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**Book: Paradoxes of Democracy, leadership and education: Writing the Poetry of the Future**

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in 1985 Nicholas Beattie (1985) lamented the lack of English parental participation in schools; arguing that the educational system encouraged mere parental support of schools and their management, rather than democratic participation. This differed from a more participatory model in France and Germany, Beattie argued, due to the British not facing radical questions of national leadership and authority after World War Two. Nearly 35 years after Beattie's critique, parents are still kept at a safe distance despite schools professing open door policies and government proclamations on the importance of parent involvement. An emphasis on the 'important' link between parental involvement and children's academic achievement (Alameda-Lawson, 2014; Araque, Wietstock, Cova, & Zepeda, 2017; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Hornby, 2011; S. Miller et al., 2017; Wilshaw, 2013, 2016), has relegated parents to being subservient instruments of the neoliberal education system. The role of parents is to cultivate good economic beings who do well in tests. The parental role is not to question the management, let alone the trajectory of the education system.

The current direction of travel of parent engagement, in English schooling, sets impossible standards for parents and, as I will demonstrate, these standards make it difficult to challenge everyday micro-realities, let alone larger structural and policy issues. Drawing on a research study in a Yorkshire primary school, Kirkgate[1], I argue that different discursive articulations regarding parent engagement obstruct democratic parent engagement. I reflect on how group discussions with parents involved 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, particularly the 'good' parent, can lead to the containment of voice. I unpick how the small group of parents involved in a participatory action research study moved towards a more complex understanding of good and bad parenting and how we might move away from such individualising practice. Such practice I argue leads to a seemingly uncomfortable paradoxical approach to parent engagement which entails both dissensual *and* relational working.

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[1] All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

**Context**

Parent involvement in education has been a contested idea since the inception of mass schooling in England which began in the 1880s. The very idea of taking the child outside the sanctity of the family and church and allowing them to be educated by the state was an anathema to many (Pinchbeck & Hewitt, 1973).There were efforts to educate parents in order to help them support their children such as Charlotte Mason's Parents National Education Union (Coombs & Thorley, 2015), but little effort was made to involve parents with any concept of democratic education such as Moutsios' (2010, pp. 123-124 original emphasis)concept 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.

*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. Baroness 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 wrote that "schools exist to foster virtuous circles" (1967, p. 37), implying that schools had a role in educating (or disciplining families). This furthered the idea that parents needed training to be good and useful parents. As Beattie (1985) details, the Plowden report 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 & 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, p. 174). Indeed, CASE, which encouraged parents to establish local groups, specifically warned such groups not to "antagonize the LEA" (Anon, 1961-2, pp. 12-13 in Beattie,1985).

Arguably, parents are in a similar, if not worse, position now. Parents are encouraged to *support* the school and work towards a "favourable climate" (Beattie, 1985, p. 174); such support and climate entails parental support of children through increasingly didactic and surveillant activities. For example, in her book about the Michaela Free School in North London, the headteacher, Katherine Birbalsingh (2016a) and her staff make it clear that questioning the structural problems or school policy is prohibited. Parents *must* be"100% competen[t]" and provide "100% support" for the

school (Birbalsingh, 2016b, p. 216). Support, Birbalsingh (2016b, p. 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." Presumably 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. It does however highlight that nothing much has changed since Munn (1993, p. 1) stated parents are "expected to uphold school values [ . . . but] parental involvement in identifying the values which the school will embody is rare".

More widely, far from being positioned as citizens who can participate democratically in the schooling system, parents are expected to be partners in this neoliberal endeavour of helping raise academic results. Parents are now expected to carry out activities at home, such as surveillance and help with homework to ensure that their children are successful (Vincent, 2017). As school's instigate use of "parent engagement apps" such as ClassDoJo (2018) and ClassCharts (EduKey, 2017) "teachers are able to recruit parents as correctional resources to reinforce classroom behaviours outside of school hours" (Manolev, Sullivan, & Slee, 2019, p. 44). Thus, parents are expected to silently support the school without challenge and to compliantly support their children in their learning, rather than questioning the education policy such as forced academisation or the ever-present testing regime in English schools.

It is with this background of side-lining parents voices and a commitment to Moutsios' (2010) vision of 'education politics' that led to the establishing of the participatory action research project. As part of this project I worked with a small group of parents (eleven over two years including three women, Dacia, Holly and Pat, who were present at nearly every meeting) and problematised different aspects of parent engagement. We met twice a term over a two-year period, sometimes in the form of group discussion meetings and other times with the Headteacher.

