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<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8341-744X> (2018) Democratic parent engagement: relational and dissensual. *Power and Education*, 10 (2). pp. 195-208.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743818756913>

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Democratic parent engagement: relational and dissensual.

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| Journal: | <i>Power and Education</i> |
| Manuscript ID | PAE-17-0011 |
| Manuscript Type: | Democracy and Education Special Issue |
| Keywords: | Democracy, Parent engagement, Parent voice, Dissensus, Ranciere |
| Abstract: | <p>In opposition to the discourse of silent compliance and the neoliberal colonisation of voice, this article shares research with parents in an English primary school. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière and John Macmurray, I argue that there is a need for a more relational but dissensual approach to parent engagement and voice, instead of parents being positioned by schools as support acts. Parent engagement, increasingly commodified over recent years within English school policy, has been relegated to responding to questionnaires, dutiful attendance of parents' evenings, ensuring homework completion and choosing the correct school.</p> <p>Meanwhile the social mobility agenda demands that parents inculcate aspirations in their children unquestioningly. Policies and pronouncements seek to 'close the gap' in attainment between the poorest children and their peers in England, Australia, the United States and other neoliberalised countries. Hence a context is created in which parent engagement is now an exercise in creating 'good' pupils and successful economic beings, This article considers how parents have been rendered objects rather than agentic subjects within neoliberal education systems and have lost their democratic voice. It concludes that there needs to be a reanimation of Dewey's (2013) vision of 'education politics' (Moutsios, 2010: 124).</p> |
| | |

Introduction

Increasingly, many aspects of western societies, notably education and health have been neoliberalised (Olssen et al., 2004; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Western et al., 2007). Although globally there are varying levels of privatisation, in anglophone countries such as England, Australia and the United States, both sectors have come under increasing levels of commodification. Competition between providers is claimed as essential to efficiency and good performance. Choice of provider is promoted as a responsibility to be exercised by consumers based on accountability data (Hursh, 2007). Under neoliberal education policies, choice of school has become the definition of democratic voice.

Furthermore, as the neoliberal project progresses, inequality has widened in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom (Hills, 2015; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). All three countries are in the top ten industrialised countries for unequal incomes. The United States is second (to Chile), the United Kingdom fifth and Australia ninth (Hills, 2015: 27). This gap in income further translates into a gap in achievement in schools between the most disadvantaged children and their peers, this is especially so in the UK (OECD, 2010). Whereas in the United States and Australia, education inequality initiatives have been largely race focussed (Hursh, 2007; Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood), the UK initiatives have been very much class based (OFSTED, 2013). The narratives within the discourses and policies, however, are very similar. The policies designed to close the inequality, individualise and further instrumentalise parents by reifying specific models of parenting that supposedly ensure good results and accordingly acceptable economic beings. As Ramaekers and Suissa (2011) point out, this narrow view of parenting has become an individualistic exercise in transmission from parent to child. This instrumentalisation of parent engagement within neoliberal education systems, especially within England has commodified parents and thus

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3 removed their agency as human beings. Furthermore, there is an implied consensus as to the
4
5 shape of parent engagement.
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8 This article will draw on doctoral research that sought to counter the individualistic narrative
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10 of choice and instrumentalisation, instead embracing the agency of parents regarding the
11
12 home- school relationship. Building on the work of Jacques Rancière and John Macmurray an
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14 argument will be made for a more democratic, relational but dissensual form of parent
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16 engagement. This entails a move away from an instrumentalist view of the home-school
17
18 partnership towards a more Deweyian model of '*education politics*,' in which parents, along
19
20 with teachers and pupils, might be able to shape education policy rather than submit to it
21
22 (Moutsios, 2010: 124).
23

