to show them to him, in the thesis one day.

Figure 4: Drawing by Oliver 2015

This first meeting occurred in early 2015 and meetings continued for two years, in a variety of formats as detailed in Table 2 in section 3.4.1. Further information as to the contents, data and actions involved in these meetings are contained in Appendices B; C; D. In summary, however, there were five meetings that followed some form of Community Philosophy methodology[27] over the 18 months, whereas, the rest were smaller coreflexion meetings (to be discussed) or meetings with the second Headteacher, Mr Shaw, who arrived several months into the study.

[27] An exemplar of a Community Philosophy Session can be found in Appendix E. Whilst participants asked for the term Community Philosophy to be dropped, the meetings still followed a similar format until January 2016.

Throughout the study, I gained consent from different parties including: the Headteacher, Mrs Benson, to initiate the study in Kirkgate; separate consent for an interview[28] with her; Mr Shaw to ensure he was happy for the study to continue once he replaced Mrs Benson as Headteacher; each participant at every meeting. Every participant also provided contact details on the consent form (see exemplar in Appendix H), and I also renegotiated consent at each meeting to ensure continual informed consent for taking part in the study but also for audio recording the session if appropriate. All consent forms and contact details were then stored in a locked cabinet, along with other data such as notes, audio recordings and transcripts, as approved[29] by the York St John Ethics Committee.

Whilst I gained formal ethical approval, as Michelle Fine et al. (2000) argue, forms and consent letters tend to protect the institution rather than the participants. It was therefore imperative that I engage rigorously and reflexively with ethical knots throughout the entirety of the study; this concept will be explored throughout the following chapters. Where appropriate, boxes will be used to explore ethical and methodological issues within the analysis chapters (see list of "Methodological Reflections at the end of the contents table, for further information.)

3.4.2 Data generation

Action research is "a contradiction in terms" according to Martyn Hammersley (2004:165) who argues that either political action or knowledge generation is privileged, both cannot occur in equal measure. However, this seems to be polarising the concepts of action and knowledge. As I demonstrated in section 3.3, if we use the fid as a metaphor, these two elements are co-constitutive; knowledge can catalyse action (Brennan and Noffke, 1997), and reflection on the action can challenge current knowledge and lead to theoretical development. This co-construction has implications for data generation and analysis.

It was not easy to predict the forms of data generated, as Brinkmann (2014:724) maintains, "those instances that truly surprise us, and cause a breakdown in our

[28] This interview sought to gain a deeper understanding of the school and its relationships with parents.
[29] (Approval Code: 141126 Haines Lyon 110107936 ET, see Appendix A)

understanding," are extremely valuable but by definition are not able to be seen beforehand. He goes on to argue that,

> if we allow ourselves to be sensitive to the strangeness of the world, there are numerous things to stumble upon: In conversations, media, books, advertising, consumer objects, architecture, and everyday episodes and situations. Usually, these are not simply given, as "data," but, at certain times, they may cause us to stumble—and thereby *become* data (Brinkmann 2014:724 original emphasis).

Hence, I became a 'data magpie' and the 'shiny objects' I 'collected' made me reflect differently on what was happening. I started to recognise different forms of data such as theories I was engaging with, personal reading and other sources that impacted the study. For instance, Rancière's (1999; 2010;2014) work on democracy and some feminist methodology (Ellsworth, 1989; Weiner, 2004) helped me to reflect on my hope for harmonious relationships to be fostered and developed between the home and the school (see section 4.1.1). This is an example of how fidding worked, as the idea of harmony started to fray, I was able to use the fid to insert the theories of Rancière to try and further unpick and reconfigure the knot. Therefore, whilst there is no agreed way to present the results of action research, I present the 'results' in terms of breakdowns of understanding and the development of understanding, whether of my own or of participants, rather than necessarily specific actions taken as might be expected.

The breakdowns and surprises contributed to a wide range of data generated in the study by strategies including group meetings, one interview, emails, as well as my own reflective and reflexive work). This, in turn, generated data including some audio recordings[30] and transcripts, meeting notes, personal notes, and emails between myself and the core participants (Patricia, Holly and Dacia). For further information see tables in Appendices, B, C and D.

I only made audio recordings via my tablet, for the interview with Mrs Benson and the first three group meetings, at which point the participants asked me to stop recording as they felt it was deterring potential new participants joining the study. Transcripts of audio recordings are problematic as they are yet another

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[30] After three group meetings, participants asked for meetings not to be recorded, in case this was putting off other people attending.

theorisation and interpretation of what was said (Lapadat, 2000); I decided where sentences end, whether something was a question or a statement, or even if something was said in jest. For the sake of readability, I have also tidied up the transcripts—removing some of the hums and has, for example. Transcription is arguably a "political act that reflects a discipline's conventions as well as a researcher's conceptualization of a phenomenon, purposes for the research, theories guiding the data collection and analysis, and programmatic goals" (Green, Franquiz, Dixon,1997:174). However, it is useful to have the transcripts to refer to in the same way as I refer to my notes. Whilst Tavory and Timmermans (2014:52) also recognise the interpretative problems present in notetaking, they argue convincingly that,

> field notes operate as all methodological precepts do—they increase the object's potential to resist our interpretations. They make it slightly harder for us to say whatever we wanted to say before we came to the field.

Thus, I argue that my written notes, as well as the transcripts, provide another destabilisation to my perspectives and another tool with which to critically reflect on the issues at play. They do not provide a pure account of truth, however. This range of data provides a "rich complexity of abundance" which is a marker for "rich rigor" (Tracy, 2010:841) as will be discussed shortly.

In line with my abductive approach, I carried out one interview and 14 group meetings to find out what the situation looked like according to the various social actors—participants and gatekeepers, so their perspectives could challenge my perspectives (Blaikie, 2013; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). However, I didn't want to just report on what I found. I used abductive logic to build theory. This process involved abstracting the data generated, for example, basic thematic analysis and taking some of that back to participants. Building on the abductive approach, I embraced the surprises—the breakdowns and reflected on them and tried to theorise them, before taking them back to participants for a coreflexive process.

Rather than trying to frame the interview as a controlled research strategy, I saw it as co-generating data rather than a process in which I might find 'truths'. This meant, that whilst I prepared questions for a semi-structured interview, I designed

it "for dialoguing with an evolving reality of persons in conversation rather than attempting to formulate theories that are universally true" (Brinkmann, 2013:12). As Lather (1991:61) argues, a "dialogic manner" is required in interviews, one that is open to what the other says, and able to change the direction of travel as needed. To do this, there has to be some element of disclosure by the researcher, rather than them playing an apparently neutral outsider. This is one of the reasons why, throughout the study, I was upfront about my being a governor and parent as well as researcher. Some form of reciprocity was necessary to ensure the participatory and dialogical nature of the study; it is not fair or right in participatory research to expect participants to be more vulnerable than myself (Positionality will be discussed in Methodological Reflection 3, and Methodological Reflection 10, see tables of contents).

Group work was chosen for the reasons discussed in section 2.3; primarily, I wanted to create a practical reflective equilibrium. Group discussions have a further benefit compared to interviews; they afford development of ideas and "greater insight into why certain opinions are held" (Blaikie, 2013:207) over individual interviews. The group discussions—whether as part of a Community Philosophy Group, coreflexion meeting or any other form—were dialogically generative. As part of a participatory action research study, group discussions afforded the questions, what is happening, why is it happening and how can we do it differently? In setting up the group work, there was "an assumption that people become more aware of, and can reflect on, their ideas and assumptions by being confronted with contrary views" (Blaikie, 2013:207). This assumption is akin to the Macmurrayian view (discussed in section 2.3) that we cannot act as discrete individuals as we are always affected by each other and need to see how our actions affect others.

3.4.3 Coreflexion

I have used the term data generation advisedly, recognising that data is not an object that is found and remains the same. This was a group process, and as discussed in section 3.2, knowledge is contingent and changes dependent on new information. Rather than accepting the data from one Community Philosophy Group or meeting as 'fact', as part of the recursive process of action research, I

would take things back to the 'core participants[31]' to discuss. Not only did this generate new thinking as they reflected on their previous discussions, but it was also a more complex form of 'member checking'.

As part of establishing validity, 'member checking' is a common form of participant verification advocated by some participatory researchers, including Harry Torrance (2012) and Herr and Anderson (2014). Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985:315) claim that this process in which researchers check back with participants that they recognise themselves in their data and analysis, "is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. However, it is a relatively passive process in participants agree or disagree with what is presented. A more interesting, and participatory approach is "coreflexion" which Jeasik Cho and Allen Trent (2009:13) describe as "a space where an advanced level of un/learning takes place as seriously as possible. Perhaps such a high level of serious un/learning is equivalent to being critical in a sound way". This process of *un/learning* can be seen, in action in section 6.3.1, where participants explore their comments on good and bad parents and on battles with the school. Coreflexion can be understood as another defamiliarisation strategy.

As part of the coreflexion process, I took transcripts, analysis as well as my reflections and theoretical thinking to the 'core participants' for reflection and discussion. I chose the more problematic and surprising excerpts drawing on Brinkmann's (2014: 723) concept of "breakdown-driven research", as discussed earlier, where we problematised the unexpected problems, contradictions and surprises together. This process afforded further problematisation, co-deconstruction and co-construction of ideas. Coreflexion thus establishes accountability, further relationality, and enriches the data and in turn rigour. It can also be said to be a defamiliarising strategy, as it creates a distance from the group discussions and a chance to reflect and think differently as is demonstrated in section 6.3.1.

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[31] The core participants were Dacia, Holly and Pat. Their attendance at nearly all meetings, meant that they took part in more activities such as coreflexion. It was not an exclusionary status. However only people who had already participated in the project were invited.

3.4.4 Reflective and reflexive writing: a practice of defamiliarisation

Another defamiliarisation strategy used, in my study, was reflective and reflexive writing. I carried out reflective writing straight after each meeting, and reflected on what happened, rather like a mirror. Reflexive writing was carried out at a later point, providing an opportunity to make "aspects of the self strange" (Bolton, 2014:14). This enabled me to consider the implications of specific happenings at a later point, which were not spotted in the immediate reflective writing exercises. An excerpt of such notes is presented in the table below. The first column contains some of my reflective notes immediately after the November 2015 meeting; the second column contains the notes that I wrote in response to these a week later.

November Notes 2015	November 2015 reflexive notes
So today we had 3 'usual' faces and two new nervous mums much to our excitement. I started with (after explaining everything including confidentiality and handover) then asked them [the group] to write their thoughts about voice. (Note this is different to plan as didn't want to scare off) Both mums have older children at college and uni.	Still stumbled over explaining Community Philosophy to new people. What did I change? I had 2 plans in my head, depending if the same group as last time or new people. I did actually use handouts later, but original plan depended on previous discussion. (Using Hornby and Lafaele (2011) barriers to engagement.) Scare off? What assumption is here? Didn't want to give out model without context. I didn't want new people to think this might be hard work or overly academic.

Table 3: Reflective and Reflexive notes

This is an example of how I provided distance from the meeting and the original notes and was able to question my assumptions and engage more reflexively with my thoughts. At points through the next few chapters, reflective or reflexive writing may be placed within text boxes where appropriate, to indicate my thinking where relevant. Reflexive writing might also include making links with

new theories or even stories I heard on the news, read in a novel or watched in a film.

As I discussed in the earlier section 3.1.2, this research is located within the Chronotope of Knowledge/Power and Defamiliarization (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005). To aid the defamiliarisation and consequent problematising and unpicking, Alvesson and Kärreman (2011:48) advocate an "interpretive repertoire", which may include the use of a range of theories and tactics to problematise situations and further defamiliarise them. This affords a more fluid approach that is open to new ways of working as appropriate. As a practical iteration of my 'fid', I reflected on different instances, I turned to the literature to help me make sense of what was happening, and at times, took the literature to the participants for further consideration and discussion. The insertion of a new strand of theory sometimes helped change the shape of the knot and the direction of the study.

This defamiliarizing approach to research embraces surprise and embraces the micro empirical experiences that afford theorisation that might challenge some of the grander narratives. In this research study, small, everyday experiences highlighted the microparticles of democracy, thus helping to develop further understanding of democratic theory in relation to parent engagement with schools.

3.4.5 Everyday practice

This use of the everyday was not confined to self-reflection on the research study, but to recognise that my everyday practice as a parent and a governor was entangled with the study. More importantly, these experiences helped me to destabilise understandings gained and provided different lenses with which to view different phenomenon and to further theorise.

Rather than seeing personal entanglement as damaging the research quality through bias, action research seemingly *necessitates* elements of autoethnography; the "use of personal experience to examine and/ or critique cultural experience" (Holman Jones et al., 2013:22). Consequently, my journal notes capturing frustrations, or indeed surprises outside of the research study, are occasionally included as primary data for analysis. Far from bracketing off the personal, I have

unashamedly engaged with the personal to further "expand the understanding of social phenomena" (Chang, 2013:108).

Such self-reflection was challenging, as it has demanded vulnerability, as both researcher, parent and governor. I would prefer not to share my misgivings about my governing practice as it is not flattering. Nevertheless, such vulnerability was crucial to destabilise the research study further and challenge the implied assumption, throughout the research, that school staff and governors should always be open to parents' voices. To facilitate and encourage deep, troubling reflection, I did not write my journal for publication but, where useful and pertinent, I have included excerpts within this text. This further complication of the personal within the research has contributed to a richer, more rigorous theoretical understanding of the parent-school relationship.

Whilst there are elements of autoethnography, to see this research study as autoethnographic would neither do justice to the complexities of autoethnography nor action research. At surface level, this thesis might appear to meet the five features of autoethnography:

> (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis. (Anderson, 2006:378)

Thus, some may argue it looks like an autoethnographic case study in presentation, but this is too simplistic. My primary commitment was to work with a group of parents towards democratic parent engagement in a primary school. However, after moving to a Chronotope 4 with a more destabilising and deconstructive approach, I forged a more radically complex approach to action research. The fidding approach splices a variety of strategies including "analytic reflexivity", some "narrative visibility" of my "researcher self" (Anderson, 2006:378) but also dialogical experimenting, coreflexion, critical discourse analytics and splicing theory (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012).The result of the fidding approach is a rupturing of understandings of parent engagement as much as practical change for myself, participants and the school. It is the rupturing of understandings, laying bare the hegemonic struggles that is laid out in the following chapters.

The complexity of such an approach demanded a move away from a narrative presentation towards a more nuanced, complex, and at times ambiguous presentation of the action research. I had originally hoped to present results such as 'after three months the participants decided to do x as a result of Community Philosophy, after 9 months the participants took over the running of Community Philosophy and after 18 months democratic engagement had been transformed,' with details of the actions leading up to each key moment. However, as has already been discussed and will be discussed in section 4.1, this is not what happened. Rather, the fidding approach requires seeing actions as reflecting on the breakdowns in understanding (Alvesson and Kärreman,2011), either my own or participants' and the active disruption of the apparent hegemony regarding parent engagement. Thus, the following chapters present a variety of breakdowns and splicing of experience and theory as we tried to understand and improve democratic parent engagement.

3.4.6 Analytic strategies

A range of analytic strategies were used to afford a depth of understanding and also rich rigour. Within the following three chapters I highlight pivotal moments in the research study which caused some form of breakdown in understanding (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011) and the strategies I used to make sense of the situation and what action I should take next. This includes examining the metaphorical language used and its contribution to the construction of discourse, behaviour and thinking is examined (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). There is also examination of the political and social logics (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) as well as logics of equivalence and difference (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) at play.

However, the results and analysis discussed do not so much provide a grand narrative on democratic engagement but rather, highlight the dialogical experimenting and micro issues that impede democratic engagement on a daily basis. The idea of dialogical experimenting is that it involves different people working together to try new things, playing with ideas and reflecting together. This is the exact opposite to the more positivistic experimenting in which embodied experiences are discounted and it is assumed there is one way of working that will be found. Dialogical experimenting firmly embodies experiences, and recognises

the multisituatedness of such experiences, thus complexifying the learning and knowledge that arises.

As discussed in section 3.1.2 this research study moved into Chronotope 4: Power/Knowledge, defamiliarisation (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005, 2015) and became "breakdown driven" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Brinkmann, 2014), in which I looked for the surprises and the breakdowns in understanding. This involved a process of 'getting to know my data' through listening to audio recordings, compiling transcripts, writing reflective and reflexive notes and discussing data with participants. Sometimes such breakdowns might be an obvious moment, for example, a participant pulling out and other times it was something was puzzling in the data, for example, noticing regular bellicose language despite participants expressing a desire for harmonious relationships – see section 4.1.1. Another key moment was near the end of the study when participants raged at the change in meetings as they occurred in the Headteacher's office, see section 5.3. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) advocate it is at this point, the researcher engages with broader literature to try to make sense of the mystery at hand. The task is to understand what has broken down in our understanding through the use of "interpretive repertoires" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011:87). My repertoire included different reflexive writing exercises, coreflexion, using the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2014) to unpick some of the struggles at play, as well as Glynos and Howarth's work to analyse the ethical and political moves.

Another analytic strategy is to use Maggie MacLure's (2013:229) metaphor of data as a "cabinet of curiosities" in which we curate data and stimulate thinking and destabilise understandings through interesting juxtapositions. As I will demonstrate in section 6.4, I used a mapping technique at one point and literally folded the paper over and used the new connections to stimulate thinking (see Appendix J).

These different strategies worked like the fid, helping to reflect on situations askew—but also to insert new theories into what I might have seen as obvious strands of thought. This section covers different *breakdowns* in understanding, as well as the attempts to make sense of the *mysteries* and then moves on to

reimagining the conditions for democratic parent engagement (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

3.4.7 Rich rigour

Whilst I discuss the notion of destabilising and dissensual ethics more deeply in section 4.4, it is important to articulate my commitment to a rigorous and ethical study. Rigour in such a destabilising, political study, does not mean rigid, inflexibility as desired in Western positivist science (Kara, 2018). Instead, I argue that rigour connotes a rigorous approach to ethics involving critical reflection on practice including “questions of relational practice. How have the values of democracy been actualized in practice?” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:12). Rather, than just assuming a fixed understanding of democracy, it can be seen how during this study, I had to change my understanding of democracy, thus arguably I fostered democratic practice in which I allowed my assumptions to be challenged.

As Sarah Tracy (2010:839) argues, in qualitative research, it is possible to conceptualise “common markers for goodness without tying these markers to specific paradigmatic practices or crafts”. It is possible to pay attention to power relationships without assuming the outcome is harmonious or consensus. Working with social antagonisms can be ethical, if attention is paid to such markers: “(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence” (Tracy, 2010:887). As Tracy (2010:839) argues, attending to these markers allows the researcher to speak to power, which is part of the ambition of the research study. Not only do I want to effect change locally and personally, but I want to be able to change the more macrostructures, by offering at least a challenge by the possibility of change. To do so robustly requires such hallmarks of good research to be present to persuade different parties and readers.

To ensure such complexity and abundance I used a range of strategies for defamiliarisation, and data collection and analysis, as I have discussed, which helped me to build a study with ‘rich rigour’. “Rich rigor”, as Tracy (2010:840) defines it, comprises “sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex: theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, sample(s), context(s) [and], data collection and analysis processes.” It should be seen throughout this thesis that the use of

different theoretical lenses afforded such "sufficient and abundant data collection and analysis processes", regardless of a small sample of participants.

Furthermore, I was attempting to gain a doctorate out of the research study whilst participants were giving up their time to help me do so. I felt I owed them a quality research study, that was carried out well and provided knowledge for public use beyond the local context (Herr and Anderson, 2014, Somekh, 2006). As Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson (2014:64) note, action research has often been "delegitimised" by academic institutions and held with suspicion due to the supposed inability to generate "public knowledge with epistemic claims". Therefore, I felt an extra burden to ensure that the study could be deemed to have validity and rigour. The rigour and validity of the study was, in my mind, an ethical imperative.

Such knowledge for public use, demands "*resonance*" which Tracy (2010: 844) argues indicates the "researcher's ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience". Imbricated with this marker, is my responsibility as a researcher to recognise the power I have as a writer in presenting evocative research whilst maintaining verisimilitude (Kara, 2018); this is more than just my agency as an author but recogising I have the power to affect others through my presentation of the research. Such resonance will hopefully be present throughout the thesis, challenging readers with new understandings of democratic parent engagement. However, this responsibility is also entwined with "deconstructive responsibility" which means refusing to deliver participants and their actions "in a linear, tidy tale" (Lather, 2007:146-7).

Tracy's (2010) remaining markers—rich rigour, sincerity, credibility and ethics—can be distilled into that of ethical relationality and strategies to ensure accountability in my research. As Helen Kara (2018:25) upholds, the two essential criteria for ethical research is "relationality and accountability".

A key strategy to address relationality and accountability is critical reflection as Robin Nelson advocates (2013). Moreover, as part of the fidding approach discussed earlier it is essential to use defamiliarisation strategies. As I will demonstrate in the coming chapters, I used defamiliarisation strategies to aid critical reflection on all aspects of my work, especially that of relationality.

Rigorous attention is paid to relationships by way of critical reflection, including attention to power dynamics and positionality, both of which slippery in practice. This in turn provides an accountability to the reader by way of being able to see a flavour of the various procedures I undertook, alongside the critical reflection. The remainder of this thesis will include key moments in the entry and exit processes of the research, ongoing consent as well as information on data collection and analysis. It should be noted due to this being action research, I also discuss my critical reflections at each stage. As I discuss the analysis there will also be moments of critical reflection on processes and procedures including ethical knots. These are entangled within the whole story and it would be inappropriate and impossible to distil such discussion down into a neat few points. Rather I am attempting to make clear my continual rigorous commitment and ethical entanglement to issues of relationality within the research study.

3.5 Summary

In summary, it can be seen that this was a complex research study, requiring continual reflexive engagement. As situations and thinking developed, different approaches were developed. Reflection on the research, led to me changing my guiding frameworks which I would argue is a hallmark of good action research; I did not simply expect practices in the school context to be changed but had to be open to fundamentally changing my thinking.

Whilst there are more strategies to explore in the following sections and deeper reflection that forms part of the analysis, reflection and reflexive strategies have formed a core part of my approach to this study. This has contributed to a deep engagement with ethical issues which will continue to be explored throughout the thesis.

Such a wide range of strategies for generating and analysing data collection afforded a “rich rigour” (Tracy, 2010:840). This “is a form of bricolage” which as Gergen and Gergen (2008:169) argue entails

> the piecing together of various, disparate modes of doing research. By acknowledging these sources, not only de we begin to see continuity, but we credit the process of collaboration that is so central to action research itself.

I argue that action research necessarily requires a bricolage of approaches and strategies, including autoethnographic work and in the case of action research as a fid, critical discourse analytics. The following three chapters will demonstrate how this fidding approach unpicked each strand of the noose, affording new understandings of democratic parent engagement.

Figure 5: Drawing by Oliver, at one of the many meetings he attended.

Chapter 4. Agency: actions, breakdowns and analysis

"Now Faith saw glitters of defiance, and a tightrope beneath her feet."

(Hardinge, 2015:404)

This chapter is the first of three analysis chapters, each of which will unpick a particular strand of the metaphorical rope. As identified in 1.8 the current form of performative parent engagement is problematic for three reasons.

- Lack of agency
- Lack of space for education politics for parents
- Lack of collective parent engagement.

These strands twist together to form a rope and, in turn, a noose that is restricting democratic parent engagement. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the aim of this action research study was to unpick this noose and provide a counter to the neoliberal form of parent engagement, by starting a Community Philosophy Group with some parents within a school. In the following chapters, I discuss key moments of change in the study, the breakdowns in understanding (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011), and the diffractive analysis (Mazzei, 2014:12) that I undertook. I unpick the strands of lack agency, lack of space and lack of collective parent engagement. As it was an action research study, it was not linear or predictable so there were surprises along the way. On unpicking the strands, I developed very different understandings as to how the strands were comprised and how they affected democratic parent engagement.

The chapters are recursive—they do not follow a neat linear line—as I gained more information, I would return to different meetings and data to analyse further. Hence as the chapters proceed, different meetings are referred to repeatedly at different points. Table 2 on page 92 is useful to help see how the meetings fitted together in the study as a whole. In order to address engagement with issues of ethics, rigour and validity I have punctuated the chapters with boxes containing 'methodological reflections' at appropriate points. These boxes may interrupt the flow of the text but can also be read separately as desired, using the table of contents for Methodological Reflections. As the three strands are metaphorically imbricated there is not always a neat separation. However, for the purposes of

unlaying and unpicking these strands, I have tried to concentrate on each factor, in turn, as much as possible. Following these three chapters, in Chapter 7, the Conclusion, I will re-lay the rope and discuss how the strands now look and how they hold each other in tension.

This chapter on *agency* starts by unpicking the original framing of the study within Chronotope 3, and how some of the starting assumptions regarding my emancipatory chronotope restricted agency of participants rather than embraced it as originally hoped. Through this analysis, I consider how a poststructural framing of the study enabled more democratic and agentic research.

Secondly, I consider the ramifications of my original aim of engendering harmonious parent-school relationships regardless of the support from the school and participants. We (the participants, especially Dacia, Holly and Pat, as well as myself) found the demand for harmonious parent-school relationships confined parent voice and, I argue, agency. Our experiences point to the need for a more dissensual model of parent engagement.

Finally, I unpick the myth of home-school partnership and examine how in this case, and arguably elsewhere, partnership is often on the terms of one partner (the school) and undermines the agency of parents. I also consider the ethical ramifications of a more dissensual home-school relationship.

Throughout the chapter I will demonstrate: how the participants problematised concepts such as support and partnership and how they challenged concepts of good and bad parents as part of the 'us/them' thinking. Excerpts of transcripts are used where possible and descriptions of unrecorded meetings are based on notes taken at the time. This will provide insights to the discussion and thinking that occurred throughout the research process, whether in a Community Philosophy Group or in a meeting between core participants and the Headteacher.

4.1 Initial reframing of the study

4.1.1 The unravelling of aims and assumptions

As discussed in Chapter 2, much of the literature regarding parent engagement positions parents as a support act. Jacky Lumby (2007), Diane Reay (2008; 2013) and Stewart Ranson et al (2005), criticise the increasing performative mode of

parent engagement which assumes parents are in agreement with the aim of education, rather than engaging critically with the 'educational needs of the community'. This is a result of the neoliberal policies that have pervaded education over the last 40 years and consequentially 'responsibilised' parents in relation to their children's achievement (Olmedo and Wilkins, 2017; Reay, 2008). Responsibilisation and the resulting individualisation distract or deter parents from questioning the assumed purposes of education, or indeed, structural problems of inequality within society and the education system (Reay, 2008).

In section 2.3.1., I detailed how I chose Community Philosophy as model to use to develop democratic parent engagement due to its emphasis on critical engagement and action. I was particularly keen to embrace the agency of parents, so often denied in apparent parent involvement initiatives. However, another attraction to Community Philosophy was the methodology advocated by SAPERE (2011), which encourages building on the last person's argument and cogenerating new knowledge. The aim is to move towards some form of consensus through deliberation and then to action. This method, I hoped, would prevent people coming along armed with specific gripes and using the study to complain about the school.

This way of working was appreciated by the Headteacher, Mrs Benson, in our interview:

> *Mrs Benson: Well I think it's really good to come at it from a different point of view and not be a kind of come along and moan about the school. I think that erm where thinking about problems or issues and how we can solve them together has a lot more merit. Because hopefully as time goes on we'll be able to get a more shared understanding of what it's like to be at school and how they have to think beyond their child and their own circumstances and perhaps think a bit wider than that*
> *Transcript excerpt 1: HT interview June 2015, lines 128ff*

As the Headteacher explains it, the hope is that if parents only took time to explore this with supposedly rational argument, they would start to understand the school. Mrs Benson was trying to do her job, and do the right thing, and was willing to let the research study take place. However, no matter how reasonable the request, in asking parents to see from the educator/administrator perspective, there was no entertainment of the notion that the school might need to also understand the

parent's perspective. This relates to the disruption of the perceived fixed truth and how this causes a social antagonism as I discuss in section 3.2.2. There is an attitude of 'don't disrupt our truth' that the school has it right.

In the initial meeting (April 2015) to plan the study with, Mrs Benson, Amy, Christine and Pat, possible participants also appreciated this way forward. An extract from my notes after this meeting illustrates this:

> I also placed much emphasis on the study being about exploring issues and collectively taking action to resolve problems rather than simply being a place to criticise the school. I emphasised the desire to develop harmonious relationships between parents and the school and not to 'rabble rouse'. This seemed to satisfy some concerned parents and the Headteacher who wanted the study to have a positive outlook. Concern was expressed about 'loud people coming for a moan'. I emphasised this was for the benefit of the school. I explained that Community Philosophy methodology was designed to build on the previous person's argument and to prevent someone coming in and taking over with their own agenda. After the meeting, I emphasised to the Headteacher that I did not see this as "a moaning shop". She responded "Oh good, I wouldn't be happy with that. Parents have enough places to moan."

Reflective notes excerpt 1: April 2015 meeting

The first Community Philosophy meeting was in May 2015; seven women (Holly, Dacia, Pat, Amy, Christine, Stacy, Lindsay), one man (Tom), and three preschool children attended. I explained the harmonious ethos that Community Philosophy aims to offer to participants, whilst also explaining how the study would work and outlining issues around consent. In this meeting we explored the barriers to parent engagement within the school and discussed some practical issues, along with some suggestions for further action. These actions included parents, Dacia and Tom, meeting with the Headteacher (Mrs Benson) to suggest publishing class schemes of work on the school website, ensuring that a member of staff was available for 'soft chats' in the morning and the creation of a glossary of school and educational terms for new parents. Arguably, much of the group discussion was limited to performative and practical elements of parent engagement rather than

democratic engagement. However, what happened next in the meeting and later that evening led to a re-evaluation of the study.

When Dacia and Tom agreed to meet with the Headteacher, they joked about needing two people to go

Dacia: Will you come with me

Holly: Yes two's always better

Dacia: Laughing - we can gang up on her

Tom: I'll just stand in the door like that. Wait to leave

Dacia: And I'll have my bat....She'll have to listen

Laughing

Holly: Remember trust

Dacia: I'm only kidding I won't do anything
Transcript excerpt 2: May 2015 CP Meeting, lines 630ff

When Dacia and Tom laughed about taking the baseball bat, Holly reminded them of the need for trust. Not only was the parent-school arena framed as a battlefield, but at times, participants were positioning themselves as the peacemakers. Despite such ameliorative moves, the presence of combative metaphors was noticeable; metaphors of war and mention of battlefield tactics were not uncommon throughout the research study. For example, in the October 2015 meeting, when discussing how she and Tom had been to visit the head, Dacia refers, albeit, again with humour to "We tried to attack from the top" (October 2015 transcript, line 114). In our July 2015 meeting, as the participants were talking about the study, Holly conceptualised it as "a sort of early warning system for them [the school] as well and before it gets to a big problem it gives them some sensible people saying actually have you thought about" (July 2015 transcript, lines 53-54). Dacia went on to explain that the role of the study was to mediate between the school and parents (see further discussion in section 5.2.2). These notions of an early warning system and mediation still imply that there are two opposing sides in a battle.

In these examples there are echoes of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980:4) idea that we tend to abide by the metaphor that "argument is war" ...in which

> we can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war.

The participants were often trying to avoid the battle or mediate between different opponents. Indeed, the need to avoid conflict or at least criticism became an increasingly pivotal theme.

At the end of our first Community Philosophy meeting, I went around the group asking people to review what we had done. There was concern about criticising the school, but there was also positive appreciation of the school:

> *Dacia: There's lots of good points -we should talk about them,*
>
> *Holly: but the fact this has been really constructive shows that this is really positive*
>
> *Dacia: We care*
>
> *Lindsay: We care, we care enough to moan*
>
> *Dacia: You have got just the worse bit of it; you are kind of getting the moaning. They do lots of good things I think it's a good school*
>
> *Tom: Yeah I do*
>
> *Dacia: There's lots of good things, I 'm so sorry*

A little later Amy said:

> *I think that's what I probably wanted to say was we do trust them [the school] they're there 9 til 3 every day. When you think what they [the children] were like when they went there, they thrive at school and the teachers I guess have just got so much on their plate, such huge school, that I guess they want to do all this and they would do all this in an ideal world but I guess in an ideal world we'd do more and you know yourself with all the will in the world you can't be, you do get letters home and you want to do it but you just can't do everything. But it is, it is a lovely school and I would recommend it to anyone really.*
>
> *Transcript 1 May 2015: 657ff*

Later, that evening I received a text from Amy:

> *Hiya Charlotte—it's Amy from [Kirkgate]—enjoyed it this morn but concerned it may develop into a Slag-Off-A-Thon!!!!! Feel a little disloyal so don't think I'll come to any more meetings...*
> *Participant Communication 1: text from Amy May 2015.*

I responded saying that I thought it was useful feedback and her contribution in the meeting was really positive. I told her the subject of the next meeting, thanked her for her honesty and wished her well. I did not want to push it too much, as the consent letter (see Appendix H), (in line with BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018)), said people could withdraw at any time.