In the second group meeting, to stimulate discussion, 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 (2013) and the so-called Social Mobility Tsar Alan Milburn (2014) regarding the responsibility of parents to ensure their children achieved well. I asked the group to think about it and question the ideas. The group's unequivocal answer was that it was everybody's responsibility, not that of individual parents, to support children in their academic achievement, we then proceeded to problematise this further. At the next meeting we problematised the idea of 'support' considering government and school

proclamations that parents must support their children. 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 of problems faced by many people in Skellthorpe. However, as with the Troubled Families programme (House of Commons Library, 2018) much critiqued by Jensen (2018) and Levitas (2012), the issues were conflated over time into one parent with myriad problems, rather than a diverse set of people with a variety of skills and problems they are trying to resolve.

Whilst participants knew people who were experiencing such issues, they weren't necessarily experiencing it themselves. However, throughout the project, Dacia, Holly and Pat demonstrated 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 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'. Despite tremendous sympathy with 'troubled parents', we were still making it clear that we were not as troubled as 'them'. Whilst such imaginings were based on different experiences either we had had, or knew others had had, it was the conflating 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 he finally achieved his alchemy, he was so horrified by his creation he recoiled and fled in disgust and fear (Shelley, 2003).

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. 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, Osgood, O'Toole, & Tsouroufli, 2018). Parents must navigate the "double bind of parenting culture" (Bristow, 2014, p. 200) where they are expected to both embrace intensive parenting but reject it for fear of being accused of smothering by 'helicopter parenting'.

Chiefly these good parenting behaviours are often implicitly defined by being the opposite of the identified bad behaviour. When the group explored the concept of '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. We all 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.' There was a clear normalising of parents who read with their children. Reading with one's child was seen as 'morally correct', rather than merely the pedagogically pragmatic thing to do. There appeared to be an implicit assumption that 'as long as we maintained such morally correct behaviours, we could maintain our good parent status'.

Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) critical discourse theory helps to explore how such hegemonic constructs are 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. As humans, we tend to define ourselves by what we are not (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). 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 the school, 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 the government's discourse on parent engagement. The disadvantaged parents are 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 Implies we 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.

This fantasmatic logic affords blame on parents. A fantasmatic logic is builds upon a desired fantasy that if certain things are in place then a particular thing will happen (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) and this case the government has promulgated the idea that parenting can compensate for inequality and parents are thus blamed in order to obfuscate the real issues of such an unequal society (Reay, 2013; 2017; Hartas, 2012; 2015). Recently this type of blaming of parents was carried out by the Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds (2018), 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 (i.e. supporting not questioning the school or education policy), 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 as 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, and 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, p. 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 parental engagement assume notions of acceptable parenthood that mirror behaviours of middle-class families (Gewirtz, 2001; Diane 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), 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).

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, pp. 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 individualising, and difficult to admit to being the 'bad parent'.

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

The November 2015 meeting highlighted how being seen as the 'other'—the bad parent—affects democratic engagement. Jenni shared her frustrations of her concerns being dismissed as a paranoid new mother and feeling belittled by staff. 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 Jenni said, were leading her 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, p. 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?" (1988, p. 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 Jenni spoke about her treatment when arguing for her child with additional needs, I reflected on how different people had more reasons to get angry than others. It is not necessarily appropriate

to maintain the apparently desired harmonious or supportive relationships with schools if children had to suffer. Some people need to express their anger, to fight for their child, where others might benefit more from keeping quiet. 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 who lacks the social capital to engage with parents (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) or that the "schools rather than parents are often 'hard to reach'" (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 277); staff in schools may not know how to relate to people who are not on the same professional level as them. It is seemingly impossible to provide a democratic parent engagement model, that is supportive of schools if parents were being silenced by the micro-realities of the everyday.

**Relating to the "other", a dissensual move**

In order to negotiate such challenges and silencing, parents have to risk being the 'other' and break the chains of equivalence. Despite the strident group discussion about the importance of reading as an apparent marker of a supportive parent, one mother, Beth, admitted that she didn't always read with her son, although she couched it carefully,

> 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. (October Meeting)

There was a volte face within the group as different mothers and guardians started to say that support actually required parents to not support their child in ways the school demanded, for example reading. Dacia argued that when her child was struggling, "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." The group started to explore how support could be considered as "holding back" on what might be considered support by the school.