24 25 **Context**

26
27 Neoliberalism connotes individualism, free markets, consumerism and minimal state
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29 intervention with competition as the final arbiter; any intervention that the state makes is for
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31 the protection and functioning of the markets rather than for the sake of the individual or
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33 community (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). This is in direct opposition to the social democratic
34
35 concept of people living in relationship with each other, negotiating power dynamics, social
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37 values and tensions (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). In the anglophone states including the United
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39 States, Australia and England, education has become increasingly focussed on creating
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41 human capital (Connell, 2013; Olssen, 2010). The results of high stakes tests are of the
42
43 utmost importance, with concepts of well-being, social skills, and political understanding
44
45 being side-lined if not eviscerated.
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49 Dewey (1922: 111) complained that too many saw education as a means to solving today's
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51 problems, rather than 'the proper end of education: the promotion of the best realization of
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53 humanity as humanity'. This still applies today, with education policy being dictated by the
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55 apparent needs of now, by the government and employers rather than necessarily wider
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3 social goods. As Fielding and Moss (2010:15) argue, schools are 'at risk of being a place of
4 regulation and normalization, tasked with producing subjects fit for the purposes of the
5 nation state and the capitalist economy'. Similarly, parents are now positioned as subjects fit
6 for economic purpose rather than citizens 'empowered to influence the education that in
7 turn shapes the political values, attitudes, and modes of behaviour of future citizens'
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13 (Gutmann, 1987: 14).
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19 Thus

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22 As a consequence, education politics as the activity of teachers/
23 academics, learners and parents to question and reflect on the
24 purpose, the contents and the pedagogic mode of learning, is
25 superseded by transnational policy-making, which aims primarily at
26 generating the cognitive and human resources required by the
27 labour markets (Moutsios, 2010: 127).
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35 **Choice**

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37 Whilst countries are competing in the global market place, and within the PISA rankings
38 (OECD, 2015), individual schools have been forced to compete against each other within their
39 own locality with the introduction of standardised tests and publication of their results.
40
41 School performance in these tests is used as criteria for competition, as parents choose the
42 'best' school for their children. This data is readily accessible, either through government
43 websites such as <http://www.myschool.edu.au/> in Australia, a plethora of websites in the US
44 including www.schooldigger.com, and School Performance Tables in the UK (Department for
45 Education, 2014).
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3 Choice is key to the market logic. As competition enables more efficient production rates
4 (whether of factories, or indeed schools), and the ability to choose between the best school
5 and its failing neighbour is essential. In order to promote standards, the logic 'assumes that
6 market arrangements will always produce better outcomes than government regulation'
7 (Angus, 2015: 396); if a school roll starts to drop, then the school will improve in order to
8 regain pupil numbers.
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16 Choice of school thus comes at the expense of social cohesion as parents are expected to
17 choose the best school rather than the community school (Weller, 2012). Reay (2008) argues
18 that school choice, is now understood as the act of a responsible parent and, moreover, the
19 wrong school choice is the act of an irresponsible parent. To choose the best school has
20 become a moral act, and thus parents have been responsabilised (Reay, 2008: 645; Shamir,
21 2008). This is problematic, not least because the grounds for choice are spurious and,
22 certainly in England, the choice is not actually there. For example, there may be no local
23 school designated 'Good' or 'Outstanding', the parents may not be allocated their first choice
24 of school, or the parents may not have the resources to choose or transport their child to the
25 'best' school (Adams, 2017; Vincent, 1996a). Thus, as Reay (2008:643) argues, 'the ability to
26 take up [this] new parental [position] – as active chooser. . . – is differentially distributed
27 according to social class'.
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42 The logic of choice, has deposed the more social democratic concept of participation in
43 institutional life (Beattie, 1985); it equates the choice of joining (or withdrawing) from a
44 school to participative power (Vincent, 1996b). As Ball (2003: 32-32) argues, this notion of
45 choice within schooling has become very utilitarian with the concept of values being
46 relegated as old fashioned or needless. Thus, parents have been placed not as citizens
47 involved in a shared endeavour of bringing up new citizens, but as 'choosing subjects' (Angus,
48 2015: 396). Democratic voice has become colonised by the concept choice.
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Consensus

As Biesta (2016: 55). argues 'It is, of course, important to acknowledge that parental choice in itself can hardly be called democratic if it is not a part of wider democratic deliberation about the shape and form and ends of education in society' Neoliberal education systems, have removed the ability and space for such deliberation.