My journal entry displays the fear I felt

> Absolutely gutted as I really did not want this to become a moaning shop. Amy's reason is so galling. It is exactly what I didn't want to happen. Am gutted as I think she may feel this [slag-off-a-thon] happened today judging by her comment at end but am hoping everybody reassured her. Was today focussed too much on the school side of things? -but communication is an eternal moan, and they did come up with the ideas, so I am hoping the positive steps will be positive—do I need to check this with Mrs Benson?...
>
> Have loud voices already scared off one person? Does Community Philosophy put off certain F type people[32]? Do some people see criticism as always negative? (Yes) How do I sort this? Will this be contagious?

` *Journal Excerpt 1: May 2015*

I was upset by Amy's concern, as I had done my very best not to create a 'moaning shop' or 'slag-off-a-thon'. It was the last thing I wanted the research study to be. I was determined that it must be possible to critique but maintain harmonious relations and thought that the deliberative model of Community Philosophy might provide an appropriate forum for this. Furthermore, another fear niggled: what if Amy told the Headteacher, and the plug was pulled on the research? This led to

[32] F Type people is a reference to the Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator in which judgement tends to be based on feelings, values and concern for other people. (I used to be an MBTI practitioner).

soul searching over the following few weeks. Was Amy right, should we not even be offering any critique? What would the others think? This led me to reflecting and reading more about support and dissensus.

To add to my concerns about the study, at the next meeting (July 2015), which only Dacia, Pat and Holly attended, the participants questioned the use of Community Philosophy. Towards the end of the meeting, after a discussion on 'closing the gap', we discussed how to proceed with the research study. The women explained that when they spoke to people to invite them, they found that some had been put off by the need to act—even if it was just taking the responsibility of buying biscuits for the next meeting—and would prefer listening to an expert talking about parenting issues. This was the precise thing I was trying to avoid. They also said that people didn't understand the term Community Philosophy and that they were finding it hard to explain to other people. What these participants wanted from such a group was some form of *support* from each other, as well as being able to *discuss* relevant issues. Hence, they determined to change the name of the group and rewrite the fliers in terms of discussion and support rather than Community Philosophy. They wanted some of the ethos of Community Philosophy but not all of it, and not the name. Questioning and debate were good, but support and sharing experiences were more important.

I found this particularly hard, as I felt that we were losing the point of the study, which was to have some form of critical, and not just supportive engagement. However, this was a participatory research study, and whilst I set it up, the idea was that participants should be able to shape the study. I went with what they suggested but resolved to investigate the issues of concerns around critique and support further. This led to some further theoretical engagement and a reframing of the study. Unbeknownst to me, the project was about to undergo a change in chronotope.

The conclusion of this meeting—the decision to move away slightly from Community Philosophy combined with the issues around critique and harmony, amplified this breakdown in my understanding. Had I approached the study in the right way? These occurrences, as well as the problems I encountered when visiting the sing-a-longs (discussed in 3.4.1), led to some deep reflective work, engagement

with theories as well as some soul searching. It appeared that everything I had set out to do was unravelling.

4.1.2 Splicing the unravelled threads: a deconstructive move

To enable me to reflect on the unravelling of the study, I engaged with feminist and poststructural theory. This 'fidding process' (see section 3.3) allowed me to reflect and view the situation from askew. I was able to splice new thinking into the old, leading to a far more poststructuralist approach as described in sections 3.2.2 and 3.3. My personal contortions centred on the injustice I saw within the 'closing the gap' agenda but also within the positioning of parents within a neoliberal education system. I wanted to challenge this and 'make things better'. Such contortions, according to Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989:307) are due to the "failure of critical educators to come to terms with the essentially paternalistic project of traditional education," this is particularly so for emancipatory education. I had to grapple with the implicit, but increasingly obvious assumption that I knew better than the participants.

After much reflection following this second Community Philosophy meeting, I realised that I had designed the project to facilitate a particular utopia that I wanted to achieve; a utopia relying a specific form of democratic voice and rational thinking (Ellsworth, 1989). Even my desire for a harmonious parent–school relationship was problematic; 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, 1992:143). This was far from the participatory research methods I was espousing.

After being somewhat humbled, I had to develop a more nuanced understanding of agency which moved beyond the traditional binary of structure versus agency (Griffiths, 1995), in which either the agent is complete and defined as fully separate from the world they abide in (Descartes, 2003), or the subject is defined by the discourse they are part of (Foucault, 1972). Rather, as Morwenna Griffiths

(1995) argues, the agent is in a context and is retroductively assessing and reflecting on theirs and other's actions, their self and the context. This is a process of becoming. The agent is never complete and separate from the context. As a subject of the discourse they are interpellated but are able to reflect and change. This in turn changes the context they are in. Griffiths (1995:178) compares this process to making a "web"—defined "as tapestry, weaving, crochet and lace, as opposed to a spider's web".

The context (discourse) shapes what we do in the same way, Griffiths argues, a needleworker is affected by the age they live in. They are free as an agent to create, but they create something that is also shaped by their context. The web of actions of the agent is also entangled with the actions of others; thus the process of becoming involves reflecting on the tangled web created, to understand more about oneself. Such reflexivity is partial and contingent on the next piece of information contained in the web. The subject is not fully conscious of all that shapes them, but as they understand their actions and their context more, they understand more about themselves as a subject, thus developing subjectivity.

As I played with the contingency of the agent, I engaged with poststructural and deconstructive methodological theory and drew on Patti Lather's work (1992:96). 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 a simplified binary logic (Grosz, 1991). Rather, it is an approach that transcends such logic by exploring the possibilities caused by playing with the assumptions underpinning the opposing binaries (Grosz, 1991). For example, in my research I had assumed that when talking about voice, it was a case of having a voice *or* not having a voice; the former good and the latter bad. By deconstructing the notion of 'having no voice is bad', I started to wonder if it was conceivable to technically have no voice, yet for this be a good thing. This raised a range of possibilities including having the agency to

withhold voice, which, as Fabienne Doucet (2011) demonstrates, is sometimes necessary as an act of resisting involvement in an oppressive system.

I therefore started to view the research process differently; rather than have an answer to a problem and hoping 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. This was a move away from the emancipatory Chronotope 3, *Scepticism, Conscientisation and Praxis* towards Chronotope 4 *Power/ Knowledge and Defamiliarization* (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005) as discussed in section 3.1.2.

Emancipation wasn't abandoned but understood differently; the study became about collating stories, deconstructing them, disrupting the status quo—*together*. However, 'together' did not necessarily mean collectively agreeing. It was more a connected approach rather than a collective approach. This connected disruption of the status quo, according to De Lissovoy (2014), is a process of emancipation.

This change in perspective embraced the agency of participants in a far more congruent way. As Gaby Weiner (2004) argues, rather than critical research focussing on the oppression of victims, a more preferable approach

> 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.

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 participants' agency, their different experiences and knowledges, 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.

Methodological Reflection 2: Reflection Democratic and Catalytic Validity

As I struggled with these issues within the research process and started to work with theory, I had to consider how to approach participants regarding theory. At first, I had assumed participants may not be interested, however as I embraced their agency I returned to meetings with some of the thinking I had been doing. At different points in the study, I took my work around Rancière

(2010) and dissensus, and Laclau and Mouffe (2014) and critical discourse analysis and presented it (with a lightness of touch) at meetings.

This process was iterative; I would take some analysis and an issue I had been trying to develop to a meeting, then the participants (namely Holly, Dacia and Pat but also occasionally Mr Shaw) would share their experience and how they thought it might relate to the theory, and I would then have to rework the theory in the light of what I had learned, which as discussed in section 6.3.1 was part of a process of coreflexion (Cho and Trent, 2009). This helped to ensure that knowledge was co-created, despite our different situated knowledges. One type of knowledge was not more valuable than the other (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). There was an exchange of knowledges and cocreation of knowledges rather than me just collecting the knowledge of participants or imparting my 'wisdom'. This process helped develop democratic validity, as I worked with the participants on many different parts of the research rather than simply taking their voices and doing something with them (Herr and Anderson, 2014). Furthermore, this reflexive process that involves researcher introspection in the light of new information from participants, can be considered to provide "triangulaxivity" (Koro-Ljungberg, 2015:36ff).

A process in which the participants and I were "open to reorienting their [our] view of reality" can be said to have "catalytic validity" (Herr and Anderson, 2014:68). This was achieved through regularly critically reflecting on our work, engaging with new theories and working individually and together to construct new knowledge. Moreover, our views about the purpose of the study were constantly challenged and reshaped. I reframed the study, but Holly, Pat and Dacia also came to terms with the fact we were not designing a model that would be used by everyone, but rather learning about our own practice and maybe contributing to understandings about parent engagement (this was discussed in emails between myself and the 'core participants' at the end of the study in May 2017).

4.2 Beyond a moaning Echo: the move to dissensus.

The concern around the "Slag-of-a-thon", as discussed in section 4.1, acted as a dislocationary moment for me, but also, Pat, Holly and Dacia. Dislocation is when we are awoken from the accepted status quo— "a moment where the subject's mode of being is experienced as disrupted" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007:110). As discussed earlier, Amy's use of the term "slag-off-a-thon" unnerved me and forced me to rethink what we were doing. It also annoyed Pat, Holly and Dacia and made them review how they thought about critique. The "slag-off-a-thon" moment was referred to throughout the study and was often used as a reference point in our thinking that led each one of us involved towards reviewing our commitment to harmonious relations. Incidentally, Amy asked to attend our very last meeting

(June 2017), where she told us that she had changed her mind and could see the point of the study. She also explained how being involved with the school for over 20 years had created a loyalty which made it hard to hear criticism, even when it was constructive. (See discussion on "blind partisan loyalty" (Steenbergen and Johnston, 2013:200) at the end of section 5.3).

The dislocationary "slag-off-a-thon" moment led me to reflect and read more about support and dissensus. I started to engage more with Rancière (1999; 2010) and began to see that, if in the research study we were expected to bite our tongues and not criticise, we were in fact being silenced. However, it was not just me. As the study moved on, participants also explored different ideas around critique but also around anger. Towards the end of the study, increasing frustration and anger, with different aspects of the school, was expressed by Dacia, Pat and Holly due to particular situations they were all individually facing. This led to discussions, in a café, on how to deal with the anger. There was concern at how one might be perceived or treated when angry, and whether it would affect their children or other parts of their life. There was often a feeling that participants had to contain their anger.

Looking at the situation analytically, Amy's refusal to stay with the study due to parents' criticism of the school, can be seen as located in the social and ideological quadrant (see A in Figure 6 below), of Glynos and Howarth's (2007) four dimensions. She had absorbed the norms that the school is right and should not be questioned. There was possible complicity with the idea that school practice does not need questioning, especially by parents (see earlier discussion of Michaela Community School in section 2.2.1). There was a certainty regarding who was right.

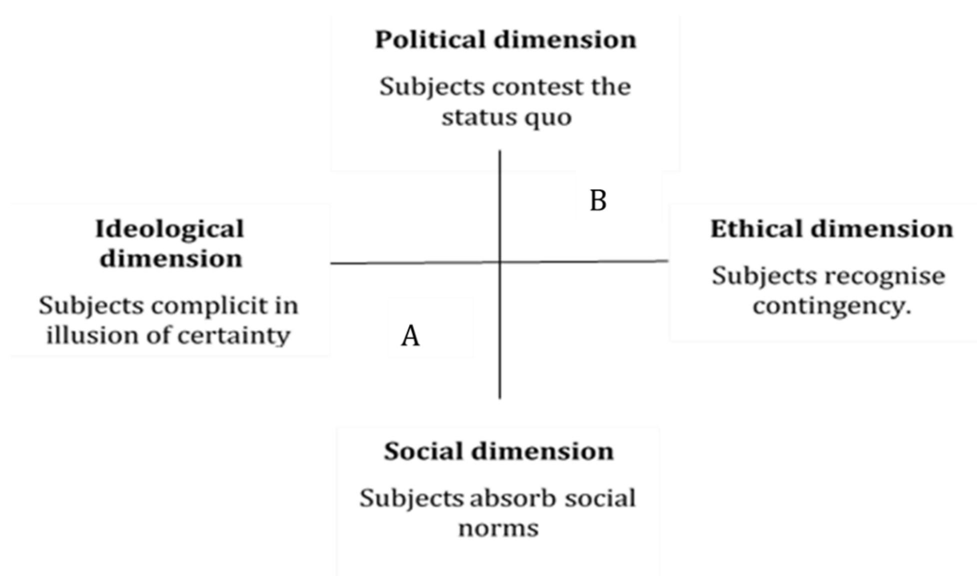

Figure 6: Adapted "Dimensions of Social Relations" (Glynos and Howarth 2007:112 Figure 3) with marker A in social and ideological quadrant and marker B in ethical and political quadrant.

Even though, in the July 2015 meeting, there was frustration about Amy's withdrawal from the study, all participants defended our stance; critique is not criticism and, indeed, by engaging with critique we could achieve harmonious working. Arguably such a stance is located in the same social and ideological quadrant (see A in Figure 6 above), as we were still colluding with the myth of harmony. Despite our frustrations, we endeavoured to work as peaceful partners rather than being seen as defiant parents. There was still an insistence that the point of the group was constructive critical engagement rather than destructive engagement. We were not to be a moaning shop. Any critique was to help improve things and ultimately contribute to a positive relationship. Critique was seen as constructive and a way ensuring there was a sensible form of parent engagement.

However, as we reflected on the 'slag-of-a-thon moment', as well as our own anger and frustrations, there was far more nuanced recognition of the complexities of the situation and our positioning within it. A determination, amongst Dacia, Holly, Pat and me, grew to not contain anger but to have a willingness to publicly contest different issues. There was a move into a more ethical political space (see B in Figure 6 above), as more contingent complex understandings grew. I also started to realise how some of the language being used to describe speaking out and questioning—such as 'moaning'—was problematic in terms of agency.

Feminist historian, Mary Beard (2015:814) has criticised such words as 'moaning' and 'whining' for

> underpin[ning] an idiom that acts to remove the authority, the force, even the humour from what women have to say…effectively reposition[ing]women back into the domestic sphere.

Considering the gendered nature of home-school relationships and parent engagement (Reay, 1998; Vincent, 2017) this framing of women's voices is of concern. By framing criticism and anger as moaning, whinging, slagging off, we are arguing that such voices need not be heard.

If the neoliberal subject is resilient and adaptive (Chandler and Reid, 2016), then women are "constructed as [neoliberalism's] ideal subjects" (Gill and Scharff, 2011:7) due to the much greater pressure, historically, on women to quietly adapt, self-police and self-regulate. Little has changed since ancient Roman times for women, (Beard, 2017); we are still expected to be mute and modest in the public sphere. Furthermore, as will be discussed in more detail in section 5.2.2, Rancière (2010) argues that to relegate people to the private, domestic sphere is to remove their agency and voice. Thus, this self-regulation of 'moaning' and anger ensures that the individual keeps their frustrations private, rather than public, thus losing their agency. Mothers'[33] opinions, it would appear, should be contained in the home.

Moreover, the emphasis on Community Philosophy being a space in which rational argument could occur, thus building consensus, is problematic. I had viewed this as an ideal format in which parents could demonstrate their agency. In order to have parents' views accepted, they had to be framed as suitably well thought through and rational. Historically the subject has been framed as someone who is an individual agent, objective and able to reason and thus behave rationally (Hodge, 1988). As Joanna Hodge (1988) argues this conceptualisation is questionable. There is no neutrality in rationality and reason, nor are these qualities necessarily benign. Rationality and reason can be used to further domesticate and privatise issues that women, especially, want to talk about. As Rancière (2010:139) notes, some people's arguments are allowed to be heard, whilst other people's voices are reduced and dismissed as "mere noise".

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[33] This is especially important in the light of mothers taking on the parent engagement roles more than fathers (see section 2.2.2.)

For example, in the November 2015 meeting[34], Jenni told the group how when explaining to a teacher that she had concerns that her child might have additional needs, she was dismissed by the teacher as a "paranoid new mother". She retorted angrily that she had two older children who were adults. In this instance, arguably Jenni was framed as mere noise, rather than someone who was worthy of listening to and capable of forming a rational argument. It is the speaking out and demanding a voice that makes us human (Bingham et al., 2010; Rancière, 2014). In this respect, I would argue that it is vital that women can defy containment within the private sphere and speak out about the school system, or indeed other systems.

Yet in the more public sphere of the school, parents, especially women are frequently expected to be mute. They are not expected to challenge or question the school. Such muteness appears to be how some schools[35] are increasingly framing parental support (see discussion on Michaela in section 2.2.1). This relates back to being in what Glynos and Howarth (2007) term as the social and ideological quadrant as highlighted above in Figure 6 on page 124 .

As Adriana Caverero (2005) illustrates the problem of agreement well by drawing on Ovid's (1998:65) poem *Metamorphoses*:

> A strange-voiced nymph observed him, who must speak
> If any other speak and cannot speak
> Unless another speak, resounding Echo.
> Echo was still a body, not a voice,
> But talkative as now, and with the same
> Power of speaking, only to repeat,
> As best she could, the last of many words.
> Juno had made her so; for many a time,

Echo does not have a voice, as she has been cursed by the Goddess Juno to only echo other people's voices (Cavarero, 2005). As the curse evolves, Echo loses her body and becomes just an echo—noise. Echo thus loses her agency as she cannot

[34] In the previous meeting, participants asked for no more recording as they felt that it was difficult to invite people, but also recording, they said,it made it more my project. If they didn't have to tell everyone it was recorded, they argued they felt they owned the project more. Therefore, there are no transcripts for this or future meetings.

[35] Michaela School expect "100% support" (Birbalsingh, 2016b). Great Yarmouth Inspiration Trust's Home School Agreement contains the following lines: "Families will: 1. Ensure that their children keep to all of Charter policies ***without exception.*** 2. Support the school by explaining to their children the importance of keeping to all Charter policies." (Great Yarmouth Charter Academy 2018, provided by a parent), although it should be noted that this phrasing is not currently used on the school website.

start a conversation or reply to another. She can only copy what others say, it is not thoughtful, deliberate copying, just repeating sounds. In the same way, arguably, parents are expected to copy what is professed by the school or government. There is an expectation that they absorb, and perpetuate, dominant the social norms.

Rancière (1999; 2010) further emphasises the importance of voice as a marker of human agency. The voice which is noise from within—aimed at others demanding recognition—is what makes us human. Cavarero (2005:169) enriches this idea by arguing that a baby's first breath results in a cry—to its mother, "the voice is an invocation that is addressed to the other and entrusts itself to an ear that hears it." Thus, the voice is always *relational*. Of course, this concept of voice is problematic if taken too literally; for instance, do humans who cannot physically hear or speak not have agency? However, as Michael Feola (2014) argues, Rancière's use of Rosa Parks' actions as an example of agency—as a black woman refusing to leave the front seat of a bus for a white passenger—demonstrates his understanding of speech as an embodied act, a bodily disruption.

Arguably the visceral anger demonstrated by Jenni about being 'voiceless' (November 2015 Meeting) in the school, was a bodily disruption that interrupted the 'common sense'. Her upset, the shaking of voice, disrupted our previous assumptions about expecting harmonious relations when questioning injustice within the school. Moreover, I had to consider how I, as a privileged middle-class white woman, might collude with the school when expecting harmonious relations rather than question injustice. With regard to Glynos and Howarth's (2007) model, this is a move from the social dimension, in which the norms are accepted, to the ethical dimension as we recognised that things were not always as straightforward and settled, as we had hoped but are contingent. The school might be right, the school might be wrong, and the same can be said for parents. As this discussion was being articulated in a forum, and as new understandings developed, it could also be said that we moved across from the social dimension to the political dimension in which we were contesting the status quo. We had therefore moved from position A, in the social and ideological quadrant to position B in the political and ethical quadrant, through our discussions (see Figure 6 on page 124).

The expectation to comply with a particular narrative is becoming increasingly common within the neoliberal school. Neoliberalism encourages an echoing compliance rather than speaking. Pam Jarvis (2017) argues that neoliberalism's

> core philosophy is that all adults should be compliant, uncritical consumer/ workers within the national economy in order to stimulate national and international money markets to the maximum extent. This is the change that Thatcher and Reagan worked so hard to bring about: that human life should be primarily governed by economics, with human lives becoming subordinate to "capital"

In the same way, parents are expected to develop economic human beings, and comply with what is demanded of them by schools and the government, rather than question the system and processes. They must be responsible for themselves and their family so as to not burden the state (Cooper, 2017). They must be resilient, insofar as they must keep taking on more stress and cope with all that is thrown at them irrespective of the failings of the education or economic system. This involves dealing with despair, anger and being able to self-regulate behaviour. The neoliberal subject is mute, compliant *and* creditworthy (see section 6.3). To express anger is to highlight our imperfections and inability to be the perfect subject. Any notion of support requires mute compliance—it involves holding up a structure, buttressing a wall (as I discuss in the next section), not "critical collaboration" (Heimans and Singh, 2018:187).

In keeping with embracing the agency of parents, but also recognising the complexity of critique, it was essential to move away from the harmonious ethic towards a poststructuralist, destabilising, dissensual ethic as discussed in section 4.4. The expectation of harmony and lack of moaning in schools demands that parents support the school, not start or interrupt the conversation and change things, but simply repeat words. Parents are relegated to making noise rather than conversation. Thus schools, and the government act at as Goddess Juno and curse parents to become Echoes by removing their voice and in turn agency. If parents have no voice, and no agency, there is no democracy.

4.3 The conformity of partnership

After the discussions and concerns about moaning and support in the May and July 2015 meetings, I decided to explore the concept of support in the next meeting

(October 2015). I set up a stimulus activity to 'explore what supporting our children's education might mean to people', I made clear it wasn't necessarily about supporting individual children but could be understood more widely. Although it wasn't a full Community Philosophy meeting the participants had said they found the basic format useful if it wasn't too rigid. I asked participants (Beth, Pat, Holly and Dacia) to look at the sheet (Appendix I) and think about the *who, what, why* and *how* of support. Initially the consensus appeared to be that support was about ensuring children were happy and healthy.

The four participants split into pairs and answered 'why support?' as follows:

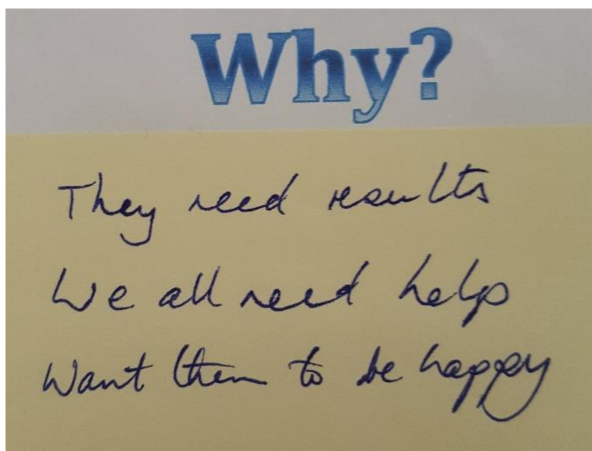

Figure 7: October 2015, Why support? Pair A

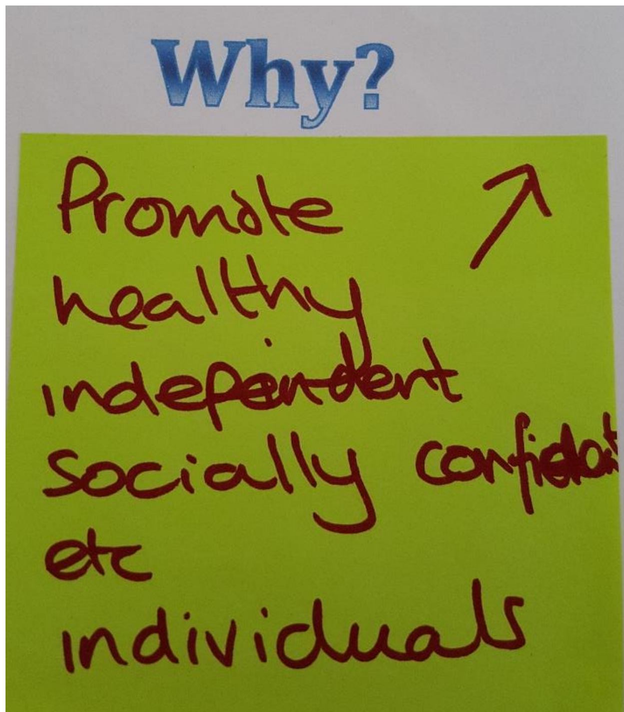

Figure 8: October 2015, Why support? Pair B

There is an interesting mix of both supporting children to achieve academic success, but also a more holistic view of supporting children to be happy and healthy, independent socially confident individuals. This echoes Lareau's (2011) "concerted cultivation", although when we look at the response for who should support, one pair's response (Figure 9) said that support is provided by the school, parents and wider family. However, the other pair (Figure 10) offered a much wider support network including the class, peers and Sainsburys—they said this was an example of how a local business might support children. This latter notion of support seems to be wider with a concept of supporting children other than one's own. It suggests a broader, more public, notion of community support.

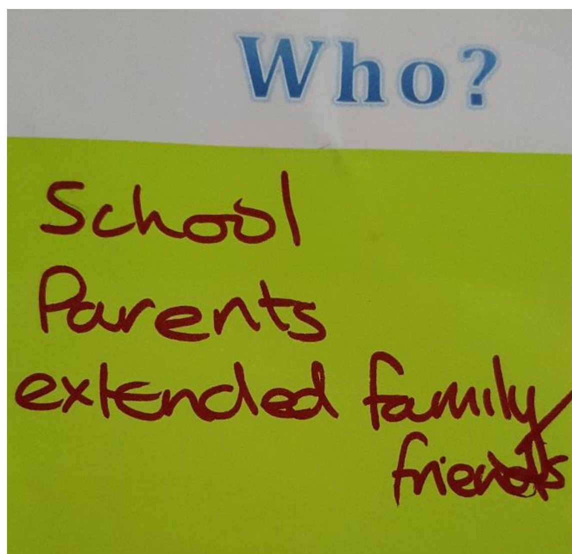

Figure 9: October Meeting 2015, Who support? Pair B

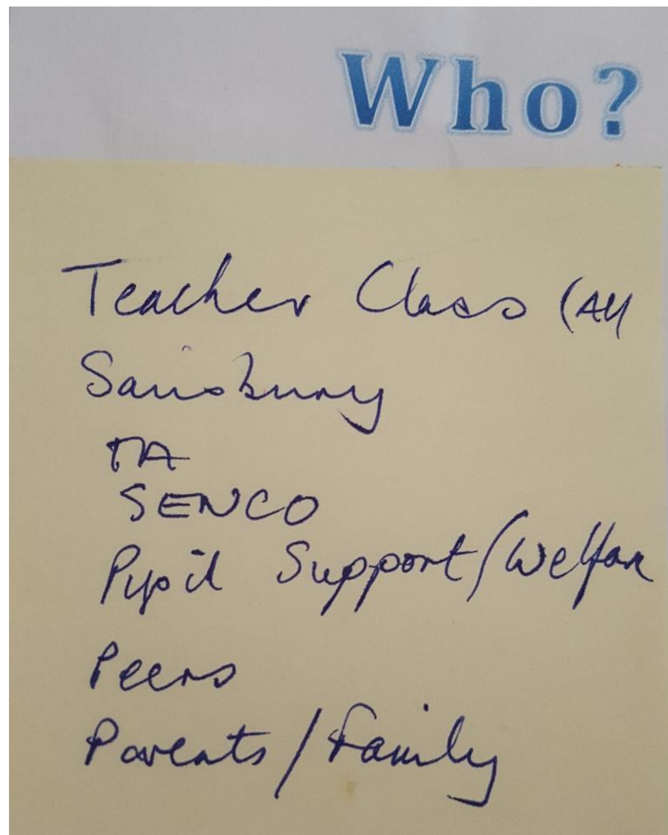

Figure 10: October Meeting 2015, Who support? Pair A

After this stimulus activity the discussion started in earnest, as Dacia said that she would like to be able to better support her children at home with their school work. She gave an example (October 2015 line 209) of wanting to know her children are learning about Anglo Saxons, so she can slip Anglo Saxons into conversations at home and maybe provide books on the topic.

> *Dacia: And then "Oh we're doing that at school"– "Really? Oh well I'll tell you what I'm doing. What are you doing? You know and kind of do that. Or I've found this really good book, do you want to look at it? That's how I kind of approach it, you know it's as if it's just by magic.*
> *Transcript 2 Oct 2015 211ff*

This role of support is one of the four roles identified by Vincent (1996) that are offered to parents in the education system (supporter, consumer, independent parent and participant). As Vincent (1996:45) points out, this role is "to support the professionals by assimilating their values and behaviour." In this case, Dacia is wanting to support the learning of history. The goal is to do well academically, which as John Hattie (2009) claims, requires support inside and outside of school. It can also be understood as "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011) in which the parent actively pursues enhancing their child's education.

The group discussion then moves to how other parents might find it difficult to support children in Maths and English homework as so much has changed since parents went to school.

> *Beth: "I think Maths is the thing that throws parents off"*
> *Transcript 3: October 2015 228*

Pat and Holly suggested that the school could provide sessions to teach parents the requisite skills, however they then reflect on experiences of people not turning up to such meetings. Garry Hornby (2011:28) characterises this form of parent engagement, not as partnership, but as the "transmission model", in which a school "recognises benefits of parents as resources," and provides training to develop the resources.

Dacia went on to discuss how she sees supporting children as a *teamwork* between the school and parents. Pat pointed to how this was discussed in our first Community Philosophy meeting, which led to some parents asking the Headteacher to provide more curriculum information to enable parents to support their children's learning further. As a result, sections were added to the website and letters were sent to some year groups over the summer term.

> *Dacia: The kind of question I always end up asking school is you know what I could be doing to support erm the kids and my children more at home and you know so that I can then help school out a bit more and I feel it should be a team thing.*
>
> *Pat: Well I hope, I mean, we said that last time didn't we. And you went and saw Mrs Benson and took that sort of message to her. Now I'm seeing in Year 5, the result of that. I had a letter, telling us what they're doing this term...Suggesting what kind of things we can do to support them*
> *Transcript 4: October 2015 82-91*

This kind of 'support'—transmission– is not partnership (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Critically, there is no space for agency in such arrangements and relationships.

'Support' is often envisaged as meaning something holding something else up. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) point to the metaphorical nature of arguments and how they can be deemed to be like unstable buildings and need supporting or buttressing. Similarly, we can see how the school and parent's supposed task of creating economic beings is shaky and needs buttressing by the

other parties. As Pat said, the parents at the school were sent a letter detailing how they could support the children and in turn the school. This exemplifies Vincent's (1996:107) contention that when parents are positioned as "school-supportive parents" they conform and "accept the teacher's view of 'appropriate' parental behaviour". Annette Lareau (1989) echoes this in her study of twelve family – school relationships. She found that teachers saw the role of the parent as an extension of school into the home. Moreover, she argues the idea that parents should act as co-educators has "attained a level of institutionalised standard" which is rarely if ever contested (Lareau, 1989:35), thus signalling the hegemony achieved regarding performative parent engagement. It is not both parties supporting each other, but one smaller structure supporting a larger edifice. Whilst Lareau first discussed the idea of concerted cultivation in 1989, she (Lareau, 2011) found it still prevalent nearly twenty years later, with minor differences in practices, and resources available to parents, which contributed to *unequal childhoods* in terms of experience and outcomes. Close to a decade later, we find these issues to still plague our education environments today (Matsuoka, 2019; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016; Wheeler, 2018). Indeed it could be argued that the era of punitive neoliberalism (Davies, 2014) has given such structural barriers a new lease of life and further removed agency from the space of the school.

As an excerpt from my journal, indicates, it is my role as a parent to ensure that education continues outside of school hours, and it is up to me to ensure my daughter's success.

> Tonight, I attended the Key Stage 4 parents evening "Study for Success." Apparently, my Year 9 child should be revising 3 hours per fortnight per subject for the next three years. Apparently, "research shows" (I cannot find this and am awaiting the school to furnish me with details) that children who have parents who support them with their studies, will do eight times better! Seriously—how does the maths even work on this? Moreover, when I asked if the school taught the children how to revise, the teacher said "no, that is why we have these evenings, so parents are equipped to teach them how to revise". Moreover, it seems that

> it has just become our responsibility, as parents, to get these kids their GCSEs.
>
> *Journal Excerpt 2: November 2018*

The spurious explanation that my support will ensure my daughter does "eight times better", makes it clear that this is the choice any sensible, responsible parent will make. Both the school *and* the parents engage in buttressing the shaky foundations of the new GCSE system that has encouraged some schools (including my daughters') to spread GCSEs over three years. This, in turn, requires parents to ensure their children engage with intensive revision activities to ensure a good outcome. There is a strange paradox, however; the school and parents are in partnership to achieve the performative outcomes, yet as Debbie Ralls (2017) points out, parents are now positioned in competition with schools. Parents have been encouraged to set up free schools in response to deeming local schools as not providing a good sufficient education. Whilst supposedly in partnership with the school, parents are in a surveillance position that also undermines relational trust and arguably agency. There is little room for both parties to be working *together*, but rather an expectation, or even a necessity, for one party to *acquiesce* to the authority of the other.