The idea of support started to evolve and move away from the simple idea that reading is essential to being a good or supportive parent. Participants 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. 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 (W. I. 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).

To defy the authorities and assume we can speak out and engage in educational politics is risky. To even challenge the assumptions of what makes a good parent, can present problems for democratic parent engagement, risking being seen as a bad parent, an 'other'. It is, seemingly, 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. Such dissensual engagement goes against Birbalsingh's (2016b, p. 216) desired notion of 100% support from parents for all school rules and practices, nevertheless, an apparent paradox of a dissensual *and* relational form of democratic parent engagement is necessary.

Nevertheless, a dissensual mode of parent engagement still requires some form of relationship between parents and between parents and schools. Indeed, the participants placed much emphasis on the need to know each other and school staff. However, such knowing and relating entails relational power dynamics as Jenni illustrated, the fear of being known as the bad parent, affects the way one might interact with another. The current model of performative parent engagement induces a fear of the other in which "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, p. 260).

Democratic parent engagement thus requires a fundamental shift away from the performative, supportive model that is currently required by the neoliberal education system. During the study dissensual practices became an important part of parent engagement, however, paradoxically so did relationships between parents, but also between parents and school staff. The importance of the ability to relate to each other as parents and staff became clear, rather than building barriers, both physical and metaphorical between parents and the school which confine and restrict the role of parents, leaving notions of democratic engagement to tick box votes and surveys. The participants did not want to be friends with staff 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 via an app was not adequate. The presence of the

teacher in the playground was a theme in all meetings, and in the November 2015 meeting, the new Headteacher's presence in the playground is noted and welcomed.

The requests to see staff in the Kirkgate playground can be seen as an allusion to the presence required to be able to relate to them. There is a lack of trust about the message getting through to staff and participants talked about the need for "soft communication". Forty years ago, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978, p. 11) argued 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 discussion groups formats might offer a form of democratic parent engagement, the feeling seemed 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, p. 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).

## Spacious agonism

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 the study's 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'. 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, p. 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 (2014, p. 55), refers to such space, there needs to be "spaciousness". There must be an imbrication of spaciousness, dissensus and relationality. One of the key recommendations made by Linda Powell and Margaret Barber (2012) 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." Within this particular

study, space external to the school was essential in allowing difficult and complex conversations; ones that did not have to adhere to particular school mores.

These spaces such as the local community centre and cafe acted as "liminal spaces" (Conroy, 2004, p. 54) at key points within the study. Discussion groups took place within the community centre, meetings with the Headteacher in his office and further reflection meetings in the local cafe. Drawing on experiences in divided societies, such as Northern Ireland, James Conroy (2004, p. 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, p. 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.

The need for such spaciousness within and without the school, to afford both relationality and dissensual practices provides a challenge to leaders of schools within a neoliberal age. The challenges to democratic parent engagement arguably apply to education leaders too. As well as performative pressure on parents, teachers are also expected to develop successful economic beings, which in turn requires to work in specific ways. The unmanageability of teachers' workload is an increasing problem (Department for Education, 2018) as the Headteacher of Kirkgate pointed out, to expect the teachers to spend more time relating to parents was unviable. 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 & 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.

# Conclusion

Over the two years the participants and I played with notions of parent engagment which included problematising concepts such as support and relationships but also working together in different locations, providing a spaciousness to expand our thinking. Having intitially hoped for an overarching democratic model which would transform the system, we came to terms which much smaller but possibly more radical ways forward. The microrealities of the lives of both parents and staff became increasingly important in our quest for more democratic practices. The need for relationality, dissensus and spaciousness became clear as the conditions required to afford such practices.

Countering such a formidable force, as neoliberalism, may not be possible in terms of an overarching alternative narrative, but it could be that little moments, relational and democratic gestures make the difference. As Kelly Oliver (2004, p. 170) argues "the real revolution can only be won by the imagination", maybe if we afford at least a little spaciousness to think, relate and act differently, democratic engagement might be possible within schools, however fleeting. Relating to each other becomes an act of defiance in an age of individualism as much as a refusal to conform to the hegemony of so called good or bad parents. Each glimpse of democratic engagement serves to offer the possibility of destabilising the status quo.

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