In England, some parents and parents' groups protested in 2016 against the implementation of a new form of testing for six and seven year olds (year 2) and ten and eleven year olds (year 6); a particularly technical grammar test provoked significant consternation. Nick Gibb, the schools minister, claimed that the tests were necessary because 'if you do not come from a home where your parents speak in a grammatically correct form and if you do not have a home surrounded by books where reading is the daily occurrence, they (those children) need that structural instruction,' (TES, 2016).

London Free school founder and columnist Toby Young opined (Young T, 2016):

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

Consequently, parental debate within the mainstream media about the rights and wrongs of these tests and the direction of the education system was shut down. Middle class parents were positioned as self-interested enemies of promise and disadvantaged parents too inept for their children to succeed at school. Democratic debate was shut down.

Brown (2015: 22) argues that neoliberalism has led to people (and I would argue schools) needing to behave in investible ways, rather than moral or democratic ways. Schools need to

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2
3 be seen as succeeding in the high-stakes testing and accountability measures. In the UK, they
4 are also expected to demonstrate parental support and consensus by way of Parent View (a
5 questionnaire completed by parents that the inspectors from OFSTED use as part of its
6 judgment found at <https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/>). If a school does not adhere to the
7 required standards (i.e. fails the high stakes testing requirements), it will be disciplined by
8 way of privatisation and reform. In the United States 'failing schools' are forced to become
9 Charter schools and in the UK they are forced to convert to Academies (Burns, 2015; Hursh,
10 2007). A similar policy has been advocated in Australia (Zyngier, 2015). There is no room for
11 deviation. It is unsurprising then, that parents can feel pressurised to compliantly support the
12 school and children to succeed in tests. Hursh (2007) suggests that the real purpose of these
13 apparent accountability procedures is to speed up the route towards privatisation, rather
14 than school improvement.

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29 Even the democratic role of parent governors in England is debateable with pressure to agree
30 with the head and general education policy. The role of governors is often to maintain a
31 harmonious consensus; as Young (Young H, 2016) maintains, 'The conception of a singular
32 common good and the constitution of education and governing as apolitical operate against
33 the discussion of alternative conceptions of 'good' education to that of the national
34 performative system'. The apparent need for consensus has become more a demand for
35 silent compliance within a system, thus further removing democratic voice of parents.

43 44 **Removal of agency**

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Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom have all recognised that there is a gap
between the academic attainment of the poorest children and their contemporaries. They
have each developed a range of policies intended to close this gap. The Australian 'gap' is
portrayed as being between Aboriginal children and their white peers (Ministerial Council for
Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs) and the USA similarly has focussed

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3 on a race based gap (Hursh, 2007). England however has focussed on the gap between
4
5 working class white children and their peers (OFSTED, 2013); the problematic conflation of
6
7 working class and disadvantage notwithstanding (House of Commons Education Committee,
8
9 2014: 3; OFSTED, 2013; Perry and Francis, 2010).

10
11
12 The UK's 2010 Coalition government and the current Conservative government have touted
13
14 parental engagement as the panacea for the achievement gap between the poorest children
15
16 in England and their contemporaries. Michael Wilshaw (2013), the then Chief Inspector of
17
18 Schools in England, stated that 'poverty of expectation is a greater problem than material
19
20 poverty'; the raising of aspirations is commonly purported to be key to narrowing inequality
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22 (Baker et al., 2014; OFSTED, 2013; Sharples et al., 2011; Sodha and Margo, 2010; Vasagar,
23
24 2011). This assertion is heavily criticised by some researchers who argue that there is no
25
26 evidence for a lack of aspiration but rather there is a problem with the lack of resources and
27
28 often barriers to achieving such aspirations (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Kintrea et al.,
29
30 2011; Perry and Francis, 2010). The policies designed to 'close the gap' in Australia, the
31
32 United States and England all individualise the problem of poverty through pathologising
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34 economically poorer parents, rather than questioning the vast structural inequities.