Neoliberal thinking promotes competition; it is important that there are two parties—one who wins, and one who loses (Davies,2014). As Raewyn Connell (2013) points out, to maintain a good market, it is imperative that some are allowed access whilst others aren't; there must be insiders and outsiders. If people are to be persuaded to work hard to buy a commodity, there needs to be an element of scarcity. This is how capitalism works: "Capitalism doesn't require that scarcity is real […] but it does demand that the threat of scarcity be credible" (McGowan, 2016:197). Thus, in education, not everybody can access a good school. As a good education is not necessarily available to all, parents need to be engaged to ensure their child's academic attainment. Furthermore, if Ralls (2017:217) is correct about parents being in competition with schools, it is hardly surprising that schools might try to keep parents as outsiders regardless of what they espouse.

The individualistic nature of education policy has seen relationships between staff and parents become characterised by what Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider

(2002:136) term “contractual trust”. This becomes very performative and mechanistic as the relationship is built on the trust that each party will carry out their role to ensure the job of educating the child is carried out well. Such a contract of trust is exemplified in the home-school agreement common in English schools as discussed in section 2.2.1. As the laws and general trajectory of education increasingly emphasise parents as choosing, consuming, supportive individuals (Vincent, 2000), public debate, often held within national media, becomes focussed on the ability to make such choices. This focus on the individual mutes debate, let alone criticism of the wider system. Consequently, relational trust between school staff and parents is lost. Moreover, as parents and, indeed, schools are expected to support and comply with the neoliberal performative narrative, there is little room for agency; a more dissensual, questioning home-school relationship is needed.

4.4 Dissensual ethics

Dissensus is a rupturing practice, and therefore 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 (2005;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 agonistically facing those who believe something else. Supporting Mouffe’s (2013) point, 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 need 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, at the same time recognising their anger at certain injustices. There was no expectation of agreement or consensus, but a tenacious intention to relate to the ‘other side’, even if it was extremely uncomfortable and agonistic. On occasions, participants left the Headteacher’s office furious and demanded a regroup in the café to unpick what had happened. However, despite the fury, there was a determination to return to meetings even if

that meant unpicking the power relationships first and returning with a different plan. After one such meeting with the Headteacher, Mr Shaw, it was pointed out by 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 in the café together, 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 new academic year but on the condition that it was parent led and that 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 parties yet also a determination to strategically work with each other in a form of agonistic relationship. Despite recognition of power dynamics and their entanglement with space, 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 and 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 minimise some of the power dynamics, and, recognising that intractable differences of opinions can sometimes lead to new ways of knowing and acting.

As Irigaray (1993; 1998) argues, as humans we are not one and must recognise our differences. Two (or more) do not actually become one. As two (or more) relate, it is necessary to have space that enables reflection and regarding of each other without the pressure to become of one mind. This space—which may be as simple as a meeting in a café—allows us to reflect and look awry as Žižek (2010) advocated. In turn, this affords recognition of different dynamics and hence some understanding of, and relating to, the other. Allowing or even encouraging such spaces can be challenging when the fantasy of harmony is so compelling. However, a dissensual relationship in which people can move in and out of the space, and in and out of the 'common sense', is arguably more ethical.

4.5 Summary

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, despite good intentions, this research study did not initially afford enough agency to participants or parents. Yet, the subsequent breakdowns and fidding approach afforded a much deeper understanding of agency. Through the unravelling of initial assumptions in which I realised that I had made participants "objects of [my] emancipatory desires" (Lather, 1992:143), and my insistence on a harmonious ethic, I moved to a poststructural and dissensual approach. This involved recognising a more radical, partial, contingent form of agency and subjectivity of participants in research and thereby parents.

Too much emphasis on harmonious working and consensus, by way of Community Philosophy, became constrictive and undermined agency and thus democracy. Through careful coreflexion we (Holly, Dacia, Pat and myself) were able to unpick the idea of harmony and recognise that anger should not be expected to stay private and in the domestic sphere. A harmonious consensus as originally hoped for, was in fact antithetical to democratic parent engagement. In essence, such consensus colludes with neoliberalism.

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. This enabled a more radical democratic approach to parent engagement in which participants became happier to challenge practices within the school, even if sometimes required a space to go for the women to question the norms presented in a hegemonic discourse.

As the research study progressed it is possible to track the move from a compliant and complicit mode of parent engagement located in Glynos and Howarth's (2007) Ideological/ Social quadrant to a more disruptive, dissensual approach located in the Political/Ethical quadrant. Despite this being on a small scale, the move offers hope within the neoliberal schooling system, where support is not only expected, but prevents mutual partnership and relationships (see Chapter 6 for further discussion on individualisation). Such harmonious working often demands that one party (e.g. parents) supports a more powerful party (e.g. the school)

compliantly. Arguably, this is also true within families, where there may be an effort to avoid intergenerational dissensus, in turn suppressing the agency of the children or possibly the parent. Harmony and compliant support twist together to prevent agency. Yet, as John Macmurray (1995) argued, it is when we act on the world or with other people that we are agents.

To defy the authorities and assume we can speak out and engage in educational politics is risky. For instance, to even question the apparent importance of my role in my daughter's revision, let alone the system that says she should be revising for three years, is to risk my daughter's academic success, or so I am led to believe. It is, apparently, better to be a compliant servant of the neoliberal system. However, this leads to a mute, subservient form of parent engagement that results in removing the agency of parents and thus any sense of democratic parent engagement. Against this, it is necessary for parents, and schools, to dissent; to challenge the apparent common sense. Nevertheless, a disruptive destabilising ethic does not need to be destructive. Building on Mouffe's (2005; 2013; 2018) agonistic ideals, it is possible to view the 'other', recognise their humanity, yet fundamentally disagree with them.

Dissent and, indeed, defiance, are vital markers of agency. Faith, the protagonist of the novel *The Lie Tree* (Hardinge, 2015), was told by scientists that by virtue of being a girl she could not be involved in science or the archaeological digs, she did not belong in their world as females had smaller brains than males. She defied the men and claimed her space by studying and conducting the forbidden science. Her defiance led to her feeling fully human; she was able to do what she knew she had to do and was recognised for doing so, albeit not by everyone. The contestation of her containment as an unintelligent girl who should be quiet, led to arguments and strife. However, by looking in the face of those she defied, she also started to see the defiance and gimmers of humanity in others. However, the risk of such defiance was always present: "now Faith saw glitters of defiance, and a tightrope beneath her feet." (Hardinge, 2015:404).

As we started to walk the tightrope of dissensus, the study moved away from consensus in order to afford a more agonistic democracy that did not silence voices, especially those angry voices. Such dissensus is the basis for political action and agency. As Leonie Jennings and Anne Graham (1996:176) argue,

> instead of consensus being the powerhouse of social action, it is 'dissensus' which continually compels our attention...That is making a 'space' for social action is possible only if there is continuous struggle through language games.

Moving away from one practice to another, requires agency but it also implies space. It is to the problematic subject of place and making space that I will now turn.

Chapter 5. Space: actions, breakdowns and analysis

There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold
And she's buying the stairway to heaven.
(Page and Plant, 1971)

In this chapter, I explore the various breakdowns that occurred during the research study that related to space and place. In Chapter 2, I discussed how there was a lack of public space in which to discuss or even 'do' education politics (Moutsios, 2010). I had hoped that this study would create a public space for such politics by way of Community Philosophy (see section 2.3.1), but as I have discussed the research study changed direction and moved away from Community Philosophy. Rather than creating a public space and a model for consensual, harmonious deliberation, as the last chapter detailed, the study became more agonistic and orientated to making or claiming space for parents' dissensual voices. This orientation was achieved through the various breakdowns which made me (and the participants) question the concept of *space* at a far wider and deeper level.

A constant theme within this chapter is the physical barriers in the Kirkgate playground. The barriers themselves were fascinating, but combined with the metaphorical use of barriers, the idea of space became more complex and interesting to explore. As part of the fidding process, I have engaged with a wide range of theoretical work on space, as well as exploring Lakoff and Johnson's (1990) work on the use of metaphors alongside the political theorising of Rancière (1999; 2010; 2014), Laclau and Mouffe (2014), and Glynos and Howarth (2007). This has afforded a variety of theoretical lenses thus developing a more complex knowledge regarding the role of space within democratic parent engagement. Unpicking the different logics at play, enabled me to understand how the use of the space and place in the school were denying home – school partnership. As I explored the apparent need to keep 'undesirables' out of the school, I was able to further draw on Rancière's (2010:44) concept of the police as "a distribution of the sensible (partage du sensible)".

Toward the end of the chapter, I examine how participants contested the space, made room for their own voices but also worked with the Headteacher to move

toward a more equal and democratic form of partnership. In the light of apparent breakdown, I applied some of the work of Doreen Massey (2004a) to discussions and subsequent analysis of metaphors used, which led to an exploration of the constitutive power of both space and metaphors.

5.1 Barriers to partnership

5.1.1 Lack of access to space

As I discussed in section 3.4.1, I chose to use a community centre for the group meetings in case parents were put off by having to enter the school. The centre was owned by the school but was not located on the premises; even so, using the community centre for meetings was not simple. I will explore some of the interesting issues that arose with using the community centre, including: policing, surveillance and exclusion of 'others'. Communication between the first Headteacher, Mrs Benson, the business manager and the centre manager rarely worked smoothly during the time we used the centre during the start of the project. On the day of the first Community Philosophy meeting, I was not allowed in the building until there had been fraught to-ing and fro-ing between the business manager and the community centre manager. This was despite assurances from Mrs Benson that all was arranged. On the morning of the October meeting, having filled in the new requisite booking forms the school gave me the key; I opened the door and set the alarms off. Frantic running back and forth, between the school and centre, led to a sweaty, breathless start to the session. To make matters worse, we were then asked to move into the sports hall halfway through the session, due to a double booking.

When using the building, despite watching out of the window and listening continually for people coming through the door, we were asked to lock ourselves in. We explained that we did not want to lock people out but were told we must for fear of people coming in and using the toilets for drugs or other illicit activities. This furthered feelings of alienation from the school. The difficulties made us feel

unwelcome, yet we were also locked in and contained for our own and the school's safety.

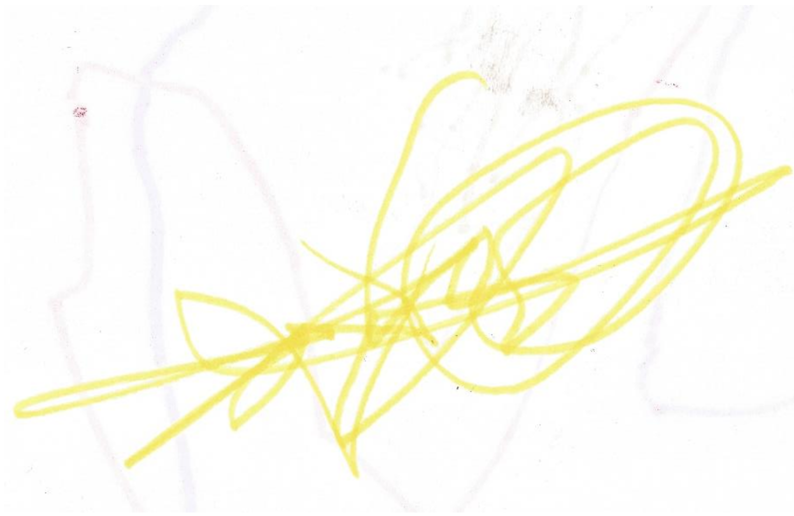

Figure 11: Drawing by Oliver. Seemingly children were welcome but not adults.

We had chosen the community centre as it was seen to be an open public space, in which children of the parents involved, would be welcome and able to cry and play without the embarrassment that may be caused in a public café. However, the idea that the community centre was a better space with fewer barriers than the school proved to be mistaken. The term 'community centre' "implies open access and shared participation" which is not subject to the powers of the school, and "implies a space for community assembly"; yet neither are able to happen easily, if at all (Blackmar, 2006:49-50). This was the first hint that spaces and places related to the study might provide a rich source of breakdowns for the research study; there were both physical problems, but metaphorical issues were also raised.

5.1.2 Physical barriers

Not only did the issues with the community centre cause consternation, but some physical barriers in the playground led to some interesting discussion throughout the study. In the October 2015 meeting's discussion about support (see section 4.3), the concept of the home-school relationship comprising support and partnership is firstly articulated then strongly challenged. Dacia explains her expectation that the school will also support her whilst Holly furiously argued that the physical barriers contradicted such support.

> *Me: So [the school] are thinking what can you do to support your children?*

Dacia: That's what I tend to be asking a lot. But also, if I, if there's things going on at home, I also then ring them and say, 'how can you best support my child' at school, but not like that but you know I'll make you aware of the situation and you might need a bit of extra support erm so I see it very much as a team thing.

Holly: I think it's quite hard to see it as a team thing when it still is—certainly it felt in the first couple of weeks—very much that the reception children and the teachers stand over there and you stand back over there behind the barriers.

Beth: Behind the barriers

Dacia: Yeah it does have that feeling that

Holly: you probably don't know, but when they put the barriers up to remind us where we should be standing the parents, you could feel parents getting irate around you...

Holly: They're actual physical barriers

Pat: and Dacia: Ah yeah

Holly: We had Mrs Benson walking round on the blue

Beth: And you wanted to go on the green, you had to give them space, it was a bit daunting. It was very daft.

Holly: It was

Holly: it is very cramped

Beth: It is
Transcript excerpt 3: October 2015, lines 128-145

This excerpt provides a very vivid demonstration of how Dacia's concept of parents, child and teachers being a 'team' is belied by reality. Notably, the parents are not 'co-educators' (Lareau, 1989)—they are kept in a separate place and categorised as not part of the school. Previously, parents had contended with coloured lines to indicate where they should stand, but now physical barriers had been erected in the playground. Holly describes how the school reminds parents of where they should stand. This is a physical representation of the parents being put in their place. David Bridges (2010:301), discussing supposed partnerships between parents and schools, catalogues "the great divide" that in reality separates the two. In the 1950s and 1960s there was clear separation between home and school, and parents were kept out of the school. He reminisces how, in the 1970s, his school had

> a white line painted outside the school gate and a notice that warned "No parents beyond this point." This was not just about avoiding crowded entrance halls, it was a reminder that at this point the school took over and that you had better leave them to their work. (Bridges, 2010:301)

In the same way, the physical barriers, that keep the parents out of Kirkgate, communicate 'parents do not belong in this school'. As discussed in section 4.1.1 the previous chapter, the use of this metaphorical language does not simply highlight an issue but contributes to the construction of the concept or characterisation of how all parties relate to each other (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Institutions such as schools and children's playgrounds are "controlled spaces which signal exclusion" (Sibley, 1995:85). Barriers communicate that parents are not qualified to be part of the school space and parents are expected to defer to the expertise of the professional elite. They are part of the spatial structure that communicates who is in power and who isn't. As David Harvey (2007) argues our environment embodies the capitalist structures and consequent power relations.

Such a divided relationship seemed especially difficult for parents who had been used to a more open relationship with staff at their children's previous nursery school. Now, at primary school, any level of communication with teachers was impossible as Beth explained:

> *Beth: When I was reading through the information. I mean like this I found it all very—very, very strange. After being at nursery when you go in and talk to people and suddenly you come in and it's like boom they cordon you like—I can't even talk to the tea…I wanted to say something and the teacher or whoever it was in the playground said "its ok I'll take this to Mrs Benson" and I thought "no, I just want to*
>
> *Holly: "I want to say it"*
>
> *Beth: I just want to, and I felt really cut off by them*

Transcript excerpt 4: October 2015, lines 155-161

The different kinds of barriers effectively prevent the building of relationships between staff and parents, as well as undermine the concept of partnership. The physical barriers, and notion of a cordon, communicate an antagonistic 'parents versus the school' vision. Parents are positioned as outsiders in more ways than one. Despite partnership being frequently espoused by the school, it is clear that the school is in control and parents are *not* seen as an agentic partner.

This authoritarian attitude, whilst contradicting the concept of partnership, is common. As Annette Lareau (1989:35) argues, whilst espousing partnership, teachers in her study "wanted to control...the amount of interconnectedness between home and school". The teachers wanted the type of involvement that suited them, and this did not include suggestions, critique or accountability. As Fabienne Doucet (2015) pithily argues,

> as did Goldilocks, school teachers, administrators, counselors and others seem to have a formula of "just right" participation that is not too much but not too little; not too pushy but not too passive; not too directive but not uninformed.

Indeed, a primary school in England, hit the headlines for grading parents A – D for their involvement with their child's education. D and C were unacceptable, B was perfect, but A was too pushy (Ough, 2016).

5.1.3 Metaphorical barriers

It was not only physical barriers that exposed the lie of partnership; a metaphorical wall was discussed too. I attended the new starters meeting in June 2015, and at the July 2015 meeting Community Philosophy meeting there was discussion about it:

> *Holly: The meeting I went to was perfectly nice, but it was very much "this is what we do" and stuff, "don't come into school". It felt not quite confront, not as bad as confrontational but quite "this is us—this is you. We do communication really well." [Said in a heavily sarcastic tone]*
>
> *Laughter*
>
> *...if you haven't been in school for, you know since you were in school, it was quite a solid brick wall. "This is us and we'll tell you what we want you to know"– erm ok .*
>
> *Transcript excerpt 5: July 2015, lines 874-882*

At this 'new starters' meeting, which Holly, I and over 80 parents attended, the Headteacher, Mrs Benson, spent over half an hour laying out her expectations of parent behaviour. This included: the type of yoghurts to include in a packed lunch; how to check for nits; how to arrange your child's hair (no gel and no fancy haircuts). These rules were needed as "children just want to be 'normal'" (New Starters Meeting June 2015). What is interesting is the effect of prescription; Holly

sees the long list acting as a wall keeping parents out. Sara Ahmed (2012; 2017) argues that institutions can be understood as brick walls that prevent entry to ‘others’. Moreover, it is the institution’s inertia which prevents change and challenge, and that acts as the wall. The school’s list of prescribed behaviours acted as a wall with each behaviour an individual brick, contributing to the institution and keeping challenging behaviours out.

Furthermore, the metaphorical wall of prescribed behaviours acts as a buttress to the institution. The list of behaviours was presented by Mrs Benson, as being supportive to parents, so children were not seen as different and bullied. However, when support is top down in nature, demanding a mute buttressing support as discussed in Chapter 4, it is not necessarily the support that parents desire or need. Rather than working in partnership with families, such support “represents a top-down projection of values and standards on to families, thereby ‘supporting’ conformity” (Gillies, 2005:70). This notion of support relates to Jacky Lumby’s (2007) argument that much parent engagement is to do with converting parents to a particular way of behaving—white middle class. Support becomes imbued with compliance, buttressing the institutional wall, which is deeply problematic for democratic engagement. Not only does the buttressing support wall keep people out, it standardises behaviour, encouraging the view that challenge or questioning is wrong, thus diminishing agency.

5.1.4 Additional barriers: othering the undesirables

Another discussion further highlights the feeling of parents being kept out by the school as undesirable visitors. This excerpt from the October 2015 meeting shows the participants discussing a coffee morning at the school that new parents had been invited to. The frustration was, that despite the invite, they did not know where to go or how to get in.

> *Holly: And even if you’re invited to the coffee morning, we still didn’t know what we were meant to be doing. We stood in the playground looking at the teacher wondering ‘is somebody going to invite us in somewhere?’*
>
> *Beth: He was asking the lady on the door if she knew.*
>
> *Holly: The lady on the door—‘ooh I don’t know’—‘it’s a coffee morning thing, do you have any idea where it is?’*

Dacia: It is like that and it doesn't get any better so you know.

Laughter

Dacia: I'd like to say yeah it's much more organised further on but actually it isn't. You just loiter around playgrounds and hope a door opens and then go in.

Laughter

Holly: Yes we just followed everyone else in.
Transcript 5: October 2015 643ff

The participants demonstrate that they were still very much outsiders to the school. The word 'loitering' is reminiscent of gangs of teenagers hanging around in a public space with nothing better to do; it connotes criminal characteristics. We are told by police to hide our precious belongings in the boot of a car and not to leave them in view of possible criminals. Thus, it is interesting to see how the school hides what is inside from the loitering parents on the outside. Not only do such behaviours act as the brick wall, but the walls themselves prevent parents knowing what is happening on the other side. As Ahmed (2012) points out, glass ceilings at least allow one to see what they are missing out on, but institutional brick walls hide what is within or without.

5.1.5 Logics of partnership: barriers as a fid

To further problematise of the role of barriers both physically and metaphorically, it is useful to identify the different logics at play. As discussed in section 3.2.4, social logics help us to understand why particular social practices occur and how they are held together (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). They provide a descriptive starting point to explore the political and fantasmatic logics also at play.

As meetings continued, the issue of the barriers was revisited regularly. When I first met with the new Headteacher, Mr Shaw in October 2015, I raised the issue of physical barriers; Mr Shaw, explained that he had been trying to cross the barriers himself. Mr Shaw said that when he arrived at the school he was struck by physical barriers and the problem with relationships within the school. There was a hint that his disapproval of the barriers might lead to their removal.

However, when Dacia, Holly, Pat and I met with Mr Shaw in March 2016, despite earlier acknowledgement of the problem of the barriers, Mr Shaw argued strongly for the need for them. They provided a sterile corridor in a crowded playground

(the playground is very small for the number of parents and children entering it). The barriers allowed the school to maintain safety insofar as the sterile corridor allowed staff to see who was entering in a more controlled fashion.

Mr Shaw denied the barriers proved that there was no partnership. Rather, the barriers are a signifier of safety; any sensible parent would want their child to be safe, he argued. Secondly staff were crossing the barriers, and there was a member of staff in the playground for parents to talk to each morning, so there is a possibility to pass on messages from parents to teachers. Thirdly, the head was very proud to be introducing regular surveys that would provide an opportunity for parents to communicate the thoughts about a specific subject to the school. Finally, the school had introduced a new app that allowed teachers to communicate the development and successes of children to the parents. These different factors, taken together, 'proved' that there was no doubt that the school was working in partnership with parents: it cared about children's safety; it had a member of staff present in the playground crossing the barriers; and it had methods of communication between the parents and the school. Arguably, the message is—any sensible person would be on our side and see we care as much as them, and we work with parents as partners.

5.1.6 Barriers rupturing the rhetoric of inclusion

However, as the participants reported, the barriers also acted to keep parents *in their place*, outside of the school. The barriers made the parents feel that their place was most definitely not inside the school. As Holly critiques, in Transcript excerpt 3, (repeated in Transcript excerpt 6 below), below, the barriers embody the lie told of partnership between parents and the school. The school promotes a rhetoric of inclusion, which is a logic of difference— 'everybody is different, but we are all in this together'—which attempts, but never quite "manages to constitute a fully sutured space" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:115). This rhetorical attempt to suture the wound in relations is ripped open by the subverting logic of equivalence, which is embodied by the barriers. The latter conveys a clear message of division—us v them—with polarised parties on each side of the barrier.

Holly's aforementioned reaction to the barriers in reference to the partnership could be understood to be a dislocationary moment as it challenges understandings of partnership with the school:

> *Holly: I think it's quite hard to see it as a team thing when it still is—certainly it felt in the first couple of weeks—very much that the reception children and the teachers stand over there and you stand back over there behind the barriers.*
>
> *Transcript excerpt 6: October 2015, lines 130ff*

The barriers, physical and metaphorical, led to the group questioning their relationship with the school and the practices that instantiated this relationship. Far from the Headteacher's understanding of them as a symbol of safety, the symbolic act of the barrier alerted participants that something is wrong with this arrangement. Is it keeping their children safe or is it further fracturing their relationship with the school?

Questions were raised around parents' ability to build trust with teachers and the school, particularly if the barriers prevent parents from talking to staff in the mornings. In the February 2016 meeting, Pat described how when Mr Shaw shared some personal information about his life with her, she felt this was an indication of trust and that she could trust him. Later, Holly discussed how the ability to talk to staff, albeit very briefly, in the morning could provide an opportunity to build a relationship and trust. Far from the contractual trust, discussed earlier, this is the relational form of trust, advocated by Bryk and Schneider (2002:136), which is "forged in daily social exchanges". The absence of such possibilities prevents trust building while symbolic nature of the barriers—cordons as they were referred to—highlights the lack of trust.

There is fantasmatic logic at play as the school promotes the 'fact' they are partners with parents; if only parents used the member of staff within the playground, and the routes of communication that were available, then they would realise they were in partnership with the school. Equally, it could be argued that the participants share a similar fantasy—if only we could talk to teachers in the morning—as presumably they could in some putative past—we would be working in partnership with the school and all our problems would be solved. This directly relates back to the discussion in Chapter 4 about the fantasy of harmony.

5.1.7 Partnership as a nodal point

Partnership can be seen to be the nodal point of parent engagement discourse articulation. Indeed, partnership between parents and school is often hailed as key to parent engagement. For instance, at the new starters meeting, the Headteacher, Mrs Benson, stated that parents were partners with the school regarding their children's education. Using Glynos and Howarth's (2007) dimensions of social relations, I would argue that the concept of partnership proffered by this school, is within the social and ideological dimensions as will now be explained.

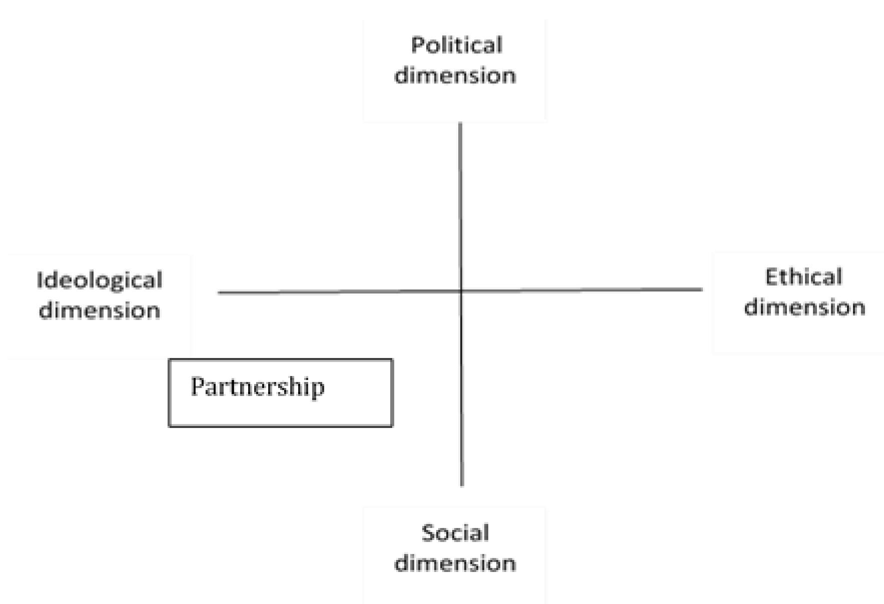

Figure 12: Adapted "Dimensions of Social Relations" (Glynos and Howarth 2007:112 Figure 3) with marker " partnership"

The term partnership was being espoused and practiced within the ideological dimension rather than an ethical one. At the start of the study, participants complained about some aspects of the partnership, especially communication and access to teachers. However, if we understand *partnership* as the nodal point—an empty signifier that highlights the school does *not* in fact work in partnership with parents—it is possible to see the discussion of the physical barriers, as a dislocationary moment in which the participants realise that there is a very real problem with the notion of partnership as they start to question all that is espoused in the name of it.

Dacia, Holly and Pat raised this mirage of partnership in a meeting with the Headteacher (November 2016). In doing so they moved into the more political dimension and actively challenged the policy of barriers. Despite, as discussed, Mr

Shaw having been open to the problem of the barriers a few months earlier, he defended the policy on grounds of safety, security and surveillance. However, it should be remembered that headteachers and schools are subject to other authorities and pressures; in the following chapter, I argue that schools must maintain the safety of children and staff, but also establish a metaphorical credit record. Thus, whilst it is easy to criticise the school, the whole picture is far more complex, echoing the everyday structures and expectations that diminish democracy.

Whilst accepting the safety concerns, Dacia, Holly and Pat were at pains to point out the difficulty in relating to staff and simply getting to know the children's teachers (see discussion on 'being allowed to know' in the next chapter). They raised other issues and policies which also emphasised that that the school was not acting in partnership with parents. Pat raised the issue of letters sent home regarding children's absence, that were overly officious and to some extent threatening, especially when absence was caused by known health conditions and hospitalisation. Mr Shaw responded that sending letters home in this manner was based on OFSTED's advice, but agreed the system needed to be adapted to take exceptional cases into consideration. However, Pat argued that it should be a personalised letter, not just for exceptional cases. All three women expressed frustration that procedures were tick box and parents nor children seen as individuals. There is a strange paradox that whilst parents as a community are fragmented through individualistic policy they are also collated together as a group of people under suspicion (Oliver, 2004). In this case, all parents are likely to lie about their child's absence and hence should be sent a standard threatening letter.

5.2 Space and power: policing the suspicious

Suspicion of parents is played out through the use of the physical barriers. The participants rather than simply complaining about being kept out of the school, also complained of being "cramped" (Holly, in Transcript excerpt 3 on page143*)*, implying the parents are *in* something; rather than simply being kept out; they are being contained. This puzzled me and led me to exploring ideas around space and power. Whilst often space might be considered benign or as a neutral container, critical geographers (Katz, 2017; Kraftl, Horton and Tucker 2012; Lefebvre, 1991;

Massey, 2004a; Massey, 2004b; Singleton, 2012; Soja, 1996; Tucker and Horton, 2012) understand space as far more complex. Space is not a benign container, for as Hille Koskela (2000:250) argues, power relations affect the containing qualities of the space; furthermore, “surveillance actually *makes* space a container”. Arguably, the enforcement of a sterile corridor to ensure that only good people entered, constituted the space that parents were held in as a container.

5.2.1 Parent engagement as surveillance

Not only are parents surveilled, but surveillance appears to be the usurping parent engagement (Crozier, 1998, Fretwell et al., 2018). Parents are often expected, by schools, to surveil their children, in terms of ensuring homework completion, correct wearing of uniform, and excellent behaviour. Moreover, these so-called acts of parent engagement are increasingly being surveilled through the checking of signed planners or reading records and accessing of ‘parent engagement’ apps. Such surveillance, Koskela (2000:255) argues, can be understood as “a common and effective form of harassment”. Furthermore such scrutiny objectifies those being scrutinised, more often than not women[36]. Similarly, I argue that signing the planner or reading book, engaging with the apps (Kirkgate had proudly introduced a new app), is an act of scrutiny of parents. It is an embodiment of a chain of power: schools scrutinising parents scrutinising their children. As Koskela (2000:255) says “looking connotes power, and being looked at powerlessness.”

> 8th September 2018
>
> I was asking A how she chose who she sits next to in class, or does her teacher set the places. Her response was a little gobsmacking. Apparently, her teacher uses ClassCharts (Edukey 2017) to set the seating plan. A explained that the positives or negatives that she earns in each lesson are put into ClassCharts which somehow works out the best place for her to sit and who to sit next too. This is quite mind boggling! There is obviously quite an algorithm going on. I can’t quite believe this is being used as such.
>
> 12th September 2018

[36] Koskela is referring to the use of video cameras in public places to keep women safe.

I spoke to Ben Williamson at BERA today who has carried out research [37]into ClassDojo (2019) and similar apps. I asked him about what A told me regarding ClassCharts. He told me this is entirely true and that these apps obtain so much data from the school, they are able to offer these services. This brings a whole new level of surveillance and creepiness to this so-called parent engagement app! I am now assuming that they are also counting how many times I access the app to check on the girls. I will be looking super engaged this week as I keep showing people how disturbing it is. I do not believe for one moment that I have ever signed agreement to such data being collected, but then I suspect there may have been a long and complicated terms and conditions tick box.

26th November 2018

At A's 'study for success evening', we were encouraged to use the parent engagement app 'ClassCharts'. They explained how useful it is for us to see what homework our children have (because obviously I am incapable of having a conversation with my daughters). Then Mrs Milner[38] said that just before the meeting, she had looked at the app and printed off a list of parents who hadn't accessed it. Obviously, these parents had lost their login details, so she had printed off the login details and would be able to give them to each of those parents! Whilst I suspected this was the case, I am still mortified to discover this is a real thing and the school is actually checking up on us. I am now considering not ever opening it up again.

Journal Excerpt 3: entries from September and November 2018

As can be seen, both parents and children are being surveilled by the school. Arguably, this removes any sense of partnership, despite the promulgation that these apps afford deeper home-school partnership (Jenna K, no date). Furthermore, parents are objectified as a surveillance machine, ensuring appropriate work is done.

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[37] (Williamson, 2017)

[38] A pseudonym

5.2.2 Maintaining the 'common sense'

The power relations and objectification of parents are further signalled by the use of the barriers, both physical and metaphorical. Rancière's (2010) concept of the police order conveys how such an order puts people in their place. Only acceptable voices are allowed 'in' whilst unacceptable people are kept outside. Drawing on the use of the word 'cordon', the police order conveys the idea of barricades keeping rioters out/ away from the sensible authorities. Those prevented from speaking in this public sphere are rendered voiceless—whereas speaking out against this injustice is part of becoming human and demonstrating agency. Exiling people (parents) from the police (the school) can be seen to be a denial of agency and humanity, whilst their insistence and claim to the right to enter demonstrates their agency and humanity. Likewise, to deny voice and to remove agency, or capacity is to "treat [people] as if they were not human" (Couldry, 2010:1).

However, whilst these parents felt they were kept out of school, they also colluded with the idea of common sense and police. At the second Community Philosophy meeting (July 2015), as the future of the study was discussed and participants tried to work out the group's purpose, there was some interesting framing:

> *Holly: I think it's a sort of early warning system for them* [the school] *as well and before it gets to a big problem it gives them some sensible people saying actually have you thought about*
>
> *Me: Yeah you can be a bit proactive I think, I think that's part of it isn't it it's just trying to just sort of solve things to how it works for us not just . .*
>
> *Dacia: It's like mediating isn't it, mediating between like you know parents 'yeah you're doing this you're doing that' and the teachers are not being all like 'you know we're doing our best and we can't do any more', it's that bit in between isn't it and that's what we need that's what every school and anywhere communication is not working well that's what you need. We've got people we've got to meet half way who go 'ok I understand can you think of a way to tackle it.'*
>
> *Transcript 6 July Meeting 2015: 53ff*

The implication that the participants were 'sensible' was later encouraged by Mr Shaw. He explained that his meetings with the core participants and I, allowed him to test out ideas on this group before going to the wider school. He said the participants were like a "barometer". Thus, positioning them as a scientific

instrument which could warn of tempestuous weather ahead; they were a safe group to try things with. Arguably the Headteacher is 'privileging' those parents whose values are possibly more akin to those of professional teachers, than those of 'others', (McClain, 2010). Such privileging was recognised in the participants' discussions (November 2015, January 2016 meetings) regarding how they felt specially chosen by the Headteacher, Mrs Benson, because they were apparently deemed more acceptable than others whom the participants felt may have benefitted more from the group.

The idea that some parents are more sensible than others, echoes Rancière's (2010:44) concept of the police as "a distribution of the sensible (partage du sensible)", which he argues is part of the inequality in society—the divide between those who adhere to the common sense and those who do not (May, 2008). However, it was interesting to see as the study progressed that the so-called sensible participants, Holly, Dacia and Pat faced different obstacles in their home-school relationships. In turn this affected how their view of being part of the sensible changed and how they felt equally outcast.

I further engaged with the work of Rancière, which acted as the fid, diffracting my understanding and splicing new understandings of agency and dissensus and. space together. Rancière (2010), drawing on the workings of ancient Greeks, argues that only certain people were deemed capable of political behaviour in the public sphere and thus allowed to be citizens. In the same way some parents are treated as more sensible, more capable of this type of parent engagement than others.

A 'common sense' (in this case, performative parenting) infuses society and helps people know where they belong and how to behave. As Heidi Hudson and Henning Melber (2014:2) argue, "space and (local) place remain a fundamental source from which ordinary people and states draw their identity". They point to the much-contested issue of boundaries and territories whether at local or national level and to how "space as both a construction and practice is always tied to historicised experiences of power and systems of inclusion and exclusion" (Hudson and Melber, 2014:2). To be included requires the ability to navigate the space and entangled systems, as well as accepting the 'common sense' of that place.

Rancière (2010) conceptualises common sense as the police; the place where the sensible reside. Specifically, Rancière (2010:46) argues that an easy way to shut down anti 'common sense' behaviour (that which question's the status quo) is to make clear that certain people do not belong, or are not qualified as citizens, these people belong to the "obscurity of domestic and private life". By keeping parents firmly out of the political arena of school, the former are positioned as incompetent. However, it is the rupturing of this common sense, the refusal to stay domesticated, that is the political, democratic act (Rancière, 1999).

5.2.3 Policing the moral bounds and undesirable contamination

As the physical barriers acted as a powerful metaphor in the breakdown in relations between school and parents, I reflected on how different types of barriers might be understood as metaphors. As part of the "diffractive analysis" process (Mazzei, 2014:12), I returned to the work of Lakoff on metaphor. Lakoff (1995) examines the morality of metaphors. Not only does he examine the use of financial rectitude as metaphor (see discussion in the next chapter on creditworthiness) but he notes the importance of moral strength as a metaphor. Lakoff identifies a group of metaphors surrounding 'moral strength'. These include: moral bounds, moral authority, moral essence, moral health and moral wholeness. The metaphor of "moral bounds" (Lakoff, 1995:188), in particular, casts an interesting light upon the repeated exploration of barriers.

> Moral Bounds: Here action is seen as motion, and moral action is seen as motion within prescribed bounds or on a prescribed path. Immoral people are those who transgress the bounds or deviate from the path. The logic of this metaphor is that transgressors and deviants are dangerous to society not only because they can lead others astray, but because they create new paths to traverse, thus blurring the clear, prescribed, socially accepted boundaries between right and wrong. (Lakoff, 1995:188)

The metaphor of moral bounds inserts new understanding into the entangled issue of parents loitering in the playground and the demand by OFSTED and the police for the school to have a sterile corridor. The 'need' for a sterile corridor between parents and classrooms, is reminiscent of 'Filth Theory', used in the 19th century to explain how disease was caused by dirt and filthy conditions, often inhabited by the poor. As Eula Biss (2015) argues, Filth Theory resulted in the poor being equated with disease.

Biss' argument made me question how parents were being framed and how the fear of the 'other' was being developed. Parents had to be kept behind physical barriers for fear of contamination and this possibly contributed to the barriers to relationships between staff and parents. The barriers also contribute to the notion that the school is, what Miwon Kwon (2014:27) calls a modernist assertion, an "uncontaminated space". Schools in their bid to be uncontaminated by the immoral or irresponsible, or simply the inexpert, are encouraged to ensure they are safe from the undesirable. Sterile corridors and one-entrance-only policies are all forms of a Foucauldian panoptical surveillance (Foucault, 1979). Such "surveillance has become a mechanism with the aims of guaranteeing purity and the exclusion of feared strangers: 'the Other' in a literal as well as metaphorical sense" (Koskela, 2000:260). Undesirable parents have no place in the police state of the sensible.

5.2.4 Fear, containment and contesting the divide.

It is not just the parents, however, who are contained by such panoptic measures. There is an implicit fear of parents on behalf of the school, as they seemingly barricade[39] themselves in. This is to some extent unsurprising, due to some experiences of aggressive parents mentioned by both Headteachers. As reported in the Times Education Supplement, aggression towards teachers by parents is seemingly on the rise (Bloom, 2015). Interestingly Adi Bloom's article also shows the apparent tension between parents wanting to see and talk to teachers more and the teachers' fear of aggression; teachers also have concerns regarding the use of social media and emails to denigrate them. The question remains though, why are parents so frustrated? Moreover, does shutting them out reduce or merely increase tensions?

As Stewart Ranson, Jane Martin and Carol Vincent (2004) demonstrate, parents may turn up at the school angry, but this anger is often borne out of endless frustration at not being able to have meaningful discussions with staff. Drawing on Habermas's (1979) theory of Communicative Action, Ranson et al, (2004: 262), argue that "the extent of reasonableness in communication depends upon the quality of the moral and ethical relations that informs the dialogue." Parents had

[39] Although as Eric Hazan (2015) charts the history of the barricade it is clear, that the barricade was used by protestors through the centuries to keep the police, army and other opposing forces out.

entered a school in anger (stormed) due to feeling that they had not been listened to. If there had been full dialogue earlier on, in which staff had listened to and trusted the parents, they may not have been on the receiving end of such anger (Ranson et al., 2004).

The anger towards the school shown by Jenni (November 2015), after being dismissed as a paranoid mother (see section 4.2), is an example of how the school, by not taking part in dialogue with parents, can engender anger and possible storming. However, there were also hints that the school culture might be changing as I met straight after that November meeting with Mr Shaw[40]. He told me there were parents at the school who had previously been banned for aggressive behaviour. As the new Headteacher, Mr Shaw was finding that if he invited them into school and listened to them, they were able to resolve the problems together and their anger was receding as a result.

'Storming' and poor home–school relationships could also be a consequence of parents moving away from the traditional view, which sees schools as the authority, and wanting more input into education (Beattie, 1985; Cooper, 2017). Arguably, the leaching of authority will come as parents are positioned as consumers. As they consume, they have more questions about why we have chosen this route or are paying for this route (even via taxes). Teachers can also be wary of parents as the latter have been positioned as auditors, checking that a school performs well enough—through checking performance and choosing schools, but also providing feedback on the public OFSTED Parent View Website (OFSTED, no date). As schools and the state stake a claim on the domestic space of the home and family[41], thus dissolving some of the barriers between school and the home, parents are also starting to stake a claim on education. Parents are expected to scrutinise how well teachers are teaching their child and will far more readily

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[40] This was a brief meeting in November 2015 between the new Headteacher and me. I wanted to ensure he understood the project and was happy to continue with it. As it was informal there is no recording or transcript.

[41] Both Michaela Community School and Great Yarmouth Charter Academy demand that parents ensure their children have a specific bedtime and get up at a set time. The latter's Home – School Agreement says families are expected to "Ensure their children are asleep by 9.30pm on a school night" and "ensure that their children have a structure morning routine." Michaela say children should be "asleep by 9pm" and awake by 6am (Smith 2016: 202}.

question how the school treats their child (Ratcliffe, 2017; Ravalier and Walsh, 2018).

Surveillance is two sided. On the one hand, the neoliberal schooling system demanding that parents ensure children are meeting the needs of the school in terms of test scores and enabling the data to meet the requirements of the market mechanisms. Yet, on the other hand, schools must also meet the ever-increasing demands of the education system, which may well translate it into the demands of the parents. The demands from either side become ever more entangled as they effectively compete against each other (Ralls, 2017). However, whilst either party may lose the competition, arguably the biggest loser will be the child.

5.2.5 The contestation of public space

The barriers were discussed yet again in the November 2016 meeting with Mr Shaw. Pat raised the issue of an incident opposite the school around which there were some extreme safeguarding concerns. This pressed home the unusual situation of the playground—it is very small for a large group of people, raising the real possibility of people entering the school amongst a crowd, not being seen and presenting a risk to the children. At this point the discussion changed and there was agreement by all parties that there was a safety issue and the barriers *may* be necessary. However, it was also recognised that the barriers raised relational issues that would need to be addressed.

Previous arguments about the barriers had become polarised and simplified, yet both sides could now see the complexity of physical barriers at the school site. Core participants (i.e. Holly, Dacia and Pat) and the Headteacher, Mr Shaw, started to understand the problems that each were experiencing and suggesting answers. The Headteacher said he had given certain staff specific responsibilities for being present in the playground until all parents had left, enabling them to take messages from parents to teachers, which was a move towards some accessibility for parents. In response, Dacia and Pat said that they did not know this was possible and requested that it be further communicated. Ideas were discussed for overcoming the metaphorical and real barriers to communication and relationships, such as the ability to email individual teachers and the identification of someone with a more obvious messenger role within the playground.

Mr Shaw, Holly, Pat and Dacia accepted that there were different positions and no correct one. The barriers were problematic for parent – school relations, yet they appeared to be helping with some serious safeguarding issues within an unusual situation. As they explored this, Holly pointed out the issue was not simply about getting messages through to staff, but also to build trust with a teacher. Having an intermediary, by way of a teacher on duty, was helpful to an extent but did not build up trust between parents and teachers. This contributed to the thinking about 'knowing' which is discussed in section 6.4. The question was asked, if parents and staff are relating well in other areas of school life, would the physical barriers seem so significant? Might they even become *permeable barriers*, in which only the most dangerous elements are kept out? What shape this might take was not resolved, but there was a willingness to explore it in the future by all present. Whilst there was not a resolution to the issue, the problem of the barrier had been shared rather than polarised as I will discuss below.

Within this discussion there were moments where a logic of difference (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) was at play; Mr Shaw's pushing the point of safety and protecting the children, temporarily breaks up the opposing sides; the concentration on safety and protecting children, appeals to everyone by "weaken[ing] and displac[ing] a sharp antagonistic polarity, endeavouring to relegate that divisions to the margins of society" (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2009:11). The logics of equivalence and difference that are at play during this process, highlight how each logic "mutually subvert[s] each other" (Torfing, 1999:125) as different parties try to push their point of view.

Arguably, "the myth of neighborhood community, of common values and lifestyle" (Young, 1990:246) was shattered as the participants realised that a harmonious partnership was a fantasy. Rather, the act of parent engagement became an act of contestation; the idea that the school, as a space, was a site of purity was thus also contested. The barriers and their symbolic nature were contested by continual pressure for access by the parents involved who refused to be contained or kept out.

5.3 Exiting the Headteacher's office and the need for a third space

In March 2016 Holly, Dacia, Pat and myself met with Mr Shaw (see discussion in section 5.1.5). There was initial excitement of meeting in the Headteacher's office and the novelty of hospitality on behalf of Mr Shaw. However, by the beginning of 2017, the novelty of meeting in the Headteacher's office wore off and created another spatial breakdown. There was frustration at the Headteacher increasingly taking control of the meetings, presenting his thoughts and the parents being positioned as responders, rather than agents of change. I had started to notice it and was wondering whether to draw attention to this. However, after the next meeting (March 2017), participants asked if we could immediately go and talk in the cafe.

Methodological Reflection 3: Positioning

Again, as a researcher I found myself in an awkward position. Was I being treated as a fixer by the participants? I considered pulling out of this meeting but then felt that as this was our last meeting together I owed them the opportunity to explore the issues further with me. I explained how after our last meeting I had been exploring how space can be imbued with power relations and have different effects on relationships. The participants talked about how they felt and behaved in different spaces and decided to continue the study on their own but in a different space. This is another example of how I would share my theoretical work with the participants and they would use the theory to reflect on how they might solve a problem. Likewise, they would offer me their experiences to enable me to refine my theory making. This became a transaction that we became increasingly comfortable with over the last year.

This was also a change in our relationship as sometimes at the start I was the instigator – an outsider catalysing the study but went on to be a co-participant – an insider. Greenwood and Levin (1998:104) characterise this kind of position as a "friendly outsider" and advocate the role of researcher as "critical friend". They state that the researcher "should
be able to reflect back to the local group things about them, including criticism of their own perspectives or habits, in a way that is experienced as supportive rather than negatively critical or domineering" (Greenwood and Levin, 1998:104).

Towards the end as I was preparing to exit, I played a more academic role, reflecting on the study, developing theory and taking it back to them whilst the participants organised meetings, and prepared for the future of the study. In the meetings with the participants and Mr Shaw I tried to reflect back what I was finding and how I was theorising the study even if this might imply criticism.

In the cafe there was a lot of talk of frustration, but the participants asked me to be careful about what I wrote down. One commented they felt like they were entering the Headteacher's office and he was "holding court". There were comments about how Mr Shaw sat in the same place each time which made them feel like he had more authority. There was a quip that next time they would take his seat when he got drinks, "to shake the space up a bit". One parent was frustrated that it seemed "parents had to manipulate teachers and situations" in order to get their point across, rather than "simply state what they thought". There was frustration that it felt far from a space to discuss education (to do education politics (Moutsios, 2010)). The meetings, it was said, were becoming more like a list of boxes to tick.

Methodological Reflection 4: Ethical Reporting

Names are deliberately not used at this point. Frustrations were high, and we agreed which comments I could report anonymously. There were increasing problems with the relationship between participants and the school over a variety of issues. At this point it is very difficult to go into further detail without compromising any participant involved.

As Helen Kara (2018) points out I am able to wield power as the author of the thesis. I know what I would like to say to make this a 'complete' story, detailing specific situations that made the study very difficult at the end, but also highlighted problems with democratic engagement. However, this would be betraying the trust of the participants to do so. All that can be said is that everyday situations that occurred between the families and the school are indicative how democratic living is often prevented by small everyday micro occurrences. The thesis has already alluded to many such occurrences and towards the end of the study these were amplified.

The women said that the space of the office was becoming an issue. One said they felt they had to be "nice and smiley and peaceful in school" and the other two agreed, saying that with various things happening they felt "anything but". However, they felt unable to raise these issues because of Mr Shaw's authority and the feeling that they had to conform within the school. As Marit Honerød Hoveid and Arnhild Finne (2015) argue out, schools often profess to have 'Open Door' policies, (although it should be noted that when I asked if there was such a policy in the coreflexion meeting (February 2016), I was told by participants there was definitely not such a policy at Kirkgate). However, such policies are problematic,

often assuming that the open door will be entered from the outside in. The parent will enter the school, and in doing so "would be compelled to conduct themselves and think in just one way, the leader's way (in other words to become dominated)" thus belying the reality that this is not an open door at all (Hoveid and Finne, 2015:77). Moreover, this relates to the earlier discussion about only the sensible being allowed to enter certain spaces such as a school. This goes to some way towards explaining the discomfort the participants began to feel over the months of meeting with the Headteacher in his office. It was one-way, almost a monologue, and as they identified, the participants felt compelled to behave in a particular manner. A more radical practice would be for the door to be exited by the Headteacher, and for them all to enter a more liminal space with different terms of engagement.

Holly, Dacia and Pat decided to meet again, before the next meeting with the Headteacher, so they could plan in more detail what they wanted out of the meetings. They asked me to come too, so they could bounce ideas off me. It was also a way of marking the end of the study and our time together. We met in a local café, before our final meeting with Mr Shaw, which was to be the end of my involvement in the study. This meeting in the café was just myself and the core participants. However, Amy, who had originally pulled out of the study due to concerns over possible "slag-off-a-thons" (section 4.1.1) joined us with Mr Shaw, having spoken to the others previously and asked if she could come to the meeting.

In the café, Holly, Dacia and Pat decided that they wanted to continue the study after I withdrew. They wanted to have regular meetings with parents, off the school site, to discuss relevant issues. The Headteacher, staff and governors were to be invited, but there was an expectation that they would *leave* the school premises and join the parents in a more neutral setting (the community centre). It was only several months later, that I realised this demand that the Headteacher must exit the school provides a certain irony, in that the participants have also exited the school.

At the final meeting (June 2017) with the Headteacher, Amy, Dacia, Holly and Pat explained their plans and Mr Shaw said he was happy to agree as long as dates were arranged in advance. Everybody agreed that they had learnt more about school relationships and democratic engagement, although they would more likely

use terms such as 'parent voice' and 'discussion' than 'democratic engagement'. We discussed explicitly how we (Pat, Holly, Dacia and myself) had learnt that we hadn't provided a grand narrative or overarching model of delivering democratic parent engagement. Having discussed this before, Pat, Holly and Dacia said they understood how democratic parent engagement takes various forms, in that this group might meet and work in certain ways, but other parents might do other things differently. There was also a requirement for the school to be more open, more porous, to parents to raise issues and question practice.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Amy said that she could see the value of critique but that she had found it hard to hear criticism, after being linked to the school for over 20 years and she had felt it compromised her loyalty. However, now, she wanted to be part of the project going forward. This could be understood as a move from the social dimension to the ethical dimension of Glynos and Howarth's (2007) social-ethical axis. Amy no longer saw loyalty as a "blind partisan loyalty" something which Howard Lavine, Marco Steenbergen and Christopher Johnston (2013:200) argue impedes democratic citizenship, as it provides a "view of the political world through a crooked lens". Rather, she espoused a "critical partisan loyalty", in which a more ambivalent and contingent loyalty is required, where one is not so convinced that the institution is always correct (Steenbergen and Johnston, 2013:200). However, this move was possibly risky; as Lavine, Steenbergen and Johnston (2013) point out, institutions often reward blind loyalty—questioning the institution can lead to being labelled as 'mouthy' or 'moaning', not an acceptable voice, whereas mutely loyal is how the 'good parent' is positioned.

Dacia agreed to take the project forward in the new academic year, however sadly in the new year she had to withdraw due to family circumstances. The school also had a difficult OFSTED inspection shortly after, and it seems from what I can gather, the meetings never took off. This is sad for me personally, not least because it is an example of how everyday pressures seem to squeeze or strangle democracy and voice within the home-school arena.

5.4 Theorising space and democracy

These last few meetings highlighted the issue of space as being vital to democratic parent engagement. The Headteacher's office became increasingly problematic,

despite initially there being excitement at being invited to the inner sanctum. This made me reflect on territory, space and power. Why did things work better in a coffee shop or more informal space? Why were things more fraught in the school? In order to grapple with these questions, I explored concepts around space.

Returning to Rancière's concept of the police as "an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying" (Rancière, 1999:29), it could be considered that once we (myself and the core participants) started to meet regularly with the Headteacher in school, we were becoming part of the public space and the common sense—the bureaucracy, the police order. Paradoxically, this confined us to particular ways of behaving and, having been outside, we now found that being inside this space was problematic too.

Doreen Massey (2004a:5) argues that the "ineluctability" of neoliberalism, ('there is no alternative' as infamously promulgated by Margaret Thatcher) has colonised geography and space. Whereas we might once have considered all countries as different places with different cultures, they are inevitably on the road to neoliberalism.

> If you point to the differences around the globe, to Mocambique or Mali or Nicaragua, they [governments of the UK and USA] will tell you such countries are just 'behind'; that eventually they will all follow the path. (Massey, 2004a:4-5)

Thus, the different geographies become history and different spaces are now units of time—they are just different steps on the "stairway to heaven" (Page and Plant, 1971), the apparent heaven of neoliberal hegemony. In the same way the spaces in schools are now just markers on the way towards becoming the 'outstanding' neoliberal institution. These spaces are increasingly embodying the neoliberal regime. Furthermore, parents are just at different points of conversion; at some point they will see reason and common sense.

> And it's whispered that soon, if we all call the tune
> Then the piper will lead us to reason. (Page and Plant, 1971)

Thus, opportunities to challenge this trajectory are important; the contestation of space and apparent hegemony are key. As Massey (2004a:5) asks "what if we refuse to convene space into time? What if we open up the imagination of the single narrative to give space (literally) for a multiplicity of trajectories?". Maybe it

is possible to contest the institutional geography and to abuse Led Zeppelin, the trajectory of following the glittering gold and continuing up the “stairway to heaven” (Page and Plant, 1971).

This trajectory is why it is so difficult to foster democratic practices within a school; the need for staff, students and parents to be continually working towards economic viability is all pervasive. Democracy takes time and care. This is why, what cultural geographers call a third space (Oldenburg, 1989) needs to be created. Moreover, it is the multiplicity of spaces and practices that are important; the moment we move towards a fixed narrative we are simply moving to another police order in Rancièrian terms (1999).

Despite the difficulties of meeting in the community centre, one might consider it a third space. Laughter was a distinguishing characteristic between the community centre, used as a third space, and the school site meetings. Laughter is especially noticeable when listening to the recordings; but it is also a key quality that I will always remember about my time at Kirkgate. In the community centre meetings, there was often hearty laughter at ourselves and at each other. This space encouraged conviviality as described by Neal, Vincent and Iqbal, (2016) and was in turn a space of refusal where we did, at times, refuse the neoliberal trajectory; however, when we were in school this was much harder to resist. Ray Oldenburg (1989) writes about “the other space”, which is neither home nor a site of work, but infused by humour and in turn questions and challenges our practices, ourselves, our modalities and our ranks. This can be seen when we chide each other with humour and grace or are self-deprecating. The chiding in this space is one of friendly but political challenge; it holds a mirror up to show the absurdity of what has been said.

> The energizing and liberating nature of humour and laughter is suspected of expressing a sense of challenge, rebelliousness, and defiance, due to which even the supreme authority, God, can be degraded, disgraced, humiliated, possibly denied, and ultimately rejected. (Yalcintas, 2015:43)

Tamara Bibby (2011), plays with Lacan’s (2006) notion of the mirror phase arguing that in the neoliberalised classroom space, assessment, accountability and performative measures provide a distorted mirror to the self. Criticising Lacan’s

seemingly benign mirror, in which the subject starts to both recognise itself but at the same time know that it is not itself, Bibby (2011), argues that the neoliberalised mirror distorts the reflection, akin to fairground mirrors which distort and diffract the image, thus giving a false reflection of the subject and making it difficult to understand who they are. Lacan, Bibby (2011) argues, places too much onus on the subject to make sense of the reflection, when we need others to help us build up a more accurate picture of who we are and to help piece together the different images and diffractions. The physical space interpellates our mental space, and vice-versa (Massey, 2004a). Therefore, it is possible to see how particular spaces, i.e. the headmaster's office or even the school building, can colonise our psychic space (Oliver, 2004). It is important, therefore, to consider the role of a possible third space, that as well as encouraging laughter, can help to decolonise our psychic space.

It is not simply about finding a third space for educational politics, but perhaps it is more apposite to argue for the need for "spaciousness" in schools. As Yi-Fu Tuan (1977:52) explains, "spaciousness" is not simply a matter of having enough physical room within a school or college, but it is a space where we as humans are enlarged, rather than confined. There is a need for spaciousness in schools, where parents, staff and children can question the status quo, but free to transcend barriers whether physical or psychic. However due to the neoliberal constraints already discussed, it may well be necessary for third spaces to be used to afford such spaciousness.

Finally, the physical barriers of a space, whether the actual barriers in the playground, or seemingly impenetrable walls and doors of the school building, can exclude particular forms of knowing or being. As Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon (2017:8) argue, using the example of Oxford University, the walls were built in an act of "enclosing knowledge, limiting access to knowledge, exerting a form of control over knowledge". The knowledge on the inside is prized as professional knowledge and knowledge on the outside is abjected and rejected; in the same way knowledge, on the inside of the school is valued, whilst parents' knowledge is increasingly abjected. This abjection of knowledge is epistemicide and it fundamentally undermines democracy (Hall and Tandon, 2017). In this sense, schools take a 'Parents must be controlled lest they be able to contribute to

knowledge creation' approach, acting in a way that is fundamentally anti-democratic. Thus, physical space, knowing and agency are imbricated regarding democracy. This aspect of knowing is explored in the next chapter.

5.5 Summary

This chapter has explored how the barriers in the playground acted as a focal point for our discussions, which through the use of a range of theories helped us to develop a much more nuanced understanding of how space is entangled with democratic workings. The physical barriers led to a deconstruction of the concept of partnership and further understanding of how policing and surveillance both undermine democratic parent engagement. Whilst we never resolved the issues of barriers, there was an understanding that they needed to be overcome in some sense, to build trust and afford democratic parent engagement.

I have explored how I exited the project, but also in some senses, the participants exited the school by demanding that future meetings should be outside of the school. However, when working through these complications and problems, it became clear that some spaces can be inconducive to democratic workings; in effect, they act as signifiers, communicating messages of separation or belonging. Critically, they are not only constituted by the power relations but are also constitutive of power relations.

This all led to deeper and more political understanding of the importance of spaciousness and how it is imbricated with relational working and agency as necessary conditions for democratic parent engagement. Spaciousness is a quality that though desirable in schools is not easy to afford. Trying to create such spaciousness can require more bureaucracy and policing; rather to demand a more democratic approach can be to claim a space, as the participants did within the Headteacher's office, but to also enter or indeed leave a space. To demand that we have a place within a specific place, is an agentic action which in Rancièrian (1999; 2010; 2014) terms is democratic and a marker of humanity. Space can affect relationships and create a divide between people, through exclusionary boundaries which in turn individualise people, whilst some spaces, third spaces (Oldenburg, 1989), might be able to bring people together. I will explore the

problem of individualisation and the possibilities of relationality in the next chapter.

Chapter 6. Individualisation and relationality: actions, breakdowns and analysis

Knowing me, knowing you
is the best I can do
(Ulvaeus et al., 1976)

As I identified in Chapter 2, *lack of collectivity* is a key strand of the neoliberal noose that is strangling democratic parent engagement. This lack of collectivity is due to the inherent individualisation of neoliberal policies (Frank, 2016). Hence, I attempted to work towards a collective form of democratic parent engagement through the use of Community Philosophy. However, as this chapter explores, as the study progressed, we found that collective parent engagement was more complex than expected. The everyday realities presented within the group meetings, as well as my own experience as a school governor and parent afforded a more nuanced understanding of individualising practices and the need to form collective parent engagement but a more connected practice.

In this chapter, I explore the challenges presented by different discursive articulations that effectively individualised parents and in turn obstructed democratic parent engagement. I examine some of the discussions in group meetings that explored notions of support. When typing up the transcripts, I became conflicted as I could see that although the conversations were well-meaning, our discussions contained implicit othering. As I unpick these knotty group discussions, I reflect critically on the discursive construction of two different, but equally caricatured, versions of monstrous parents—the impossibly good and the impossibly bad parents. Using Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) critical discourse theory, it is possible to see how trying to align or refuse to align with one of the monstrous parents can lead to the containment of voice.

To help me unpick the confliction I was feeling, as part of a coreflexion process (Cho and Trent, 2009), I took back the problematic transcripts and my analysis for further reflection of the participants. I will explore how this process led to deeper reflection for all of us and changes in understanding and possible practice. This, in turn, led to further analysis using Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) discourse theory. I also used Glynos and Howarth's (2007:112) "four dimensions of social relations"

to unpick how we moved towards the ethical dimension in our understanding of good and bad parenting and how we might move away from such individualising practice. We started to develop a more collective approach through challenging the individualising 'us and them' thinking. However, this was still problematic as it obfuscated the role privilege plays in such containment of voices and the consequent diminishing of democratic parent engagement. Thus, I was able to develop an understanding of how democratic parent engagement is further complicated by privilege and risk management.

A collective notion of parent engagement had underpinned the research study as discussed in Chapter 2. However, as the study continued, it became clear that the idea of being in it together was another problematic discourse articulation, that prevented a plurality of ideas. It was a piece of "stumble data" (Brinkmann, 2014: 724) that acted as the necessary fid, rupturing the strands of thought and enabling me to reflect on the issue from a different point and insert new theory to relay the strand. Whilst relationships between staff and parents appear to be problematic, and many elements in everyday life discourage relationship building and conduce individualisation, there was a yearning by participants to relate to staff. This "stumble data" encouraged me to explore different concepts regarding 'knowing'.

To help me unpick these striking uses of 'knowing' and 'know', I played with different approaches including mapping and some theological, political theory to help understand the importance of relationships further. Through the exploration of concepts 'connaitre' (to know someone) and 'savoir' (to know something), I argue that both are needed in order to relate to others. Such relational practice fosters trust enabling each other to voice concerns and engage in democratic practice. This work offered a glimmer of hope—countering the binary positioning of individualistic and collective parent engagement by moving to a more connected notion of democratic parent engagement.

The desire to know, in the data, provides a way to address the paradox of neoliberal parent engagement where we are both individualised and also our individuality is lost in the dominant discourse. The need to recognise each other as human and not 'other' bridges the divide. A willingness to know the person in terms of being present (not via apps) and relational gestures (simple waves and

hellos), appeared to be key to building trust and relationships rather than simply expecting trustful relationships.

6.1 Constructing monstrous parents: I am not one of 'them'

At the July meeting (the second Community Philosophy meeting), for the stimulus, I gave participants local statistics for the gap in academic achievement between the most disadvantaged children and their peers. I also provided some of the quotes from the then Chief Inspector of OFSTED Michael Wilshaw and the then so-called 'Social Mobility Tsar', Alan Milburn, regarding the responsibility of parents to ensure their children achieved well (see discussion in section 2.1.1). I asked the group to think about the stimuli and question the ideas it embodied. The group's unequivocal answer was that closing the gap was everybody's responsibility, so we then proceeded to problematise this further. At the October meeting, we problematised the idea of support by considering government and school proclamations that parents must support their children (see Chapter 6). At different points in the meetings, participants identified issues that 'disadvantaged' parents might face which make it difficult to support their children's education. Housing problems, job insecurity, absolute poverty, health conditions, long shifts, complex family situations were all discussed. The participants rarely criticised such parents, and there was much sympathy regarding the legion problems faced by many people in Skellthorpe. However, as with the Troubled Families programme (House of Commons Library 2018) discussed in section 2.1.1, the issues were conflated over time into one parent with myriad problems, rather than recognising a diverse set of people with a variety of skills and problems they are trying to resolve.

> *Pat: Again, the lists are—there are at least 3000 people on the list waiting to be housed.*
>
> *Holly: And just a stressful family situation - you've just got no money, it does bring stresses to the children as well—you can't say to the parents, well you can say to the parents make them do their homework, but if you're working out whether or not you can feed them or feed yourself that night then it's not a priority*
>
> *Dacia: And also like what you were saying about work patterns and stuff erm I guess that would play a factor wouldn't it if you have funny shifts and you have kind of you are either a single parent or and, and*

Holly: You try to cope

Dacia: And actually try to be there, but there are two or you and you are just doing a swap over and you are like oh well I'm not too sure if I'll be able to do that because they don't know the background of what they're supposed to be doing and...

Transcript excerpt 7: Community Philosophy Meeting, July 2015, lines: 219-231

It should be noted that the participants were describing what they thought people were experiencing and with sympathy. Whilst they knew people who were experiencing such issues, they weren't necessarily experiencing it themselves. However, Dacia, Holly and Pat also had an awareness that they represented a different group of parents to those that they were talking about. They frequently mentioned the desire to have more 'different voices' in the group, for example, the need for "grit" in the group (October 2015 meeting, transcript line 715) to challenge what they suspected was quite a narrow view. Whilst we wanted to trouble the homogeneity of the group, there was still a tendency to distinguish an 'us' that is different to 'them'. As a group, we had tremendous sympathy with 'troubled parents', but we were still making it clear that we were not troubled. At times we create 'the other' from our own imagining. It could be argued we are 'exoticising the other'—a process Staszak (2009:2) describes as not only being fascinated by difference but a "discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us," the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them," Other) by stigmatizing a difference—real or imagined...".

These imaginings were based on different experiences either we had had, or knew others had had, but, it was the conflation of the issues with particular groups of people that was problematic. We constructed particular problems and problem parents. These constructs became 'Frankenstein parents', made up of many different parts, or ideas of parents, mirroring Frankenstein's attempt to construct a new being out of dead body parts. When Dr Frankenstein finally achieved his alchemy, he was so horrified by his creation he recoiled and fled in disgust and fear (Shelley, 2003).

Methodological Reflection 5: Framing of discussion and possible effects

Some of the construction of Frankenstein parents may be due to framing some of the Community Philosophy sessions around the "closing the gap" narrative, in order to explore possible actions and answers to closing the gap. This has likely encouraged the idea that there are parents who are 'disadvantaged' and who

behave differently to those who are not disadvantaged. As such, it contributes to the masking of the structural problems at play and atomisation of parents as individuals solely responsible for their situations.

As a result, the group in each of the May, July and October 2015 Meetings, often focussed on identities – leading to 'us and them' distinctions rather than imagining or thinking than how, as parents, we might wish to support our children and indeed each other. When the group started to look at moving away Community Philosophy and *supporting* each other starts to become a stronger focus; identities become more fluid in terms of resisting being framed as a "good" or "bad" parent.

Whilst it is impossible to be neutral and not affect the research, it is important to recognise the role I, as a researcher, had in shaping some of the ideas and discussions. My role as school governor and mother, amongst various modalities impacted how I approached discussions at different times. It was therefore important to acknowledge these roles and continually reflect on my own input and learning. This also meant that at different times I was an outsider or insider researcher and sometimes both.

Just as apparent bad behaviours are conflated, so-called good parenting traits are also rolled into a single responsible phantasm, i.e. parent. The good parent is impossible to emulate and arguably induces guilt amongst parents. Dacia expressed guilt at not "catching" nits from her daughter – did this mean that she was not affectionate enough? (November 2015 meeting notes). I, personally, anguished as to whether my daughter had eaten enough breakfast and what the school may think of me, not least because I had signed a home-school agreement promising to provide a healthy breakfast to my child. I had also been called in by my older daughter's teacher a few years previously, to be told that her frequent stomach pains were probably due to hunger (I suspect they were more likely to be caused by the anxiety due to her father having cancer at the time). These real but micro contortions parents go through, demonstrate the problems caused by trying to live up to the phantasm of the good parent.

Moreover, such reflexive engagement with the micro-activities of parenting (or more pertinently mothering (Skeggs, 1997; Vincent, 2017)) is an important factor of self-governance that is encouraged within the role of the neoliberal parent (Fretwell et al., 2018). Parents have to navigate the "double bind of parenting culture" (Bristow, 2014:200) where they are expected to both embrace intensive

parenting but reject it for fear of being accused of smothering by 'helicopter parenting'[42]. This double-bind is akin to that mentioned by Maggie MacLure and Barbara Walker (2003:58 original emphasis), who point to how teachers at parents' evenings, are "obliged both to deliver good news and to display a 'proper' degree of engagement with the specific needs and abilities of this particular student". Staff must show they know what they are doing, whilst apparently being open to challenge by parents. Similarly, schools must be seen as protecting children from danger whilst having an open door to all. Both schools and parents are endeavouring to avoid being considered too much or too little.

Chiefly, these good parenting behaviours are often implicitly defined by being the opposite of the identified bad behaviour. As discussed in Chapter 4, the October 2015 meeting started with an exploration of 'support' within the context of education and then a further discussion around ideas about parent support. Dacia had said that she would like to be able to better support her children at home with their school work before moving quickly on to problematising the question of support. There was a discussion of whether parents felt it was their job to provide educational support at home.

> *Pat: Because there won't be will there, because a lot of people will be saying school it's your job.*
>
> *Me: - well I've had that before*
>
> *Dacia: I get a lot from people when I say this and they say well isn't that their [the teachers] job. I'd I just feel a bit sad that they have that attitude, but you know*
>
> *Transcript 7 October 2015 Meeting 264ff*

The group, including myself, demonstrated at least a little disapproval about the attitude 'it is the school's job to teach maths and English and the parents do not need to help.' Hornby (2011:27) points to a "Protective Model" of parent involvement in which the school expects parents to let teachers do their job. The participants are implicitly disagreeing with such a model and disapproving of parents who prefer this model. In Hornby's (2011:27) discussion of the "Protective

[42] The term 'helicopter parenting' is often used by schools and commentators to denote parents who 'hover' over their children incessantly. Helicopter parents are seen as too involved.

Model" he assumes it is an imposition of a school and not what a parent might want. In the same way, in the group discussion, we imply that it is not 'normal' to not want to support our children's learning in this way. There is an assumption that reading with our children is one of the most basic of requirements to be a good parent.

> *Holly, who was a teacher before extended maternity leave, continued the discussion on support:*
>
> *You've still got those children, who are not being read to, I mean it gets back to basics, who are not looking at their reading books, who aren't looking at their sounds you know, its sod Anglo Saxons*
>
> *Transcript excerpt 8: Group meeting, October 2015, lines 321ff*

There is a clear normalising of parents who read with their children in the above excerpt but also throughout the transcript. Furthermore, Holly's use of 'back to basics' embodies a moral judgmentalism that is reminiscent of John Major's "back to basics" campaign[43]. Reading with one's child becomes morally correct, rather than merely the pedagogically pragmatic thing to do. Such judgmentalism is a form of "chic fascism that evokes romantic images of unity and solidarity, a return to traditional values" (hooks, 2008:833).

However, writing such strong words about this discussion was problematic as I could identify with the well-meaning exploration of support and did not want to simply criticise the participants. I also recognised that my own attitude was not that different from that of the participants. To help me explore and understand this problem of 'us v them', I decided to use Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) critical discourse theory to help me understand more about how our discussions were working. It was helpful as their theory explores how hegemony is achieved, or at least attempted, thus enabling us to delve deeper into the discourse articulations present and understand how such binary constructs of good and bad parents obstruct democratic parent engagement.

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[43] The former Prime Minister argued "it is time to return to those old core values, time to get back to basics, to self-discipline and respect for the law, to consideration for others, to accepting a responsibility for yourself and your family and not shuffling off on other people and the state." (Major, 1993).

As humans, we tend to define ourselves by what we are not, as Laclau and Mouffe (2014) argue (see section 3.2.2 for further discussion of their work). As part of this process, concepts become simplified, as does the conceptualisation of groups of people. Thus, for instance, the two different Frankenstein 'parents'— impossibly good and bad parents—are master signifiers of two opposing but mutually dependent discursive articulations. Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) critical discourse theory suggests that, at any one time, there are chains of equivalence vying for hegemony. These articulations are made up of chains of equivalent empty signifiers. For example, to be seen as the good parent, one must read regularly with their child, support the curriculum, engage correctly—i.e. supportively with school, not "*breach the line*" (Transcript May 2015:373), be affectionate at the appropriate times, don't mollycoddle too much. The bad parent is formed by an *opposing* chain of equivalence. If one does not read with their child, they are associated with the other signifiers in the chain of equivalence, for example, negligent, uncaring about the curriculum, disengaged and unsupportive. If someone, aspiring to be the 'good' parent, questions any of these empty signifiers, they risk moving to the 'other side' and becoming the bad parent. The position of being a good parent is constituted by the fear of being, or determination not to be, a 'bad parent'. To admit that I don't have time to read with my children every night is to risk admitting negligence.

The creation of the two constructs—the good and the bad parent—complement and enable the government's discourse on parent engagement. The disadvantaged parents are deemed unable or unwilling to support their children in education whereas the more well-off parents are able to do so effectively (Spielman, 2018). This has an individualising effect. As we disidentify with a particular monstrous parent, we disidentify with the 'others'. We don't want to be that parent who does not read with their child, as that also means they are feckless and a bad parent. However, we may not be able to be the impossible good parent either and feel that we cannot identify with either monster

Glynos and Howarth's (2007) four dimensions (see discussion in section 3.2.4) help to understand the power of the simplistic view as to what made 'good' parents and or 'bad' parents. The monstrous constructs are firmly within the *ideological dimension,* as the simplicity of these constructs highlights how "subjects are complicit in concealing the radical contingency of social relations" (Glynos and

Howarth, 2007:113). Arguably, the constructions are also further along the social axis as they are just concurring with the common sense. Thus, these constructs are in the *ideological/social quadrant*. By using such simplistic constructs, we colluded with the fantasmatic logic, that if everyone is a good parent, everyone will be successful; there will be no problems with inequality and injustice. Simultaneously, however, the figure of the monstrous bad parent is held up as a warning—if you don't do this, you will end up a monster. There was no questioning if there might be anyone who disagreed with such 'truths'.

This fantasmatic logic affords the placing of blame on parents. This has facilitated the government promulgation of the idea that parenting can compensate for inequality with parents blamed in order to obfuscate the real issues of such an unequal society. As both Diane Reay (2013; 2017) and Dimitra Hartas (2015; 2012) have highlighted, this has happened with recent discourse around performative parent engagement. Recently this type of blaming of parents was carried out by the Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds (2018), who in a speech addressing social mobility, argued that it is time to address "the last taboo in education policy"—"the home learning environment"—seemingly ignoring all of the different ways successive governments have attempted to break this apparent taboo. Thus, there is a clear divide between parents who are adept at rearing academically able children and inept parents with failing children. There is a fantasmatic logic at play in which the idea is promulgated that if parents do their job properly, their children will succeed academically, despite vast inequalities in health, housing and other matters, and despite the fact our capitalist society relies on—indeed requires—such inequalities.

Moreover, as different practices are categorised good or bad, cultural or class differences and discourses are further accentuated, strengthening the hegemony of particular discourse articulations and in turn reinforcing the standardisation of expected behaviour. For example, enrolling one's child in violin lessons tends to be seen as a sign of good parenting more than boxing or football lessons; moreover, as Carol Vincent (2017) argues, the former is more expensive than the latter, thus making it easier for middle-class parents to be supposedly better parents. The eulogising of particular forms of 'concerted cultivation' is a disciplinary force and creates a "space of conformity and competition, a realm of social life that parents

often feel compelled to participate in so their children 'stay in the game'" (Katz, 2017:5). Critically for my argument, as this fantasmatic parent is silently supportive and compliant, there is little or no democratic challenge to dominant modes of schooling.

Many models of parent engagement assume notions of acceptable parenthood that mirror behaviours of middle-class families (Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2008). Neoliberalism has conflated economics with responsibility, consequently, parents must understand that to be a good person one must ensure one's self or one's children are economically viable. To challenge such thinking is to risk being considered a bad, irresponsible parent. This process of 'responsibilization' (Shamir, 2008), and the embodiment of such economic moral responsibility, ensures that responsibility for the welfare and education of children is not that of society but that of the individual. The message is clear: if you cannot be the good responsible parent, you are a bad parent. This has the effect of making it very difficult to say, 'I am not perfect' and perhaps 'I have an issue with a particular part of school or home life'. Moreover contrary to the popular discourse, parents do not always have the resources to make the 'correct' 'responsible decisions (Reay, 2017; Tyler, 2013; Vincent, 2017). The resources may be financial, cultural or social, thus ensuring that the habitus of the dominant elite is preserved and reproduced and the exclusion of the others; hegemony is maintained (Bourdieu, 2006; English and Bolton, 2016).

Neither discourse articulation is 'real'—which is not to say that it does not have real effects—but part of the struggle to normalise a particular form of parent engagement. The reification of good parent engagement and bad parent engagement is all too evident (Vincent, 2017), thus making it increasingly difficult to democratically challenge the reified discourse of responsible, good parent engagement. The possibility of becoming the 'other'—the parent who is part of the opposing discourse articulation—is used to discipline parents into becoming the right type of parent. As Iris Marion Young (1993:125-126) argues, this becomes a task of "dichotomous essentializing" in which different parties can distinguish each other as "mutually exclusive": to know that we are not like X enables us to know we must be Y. Thus, when someone can't comply with the 'good parent' discourse

articulation, it can be isolating and individualising as it is made clear that one is ‘other’ than the expected norm.

6.1.1 The silencing of the other: the impacts of micro-realities

The November 2015 meeting[44], highlighted how being seen as the ‘other’—the bad parent—affects democratic engagement. As discussed in section 4.2, Jenni shared her frustrations of her concerns being dismissed as a paranoid new mother and feeling belittled by staff (November 2015, meeting notes) As Jenni pointed out, it got to the stage where she was reticent of raising another issue for fear of becoming “that parent”. Jenni said she was fearful of going to school each day and being called in yet again to be told what has gone wrong. She also said she felt other parents watched her being called in and labelled her as the “bad parent”. She also talked about sitting and watching other parents at parties and feeling alienated. These experiences were leading Jenni to become reticent of raising her concerns and become more silent.

This silence, caused by not wanting to speak up for fear of reprisals, further stigma, or indeed just weariness leads to what Lisa Delpit (1988:281) calls “the silenced dialogue”. Delpit’s argument is based on black and native American educators not being able to complain about the racism they experience that is embodied within the education system. When they give up complaining due to the apparent futility, this is silenced dialogue. She argues that white colleagues believe “that their colleagues of color did, in the end, agree with their logic. After all, they stopped disagreeing, didn’t they?” (Delpit, 1988:281). In the same way, Jenni’s frustrations, feeling that others viewed her with suspicion and leading to her not communicating her fears and concerns, is an example of a silenced dialogue. The school may believe that she is now happy as she is not complaining but in reality she has given up.

When I heard Jenni speak about her treatment when arguing for her child with additional needs, (November 2015 meeting), I reflected on how different people had more reasons to get angry than others. It is not necessarily appropriate to maintain harmonious relationships if it meant that children had to suffer. Surely,

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[44] At the previous meeting participants had suggested we stopped recording meetings, as then it did not need to be mentioned in any publicity, they felt it gave them more ownership, and I could negotiate my role as researcher each time.

some people need to express their anger, to fight for their child, where others might benefit more from keeping quiet. I realised that privilege impacts voice and therefore democratic parent engagement. The assumptions of school staff, and indeed other parents can have a silencing effect. Rather than assuming it is parents who lack the appropriate social capital to engage with schools or that they are hard-to-reach, it may be the school that lacks the social capital to engage with parents (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002) or that the "schools rather than parents are often 'hard to reach'" (Harris and Goodall, 2008:277). Staff in schools may not know how to relate to people who are not on the same professional level as them. It was at this point I realised that providing an overarching democratic model such as Community Philosophy was not the answer. An all-encompassing democratic narrative was problematic if parents were being silenced by the micro-realities of the everyday.

6.2 Moving across the ideological-ethical axis, risking being the 'other'

As discussed, the construction of Frankenstein Parents can be located in Glynos and Howarth's (2007) social and ideological quadrant. This section will explore how the participants developed their thinking about so called good and bad parenting. After the strident conversation on parent support there was an apparent volte-face in this meeting (October 2015), as Beth admitted that she didn't always read with her son.

> *Holly: At the moment I'm quite happy for her to just do school, come home, she's shattered, she can't, she's excited to read, look at a book. But beyond that*
>
> *Yes, yes*
>
> *Pat: She needs a good sleep.*
>
> *Beth: With mine, he was great at nursery but just coming to school, he was erm, he's found it quite difficult, but like Holly I'm always, I'm—you know like you said you look out for numbers, you're doing the number plates, you're looking for buses, you know all these kind of little things, you do anyway but since he's started school, I've sort of just pulled back a bit because I'm thinking, I can't push this with him, because I don't want him to - because he's just so tired, at the minute. So we do looking at the book and the numbers and stuff, and*

Dacia: I think it's important you know your child, you know when to do that—

Beth: Yeah yeah

Dacia: Equally Y [daughter] was having a bad year I literally stopped, I absolutely and completely stopped everything at home. I didn't do anything cos I thought you are struggling so much at school, just for you to go there is good enough. And

Holly: I had a conversation with a reception mother in the queue to get in when we were still doing half days, they'd given us the first list of words,

Beth: Oh, right yes.

Holly: He come home yesterday, and he wouldn't do his homework and I phoned his dad and said when his dad came in he said get at that table and read that book and read those words.

Ahhhh.

Holly: And I said, I think they just put the words in just to get ready, I don't think you need to do anything—poor kid.

Ahh

Holly: Once they've been put in his bag...they did come with no explanation.

Beth: No no they didn't. They didn't

Holly: So, you've got the extreme, some parents would have thought 'what are they in there for? and you've got the parents who are saying 'right get home and read those now'.

Beth: I mean I felt slightly bad one day because they change the library books twice a week, but

Holly: did you not have it in your book bag?

Beth: I hadn't read the book, I hadn't read the book at home, it was two days, we'd been reading other books at home and we were looking at...

Dacia: You know your child and that's the end, that's it isn't it. You know whether to push it or not.

Pat: I make a decision at bed time if he's too tired I don't make him read, because that's going to wake him up. And then he won't go to sleep. And then we'll have a child that doesn't want to get up in the morning and go to school

Holly: Who doesn't want to do anything

Pat: Yeah

Me: So what we are actually hearing is that support is also about

Pat: Holding back

Beth: Holding back
Transcript excerpt 9: October 2015 meeting 437 ff

This excerpt illustrates how despite their earlier expectations that everyone should read with their children, these parents do not always read or do homework with their children. Furthermore, the parents see that sometimes stopping their child doing homework *is necessary* for good parenting. Whilst Holly, Beth and Dacia still emphasise they are reading with their children, Pat is more overt in saying that sometimes it is too difficult. The idea of support has started to evolve and is moving away from the simple idea that reading is essential to be a good or supportive parent. Through listening to each other and reflecting on different situations, they moved across from the ideological axis towards the ethical axis. As they subverted notions of support, they also challenged the constructs of good and bad parents. It could be argued that as they provided new meaning for apparent empty signifiers, thereby destabilising the hegemonic notions of effective parenting and parent engagement.

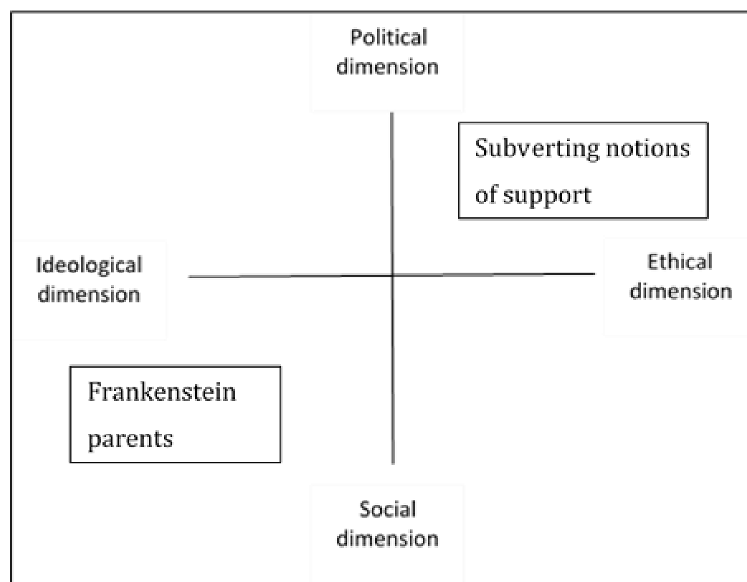


Figure 13: Adapted "Dimensions of Social Relations" (Glynos and Howarth 2007:112 Figure 3) with marker "Frankenstein parents" in social and ideological quadrant and marker "Subverting notions of support" in ethical and political quadrant

If parents sense they might be considered to be on the 'other side', there can be a silencing and individualising effect. The disgust engendered by such monstrous creations as the 'Frankenstein parents' is used to provoke fear of being seen as disgusting and thus is useful mechanism for social control (Miller, 1998). However, as the group continued working together there was reflexivity and openness to change but this required participants like Beth and Pat to be vulnerable and take the risk to be 'other' and 'disgusting'. They contested the idea that all people can be defined in a certain way. As they started to voice such questions to each other they disrupted the common sense and acted politically (Rancière, 1999; 2010; 2014).

6.3 Individual protectionism: maintaining 'credit ratings' by schools *and* parents

Whilst I was concerning myself with how parents are being silenced, whether by the hegemonic discourse of performative parent engagement or by the fear of being the other, I hadn't really considered the school's side of it. However, after the October 2015 meeting, I faced an interesting experience as a governor just before an OFSTED inspection. This ruptured my thinking and forced me to consider how schools were also themselves being silenced and forced to police and contain parents' voices for fear of being seen as 'bad' school.

> Reflection as governor October 2015
>
> A parent spoke to me of her concerns about homework being marked. My initial reaction was panic, OFSTED were due any day. How could I appease her, so that she would not mention such issues to OFSTED, or indeed comment badly on the Parent View website. I promised action and immediately spoke to the head, saying that whilst normally I would not see it as my role to say anything (I would normally ask the parent to talk to the teacher) I was concerned that this might have an impact on OFSTED.
>
> This shows the fear of inspection and how it affects daily relationships. I turned to more policing type behaviour. This seems very heavy handed and undermined the teacher-parent relationship. It would have been healthier for her to have spoken to the teacher and resolved what was

> probably a very simple issue. However, despite my values, the fear of a bad OFSTED rating, not least due to the possible consequent forced academisation led me to be more heavy handed than usual.
>
> *Journal Excerpt 4 October 2015*

I was also interfering with the relationship rather than encouraging the parent to challenge the status quo. I was therefore policing the relationship for fear of being policed by OFSTED. This made me question how much schools were caught up within a problematic system rather than being problems themselves.

Methodological Reflection 6: Using the everyday

This experience as a governor produced an ethical knot. Did the parent who triggered thoughts about my governing practice, give consent to be part of my research? Did the school consent to me writing about this? I was supposed to be researching with parents in a different school. However, this situation triggered an important realisation, leading to some important reflection and theorisation. I realised that action research requires some elements of autoethnography if we are to be truly reflective, it is not possible to compartmentalise different parts of ourselves off from others. Each part of my practice, whether as a researcher, a parent or governor informed each other.

As to whether this parent gave consent, or indeed the other schools that I use elsewhere in reflections, Brinkman (2012:60) argues that it is necessary to make “situated ethical judgements”. Arguing that it is often necessary to take note and reflect on the everyday, Brinkmann asks if when using such situations are researchers holding power *over* someone? Or indeed is the researcher making claims *about* someone? In this instance I believe not. I am questioning my own practice as a governor and making myself, not someone else vulnerable.

Protection or policing of safety, whether the safety of our reputation, the school’s reputation or physical safety, comes at a cost. Democratic voice, dissent or questioning the status quo are not allowed as they are too risky. Ulrich Beck (2009:140) argues that

> risk presupposes a decision, hence a decision maker, and produces a radical asymmetry between those who take, define and profit from risks and those who are their targets, those who must experience directly from ‘unseen side effects’ of the decisions of

> others, who may even have to pay for them with their own lives, without being able to take part in the decision making.

However, risk management is key to our success as a school and is akin to protecting our credit rating which is essential to navigate capitalist society. As Claire Westall and Michael Gardiner (2014) argue, the state and its public are wedded together through debt. After World War Two, they argue, the state provided myriad services and became the creditor to all, whether it was an education, health, housing or energy provider. Being in debt tied the public to the state and affected those who relied on this creditor far more. Those who were self-financing and could opt out of such an arrangement are able to have more freedom in how they live and have more say in how they should live. In a similar fashion, parents who cannot afford to choose the school they want or even agree with, must be grateful for being given a free school place, and must ensure that their child submits to the will of the creditor and meets their demands. Debt is a disciplinary force. Individuals must now behave in an investible way, rather than necessarily a community orientated way or a moral way (Brown, 2015). Furthermore, Lakoff's (1995) examination of how financial metaphors are used for moral rectitude, demonstrates how being creditworthy is now akin to being moral, echoing Shamir's (2008) point that to be responsible in the neoliberal age is to be economically viable.

Parents can be seen to gain good credit ratings by ensuring the correct behaviour, especially those comprising performative parenting which contributes towards creating a successful economic being. These, predominantly white, middle-class (Gewirtz, 2001, Reay, 2008), parents can get away with criticising or complaining to the school on occasion, due to having credit in the form of respect as a fellow professional. Echoing the creditworthiness metaphor, it is assumed that middle-class parents possess more of the right social capital to enable their children to achieve their potential, whether it be knowing how to engage with educated professionals or navigating the university admissions systems (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Mongon, 2013; Reay, 2006).

The endeavour to be creditworthy is an embodiment of the neoliberal discourse of high-stakes testing and accountability. If you fail the test, or moreover if your children fail the test (as a school or as a parent), you have failed to be

creditworthy. In turn, fear of damaging our 'credit rating' leads to both schools and parents having to contain behaviours, feelings and people for safety reasons. As Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson (Gibson-Graham, 2006:88)[45] argue, under the neoliberal regime, the economy is "the ultimate reality/ container/ constraint" rather than a more social "site of decision and ethical praxis". That is to say, different parties have to contain themselves rather than take risky interactions to maintain their good standing.

Moreover, there is evidence that schools do not want to be contaminated by uncreditworthy parents and pupils. As Ryszard Kapuściński (2009) points out, the world is full of historical artefacts that were built to "separate and fence [ourselves] off" from "Others", for instance, the barriers in Kirkgate playground discussed in Chapter 5. In the case of neoliberal schooling there can be a fear that parents might dent the credit rating of a school by giving the wrong responses in the parent survey, or more seriously by not carrying out their performative duties of ensuring their children achieve the correct results. These results may destroy or enhance the school's standing in the performance tables which underpin the ratings. Parents, like schools are valued by their ability to "produc[e] subjects fit for the purposes of the nation state and the capitalist economy" (Fielding and Moss, 2010:15). Thus, more disadvantaged children are being excluded by schools, either legally or illegally, at a greater rate than their middle-class contemporaries (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018; O'Brien, 2016).

This protectionist behaviour is symptomatic of England having one of the most socially segregated education systems in the world (Hills, 2015; OECD, 2012), with schools themselves being individualised and put in competition with each other through the academy and free school initiatives (Reay, 2017). This feature of the education system is "designed to polarise people" (Dorling, 2014). As Philip Whitehead (2018:36) argues, "neoliberalism which elevates the primacy of economics over ethics, has *de-moralised* the system by advancing punitive exclusion and bureaucratic management of troublesome populations". This removes any sense of education politics (Moutsios, 2010) in which we work *together* to critique and change the system, encouraging us to *leave others* behind

[45] Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson share a pen name: JK Gibson-Graham

whilst we ensure our own creditworthiness. With such emphasis on creditworthy behaviour, individualism trumps solidarity and collective politics.

6.3.1 Coreflexion: moving from the individual to the collective

Returning to the group discussions that implied ‘us and them’ type thinking through logics of equivalence; as I have already indicated, I was conflicted when reflecting on the transcripts and notes. I knew our discussions had been well meaning but I could still see othering and problems regarding privilege. I was uncomfortable with writing about participants (despite including myself) in what might seem a judgemental way, yet the new understanding I was gaining seemed important. I therefore decided to carry out a coreflexion process (see discussion in section 3.4.3). For the February 2016 coreflexion meeting, I took the problematic parts of the transcripts, my initial analysis using Laclau and Mouffe (2014), as well as other reflections back to Pat, Holly and Dacia who had attended every meeting and were taking ownership of the project. This led to a deeper discussion and reflection on the issues as well as reflection on what we had previously said. All three women were interested to see how often, in meetings, we had slipped into talking in terms of ‘us and them’ despite attempts to be inclusive. Whilst the participants turned down the opportunity to carry out some coding—this was seen as my way of earning my PhD—they were keen to examine the transcripts and revisit their thinking on the topic.

Methodological Reflection 7: Catalytic validity

Throughout the study, participants demonstrated that they were open to new ways of understanding, however the coreflexion sessions provided a forum where we were actively trying to reflect and learn from what we had previously said. This demonstrates catalytic validity, in which both participants and the researcher were “open to reorienting their [our] view of reality” (Herr and Anderson, 2014:68).

Throughout the study I had frank discussions about how participatory the study could be considering I was hoping to gain a PhD out of it. However, Dacia told me I needed to let go of that concern and Holly pointed to the work I was doing regarding the analysis and told me I was earning it, whilst they had different but important roles. I was to also value the impact the research was having on the women’s thinking and practice as they related to the school.

Furthermore, Harry Torrance (2012) asks if participants benefit as much from the research outcomes as other stakeholders including authorities and agencies. In this study, the core participants all said, at the end of the study, that they had enjoyed

the study, learnt a lot and had valued the new relationships they had built. Dacia, Pat and Holly all said they felt I had earnt my PhD whilst they had benefitted in different ways. Despite being disappointed that more people had not engaged with the study and that all three were quite like minded, they reported they now had more confidence in speaking out at school and had appreciated the support and friendship within the group. One participant became a governor, one said she discovered she had leadership qualities and offered to lead a parents' group in the new year (though sadly had to withdraw due to personal. circumstances,) the third parent's child left for secondary school, so her involvement was to cease naturally. Mr Shaw said that he had learnt much too but also, he valued the new relationships he had with the various participants. They hoped to start the project afresh in the autumn and that was a benefit for everybody. (See discussion in 5.3 regarding the future of the project.)

As part of this process, each of the three participants also wrote thoughts and comments on my writing about them There was some indication of challenging their own thoughts; for example, Holly wrote next to my linking of John Major's back to basics campaign with her comments on reading:

> *horrified to be identified with John Major! However it probably is an accurate description of what I was saying. Reflecting on my previous teaching I have probably committed most of the' sins' pointed out by parents in this group: not explaining what I wanted parents to do, not taking time to talk to (and listen to) the parents. Hopefully I have learnt the importance of parents in my classroom teaching!*
> *Participant Communication 2: Holly's notes on transcript during coreflexion meeting February 2016*

Methodological Reflection 8: Trustworthiness and Credibility

There should be an element of validity that comprises trustworthiness. Two questions can be asked a) do the participants recognise themselves and the processes described by the researcher? b) is the research credible? (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). This process of coreflexion, however enables a richer process as not only was Holly able to recognise herself, but she was able to reflect in such a way that she deepened her understanding and change her practice. Whilst some researchers (Herr and Anderson, 2014, Torrance, 2012) argue that democratic validity entails participants being happy with what the researcher reports them saying, in this case, the participants were not happy but rather than disputing their words, they took the opportunity to problematise their thinking and mine.

This process of coreflexion (Cho and Trent, 2009), was not simply one of 'member checking' (Torrance, 2012; Stringer, 2014) but a crucial part of reflecting from

askew. The use of Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) discourse theory facilitated the defamiliarisation of our thoughts and discussions, enabling us to problematise the issue of the binary positioning of parents and the consequent individualism. Through the process of coreflexion, we started to explore more complex identities, disrupting the previous binary of good/bad parents, and began to build richer connections between each other. There was a process of "deconstructive criticism" whereby "allegedly fixed identities [began to] melt down into differentiated relations" (Young, 1993:127).

We worked through some of the transcripts, which included the excerpts discussed in section 6.1). When reading the implied criticism about homework and lack of support, Dacia pointed out that *"it's just bloody hard work being a parent"* (notes from coreflexion meeting, February 2016). A little later in the meeting, Holly told of a parents' evening, in which she wanted to tell the teacher her husband would be collecting the child the following day. She was told to give a message to the office who would in turn give it to the teacher. Even though she was sitting opposite the teacher she felt an extra barrier had been put in place, preventing her from communicating with the school. However she also noted that maybe the teacher wasn't at fault, and maybe they were stuck in the same sytem of barriers. I also added my reflections on creditworthiness after my experience as a governor. As the discussion continued, the group questioned, maybe we were all in it together? If we could understand the pressures faced by the school staff due to the wider problematic system, maybe we work together for more successful change.

This at first seemed a logical move and a tremendous shift from what had seemed like two sides on the battlefield. We resolved that the forthcoming meeting with Mr Wright would be a positive step forward. Now, as a group, we were conceptualising and working *together* against the system—the current English education system, which we all recognised as problematic. There was also some recognition about the wider inequalities in society including Holly's experience of unequal access to speech therapy and Pat's knowledge of the housing system. It was recognised that these inequalities were interelated. We seemed to be achieving the collective democratic parent engagment I had originally sought.

This could be seen as an ethical move, in terms of Glynos and Howarth's (2007) four dimensions, however, it is very simple and still effectively working on a binary

of the oppressed and the oppressors, i.e. a logic of equivalence. It could also see be seen as developing a logic of difference (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) in which we are all different but in it together. However, this is still too simple, as it denies the complex power dynamics between those of us who are apparently in it together. Could we all be in it together, when clearly some people had more voice than others? Reflecting back to my thinking about maintaining creditratings, I had to start questionning privilege.

6.3.2 Privileging of the creditworthy

Whilst middle-class parents can be, and are, accused of being 'elite participationists' (Vincent and Martin, 2000:474), 'pushy' helicopter parents (Bristow, 2014) and/ or self-serving (Young, 2016), this failing is tolerated due to the other benefits middle-class parents bring to schooling, being likely producers of economically viable subjects who apparently benefit schools' credit ratings and that of society. The occasional or one-off aberration will not severely affect an otherwise unblemished credit record. A parent challenging the school can be framed as an irregularity from a parent who is usually deemed as competent and appropriately supportive.

Those on the regular receiving end of injustice; for example, working-class parents, black and minority ethnic parents—indeed, any parent who does not fit the white middle-class narrative—have more precarious 'credit ratings'. It is riskier to voice concerns, complaints and anger as it may damage an already poor rating. Raising questions about the school's treatment of a child with additional needs, may lead a working-class, black or minority ethnic parent to be classed as a vexatious parent for complaining for the umpteenth time? Too often, vulnerabilities such as disability and poverty are conflated with wrongdoing and illegitimacy (Brown, 2014). This can lead to self-policing of anger and voice, in order to avoid being seen as undeserving and one of 'them'. Arguably, within the school parent engagement context, some parents are seen as more deserving of voice and of recognition of their anger, or complaints. Moreover, because producing an economically viable human being follows a fantasmatic logic—that it is completely possible, if only we try hard enough—not producing a successful child, and thus having a complaint is seen as a mark of failure. Thus, the "meritocratic myth" lived

on; we are all created equal and have equal opportunity to achieve and if we don't it is our own fault (Crawford, 2010:6).

Kelly Oliver (2004:92) explains that different levels of privilege affect the amount of forgiveness given by one's community, thus making it far riskier to speak out in anger if you are less privileged than others:

> those who benefit from dominant values are forgiven their individuality, their difference. But those excluded *and* disowned by dominant values are not forgiven; they are shamed, ridiculed, abjected, and abused for the difference. They are not allowed to become individuals who belong to the community.

It is as if parents have access to different depths of wells of forgiveness. The more acceptable (middle-class) parents are, the deeper the well of forgiveness afforded to them. If a parent is one of the abjected other, the apparent 'bad' parent, they have a shallower well and are less likely to be forgiven for the apparent sin of challenging the rules. In the November 2015 meeting three different parents expressed frustration that their children's needs were not being met, yet the relationship with the school seemed slightly less fractured with some than others. It was notable that the person who was more middleclass appeared to be able to 'get away' with complaining more than others and was still welcome in the school, although in the long term even that relationship with the school broke down. Different people are individualised to different extents, depending on their cultural, economic and social capital.

It could be argued that it suits us to have uncreditworthy people around us to highlight our good credit rating, enabling us to think 'we are not as bad as them'. Linda Powell and Margaret Barber (2012:47) argue that the neoliberal institution of the school "requires a denigrated 'other', someone to do badly, someone to fail, and someone to be less capable." Indeed, Michaela Community School make great use of the denigrated other, those at the 'bottom of the pyramid' (Birbalsingh, 2016a) see section 2.2.1, to serve as a warning to all; Michaela students must comply or risk failure.

As Beck (2009:55) identifies, there is a "tragic irony" in which society faces numerous high risks that it either can't control, or I would argue, it suits not to control, for example high levels of inequality. However, the irony is whilst these

risks cannot be managed at a societal level, (or there is a refusal to manage such risks) there is a myth promulgated that individuals have the responsibility to navigate and mitigate such risks. The discourse that we are all in it together, obfuscates the complications of privilege and structural inequalities. This furthers the divisions of those who are successful and those who continue to be abjected as failures. Thus, the discourse of being in it together is a tragic irony as it individualises and abjects those unable to rise above the inequalities. In turn, this has a silencing effect, as due to the metaphorical wells of forgiveness, it is more difficult for some to challenge policy and institutional behaviour than others. However, despite the seemingly hegemonic effects of such a discourse, there are glimmers of resistance as individuals insist on breaching the divide and relating to others. This resistance against individualism is discussed in the next section.

6.4 Wanting to know: moving towards connected parent engagement

The aim of using Community Philosophy was to embrace the agency of parents and encourage parents to take actions beyond supporting Kirkgate school in traditionally passive ways. It is interesting that there was little appetite for formal projects that may lead to more partnership with the school. There was however a welcoming of much smaller gestures, that are more relational in nature. Such gestures seemed to engender trust in the school and a feeling of partnership. There were also frequent requests to be able to speak to staff and to get to *know* them.

The “stumble data” (Brinkmann, 2014:724), which made me stop and question, was in the October 2015 meeting when there was great laughter when Dacia expressed that she wanted to know a member of staff:

> *Holly: There’s the lady on the gate isn’t there.*
>
> *Dacia: I do not know this lady on the gate*
>
> *Holly: Is she from reception? She knows Bethan I know that.*
>
> *Dacia: There’s a different lady on the gate and I do not know this lady. I do not know who she is, maybe, that is—maybe I need to seize this opportunity and say hi*
>
> *Holly: hello*
>
> *Dacia: Hi I’m Dacia x and a lot of people know me*

Laughter

Pat: What's your name?
Holly: You're the one person

Dacia: I do not know who you are. I need to change this

Pat: There's photographs all online aren't there so

Dacia: Ugh but I hate looking online

Pat: I know but they are there so er

Dacia: It's just new staff I don't know

Pat: Yeah I'm looking forward to the meeting. I don't know Ryan's teacher at all. I've met her once and I just need to know now how's it going.

Transcript excerpt 10: October Meeting 2015, lines: 167ff

This was such a striking but also funny moment partially due to the formality of "I do not know this lady", that it stuck in my mind and led to greater reflection about parents knowing staff. In the next meeting (November 2015), there was excitement as more parents had met the new Headteacher. He had walked back out of his office and said hello to Pat which struck her as different to the feeling that the Headteacher might hide in the office away from parents. This appeared to cause more excitement and surprise than any other action during my time at Kirkgate. Taking time to say "hello" and to "get to know" parents and children, was much appreciated. He also took time to learn to communicate differently with a child which the child's carer felt showed he knew this child and knew how to communicate in different appropriate ways (November 2015 group meeting). The new Headteacher also commented that he wanted to get to know all children and families—a big task in a school of this size (November meeting 2015 with Mr Shaw, notes). The emphasis on knowing rather than relating as such fascinated me and formed another breakdown to explore.

On reading Alecia Jackson's and Lisa Mazzei's (2012:12) work on using theory in qualitative research, I decided to take a more playful approach to this data:

> To plug data and theory into one another in the threshold is to position ourselves as researchers otherwise than merely always-already subject ready to capture and code the experiences of our participants and their material conditions as always-already

> object. Such a practice of reading diffractively means that we try to fold these texts into one another in a move that flattens our relationship to the participants, the theory, and the data.

Instead of merely cataloguing the times 'knowing' was referred to, I mapped them out *together* with other references to knowing and knowledge. I also included: things I had read about knowing onto the map (see Appendix J); including theological understandings gained from prior study and work; and passages from a novel. Playing with the concept of folding, I literally folded the map over and looked to how I could link different concepts that were touching. This led to a creative process of theorisation.

Methodological Reflection 9: Rich Rigour

To add to the rich rigour in qualitative research Sarah Tracy (2010:841) advocates that researchers have "a head full of theories, and a case full of abundant data" which enables them to "see nuance and complexity". 'Knowing' reminded me of theological and religious scholarship, which I decided to embrace as I have engaged with some theology and religious philosophy in the past. Adam Kotsko (2018) argues that political theology is a useful tool to analyse the world, not least because many theological concepts underpin the state and political theory. I therefore returned to some of the theorists I have used in the past to help me unpick 'knowing'.

6.4.1 Embodied knowing as relating and problematising 'being known'

In many languages there are two words for knowing, for example in German there is kennen (to know a person) and wissen (to know a fact). In French there are the terms connaitre and savoir, the first meaning to know someone or to be familiar with them and the second to have knowledge of something. As William James (2013) argues, the concept of 'connaitre' was knowledge of acquaintance, that was embodied and experienced; it wasn't rationally deduced or analysed but just known due to that experience, for example, 'it is cold'. This might also include knowing somebody, as in meeting someone and thinking they were a nice person—which is largely a leap of trust, as we cannot know from limited interactions that they are a nice person (Evans, 1998 cited in Falkes, 2014). Furthermore, connaitre demands the presence of something or someone to be experienced. It could be argued that the participants were demanding this form of knowing; they wanted to be familiar with staff, to be acquainted with them. They did not want to be friends with them but acquainted enough to be able to make the leap to trust them, to *know* them. This is highlighted by the desire of participants to

see the Headteacher and other staff in the playground, sending messages was not adequate. The presence of the teacher in the playground is a theme in all meetings, and in the November meeting, the new Headteacher's presence in the playground is noted and welcomed. There is an implication that knowing is also related to presence; knowing is not so easy via an app.

However, there is another side to this meaning of connaitre. As Cassandra Falkes (2014) points out, Christianity has developed a trope of knowing in which there is intimacy and trust, but this, consequently, demands full submission to another. The romantic notion of the epitome of love is to be so overwhelmed by the other party (e.g. God), overwhelmed by their God-like wonderfulness, that they submit. For example, the church submits to God. This is an interesting application within the context of the research in terms of individuals relationships with the 'all-knowing' school. There were frustrations about being 'known' as the trouble maker, as we saw in the case of Jenni (November 2015, group meeting). Both Pat and Jenni expressed discomfort when called by the school as they assumed it was bad news; they felt they were *known* as the parents of problem children. Jenni felt that people avoided her in the playground and at school social gatherings such as children's birthday parties: "Why don't you just talk to me?" (November 2015, group meeting, notes).

There is possibly a fear on the part of teachers, in getting to know parents; they might have to be more than an acquaintance and maybe submit to the parent's will (Jarmin, 2018). There is a powerplay in this situation and the question is raised how we like to be known. For example, Dacia wants to be known but there are also jokes about how she will probably already be known by the new Headteacher, Mr Shaw.

> *Dacia: I want to get to I want to go and see him so he knows who I am*
>
> *Pat: I'm sure he's probably heard about you- he's probably heard.*
>
> *Dacia: Mrs Benson's probably said something.*
> *Transcript excerpt 11: July 2015, lines 928ff*

But as Jenni highlighted, it *does* matter how we are known, for instance, whether we are labelled as the troublemaker, the pushy parent or the nice parent. As Edwin Lemert (1972) illustrated, labelling often marks out deviance. However, this

becomes complicated due to our multi-situatedness. Whilst Lemert (1972) noted labelling someone as 'deviant' is an act of social control, there is also a difference regarding the effect of label wearing dependent on privilege but also agency of the person. It is possible to negotiate wearing different labels as and when it suits. I might work to be the mouthy one in some instances, where I need people to know that I can't be pushed about (or I at least want them to believe that), but it might go against me in other situations where it might benefit me to be more supportive and be seen as an ally. This had an impact on how I viewed my original plan of interviewing the Headteacher toward the end of the study. I wrestled with this dilemma as shown in the methodological reflection below.

Methodological Reflection 10: Researcher Positionality and Dialogical Validity

Positionality is not fixed by the self, but a dynamic process of co-construction, between the self, others within the research and the social context (Rochira, 2014). Thus, it was important to carry out reflexive exercises to explore these dynamics further and recognise the co-constructive processes between myself and participants, and also the social contexts that added to the continual twisting and turning of positionality and power dynamics. It was important to explore how different roles might be seen and understood by different parties and the tussle for construction of understanding of such roles. There were moments of resistance within this process, whether me or the participants resisting being positioned by others. Nina Hoel (2013:32) points to the "multiple subjectivities held by both researcher and respondent[s]" and demands that critical reflection is made upon these positionalities and relationships. It is therefore necessary to take an attitude of provoking consciousness (Sallah, 2014), in which one deconstructs their own positionality but also seeks to co-deconstruct other people's positionality. This involves problematising how they are being constructed and are constructing their own positionality.

I noticed this when talking to the new Headteacher Mr Shaw as detailed in the above journal entry. I felt I was treated as being on the same side as him, not that there were necessarily sides, but it felt as if I was different to other parents. I was also aware that I would exploit my role as governor to staff in the school, at times, to show that I understood their side of things. I was concerned about how I did this, and it certainly amplified my feelings of a battleground between the parents and school with the feeling someone was trying to get me 'on side'. This led to me questioning the validity of me interviewing the Headteacher. How would he position me and how would I position myself?

Would this do a disservice to the participants? As part of dialogic validity (Herr and Anderson, 2014) which entails subjecting myself as a researcher to scrutiny, I not only wrote about this but also took it as a concern to a peer research group (YSJ PubMethods) for further unpicking. Critical dialogue and reflexivity in

supervision meetings also afforded dialogic validity (Etherington, 2006). Through this reflective and reflexive process, I realised that part of Participatory Action Research was that I as the researcher was also a participant. This meant that I was actually aligning myself with the participants no matter how problematic this might be. As referenced earlier, Budd Hall (2001:173) calls for the researcher to be “committed participant and learner in the process of research, i.e., a militant rather than a detached observer”.

Serendipitously, the core participants (January 2016 meeting) suggested that the next step was to meet with the Headteacher and find out what his thoughts were about the study. This seemed a far more creative answer to my interview quandary, as it was more action orientated and not a research interview as such.

As Falkes (2014) argues connaitre—the knowledge of acquaintance—and savoir—knowledge through analysis—are often placed hierarchically against each other. This can lead to trust being *expected*, rather than *built up* through a relationship. Time and relationship building afford connaitre but *also* time to analyse our experiences and decide whether someone is trustworthy. To prioritise one form of knowing over the other is not satisfactory; both types of knowing need to be working together. When I visited my daughter’s High School induction evening in, we were told by the Headteacher “we have the same values as you, I can assure you. You can trust us.” In the next few minutes, it was explained how we now needed to trust the school to get on with the job, and our job was to support (seemingly) quietly at home and to never enter the school building without an appointment. The expectation could be said to be the Judeo-Christian trope of knowing, in which I as a parent should support and obey the all-knowing school. As an obedient party who is supposedly ‘in love’ or at least enraptured by the other party of the school, I should not question, or challenge, but trust them completely. Yet, there was little or no provision of information to allow analysis of this—for example the values that they apparently share with me.

More complicated is the feeling that the school do not know one’s child, as demonstrated in the October 2015 meeting. Parents discussed how they knew their child better than the teacher, and thus decided they needed their children to sleep rather than complete this homework (see section 6.2). As the study went on, the frustration increased about not being able to communicate this knowledge to staff. Moreover, because teachers didn’t get to speak to parents, they only have

particular information to go on but have no relationship with the parent to build up the connaitre, embodied knowledge.

The requests to see staff in the Kirkgate playground (May 2015 Meeting 370ff) can be seen as an allusion to the presence required to be able to know them (connaitre). There is a lack of trust about the message getting through to staff. Participants talk about the need for "soft communication". Forty years ago, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978:11) argues that even the most "mundane…small talk" between parents and teachers afforded a "moment that felt loaded with meaning" and that "these chance interactions certainly had weightier significance than the vacuous, ritualistic PTA meetings scheduled by the school." And herein lies the rub: whilst Community Philosophy or other such group formats might offer a form of democratic parent engagement, the feeling seems to be if parents can't even share their voice with their child's teacher, democracy is being undermined right at the root. We underestimate the importance of "communicative gestures" in democratic living— "those moments in everyday communication where people acknowledge one another in their particularity" (Young, 2010:57). Such gestures are essential to ensure that people are not only able to talk but have voice so that they can be heard and recognised (Couldry, 2010).

Conversely, however, there is also an issue of trust for staff, as there have been numerous attacks both verbal and physical on school staff.

> Staffrooms have long been filled with horror stories about pushy parents, desperate to ensure that their child gets nothing but the best - sometimes unwilling to acknowledge the possibility that trained professionals could know the correct course for their darling offspring. And in a system that listens most closely to those who shout the loudest, vocal minorities of parents have the power to override the educational establishment's best-laid plans, even if it means that the majority will lose out. (Exley, 2012)

The problem is this fear is based on some incidents which have led to stereotyping. It follows the logic of equivalence, linking parents with violence, horror, challenging both professionalism and authority, and inappropriate loudness. This is brought into being by the opposing chain of equivalence: teachers are all knowing professionals, who care about the children and need to be trusted to calmly and quietly get on with the job. (Indeed, a colleague asked me what made

me think that as a parent I might question a teacher's practice.) All the time this fantasmatic logic continues: 'if we can keep the parents at bay and get on with our job, everything will be ok'. We are short selling all parties. Knowing each other a little more may help us in our endeavours.

However, there are further complications as identified by different participants at different meetings. Specifically, relational trust is difficult to build with working parents who are unable to drop off or pick up children. Mr Shaw had to some extent tackled this at Kirkgate, who proudly announced a new app-based communication system, allowing teachers to communicate to parents. However, whilst parents seemed to appreciate the communication from the school, Holly and Dacia pointed out that this only afforded only one-way communication and circumvented the need for presence, which is important as part of relationship building. There needs to be more imaginative ways of building up the relationship between parents and schools to allow trust in both directions and to enable voices to be heard. It may be that emails are part of the answer—this is the way I can communicate with teachers at the high school, and on the few occasions I have used emails, it has been a positive communicative experience. But email is notoriously limited as a mode of communication and democratic relations demand more than just this single direction of communication and more opportunities to relate to each other.

An additional problem is the unmanageability of teachers' workload (Department for Education, 2018). When participants suggested to the Headteacher in the March 2016 meeting that email could be a viable option, he explained that this would be too much for teachers who were already overworked. He also expressed reservations about expecting teachers to do much more with parents for the same reason. This is understandable, but sadly indicative of today's neoliberal work regime. The work that is valued is meeting test requirements and producing data to prove that the requirements are being met, and relationships are more difficult to quantify. There is little or no space for, or value placed on time to build relationships with parents. It is a further indicator of how everyday neoliberalism is squeezing out space for democratic living (Braedley and Luxton, 2010). All the time we are fighting to fit in all the requirements for our jobs and for parenting means less time able to relate to each other, to question and to act. Schools and

work places might have adequate buildings, but they are not spacious, in terms of affording free thinking and agency (Tuan 1977). Such spaciousness and democratic working, however, is inefficient and neoliberalism values efficiency.

As a flipside to the perception that *connaitre* is demanding, as it requires the presence of both parents and staff, if we look at it from a democratic point of view, it is necessary for people to be present to ensure decisions are democratically made (Phillips, 2005b). For example, if a school authority makes a decision without the presence of parents in the room—and for that matter different parents with different experiences—decisions may not be made with full knowledge of the 'facts'. Whilst Anne Phillips (2005b:8) acknowledges the difficulties in terms of practicalities of presence, she accuses those who try to justify lack of presence in politics as being God-like—assuming they know everybody and everything, rather than listening to embodied experiences of people. Phillips points to the erasure of difference—a logic of difference—in which we argue we are all in this together, we don't need to worry about our variances, which leads to those in more power ignoring the embodied experiences of others. And, this points to the problems of relegating parent voice to bureaucratic structures like governors and PTAs. As Vincent and Martin (2000:474) found in their work, these groups often comprise "elite participationists" and thus tend to privilege their own thinking and individual needs. However, one might argue that, unless such parents socialise with different people, they are unlikely to realise the different issues at play that need to be addressed. Within the group meetings in this study, when different parents heard other people's perspectives and experiences, they were keen to support and help, thus mirroring a Deweyian notion of dialogue, in which different people "have equable opportunity to receive and to take from others" (2004:80). Holly, Dacia and Pat regularly sought ways to increase the variety of people coming to the study, recognising that is was not a good thing to have a discussion group with a fairly homogeneous membership. There was a will and desire to look the 'other' parent or member of staff in the face and start to get to know them. It is when we contemplate the 'other' and alter our behaviour to ensure equality that we become human (Macmurray, 1991).

6.4.2 Who is allowed to know?

Experiences of not being told things or not given the knowledge led to further a lack of trust. For example, two parents, Stacy and Lindsay (May 2015 meeting) expressed frustration at not being told that their children were undergoing speech therapy within the school. This reflects Hornby's (2011:27) "Protective Model", in which parents are expected to simply leave their child at school and trust the teacher to do everything else. There is no need for the all-knowing expert school to explain anything to unknowing parents. Whilst the protection model might be attractive to teachers, not least as it is straightforward and possibly saves time in a busy job, this lack of communication has created a fissure within the trust and relationship between Stacy, Lindsay and the school. This further creates a barrier between parents and staff, effectively furthering the individualisation of parents and staff.

Furthermore, during the discussion in the November 2015 meeting, it became clear that some parents had been emailed by the first Headteacher, Mrs Benson, about the research study but not others. This begged the question, for participants why some people were *allowed* to know, or deemed worthy, of knowing about the study. In the November meeting, Jenni and Cat came for the first time and expressed frustration at not being invited previously by the head (although there had been fliers and posters about the meetings). As it became clear that the Headteacher had only emailed some parents and not others, there were questions, "you got an email? Why've they invited you?" (November 2015 Meeting Notes). This highlights the tension within the study of having to use a gatekeeper (See discussion on gatekeepers in section 3.4.1). Pat, Dacia and Holly all responded by arguing that there were other people who probably had more to say than them and should have been invited instead or as well.

Whilst savoir and connaitre are useful distinctions to explore the different aspects of knowledge and knowing that were present in the data, the binary is problematic—it implies one form of knowledge that more experienced bodily, and another that is more cerebral. Foucault is helpful here, in so far as he argues that knowledge is created by "discursive practice[s]" (1972:45ff), knowledge is not pure, and unaffected or unmediated by people. Savoir is not about collecting specific pure knowledge, akin to digging up fossils, but rather about having the

mental space to think about a situation and to act. For John Macmurray (1995), it is this reflecting and acting that is not only the essence of being human but of democracy itself. Moreover, Foucault (1972) used the term pouvoir/savoir—which in English can be clumsily translated as power/knowledge—which denotes that knowledge constitutes power and power constitutes knowledge; they are thoroughly entwined. Knowledge is not just a fact but all the different practices within a discourse that *constitute* that discourse. However, as Foucault (1972:182) argues, "knowledge is also the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse". Not only does the subject have the *space* to think about this (Lefebvre, 1991) but they are also *allowed* within the space—they are part of the discourse and able to speak about it—they *can* (pouvoir) talk about it. As participants argue, they did not have enough knowledge of the school and system (Meeting May 2015 transcript, lines 353ff) to be able to navigate it, let alone shape it. Arguably the participants, and parents in the wider sense, are objects rather than subjects within the school. However, the very fact they are there critiquing the school and its practices implies otherwise. This suggests a more Rancièrian (1999) move, in which people demand their place within the public sphere, thus proving their agency (see section 4.2).

6.5 Summary

This chapter has unpicked some of the issues raised within the research study and explored my 'plugging in' of theory (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) including critical discourse analytics (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) and political theology. I demonstrated how within the study I took some of my analysis and theoretical thinking and worked with participants in a coreflexion process to further our thinking around lack of collectivity which is conduced by individualisation. I have traced the moves from creating 'others' through monstrous discursive creations, which through a logic of equivalence could be argued to have a silencing effect on those who can't or don't agree with the dominant discourse.

However, our move to a logic of difference, where we thought we were all in it together against the system, in a bid for a more collective approach was also problematic. We did not, at first, recognise the individualising effects of privilege on voice and consequently democratic parent engagement.

I then argued that what is needed is a more *connected* form of parent engagement, rather than *collective*, which does not erase individuality. This way of thinking was developed after a piece of “stumble data” (Brinkmann, 2014: 724) highlighted the importance of thinking. Through the use of theological theory, I was able to explore different types of knowing and trouble the power dynamics within parent-school relationships, often with an imbalance where the school knows the parent more than vice-versa. However, it is not grand narratives of friendship that participants desired but rather, smaller micro relational gestures in the everyday that were felt to counter some of the individualism and alienation faced by participants. It is a demand to look at the other, that offers hope amongst the individualising neoliberal education policy.

As the Abba song goes, “knowing me knowing you is the best I can do” (Ulvaeus et al., 1976). Relationships might be tough (the song is about a breakup) and breakdown, we might feel othered and alone but the possibility of knowing someone, albeit in a most basic sense, affords some hope that trust might grow. As we start to know each other it might be safe or safer to voice our concerns and thoughts. Knowing each other might help to splice relationality with the lack of collectivity that is challenging democratic parent engagement. Whilst a move toward relationality might counter individualism, there are implications for agency and also space. The imbrication of these strands is explored in the final chapter.

Chapter 7. Conclusion: splicing the noose, and re-laying a lifeline for democratic engagement

At the start of the thesis, I identified a problem with the performative nature of parent engagement in the English primary schooling system. I argued that democratic parent engagement was suppressed, and there was little room for parents to partake in "education politics" (Moutsios, 2010:123-124).

I argued, in 2.1, that over the last 150 years of state schooling for all children in England, parents have been framed as problematic—especially if they are poor, working class or belong to any 'other' abjected category—and, therefore, deemed unable or unworthy of being involved with such discussions about the purpose and direction of education. Such a framing of parents has been exacerbated by neoliberal education policies (see section 2.2). I also offered a metaphor of a noose, which signifies the strangling effect of neoliberal forces on most forms of democratic parent engagement. This noose, I argue, comprises three strands:

- Lack of agency
- Lack of space for education politics for parents
- Lack of collective parent engagement.

To unpick this noose, I devised and implemented a participatory action research study in a primary school. The study was undertaken to try and forge democratic parent engagement in a primary school by way of starting a Community Philosophy Group with parents. The original aims were to:

1) Seek new understandings of democratic parent engagement.
2) Try a new way of working—i.e. Community Philosophy— as a form of democratic parent engagement.
3) Establish the conditions needed for democratic parent engagement within a school.

The various twists and turns and seeming failures along the way, further demonstrate how effective the neoliberal noose is at strangling everyday democratic engagement. Each strand has a powerful effect, in terms of diminishing democratic engagement, yet it is the twisting together of the three strands as a rope which provides the 'tensile strength' of the rope which is then knotted into a noose, a 'scaffold knot', which tightens the more it is resisted.

This chapter will highlight how the research study amplified the sense that neoliberalism is restricting democratic engagement and unpicked the rope's strands to then explore reconfigurations of these strands that offer favourable conditions for democratic parent engagement. The unpicking and re-laying of the rope were carried out through a 'fidding' methodology which was developed in response to the happenings at the beginning of the study. My methodological approach required a move from an emancipatory Chronotope 3 (Scepticism, Conscientisation and Praxis) to Chronotope 4 (Power/Knowledge and Defamiliarisation) (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005). This early reconfiguration of the research was triggered by what became known as the 'slag-off-a-thon' moment (see section 4.1.1); this event led me to fundamentally question my aim to carry out the research in a way that would foster harmonious relationships.

Over the two years of working with a small group of parents and the Headteachers, we explored the fear of critique, or what was characterised as 'moaning' or 'slagging off'. Through the use of critical discourse analytics (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) and 'plugging in of theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012), I have demonstrated how the containment of critique served to strengthen the hegemony of parental engagement being performative. The dominant discourse of performative parent engagement requires parents to be supportive and compliant and this, in turn, diminishes the agency of parents, with the expectation of parents to be simple 'Echoes' (Caverero, 2005; Ovid, 1998:65). As we used coreflexion (Cho and Trent, 2009) to explore our practices, and some of my initial analysis, the participants helped me conceptualise how the othering practices directed towards parents emphasised an individualistic approach to parent engagement and education, rather than a more collective approach. As I combined this thinking with my own autoethnographic work I was able to illustrate how the fear of the 'other' and the damage that they might do to our creditworthiness (that of both individuals and the school as a whole see section 6.3) results in barriers, physical and metaphorical, being erected to keep the unworthy out of the space. Such exclusive practices prevent a more constructive dialogical approach which involves a more radical relationality of knowing each other and having knowledge of the system.

In this chapter, I will also explore the implications of the fidding technique for participatory action research and potentially for other research disciplines as well. I will then further the discussion on the conditions required to support democratic parent engagement, as I bring together the different themes of agency, spaciousness and relationality discussed in the previous chapters, conceptualising them as different strands of a rope. Although, I have argued the rope forms a noose, restricting democratic parent engagement, in essence, these different strands are “separate threads, each feeble yet together, as sufficient as an iron rod.” (Newman in Dunne, 1997:45). These threads of agency, spaciousness and relationality may seem flimsy on their own, but when the three are combined they form a strong rope that can be offered as a lifeline to democratic parent engagement. The three strands together, provide the conditions required for democratic engagement. By unpicking the neoliberal noose, it strengthens the rope, for any knot weakens the tensile strength of a rope (Richards, 2006). The re-laying of fibres into strands and then the re-laying of the strands provides the democratic conditions for parent engagement. It is the combining of these three strands, twisted against each other, holding each other in tension, that forms an original contribution to knowledge.

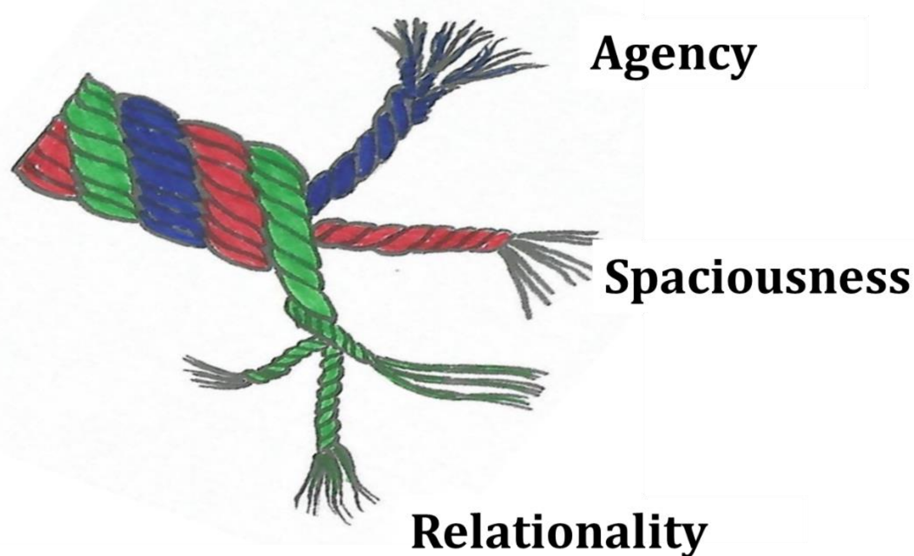


Figure 14: The conditions for democratic parent engagement designed by Haines Lyon 2019

The different ways that each strand holds the other in tension will be explored further on in this chapter.

7.1 A fidding methodology: implications for action research

Before I consider the imbrication of the rope strands, I will explore the importance of my 'fidding methodology'. I was not able to achieve my original research aim of instituting Community Philosophy as a tool for democratic parent engagement, for not only was Community Philosophy problematic as discussed in section 4.1.1, but my original plan to run three cycles of meetings, with participants gradually taking ownership of the study, was naïve and simplistic. The plan, like many action research projects was too linear to achieve my aims (see section 3.3). Arguably the original plan was in and of itself restrictive of democratic parent engagement. Whilst I had endeavoured to implement a participatory action research study, I had not fully embraced the agency of the participants; instead, I had defined the participants, as "an object of [my] emancipatory desires" (Lather, 1992:143).

Realising that my approach to participatory action research was initially following the more 'northern' Lewinian approach, in which I was trying to improve something harmoniously, was problematic, I moved toward a more 'southern' political and disruptive approach to the study (see section 3.2.1). This necessitated moving away from the apparently simple idea of action research cycles (Elliott, 1991; Lewin, 1948; Stringer, 2014), and developing a far more complex destabilising approach by using myriad strategies such as critical discourse analytics, coreflexion and 'plugging in of theory'(Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) to rupture different understandings along the way. The rupturing of understanding, I argue, is an essential component of action research.

To achieve my research aims, I developed the fidding approach, which necessitated a far more agentic approach for my participants, involving them in a process of collating stories, coreflexion and dialogical experimenting. This study required engagement with myriad theories, using the fid to insert theory into practice and vice versa. The fidding approach enabled me to create a study that did not prioritise either action or research, contradictory to Martin Hammersley's (2004) assertion that one must always be prioritised over the other in action research.

However, the contributions this methodology offer are not simply a matter of process. The approach was in itself contingent and continually developing. Unusually, the underpinning framework of this research study changed part way

through. This is due to my openness to allow different situations and participants to challenge my thinking, as well as sustained reflexive practice on my practice and theory, which ultimately led me away from Community Philosophy. These processes of co-constructing and coreflexion, forced me to move away from a Chronotope 3 (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005) emancipatory mindset and develop a fidding approach that can be both retroductive and abductive, one that ruptures practice and theory and affords a richer process of theoretical development.

As I have argued, it is essential that such a fidding approach is carried out with an attitude of dialogical experimenting—a willingness to try new things *together.* Such an approach is co-constitutive and not carried out on a research subject, but requires researcher and participants to practice reflexivity, enabling us to look at situations awry (Žižek, 2010). Conducting action research as a fid affords a deconstruction of taken-for-granted thinking and practices but, more importantly, offers a space for a co-construction of new ideas and practices. As such the fid is an original contribution to knowledge.

Using action research as a fid has enabled me to evidence how neoliberalism has colonised parent engagement and pervaded everyday practices and spaces. Yet the dialogical experimenting involved has offered glimmers of hope as we see refusals, contemplations and possibilities of doing things differently. These practices of hope can be considered as dialogical experimenting, which with coreflexion and insertion of theory, resulted in co-construction of ideas and practices. As Unger (2007:185) argues, whilst we find ourselves and democracy restricted by the "very restricted repertory of institutional options for organizing each part of social life… We can escape that fate only by renovating and enlarging this repertory." This renovation and widening of a repertoire of practices, Unger (2007:185), argues, must involve imaginative thought from "the bottom up and from the inside out". The fid, with its diffractive, reflective and rupturing nature, affords such imaginative thinking.

The dialogical experimentation combined with coreflexion (Cho and Trent, 2009) and 'plugging in of theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) afforded splicing of the strands of the noose and new understandings of the rope. For example, we used Rancière's work on dissensus to help us understand how we might move away

from a harmonious approach. Such disruption of apparently established hegemonies (that we should have harmonious relationships between schools and parents), I argue, should be a key aim of action research, alongside providing hope, even if it is just glimmers, that a better world might be achieved. The following sections will explore how the strands twist against each other, providing strength and tension in the rope and how, through this 'fidding' action research study, new understandings were developed and how a lifeline might be proffered to democratic parent engagement.

7.2 Relationality without suppressing agency: splicing Macmurray and Rancière

As I discussed in Chapter 2, I was concerned that democratic parent engagement had become colonised by individualised performative parent engagement. Such engagement is purely focussed on the best education for one's child rather than concern for the wider society. I wanted to create a more collective model of democratic parent engagement by way of Community Philosophy. This starting point was motivated by a Macmurrayian (1950, 1991) emphasis on relationality and fellowship which Michael Fielding (2015:8) describes as "a shared commitment to a richly conceived, constantly developing search for and enactment of good lives lived in a just and diverse commonality". However, as I have illustrated in Chapter 4, Community Philosophy became problematic, not least because there was an expectation to reach some form of harmonious consensus through deliberation.

I realised that Macmurray's (1950; 1991) emphasis on friendship and fostering relationships with the other, allows little room for dissent; co-operation appears to require harmonious working. This was assumed by most of us involved in the early stages of this research study, including supervisors, ethics committees, as well as participants, the Headteacher and myself. As the participants and I began to problematise such harmonious working, it was helpful to engage with Rancière's (2010) work on dissensus. However, his concept of dissensus can appear very individualistic, with one person achieving agency through speaking out, demanding to be equal to the others and challenging the public sphere. Macmurray (1991), on the other hand, argues we realise agency when we act with the 'other'; our response to the 'other' should lead us to change to forge equality with the

'other'. Used alone, Macmurray's emphasis on acting with the 'other' can overly focus on the 'other', risking adapting too much to the 'other's' demands, without paying attention to what we need; power dynamics are ignored. However, Macmurray (1950: 54) distinguished between an *association* and a *community*, arguing that the former's "members are united in the service of a common purpose" whereas "it is a community when they are united in shaping a common life." It is the confusion of these two modes that Macmurray argues leads to problems. Perhaps, it is a mistaken desire to be a community with a common life, rather than association of people with plural values and opinions that causes the problem. There can be an assumption, as can be seen by Birbalsingh (2016b) that 100% agreement is the goal (see discussion in 2.2.1).

The two philosophers temper and complement each other. Macmurray pulls Rancière back from the brink of individualism and Rancière's emphasis on dissensus prevents Macmurray's common values becoming 'common sense'. As we look to engage democratically, Macmurray (1950) reminds us that we must contemplate each other, in order to learn and change, whereas Rancière (2010) reminds us that contemplation of each other must not come at the cost of democracy or voice.

Dissensual and destabilising relationships are integral to democracy and are ethical, insofar as we can question the status quo and not simply go along with the 'common sense'. Relating to each other—an ability to know the 'other'—has a countereffect of destabilising the sense of an 'all-knowing authority' which caused such frustration at Kirkgate. The moment we looked at the 'other', it was possible to question our taken-for-granted values and eventually challenge the pervasive underlying notion of war, that was present in the discourse of parent engagement (see section 4.1.1). When participants took their frustrations to the Headteacher, there was in-depth discussion, and despite there being no resolution, there was more understanding of the issues of barriers (physical and metaphorical) that faced both 'sides'. This led to continued discussion and attempts to improve the situation. Even after the anger at the spatial effects of the Headteacher's office, participants met separately to prepare for and to disrupt the spatiality. The splicing of Macmurray's and Rancière's work affords a conceptualisation of a

relationality that considers the other but does not suppress their agency to become like the other or, indeed, make the other like them.

7.3 Conflict in relationality: affording agency

This study provides insight into how the demand for harmonious consensus in schools can restrict the agency of parents. Habermas' (1979) communicative action echoes this tension, as so-called ideal speech situations and behaviours become bureaucratic and not accessible to all. The demand for perfect behaviour and elimination of rage and anger is exclusionary. If one cannot put their anger aside, they can't enter the ideal speech situation. This privileges those who speak calmly and 'nicely', and are *not* consumed with anger and injustice, voice and agency. This was the problem with the Community Philosophy approach which exemplified this in its expectation of calm turn taking and pre-empting anyone coming in and 'slagging off the school'. In fact, what was needed was the ability to do come in and 'slag off' the school, and to be heard.

The *manner* in which one speaks out may also be against the 'common sense'; it is not just a matter of the words. As Rancière (1999) argues, this entering of the public space and speaking out against the 'common sense' is dissensus. The demand to be heard and be treated equally is an agentic act, a political act and a democratic act. It is only when dissensus occurs we see true democracy. In such moment we move away from technical democracy and the limitations of working within the common sense.

Democratic parent engagement requires this kind of dissensus; i.e. the space (both physical but also within parents' and teachers' workloads) to withstand critique and dissensus. Dissensus demands a rupturing of any notions of harmony, peaceful living, and maintaining consensus. Clare Woodford (2015:152) clarifies that dissensus is not merely a hegemonic struggle in which one logic tries to replace another, but "a counter-logic" that disrupts, or destabilises the dominant ways of thinking. It causes a dislocationary moment when we reconsider the way we are viewing the world and reconsider the meanings we have ascribed to signifiers. Such a process requires the agency not to comply with the 'common sense'. Woodford argues that this entails a practice of absurdity, to which one responds with a complete reappraisal of the situation, to look at it awry (Žižek, 2010).

However, this process promises conflict. As Pierre Rosanvallon (2008) argues, democracy necessitates conflict as opposed to harmony along with a move from simplistic technical voting to allowing citizens to question and shape public life.

> 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)

As Dewey (2004:83) famously said, such a form of democracy "is primarily a form of associated living". Parents necessarily have to associate with staff of the school, even if it is not as often or in the manner desired. It is important to recognise the need to relate within such association, yet we need to learn to live with conflict if we are not to suppress agency.

7.4 Spacious liminality: affording relationality

It may appear contradictory to argue for relational working while simultaneously making the argument for dissensus and destabilisation. Yet such thinking was at the heart of our findings. It is helpful to look to Mouffe's (2013) work on agonistics in which she distinguishes between an enemy and an adversary. An enemy is to be fought and overcome, maybe 'destroyed', somewhat akin to many of the attitudes seen within the parent engagement discourse discussed in section 4.1.1. Conversely, adversaries recognise the right for different views but will fight for their idea:

> Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent's right to fight for the victory of their position. This confrontation between adversaries is what constitutes the 'agonistic struggle' that is the very condition of a vibrant democracy. (Mouffe, 2013:7)

However, for this to happen, it is necessary to have space both mentally and physically to relate and to act; as Yi-Fu Tuan (1977:55), refers to such space, there needs to be "spaciousness". There must be an imbrication of spaciousness, agency and relationality. One of the key recommendations made by Linda Powell and

Margaret Barber (2012:50) is to create an environment conducive to such relational challenging. In their words, we need to "create external holding environments for difficult conversations", with a goal of helping "each community develop the capacity to hold multiple perspectives for the development of solutions." As I highlighted in section 5.3, the space external to the school was essential in allowing difficult and complex conversations; ones that did not have to adhere to particular school mores.

The spaces such as the community centre and cafe acted as "liminal spaces" (Conroy, 2004:54). Drawing on experiences in divided societies, such as Northern Ireland, James Conroy (2005:54) points to those "contact zones...in the heart of civic life" (e.g. a race night or other sporting event) where "traditional antinomies would, however temporarily evaporate". Within these spaces, social norms, expectations and mores evaporate and an "ontological space" is conceived in which new understandings are developed. Throughout the study, the community centre and cafe acted as liminal spaces, "located betwixt and between" (Conroy, 2004:55) where the participants felt free to act differently to how they might within the school. There was more confidence, no waiting for authority to allow them to speak and bolder questioning of regimes.

Whilst one might question whether this is purely about space or more to do with the Headteacher not being present, there is something interesting about how participants requested the Headteacher to leave his office and remove him from his seat as it were. This request suggests that such a liminal space, an ontological space, is only temporary—contingent—it cannot be lived beyond that moment but has the power to change dynamics and create space for democratic parent engagement. However momentary, it "is charged with reflection and discernment" which Conroy (2004: 67) argues is "a similar kind of energy… required for the maintenance and practices of democracy."

Conroy (2004) applies his thinking to encourage schools to become liminal spaces through changing their practices. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, spaces are partially constituted by the practices that occur within them, but practices and relationships are also affected by the space around them. Whilst I would argue that schools do need to consider how they create such liminal spaces, it is also important for parents to create their own spaces, rather than waiting to be invited

in. This, in turn, affords a Rancièrian form of agency in which parents claim their place in the public space, whether it is in school or outside it. A more liminal space, from which the social mores expected by a school are more distant, also affords a relationality in which people do not necessarily have to play their expected roles, as they would in other places.

7.5 Multiple selves in multiple spaces

This study offers a deeper understanding of the individualising forces of neoliberalism, as not only alienating us from each other but from ourselves. Adam Kotsko (2018:89) observes “neoliberalism makes demons of us all.” As we attempt to identify or even disidentify with the supposed performative parent, it is difficult to recognise that not only are there more ways of being than one hegemonic subject, but we are complicated individuals that are not finite or fixed. As we try to move away from the individualisation that is so prevalent in the neoliberal education system, and start to relate to each other, it is important to acknowledge and embrace the multiple subjectivities of each of us as individuals. The paradox is that whilst there is an expectation of individual responsibility, and individualisation occurs through competitive othering, there is no room for *individuality*. All individuals are expected to behave in a specific way; one that complies with the market logics. Parents are expected to produce successful economic beings (see section 2.2), who fit the capitalist mould, and difference is erased by individualisation (Phillips, 2005b).

Paradoxically, the emphasis on choice implies people can only hold one choice at a time. After an initial choice, there is little ability to continue choosing. Moreover, as Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton (2010:11) argue,

> while neoliberals stress individuals make choices, we see that individuals make choices under certain conditions that are not of their own making. These conditions are frequently shaped by decisions made by a small number of people who hold the reins of power.

The conditions for school choice are shaped by people other than the parents. Whilst parents are expected to ‘choose’ one school, the notion of ‘choice’ ends, once

a school has been allotted—which may or may not have been ‘chosen’[46]. The expectation thereafter is that now the parent is part of that community and will support (obey) all aspects of the school.

This assumption of hegemonic values is striking. Chantal Mouffe (1996:246) points out that although pluralism is an apparently definitive quality of liberal democracy, there are “procedures to deal with differences whose objective is actually to make those differences irrelevant and to relegate pluralism to the sphere of the private.” As discussed in Chapter 5, there are accepted ways to behave in public and any dissent is framed as moaning and should be confined to the private sphere. Parents, mothers, in particular, frequently experience this exclusion in a school setting and choose to keep their dissent private.

Further complicating the situation is the problem of the plural self, with an expectation to have a simple modality, one mode of being, within the public sphere and disown our multiple modalities. During the study, there was at times, an expectation for parents to ‘unknow’ or downplay their own expertise, experience and knowledge within the school environment. One parent said, “I feel like I am only allowed to be a parent and nothing else” (June 2017 meeting notes). This was particularly powerful as this person was being expected to disregard any prior professional experience or knowledge, despite it being very pertinent. Perhaps, this is a further consequence of Gary Hornby’s (2011:27ff) “Expert” and “Curriculum Enrichment” parent involvement models in which parents are expected to submit to the expertise of the teacher, and only offer their own expertise when requested. For example, a parent may be invited to talk about their role at work, or in my case about South Africa, where I have lived and have family. However, parents must not have, or at least demonstrate, any knowledge or experience that might challenge or indeed be equal to that of a member of staff.

Likewise, it is possible that staff are also trapped in such simplistic modalities, thus only allowed to be a ‘teacher’ or ‘teaching assistant’ and not supposed to live within their modality of a parent. This undermines any sense of partnership if one

[46] Parents don’t have a real choice, rather they make a preference in England and may or may not be allocated their preference (Riley, 1998). Moreover, not all parents are able to express such a preference—transport costs or uniform may be prohibitive, or parents will be allotted a school regardless of preference.

party has to submit to the caricatured knowledge of the other, whilst denying the fullness of their own. This insight into the impact of individualisation contributes to our knowledge of how democratic parent engagement is often restricted in neoliberal schooling.

Moreover, there may be myriad values that one holds as a parent or member of staff, depending on different situations and modalities. For example, my contempt for SATs tests, when I abide in the parent and researcher modalities, is moderated somewhat when acting in my role as a school governor. My attitude towards democracy and dissent as a governor depends on the situation I am in. When the school is in a 'good' position, I am positively for democratic engagement with parents, but after being chastised by an OFSTED inspector for not paying enough attention to Maths and English results, I had to prioritise so-called excellence in Maths and English over relationships with parents. My priorities and values are also affected by the stage we are at within the OFSTED cycle; when we are facing an inspection, I am more results focussed. The fear of the school being forced into academy conversion overrides my concerns about the testing regime. I must prioritise my own values within my own politics. Therefore, I must negotiate my own diverse values and priorities, before I can contemplate working with someone else who has different values. This illustrates the complexity and contingency facing parents, in opposition to the fantasy of simplistic understandings being promulgated by schools .

Parents are not placed only in competition with each other, but it appears that different modalities or parts of themselves are also in competition. Perhaps one way of understanding the Frankenstein Parents discussion in Chapter 6, is to see the different possibilities as competing within one person. Dacia is keen to enhance her children's academic ability through extra reading on Anglo Saxons, but the reality is the modality of concerted cultivation is in competition with the caring mother of an exhausted child. In the same way, I have been conflicted by the question, 'is it more important to fight for my child today or the school, as Chair of Governors?' It is not as easy a decision as it might first appear.

Atomised modalities can lead to a dissonance not only with oneself but also within a social setting. As Laclau and Mouffe (2014) highlight, we build our identities by

seeing our difference in relation to others: "I am not that, therefore, I must be this" we say to ourselves". Therefore,

> the self-difference marks the failure of the field to cohere fully—to form one harmonious whole… Social antagonism, then, has to be understood not as some element of the social field disturbing its integrity but as the very constitutive dimension of the field itself. (Rothenberg, 2010:122)

It is the fantasmatic logic, which feeds the desire for harmony, that pushes the idea that if only we behave in a certain manner, all will be well. This relates to Rancière's (1999) idea of the 'police' defining practices and voices. Those who are not wholly aligned are deemed outsiders or irrelevancies. It is, therefore, important to see that it is the very disharmony that is important, as part of a constitutive role, and, if we take a Rancièrian stand, a democratic role.

Offering further insights, Laclau's (2007) later thinking on democracy and hegemony in *Emancipations,* highlights the role of empty signifiers. As people, or groups of people, link together as equivalent chains, the signifiers can never fully be fixed with meaning. As the chain becomes longer, and as attempts to establish meaning become more unstable, it becomes impossible for meaning to be fixed and full hegemony to be achieved. It is this process that is vital for democracy—to prevent hegemony. Thus, it is the very destabilisation caused by the plurality of meanings given to concepts of education, parent engagement, support, that afford democracy.

The relationality strand, therefore, does not simply encompass how we relate to each other, but also to our multiple selves, as well as other people's multiple selves. Such relationality is twisted together with agency as it is an agentic act to question such fantasies of coherent whole beings and rather embrace a more plural, contingent approach to relating to ourselves and each other.

7.6 Defying oppressive spatiality through agency and relationality

Careful work on unpicking the strand of space helped enrich the understanding of how a space can affect the knowledge formation between parents and schools. The spatiality of a school affects their ability to form bonds which in turn solidifies their understanding of their agency within that space. Space becomes imbued with social practices, and as we enter a space, it has an effect on us (Massey, 2004a).

While the effect might be influential, it is not necessarily totalising, especially on our own sense of subjectivity within it. Such spatiality defines whether we are an outsider or insider (Schmidt 2015); as a parent walks into a school there can be indicators of their acceptance or exclusion from that space as an expert or a parent (e.g. signing in, wearing badges, general signage, restrictions on access).

However, Mari Ruti (2017:19) challenges the assumption of an ideal relationship as wanting to be on the inside, or judged as legitimate, instead advocating the "defiant subject—the subject who opts out of the system—the one who is able and willing to turn away from the promise of happiness (as conceptualised by the normative order)." This is particularly relevant to parents, whose identities are constricted by school policy—whether they will conform or determine to be a defiant outsider. The defiant subject impacts knowledge, as they will not allow their knowledge to be defined by the system, or to be told what they are allowed to know.

Defiance, in this sense, is key to agency and democratic participation to prevent hegemonic processes in schools. The agency afforded by defiance and dissensus does not supportively echo the common sense of the schools but affects the space (whether psychic or physical) in which parents are allowed, or indeed demand to participate in a co-constitutive way. Such agentic defiance is needed to question the spatiality of schools, how space is occupied and constituted, in order to disrupt notions of inside and outside and who is worthy of "education politics" (Moutsios, 2010: 123-124). In my research study, it was when participants questioned the issues of spatiality, that they troubled assumptions of partnership and compliance with the 'common sense'. It was when they defied the expected norms, that there were glimmers of democratic engagement.

7.7 Implications of this research

Throughout the thesis, I have demonstrated how the neoliberal noose is strangling parent engagement but more importantly, I have offered ways to unpick this noose and foster more democratic ways of working. Principally, I have presented three reconfigured, or re-laid strands (agency, spaciousness and relationality), recognising that each strand is imbricated with the others. The above section has elucidated on how such imbrication occurs and impacts democratic parent

engagement. This section will move to a more practical offering in terms of what are the implications of this study.

7.7.1 Implications for schooling

Whilst there were problems within the relationship between parents and the school, it became clear that the school, its staff, children and parents are subject to the neoliberal forces. Relationality between different parties is important to facilitate democratic working but, furthermore, to resist neoliberalism. A possible way forward is to build alliances across the traditional divide between school and home. This is already becoming increasingly common, as Muna (2017) tracks, with frustration about English school funding cuts and testing regimes, alliances are forming between trade unions, parents and protest groups. In the United States there is similar resistance being demonstrated by parents, students and school staff; the consequent threats and individualising tactics taken by the authorities (including threats to remove teachers' licences) demonstrate how hard the neoliberal regime is to resist, yet the efforts to maintain solidarity are striking (Hagopian, 2014).

Solidarity requires some form of relationality. Todd May (2014) argues that friendship is necessary to resist neoliberalism. Whilst I am not necessarily arguing for friendship, I am arguing for the necessity of *friendly* relationships to overcome the hugely individualistic neoliberal forces in education. Friendship is often seen as a concept incompatible within the professional realm, whether in school or in research. Yet it is worth considering, not least because of Macmurray's (1995:15) assertion that "all meaningful action [is] for the sake of friendship". At the end of the project, Dacia, Holly and Pat said the friendship they experienced within the study was key to their enjoyment of the study. Maybe friendship or at least *friendly knowing* is possible if we, in our different modalities and positions of privilege, are willing to heavily reflect on how the relationships work and to what extent friendship is used to manipulate or foster solidarity and social justice.

However, relationality need not be about deep friendship or grand actions of protest. As the participants argued frequently, it is the small everyday gestures that are important. Breaching barriers, and reaching across the space to say hello had great impacts. As Iris Marion Young (2010:57) argues, it is these micro-

gestures which afford "democratic living" as they build bridges to the 'other' and recognise their humanity and "acknowledge one another in their particularity".

Whilst relationality is important, it is essential that such relationality is imbricated with agency which can take a dissensual form, rupturing what might be considered to be the common sense. Schools need to move away from the desire for consensus and become more porous in terms of allowing ideas and people through the barriers. This is risky, but if we let go of our desire for fixity, it is possible to have a richer, democratic environment. However, as the research demonstrated, it might not even be a case of containing consensus between people; particular situations, the discovery of policies and practices may well cause a dislocation and result in disruption. It is a fantasy to believe we can keep everything without risk and under control, despite all of our apparent technologies that promise the elimination of such risk (Beck 2009).

7.7.2 Implications for my own practice as parent and governor

As a parent, I have always been happy to make my voice heard, however, I haven't been so good at hearing what other parents are saying or appreciative of just how suppressed certain parent's voices are. I have made a point of trying to check my own privilege and listen to others far more. I am also aware of how my silence can be useful to me at the expense of others. Now I am a parent of high school children, rather than primary school children, I have learnt I also need to take account of my children's voices even more than before. Indeed, I have had to accept there is intergenerational dissensus. As they have grown older, whilst the study progressed, my children have pleaded with me not to engage with the school and challenge their new reading policy (for example); it is too embarrassing they argue. More fundamentally, they might actually disagree with my argument. When I wanted to challenge the new behaviour policy for its new use of isolation booths for seemingly minor misdemeanours, one child said that since the implementation her life was easier and less disrupted at school. I have had to listen, negotiate and at times hold back. This has made me question the difference between parent engagement in primary school and high school. At what point do parents need to step back and allow children to make their own way in school? This is a difficult balance which I have not yet achieved.

7.7.3 Implications for research methodology

I have already discussed the implications of my fidding approach for action research in section 7.1 above in terms of a destabilising approach that encompasses dialogical experimenting, splicing theory and practice, and reflecting on situations askew. However, there are further implications for such a destabilising approach regarding research ethics. The initial desire for the study to foster harmonious relations was based on my understanding of Macmurray's work at the time, but also on a strict understanding of ethical guidelines prohibiting or preventing, causing harm (whether to the school or participants). There was concern that disrupting a school might be harmful and that I should take particular care not to 'rabble rouse'. However, as this study demonstrates, it can be more *harmful* to maintain the status quo and/ or foster a harmonious ethic.

As I explored in section 4.4, a dissensual or destabilising ethic is essential if we are to foster the agency of participants in research. Rage, discomfort and conflict must be embraced rather than contained if the research process is to be as fully democratic as its aims. Such an ethic is agonistic rather than antagonist (Mouffe, 2013) and relies on "critical dissensual collaboration" (Heimans & Singh, 2018: 186).

However, care had to be taken regarding relational ethics too, thus requiring deep reflexivity and consideration of how I used relationality in my work. The reflection below illustrates the importance of relationality within the study.

Methodological Reflection 11: Relational Ethics

At the end of the study, I asked for Dacia, Holly and Pat to reflect on their involvement in the study. When asked in February 2017 coreflexion meeting, what they had appreciated most. Their answers were:

> Dacia: I felt we achieved a lot and I felt I made some friends
>
> Holly: The time to and space to talk and think about a subject that is important to me, with a group of people for whom it is also important.
>
> Pat: The chance to talk with other parents, share experiences

However, they all also expressed frustration at the limited interest from other parents and how the "group ended up being like-minded parents" (Responses to emails in February 2017).

Whilst the three 'core participants' built friendships with each other, I also had a very friendly relationship with them that was built up over the study. The relationship between the researcher and the participants, go to the heart of Participatory Action Research. Jean Duncombe and Julie Jessop (2002) raise the concern that rapport has become reified as a commodity by business and sales cultures. Consequently, they argue that, as in the commercial world, relationship skills are used for profit, a researcher endeavours to build rapport with participants, thereby risking manipulating them in order to elicit answers. This very real concern was something that I paid attention to within my reflective and reflexive writing and negotiated throughout the two years. I took care to be as open and vulnerable as I expected participants to be, whilst also maintaining boundaries of friendliness but not friendship within the research process. This was partly done through regular reference to my role as a researcher and overt negotiations regarding how each of us was engaging with the research and benefitting from it.

I also took care as I removed myself from Kirkgate. There was a process of four months. Part of asking these questions in February was to signal that my time with the study was coming to an end. As we moved through the following meetings, I became more detached, and more of an outsider researcher as the women took more ownership of the project. (See discussion in section 5.3.)

Such a dissensual ethic affords agency for the researcher and participants as both parties are challenging the status quo, with the research embracing the role as activist compared to a supposedly benign entity simply collecting data. However, as discussed, a dissensual ethic also demands that attention is paid to the relationality between the researcher and participants. The fidding approach, in its splicing practice with theory and theory with practice, dialogical experimenting and reflecting from askew, arguably affords the ability to question issues of spatiality. As within this study, it is possible to question how space is framed physically and metaphorically, but also to play with the spatiality of such situations and thus destabilise exclusionary practices and power relationships. Furthermore, the dissensual practices, that form part of democratic parent engagement, demanded, and made space, thus arguably affording 'spaciousness'. Therefore, action research as a fid, can be considered a democratic approach.

7.8 Limitations and possibilities for the future

The knowledge co-created through this study and continual reflection on praxis (theory and action), offers some hopeful signs for the potential for democratic practice. Whilst the sample size was small, with the regular participants equalling only three, the findings provide much to consider regarding parent engagement. I cannot claim generalisability, but as Bent Flyvbjerg (2006:228) argues, small studies can challenge accepted wisdom by functioning as "black swans". In this particular "black swan" study, which offers depth through applying a range of theoretical lenses, I have been able to challenge the expectation for democratic parent engagement to be consensual. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how the micro-realities of the everyday undermine democratic engagement of both parents and staff within the school. The neoliberal pressures impinged on our lives at different times and in different ways, arguably affect the end result; participants have stood down due to various private issues thus demonstrating the difficulty of practising democracy in the everyday.

This study has notably not addressed the voice of children, however, children's voices are often sought via mechanisms such as school councils. Incorporating childrens' voices is a logical step, not least as I have noted above it is important to negotiate the impact of our parent engagement on them. The focus of this study was parents as they are seen as by politicians, OFSTED and school to have a seemingly vital role in securing our children's academic achievements. Parents are blamed (Hinds, 2018; Wilshaw, 2013) whilst the structural issues affecting children's education are left unchallenged (Francis et al., 2009; Hartas, 2012; 2015). I, therefore, wanted to provide a forum in which parents could problematise structural and policy issues.

7.8.1 Mapping of resistance

However, in the light of what I have written about increasing hegemonic understandings of performative education which seems to attract authoritarian models in an attempt to manage risk, it is also interesting to see how parents, teachers and children are starting to resist. There are the well-known protests such as the worldwide pupils' climate action strikes (Taylor, Laville, Walker, Noor and Henley, 2019) and those charted by Suzanne Muna (2017) and Jesse Hagopian (2014) discussed above in section 7.7.1, as well as examples of dissensus in various

footnotes throughout this thesis. However, what would be interesting is to map not only these protests but also those micro-gestures of resistance that happen in the every-day; parents refusing to read with a tired child; a girl hitching up her skirt against the rules; or a teacher teaching against the test. This would offer a more agentic research approach. Rather than cataloguing the problems caused by neoliberalism, as I have done, it would be useful and of interest to understand what forms of resistance are occurring already. It is easy to assume, as I originally did that if there is not an overarching democratic parent engagement programme, that there is no democratic parent engagement. As I have learnt, democratic practices occur in micro everyday situations—we might better see this if we mapped them.

7.9 Summary

When laying a rope, each strand is twisted in the opposite direction to that of the twisted strands This method of laying or twisting the rope in the opposite direction ensures that it holds together in tension, thus providing the strength of the rope. Laying the strands in parallel would not achieve such 'tensile' strength. The three strands of agency, spaciousness and relationality, twist together in tension providing a lifeline, or the conditions for democratic parent engagement. To remove one strand would be to substantially weaken the rope.

This thesis has conceptualised a neoliberal noose comprising three strands, (lack of agency, lack of space, lack of relationships) as strangling democratic parent engagement. I have offered a 'fid', a methodology with which to unpick, splice and rupture the neoliberal noose. Such a fidding process has enabled me to offer to deconstruct the noose and its comprising strands, and offer a reconstruction of these strands that promotes rather than restricts democratic parent engagement. As I have illustrated each strand, (agency, spaciousness and relationality) is imbricated with the others; all three strands must be present as conditions to enable democratic parent engagement.

However, such a rope is not necessarily the lifeline for democratic parent engagement as I would hope. It is impossible to lay out a complete answer, it would be a pretence to do so. However, this research study and its fidding approach, offer glimmers of hope for a more democratic form of parent engagement in schools. As Kelly Oliver (2004:170) argues "The real revolution can

only be won by the imagination". It is in this revolutionary spirit that I offer an imaginative lifeline to democratic parent engagement.

Appendices

A. Ethics Approval

Research Ethics

Project Vetting and Approval Form

Everyone who does research in the University is required to submit their projects to ethical screening. If the results indicate that the proposed research could raise ethical issues it must be approved before it can begin. Students (and staff doing supervised research as part of a University programme) can have their research approved by their supervisor, provided it does not raise substantial ethical issues. Staff research must be peer-reviewed and must be submitted to a faculty ethics committee for approval.

This form enables students and staff to carry out ethical review of a proposed research project. All researchers must complete Part One of the form, which will indicate if there are any ethical issues than need to be addressed before the project can be approved. If there are, and they can be dealt with by standard actions, these can be reported in Part Three of the form. If the research raises substantial or unusual ethical issues, approval will require a full ethics proposal which will be scrutinized by a faculty research ethics committee.

Before completing this form, please refer to the University Guidelines on Ethics. All research activity must adhere to the University's Equality, Diversity and Human Rights Policy. The principal investigator or student supervisor is responsible for exercising appropriate professional judgement in this review.

This form must be completed before the research begins. It is in four parts:

Part One: **Initial Screening Checklist.** Everyone completes this

Part Two: **Decision Tree.** This is completed if Part One indicates that there are ethical issues with the proposed research, but they may not require a full proposal.

Part Three: **Mitigation of Ethical Concerns**. This is completed if there are some ethical issues which can be dealt with by following standard procedures.

Part Four: **Ethics Proposal.** This is completed if there are substantial ethical issues in the proposed research that require vetting by your faculty research ethics committee.

Supervisors:

If this is a student research project and you are being asked to authorise it, look through the form and decide if you can authorise the initial checklist or the mitigation form (if this is needed). If you can then complete the relevant box and click the green button. You cannot authorise a full proposal: if your student needs to complete one it should be sent to your faculty research ethics committee.

When this project is authorised your code will be in this box:

141126_Haines Lyon_110107936_ET

Title of research: (50 characters max)	**An examination of Community Philosophy as a t**	
Researcher:	Surname **Haines Lyon**	First name **Charlotte**
Student / staff ID of the Researcher	110107936	
Status	Student: Postgraduate research programme (e.g. PhD)	
Email address:	c.haineslyon@yorksj.ac.uk	
Telephone number:		
Faculty	Education & Theology	

For Students Only

Module name and number:	
Supervisor or module leader:	Tim Lucas and Margaret Wood

When you have completed all the relevant boxes, scroll down to the checklist

For Research Administrator:

What needs authorising by Faculty Research Committee?

This form should be completed and submitted **ELECTRONICALLY.** It contains clickable buttons that will direct you through the process according to the responses you make to the initial screening checklist. Please make sure you respond to **ALL** the required questions.

When you have completed this form, email it to your faculty research administrator and retain a copy for yourself.

Research Administrators:

Arts Sue Morecroft
s.morecroft@yorksj.ac.uk

Business School Fran Pluta f.pluta@yorksj.ac.uk

Education and Theology Jelena Erstic J.Erstic@yorksj.ac.uk

Health and Life Sciences Sue Copeland
s.copeland@yorksj.ac.uk

Subject area

If the research involves matters of social, political or personal sensitivity you need to be aware of the boundary between legitimate academic enquiry and unnecessarily offensive or illegal behaviour.

1. **Will the research require the collection of primary source material that might possibly be seen as offensive or considered illegal to access or hold on a computer?** *Examples might be studies related to state security, pornography, abuse or terrorism.* No

2. **Will the study involve discussion or disclosure of information about sensitive topics?** *This may involve legal issues that are nonetheless sensitive (e.g. sexual orientation, or states of health), or topics where illegal behaviour could be revealed (e.g. abuse, criminal activity, under-age drinking or sexual activity).* No

Participants: recruiting and consent

If the research involves collecting data from people you need to be aware of issues related to ensuring that they are able to give informed consent to participate where appropriate. This means being aware of how people are recruited, and whether they understand what information is being collected and why. In some cases data collection has to be covert, or informed consent is not possible from the participants themselves. These require particular attention.

3. **Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper to give access to, or to help recruit, participants?** *Examples include head teachers giving access to schools, ministers giving access to congregations, group leaders publicising your research.* Yes

4. **Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge or consent at the time?** No

Examples might be studies of group behaviour or the use of data that was not intentionally collected for research.

5. **Will the study involve recruitment of patients through the NHS?**
   There are particular issues and procedures required if the research will involve NHS users.

   No

6. **Will inducements be offered to participants?**
   This could include direct payments, the offer of being entered in a prize draw, or, for students, the offer of course credit for participation. It does not include the payment of legitimate expenses.

   No

7. **Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent?**
   You must answer 'yes' if any participants are under 18. Adults with learning disabilities, the frail elderly, or anyone who may be easily coerced due to lack of capacity is considered vulnerable. If you teach and you wish to research your own students, they should be classed as potentially vulnerable.

   No

Data collection

Where the collection of data involves more than trivial risk to participants researchers must weigh carefully the necessity of the procedure, the level of possible harm, and the benefits of the research.

8. **Will the study require participants to commit extensive time to the study?**
   Single-session interviews or completing questionnaires once or twice would not be considered excessive, but long-term studies with multiple sampling, intensive data gathering over a day or more, or long interviews and

   Yes

questionnaires that take some hours to complete might fall into this category.

9. **Are drugs, placebos or any other substances to be administered to participants, or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?** No
Even simple procedures such as tasting sessions might be dangerous if participants have allergies, so tick yes if the research involves any substance trials.

10. **If there are experimental and control groups, will being in one group disadvantage participants?** No
Examples might be testing new teaching methods where pupils without the trial procedure may be disadvantaged, or trying a new procedure where the outcomes are uncertain.

11. **Is an extensive degree of exercise or physical exertion involved?** No
If participants are unused to such exercise it could put them at risk, so it is important for researchers to be aware of this and communicate it to volunteers.

12. **Will blood or tissue samples be obtained from participants?** No
These procedures require specialist training and are covered by particular ethical codes.

13. **Is pain or more than mild physical discomfort likely to result from the study?** No

14. **Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?** No
This might be because the subject area is sensitive, the nature of task (e.g. decision-making under pressure),or the participants are particularly vulnerable to stress or anxiety (e.g. those with a history of poor mental health).

PART ONE: The Initial Screening Checklist

Please complete the initial screening checklist by clicking either 'Yes' or 'No' in EACH row:

Date (dd/mm/yy): **25/11/14**

Researcher – enter your name here to confirm you have answered all the questions on the checklist:

Charlotte Haines Lyon

Supervisor (if applicable) To authorise this checklist, enter your ***university username*** *(which you use to login to the network) then click the green button to confirm you agree with the answers on the checklist.* ***You must be logged on with your user name to authorise this form.***

t.lucas

Click here to authorise the checklist

PART TWO: The Decision Tree

*When you click the button, the only rows that will show are those where you clicked a blue **'YES' in the initial checklist** in Part One. You then need to decide if a full ethics proposal might still be required by looking at the criteria and clicking the Yes or No response in the remaining rows as appropriate.*

Click here to set up the decision tree according to your checklist

	If you answered **YES** response to this Question:	**A Full Ethics Proposal is required if:**	**Full Ethics proposal required?**	
3	Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper to give access to, or to help recruit, participants?	Gatekeepers are overseas.		No
8	Will the study require participants to commit extensive time to the study?	Participants will be under observation for more than 8 hours in any session or required to give over 24 hours in total.		No

When you have competed the decision tree, click here to see what to do next

*If you have answered NO to all the questions, a full ethics proposal is NOT required. Complete **PART THREE** to show how you will mitigate the ethical issues identified in the checklist.*

*If you answered YES to any questions in the decision tree, you will be required to complete a full ethics proposal so go straight to **PART FOUR** of this form*

PART THREE: Research Ethical Considerations Mitigation Form

You need to complete this if you answered YES to any question in the initial screening checklist, but you do not require a full ethics proposal.

Staff Research: You need to complete this even if the checklist raised no ethical issues in order that the ethics committee can see what you intend to do.

Please describe your research project in less than 200 words. What are the main research

If necessary, use the following pages to show how you will deal with ethical issues.

This is a Participatory Action Research Project that will examine *Community Philosophy as a tool for critical engagement of parents and their collective voice in primary schools.* This study will be based in two primary schools in North Yorkshire. Permission will be gained from the headteacher and informed consent gained from the parents invited to participate. Community Philosophy (CP) sessions will be used to problematise and explore Parental Involvement and how it relates to “Closing the Gap” in attainment. It is also hoped that parents will find the process useful and wish to sustain CP groups themselves by the end of the project. Some participants and the headteacher will be interviewed in parallel with the process to find out how the process is being perceived. Interviews and group sessions will be digitally audio recorded and notes will be taken. Written notes or images produced in the groups will also be collected. Electronic data will be stored on an external hard drive and on and SD card. The hard drive and all paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office. The SD card will be stored in my YSJ locker.

The remaining rows should be those where you clicked a 'Yes' answer in the initial checklist. Complete the right hand box to show how you will address the ethical issues that your project raise

			Reset the Mitigation Form
Q#	**Question:**	**What you need to show:**	**Type your response in the box in this column, which will expand if necessary.**
3	Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper to give access to, or to help recruit, participants?	Show how gatekeepers will be instructed and that undue coercion will be avoided. Demonstrate that informed consent and rights to withdraw will be made clear to all participants.	The headteachers will be approached and asked if they are willing to take part in the project. A clear time line and expectation of time commitment will be provided to enable the headteachers to make this decision. Parents from specific years will be invited to take part in the research. There will be no compulsion to take part or to continue to the end of the research. This will be made clear by letter but also will be explained in person at the start of each meeting.
8	Will the study require participants to commit extensive time to the study?	Justify the required commitment in terms of research outcomes. Show how participants will be fully informed of what will be required to participate.	Whilst it is hoped that parents will come to 6x 1 hr meetings over an 18 month period, there is no compulsion to attend any of them. It is hoped that parents will find the meetings enjoyable and useful and that in the long term they might wish to continue the meetings themselves. Care will be taken at the beginning of each meeting to ensure informed consent.

***Researcher** – enter your name here to confirm you have answered all the required questions on the mitigation form*

Charlotte Haines Lyon

When you have entered your name, click here to see what to do next

Supervisors:** Enter your name here if you are content that the student has adequately addressed the ethical issues raised in the screening checklist. You may want to consult with colleagues, or if you are still unsure send this to your faculty ethics committee for advice. Enter your **university username** (which you use to login to the network) then click the green button here to confirm you agree with the answers on the checklist. **You must be logged on with your user name to authorize this form.

t.lucas

Click here to authorise the Mitigation Form

PART FOUR: Research Ethics Proposal

You must complete this part of the form if either:

- *You answered a 'red'* ***YES*** *in the Initial Screening Checklist in Part One of this form. OR*
- *You gave one or more non-red YES answers in the Initial Screening Checklist and the Decision Tree indicated that a full proposal was required.*

You have to complete this form because what you propose to do raises substantial ethical issues. This proposal will be seen by a committee who will want to know clearly and precisely what you intend to do and how you will ensure that you follow best ethical practice. Make sure that you specially address the issues identified in the checklist and/or decision tree.

Title of project	
Name of researcher	
Status	
Supervisor (if student research project)	
What needs authorising by committee?	

Office Use Only

Date	Action	Outcome

Chair of Ethics Committee should enter their YSJU username in the box and then click the green button to authorise this project. They must be logged on and editing this form. An authorization code will be automatically generated on page 2 of the form.

Click here to authorise this project

B. Table for meetings in initial phase of study: Community Philosophy and discussion meetings

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
Negotiation of access March 2015	Researcher	Myself and Headteacher (Mrs Benson)	How the study could work. Who to invite.	Me: wrote a letter of invitation. Headteacher, (Mrs Benson): distributed it to 30 parents and guardians.	Meeting notes Reflective notes
Planning Meeting April 2015	Researcher	Myself Headteacher: Mrs Benson Participants: Amy, Christine, Patricia 3 preschool children	The aim of the research study. Location and time of meetings. Who would like to be involved. Inviting other participants.	Group: Date agreed Meetings to be held after drop-off (9.15am). Location to be community centre, which was accessible to parents with small children. Me: change in attitude and chronotope framing.	Meeting notes Reflective notes Reflexive notes

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
Community Philosophy 1 May 2015	Researcher Facilitator	Myself, 7 women (mothers plus one special guardian), Holly, Dacia, Pat, Christine, Amy, Stacy, Linsay 1 father, Tom. 3 preschool children.	Introduction to study and Community Philosophy. Communication Guilt felt by one parent for criticising school. Recognition that time and place suited these participants and not necessarily others.	Group: To meet again in the next half term. D and T to visit head and ask for: member of staff in playground at drop off time for soft chats. class scheme of work for each term to be put on class website a glossary of terms to be developed for new parents.	Audio recording Transcription Meeting notes Artefacts—H diagrams, post its. Reflective notes Reflexive notes [SMS text exchange with Amy in evening re pulling out of project and subsequent reflective notes.]
Interview with Headteacher	Researcher	Headteacher (Mrs Benson)	Frustration with 'closing the gap' agenda.	Me: To reflect more on issues of relationships and closing	Audio recording Transcript

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
1 (Mrs Benson) June 2015			Hope for harmonious relationship with parents. Hope for a more community orientated understanding of parent engagement. Communication with parents	the gap in Community Philosophy meetings. To question my positioning. Noted concerns re moaning, especially after C's pulling out of project.	Meeting notes Reflective notes
Community Philosophy 2 July 2015	Researcher and facilitator	Myself, P, Holly, Dacia. preschool son Oliver	Excitement that 2 requests from last meeting had been met. (Website and staff in playground.) Whose gap is it? (Looked at government tables for borough.) Answer: all of ours	Group: Agreed to call future meetings 'discussion groups' rather than Community Philosophy. Group: Not so theme based but sharing experiences and support to be central. Me: Personal angst around losing Community	Audio recording Transcript Meeting notes Artefacts Reflective and reflexive notes.

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
			Concern regarding the name and formality of 'Community Philosophy'	Philosophy led to reframing understanding of critical engagement and the study.	
Discussion Group October 2015	Researcher and facilitator	Myself, Pat, Holly, Dacia, Beth Preschool son Oliver	What does parent support mean? Holding back Barriers Knowing Criticism New Headteacher Recording meetings putting people off? Action orientation putting people off.	Group: asked to stop recording sessions Me: To check if I can stop recordings. Me: to design leaflets to group specifications and send to participants. Group: to hand out leaflets.	Audio recording Transcript Meeting notes Artefacts Reflective and reflexive notes

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
Discussion group November 2015	Researcher and facilitator	Dacia, Holly, Pat, Jenni, Cat	Voice/ lack of Relationships Presence Who had been invited by head originally and why Negotiations re PhD and participants.	Dacia and Jenni to hand out leaflets on Christmas stall. Participants to take more ownership Participants to invite people on their terms—i.e. explaining it as their group not a research study. Me: start to end my role in groups.	Meeting notes Reflective notes Reflexive notes
Meeting with Headteacher 2 (Mr Shaw)	Researcher	Me Headteacher (Mr Shaw)	Getting to know each other. Explaining the project. Securing support	Headteacher (Mr Shaw): to ensure groups are advertised as fully as possible.	Informal reflective notes as this was not an official research meeting.

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
November 2015				To attend groups when invited. Me: reflect on positioning.	
Discussion group January 2015	Researcher and facilitator (in handover mode)	Dacia, Holly, Pat	Frustration at people not coming. Weariness Frustrations with school including communication and relationships.	To wind up group in current form and meet with Headteacher 2 (Mr Shaw) and “use his energy.” Me: plan new exit strategy. Move into coreflexion phase.	Meeting notes Reflective notes Reflexive notes

C. Table for key analytical moments within the study: breakdowns and actions.

<table>
<tr><th>Action undertaken</th><th>Participants</th><th>Breakdowns, insights and theory to be further explored</th><th>Actions taken as result</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Initial reading through notes and transcripts looking for points of interest: stumble-upons (Brinkmann, 2014) and themes.

Making reflexive notes and memos on points of interest.

In depth reading of notes and transcripts in chronological order over two days.

All this was carried out manually with print outs, highlighters, post it notes and eventually mapped out.</td><td rowspan="3">Me</td><td>Battle</td><td>To explore sections of transcripts with core participants</td></tr>
<tr><td>Us and them</td><td>Engage with Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). Started to look for different logics at play.

Started to look for empty signifiers.

Explored sections of transcripts with core participants.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Containment and wanting to dissent</td><td>Looked at Rancière's work.

Explored ideas with Headteacher (Mr Shaw) and core participants.</td></tr>
</table>

Action undertaken	Participants	Breakdowns, insights and theory to be further explored	Actions taken as result
		Knowing and presence	Explore different concepts of knowing and relationships. Took thinking to Headteacher (Mr Shaw) and core participants Mapping exercise of knowing Started to engage with work of Irigaray and bring together with Rancière and Macmurray.
		Binaries—empty poles. (MacLure, 2003)	Led to noticing the constructions of good and bad parents. Took to core participants.

Action undertaken	Participants	Breakdowns, insights and theory to be further explored	Actions taken as result
		Barriers	Explored notions of space—physical and metaphorical containment. Ongoing discussions with Headteacher (Mr Shaw) and core participants.
Autoethnographic work—exploring practice as governor and parent.	Me	The need for health and safety approach within disciplinary systems (OFSTED), leading to containment.	Working with Wendy Brown's concept of creditworthiness (Brown, 2015).
		High school induction, my recognition of the hegemonic struggles at play.	Further engagement with Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014)

Action undertaken	Participants	Breakdowns, insights and theory to be further explored	Actions taken as result
Coreflexion Meeting February 2016 Provided Core Participants with passages from transcripts where there were clear themes of us and them. I did not tell them what I was looking at but asked for their reflections when reading it.	Me Core participants, Holly, Pat and Dacia	Dealing with frustrations about project and lack of interest.	Explorations of more rhizomatic working.
		Is it a battle of sides? Or is it everyone is stuck in the system? Are we all in it together?	Looking at systematicity (Bibby, 2011) and Kelly Oliver's (Oliver, 2004) concepts of forgiveness and privilege. Working with concepts of subjectivity; Lacan (2006) and Irigaray (1993; 1998), Griffiths (1995).
Ongoing coreflexion March 2016 to end of project	Me Core participants: Holly, Pat and Dacia.	Shifting understandings of power and space.	Further engagement with Rancière (1999) and disruption.

Action undertaken	Participants	Breakdowns, insights and theory to be further explored	Actions taken as result
Reflection sessions in café after meetings with Headteacher (Mr Shaw). Sending pieces of written work to core participants for reflection and comments.		Reflections on individual and group learning.	Negotiations as to how to best capture voices of core participants.
		All in it together becomes problematic	Laclau and Mouffe logics of difference. Creditworthiness Kelly Oliver (2004), privilege and forgiveness.

D. Table for final phase of study: meetings with 'core participants' and Headteacher

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
March 2016	Researcher Less facilitator than study 2.	Headteacher 2 (Mr Shaw), Dacia, Pat and Holly	School-parent relationships, welcoming previously excluded parents. Playground barriers, open door v health and safety. We are all in this together. "It's the first time I've been offered a cup of tea in a school." (D meeting notes Mar 2016) Different modes of Headteacher engaging with parents.	Group decision to meet more often. This is seen as a useful process. My reflection on the apparent attempts of both Headteachers and participants to be seen as 'on side', led to further engagement with Lacanian thinking (Neill, 2014) My further exploration of rhizomatic working, relationships and knowing, trust.	Meeting notes Reflective and reflexive notes.

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
November 2016	Researcher	Headteacher 2 (Mr Shaw), Dacia, Pat and Holly.	Barriers and staff in playground	Detailed analysis using Laclau and Mouffe's (2014 Critical Discourse Analytics. Group decision to meet again.	Meeting notes Reflective and reflexive notes.
			After meeting with Dacia, Pat and Holly The tensions in meeting between personal issues and the project. "The need to be nice to be on side." The feeling of support from other participants having thought was struggling on own.	Went to café to discuss frustrations with some participants. A meeting without Headteacher was requested to take stock. Further reflection on being placed as a fixer.	

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
Meeting of core participants February 2017	Researcher	Dacia, Holly, Pat	Meeting to discuss future of the project and frustrations. Problem of space and power. Lack of parental agency.	Future project to be parent led, off school site. Staff welcome, but not parents going to Headteacher's office.	No notes were taken during this session due to nervousness regarding things being recorded.
Meeting June 2017	Researcher	Dacia, Holly, Pat and Amy Headteacher 2 (Mr Shaw)	My withdrawal from project. Amy's presence after initial withdrawal from project and keenness to re-engage and coming to terms with critique. Parents to take over running group. Group to be parent led and off site	Headteacher (Mr Shaw) agreed to support this. One participant agreed to take on leading the project. Project to start in new academic year. I am to send pieces of thesis for comment when near submission.	Meeting notes Reflective and reflexive notes.

Meeting	My role	Participants	Areas Explored	Action taken	Data
			Headteacher, staff and governors to be invited Reflections on learning		

E. A Brief Introduction to Community Philosophy and Exemplar

Community Philosophy (CP) is related to Philosophy for Children which is used by many schools in North Yorkshire and the UK as a method for helping groups of children to question and develop thinking about the world they live in. CP groups meet in communities across the country and explore issues that are relevant to their community. Some voluntary organisations such as housing associations have used CP as have some schools. I would like to explore its use as a tool for parent engagement in schools.

Democracy is a key value for CP, as is inclusion. Groups are encouraged to build upon thinking and ideas and look at what actions need to be taken as a result of their work. It is part of CP practice to reflect on the working of the group and also which voices are not being heard either with regard to members of the group, or voices missing from the group.

Exemplar

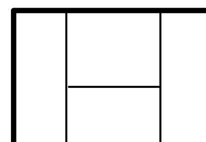
For the purposes of this exemplar, it is assumed that the theme to be explored will be parent involvement. It is based on the stages taught on the Community Philosophy Course (SAPERE, 2013a) which in turn draws on the work of Philosophy for Children.

Preparation

a. Welcome
b. Introductions
    i. Myself
    ii. Project, including recording, confidentiality, self-revelation, commitment and consent.
    iii. Each other

Stimulate

a) Split into small groups of three/ four. Provide pens, A3 sheets and sticky notes.
b) Ask groups to draw lines to form H diagram.



c) Ask people to write three things that they feel that they are involved in with their children's education. (Each on a separate sticky note which is to be placed in right hand rectangle).
d) Ask people to write three things that they do not feel involved with, in regard to their children's education. (Each on a separate sticky note which is to be placed in the left hand rectangle.)
e) Ask people to look at their own group's sheet but then to go around the room and look at other responses before returning to group.

Setting a Philosophical Agenda

a. Explain concept of philosophical question.
b. Ask groups to consider everything they have read (not just their own sheets) and think of a philosophical question they think the group should discuss. When they have agreed a question they should write it in the

bottom part of the "H". (Two examples could be "what does involvement mean?" or "why should we be involved")

c. Ask each group to read their question, to the group. They may make a short comment or explanation if necessary.
d. Explain that the group needs to vote as to which is the best question to discuss as a group; the decision should be based on which might provide the most fruitful discussion.
e. Repeat the questions to the group, and then ask for votes for each individual question. Tally the votes. (The vote might be made with eyes shut depending on the questions and group dynamics.

Dialogue

a. Listen
    i. Ask the question's originator/ group to explain their question. Invite responses
    ii. Listen to a few responses, listen for themes and concepts.
b. Build
    i. Summarize some of the concepts and how they are relating to each other. Ask if people have anything to add.
    ii. Encourage people to build on the last thing that was said instead of simply bringing new (or old) things to the table.
c. Deepen
    i. Start to analyse what is being said. E.g. "so you're saying that involvement means x", "so you think x and y leads to exclusion, what is behind this?", "what makes you feel that?", "what are the values implied?".
d. Problematise
    i. Facilitate questioning such as "What is the reason for this?", "Is there an alternative?", "What is blocking that?", "who holds the power/ answers?", "who is affected?", "who defines this?", "could there be an alternative?".
e. Last thoughts
    i. Ask participants to think about what they have learnt and/ or what actions might need to be taken. Ask them to write these in the top part of the "H".

Reflection

a. Ask participants to each share a word or phrase that says something about the session, whether is about their experience of the process, voices that are missing, ideas that have arisen...

Charlotte Haines Lyon 20/10/14

F. Parent Engagement Research Plan

(NB formatting has been changed to fit with the thesis but the text is the same)

Aim

The aim of the project is to use Community Philosophy as a tool for parent engagement in primary schools. This action research study will take place in two Scarborough schools over a period of 18 months. A Community Philosophy Group will be set up in each school, and it is hoped that the participants will attend up to six meetings and explore different aspects of parent engagement with regard to "Closing the Gap". There will be one group of participants from each school and both groups will work simultaneously.

Objectives

1) Parents will discuss aspects of parent involvement with regard to "Closing the Gap" and create strategies and actions that will help to further and develop existing parent engagement in the school community.
2) Parents will explore and develop ways of engagement that might help "Close the Gap" in achievement of children in the school.
3) Parents will examine possible existing barriers to inclusive engagement and look at how parent engagement might be broadened within the community.
4) Parents will develop the skills to run Community Philosophy groups and be in a position to continue the groups at the end of the project. It is hoped that parents from both schools might meet together and support each other as appropriate.

Stage 1

Once permission is gained from the school, it will be necessary to interview the head teacher to gain information including current parent engagement, existing activities and relationships that are helping to "Close the Gap" and possible gatekeepers within the school community. It is assumed at this stage, that the sample of parents to be invited to participate will be those with children in Year 1.

Stage 2

Efforts will be made to meet with key gatekeepers including parents, community workers and/or home school liaison workers, to establish the best time and location for possible meetings as well as the most appropriate way to invite people to meetings.

Stage 3

The first meeting will be arranged and participants will be invited. This meeting will be open to parents and carers only; it is also possible that the meeting will not be on school premises. This is to help those who are not comfortable with the school environment to feel more able to participate. As the project develops it is hoped that participants may wish to invite members of staff or governors if they felt it appropriate.

It is anticipated that one meeting will be held per half term. It will not be necessary for parents to attend all 6 meetings. Consent and ethical practice will be negotiated at the beginning of every meeting. All meetings will be recorded and participants will be encouraged to reflect on their work as meetings progress.

Stage 4

As the process runs its course, parents will be encouraged to carry out actions depending on their discussions. The project is about harnessing the agency of parents rather than the school trying to provide answers. It is hoped that such actions will benefit the school community and relationships.

In order to find out if the meetings are having any impact on school life, it will be necessary to interview the head teacher during the project and towards the end of the project. Some parents will also be interviewed individually as appropriate.

During the latter stages of the project the two groups will be encouraged to meet and share their experiences, and hopefully form an interschool relationship for future Community Philosophy work.

Parents will be actively encouraged to take responsibility for different parts of the meetings, gradually building up their experience and skills in the hope they may be able to continue the meetings in the future.

Research findings will be shared with the group and head teacher and other stakeholders towards the end of the project in order to "member check" and ensure credibility of the work.

Please note that due to the nature of Participatory Action Research, plans may change as appropriate according to the needs of the setting, participants and the research.

Time Commitment

Parents: Each meeting will last approximately 60 minutes. There is no compulsion to attend all 6 meetings. There will be one meeting per half term.

Head teacher: The head teacher will need to be interviewed three times during the process. It may also be appropriate for the head teacher to introduce the researcher to certain gatekeepers within the school such as a home school liaison worker. This could be part of an informal meeting at the beginning to discuss the project. The head teacher would also need to act as advocate for the project on occasion, for example in staff meetings, or parents meetings.

It is possible that parents may wish to invite the head teacher or other staff members to one or more meetings once the group is established. It is also possible that parents may seek to meet with the head teacher or other staff members to discuss particular actions they might like to take.

The Researcher: Charlotte Haines Lyon

I am a doctoral student at York St John University with a background in Youth and Community Work and working in the voluntary sector. As a parent and Vice Chair of Governors at Thorpe Willoughby Community Primary School, I have a good understanding of the pressures placed on primary schools at the moment as well as the needs of parents within the school community. I also have a current DBS certificate.

G. Letter to Headteacher and Chair of Governors of Skellthorpe School

Faculty of Education and Theology
York St John University
Lord Mayors Walk
York
YO31 7EX
c.haineslyon@yorksj.ac.uk
07xxx xxxxxx

Mrs Benson
Kirkgate School
Skellthorpe
Yorkshire

11th November 2014

Dear Mrs Benson,

RE: Research in to Parent Engagement and Community Philosophy

I am a doctoral student at York St John University, studying how Community Philosophy might be a useful tool for parent engagement in Primary Schools. Community Philosophy is a method of group discussion that is related to Philosophy for Children. I would like to run Community Philosophy meetings with parents from two primary schools in Scarborough with the discussion focus as "Closing the Gap". I am expecting one meeting to be held each half term over a period of 18 months in each school.

After conversations with xx and xx, it would appear that Skellthorpe Primary School would be a good school for me to work with. This is because it is felt that you are already actively working with parents, and seeking to "Close the Gap". The school is also based in an area that has a good mix of parents who may engage and benefit from the research. My research is particularly interested in the collective voice of parents and after your recent amalgamation of junior and infant school; I thought that this might be a helpful project to enhance parent engagement. Whilst the initial sample group would probably be taken from year one parents as the attainment gap is often greater in the earlier years of school, it is hoped that as the group progresses it will seek to involve other parents and also in the long term seek to continue on its own.

The aim is to work with parents who may not usually be engaged with school, and therefore it may be appropriate to run the groups off site in a more neutral space. For my pilot project, I ran a group in a café that was run in a pub after school drop off time.
I am not a teacher but have a background in community work, and would like to engage the parents in shaping their concepts of parent engagement and exploring how they can engage with the school. Hence I would not be expecting yourself or other staff to attend the initial meetings. However participants may wish to invite you at a later stage.

I have enclosed further information on the project and the commitments that would be expected of you and your school. I am hoping that you feel that this research would benefit the school. If you feel it might be of interest, please could you contact me with any further questions. I would be delighted to visit and talk to you about the project without any prior commitment from yourself.

I look forward to hearing from you
Yours sincerely

Charlotte Haines Lyon

Cc xx, Chair of Governors

H. Participants' consent letter

Dear Parent/ Carer

Thank you for coming to this meeting. Please could you fill in your contact details. These are so I can contact you regarding the research. Your details will not be shared with anybody else, and I will keep them in a locked cabinet.

By completing and returning this form you are also consenting to me recording the meetings and using the recordings as data for my research. The recordings may be shared with the group in the future to review our work and also for the purposes of my research. When reporting the discussions that are recorded, I shall do so in an anonymous way, unless I specifically gain your permission to be identified.

Please remember that whilst I will maintain confidentiality within my work, I cannot guarantee that other members will not talk about what is said within meetings.

By signing this you are not committing to taking part in the research or attending all meetings. You may leave at any time.

Thank you

Charlotte Haines Lyon

Name:
Contact Details (Please put the details that you would prefer me to use.) Email: Phone: Address
What year or years is/are your child or children in at Gladstone Road?
What time do you think is generally best for parents to meet together as a group?

Please sign here if you consent to taking part in the research project as described above:

I. Stimulus for October 2015 meeting on support

Who? What?

How Why?

J. Knowing Map

complaint not enough performative access AS
Access
barred from relational
Relationships
parents -school M224 not welcome
overture from school M493
welcome/ unwelcome
Place
do you know your place?
teacher M427
playground - ability? to speak to teacher M380 ff
presence
availability
working parents not in playground even bigger barrier M401
visibility N6
parent M400
hard to get message through if you're not there M400
Relying on children as messengers M484
children filter out what they don't want you to know M487
What if you don't want them to know? M414
barrier
Oct 643 "Even if you're invited to the coffee morning, we still didn't know what were meant to be doing we stood i the playground looking at the teacher wondering is someone going to invite us in somewhere?" . . . 646 "He [teacher] was asking the lady on the door if she knew."
O651 It doesn't get any better (as kids move through school) "You just loiter around playgrounds and hope a door opens and then go in."
Great metaphor! Criminality, hope, outcasts, waiting to get crumbs from table, let in b the king, quite passive though loitering has a bit more action.
solidarity
M444 someone (in playground) diplomatic who would need to be able to see things from all points of view and not take sides
M446" I'm for you"
speech therapy x 2 M215
lack of trust M519
lack of communication
Relationship P to school reinforcing? or 2nd parent
what professionals are doing with your child
if know can support M339
Pupil premium funding for your child m341, 345ff
Not knowing
not knowing how the system works M353
are you in the right place to find out M371
temporality
timing of providing knowledge (summer report too late)
Knowing
your child O446,495
the child (TA or teacher) M454 O188
"How do you do that without having set access points into school system" M339
or can it be more porous with out such access points = very systematic
strategy?
too much knowledge J885
drowning
overwhelmed
"feels like we're a bit lost" M201
lost at sea M568?
head stepping down M237
trust parents about what they know v dismissing paranoid parents N3
School skills Writing, spelling etc
new maths etc M565ff
parental knowledge
Knowledge
how your child is doing M 280 also O181
Parents evening useless M268
"You don't know what you don't know" M139 (3 things that you don't feel involved in) M472, 474
soft stuff/ hard stuff M375
hard - curriculum etc
valid issues- is mine important enough? M368
communicating knowledge
reading can be barrier 294
how do we find meetings are on O504
"Did you get the note" (telling off) real but metaphor too O476
"We care enough to moan" M658
constructive M658
moaning
slagathon text
worries v complaints - mitigating complaints O784
negativity M504
not "horrible parents who'd just like to be argumentative" M507
self selecting group of good people others might not be (M511)
rites and rituals
induction -into the special SHS
Fear of ineptitude M119ff, 188ff
Not understanding doesn't mean it doesn't work M665
professional - why doesn't school use this IT M323
special knowledge
barriers
magical knowledge does it exist?
teachers 'special language'
This special language is something that excludes somewhat like the priests speaking in Latin and the general populace couldn't. Then had to be translated by priests to populace.
exclusion
Oct771 People go to meetings to be told important things
for whom
qualifying knowledge
for what
Passwords
What kind of knowledge? What does it enable you to do. Does it make you perfect parent? Acceptable? Whom does it giver you access to?
Language
Ranciere Ignorant Schoolmaster, Biesta book
who does it turn me into?
Empowering or furthering policing discourse?
enthusiastic parents wanting to know (HT celebrating) J7
normal people v teachers M260
knowledge used against you (teachers J22)
accountability
neoliberal knowledge
use of knowledge
communication
Closing the Gap Implies particular knowledge will help overcome gap. Ignores structural issues. Makes peopel feel better but there is other secret stuff you need - sex money status etc. Correct taste (Stage school article)
The Lie Tree Who was allowed knowledge (middleclass men). Was it knowledge that got people 'in' no actually it was gender and money. As she had knowledge but wasn't allowed to admit that. Her brain was too small as a woman. Her knowledge was denied. She had to know her place which she refused.
communication
minor stuff fallen over etc M519 disheartening - TRUST
TRUST
parents knowledge
if teacher doesn't tell you strangling M538
team O82ff
metaphorical wall Jul +also O132 both re induction meeting
cut off by them 160
team v barriers in playground
victory M583
bat M634
'trust' injunction M636
battle lines
attack from top O115
Challenging J82
truth?
whose version
knowledge
valid
what is valued
J921 joke re having to go in next day as haven't learnt enough knowledge
who decides? J288
who measures? J288
whose is valued
mine v theirs
knowledge of the other
SATs knowledge J285
nice rounded person stuff J289
desirable knowledge impeded by targets J294
secrets
build relationships (may notes P to me) J 318 - mock in cahoots
knowledge is power
when
knowledge
what
whose
power
when
what
whose
I do not know her Oct 167ff
being known
notoriety R Nov?
I want him to know me
giving research knowledge etc expertise
CtG J meeting O240
knowledge v knowing
v all knowing
God
panopticon
Couldry - voice demands agency recognition and narrative - I would also argue presence and knowing (recognition maybe?
telling via written word
standing side by side
presence
communicating WITH parents
doing together
Habermas communicative space
knowing the other
Friendship Macmurray
dialogue
action
irigaray - having to see the other. space in between (Hoveid and Finne
subject
mirroring

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