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38 Many models of parenting and parental engagement, advocated within these policies, mirror
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40 those of middle class families. As Lareau (2011) describes, her ethnographic research with
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42 parents indicated middle class families tend to use 'concerted cultivation' to parent; ensuring
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44 the child experiences different activities including sports and arts to accumulate cultural
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46 capital in order in the hope of boosting economic prospects. The working-class parents that
47
48 she worked with tended to view parenting as more 'natural growth' including free play and
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50 time with family. Problematically, Lareau found that schools tended to value the concerted
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52 cultivation more than the natural growth style of parenting. Thus, parent engagement
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3 becomes a mechanism for 'conversion' of problem parents to 'acceptable' ones (Lumby,
4
5 2007; Reay, 2008).
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8 Invoking Dewey's (2013), concept of the 'wisest parent' Bates (2011: 314) asks how we
9
10 'ensure the "best and wisest" parent becomes the norm?'. His question not only implies that
11
12 someone other than the parent is ensuring the norm, but that there is a singular consensus
13
14 as to the make-up of this best parent. As Williams (2004: 26) argues, parenthood and
15
16 parenting have been subjected to increasing 'public regulation' and scrutiny; there have been
17
18 many diktats as to how to parent, especially aimed at the most financially disadvantaged
19
20 parents. This has included the need for parents to gain good jobs with an increasing pay
21
22 (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014), which was published at a time of
23
24 frozen pay within the public services in the UK.
25

26
27 Furthermore, a wider angst has been created as to how difficult parenting is, with 'routes to
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29 such functioning defined by the latest research in psychology; parents are understood to be
30
31 responsible for attaining a certain (preconceived) idea(l) of what "good", well-behaved
32
33 children are' (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2011: 136). These evermore scientific answers have
34
35 resulted in framing parents as simple followers of instructions which Ramaekers and Suissa
36
37 (2011) argue results in removing moral agency, and voice. This is an extremely problematic;
38
39 'treating people as if they lack that capacity *is* to treat them as if they were not human'
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41 (Couldry, 2010: 1).
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45 As Ramaekers and Suissa (2011) point out, this narrow view of parenting, has become about
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47 transmission from a parent to the child in an extraordinarily individualistic way. The
48
49 neoliberal education system's model of parental engagement has removed the democratic
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51 agency of parents, and created a narrative in which a 'good parent' makes responsible
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53 choices instead of voicing opinion, silently supports the neoliberal consensus and has no
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55 moral capacity to parent. Parents have not only been instrumentalised in the production of
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3 economic beings, but have been individualised and removed from the task of 'democratic
4 deliberation about the shape and form and ends of education in society' (Biesta, 2016: 55).
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8 **Doctoral Research**

9
10 Pring (2012: 749) argues that neoliberal education has objectified learners who are valued
11 for their ability to affect 'the place of the school in the league table, the successful
12 attainment of targets, the supply of skilled workers.'. I argue that parents have been
13 objectified in the same way, valued for how they affect the overall results of a school;
14 behaving in investible ways (Brown 2015). Echoing Macmurray, Pring (2012:747) advocates
15 'put[ting] persons back in to education'. It is with this desire to put parents as persons back
16 into education that I carried out my doctoral research. The aim was to provide a space in
17 which parents would be able to question policy, practice and the narratives of parent
18 engagement within the school. Thus, trying to recreate a Deweyian dialogue in which people
19 with different views could 'have equable opportunity to receive and to take from others.'
20 (Dewey, 1922: 97).
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34 As I have argued, parental agency is often removed or relegated null and void by the
35 government and or education professionals, therefore Critical Participative Action Research
36 Methodology (Kemmis, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014) was used to ensure participants – parents
37 in an English primary school – were able to shape the research, question their own practices
38 and those of the school. To date, the project has involved ten meetings with participants over
39 two years.
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47 Five of these meetings took the form of Community Philosophy. Community Philosophy is
48 one of many forms of community of inquiry and philosophical communities, including
49 Sceptics and Philosophy Clubs (Evans 2012). It is an adaptation of Philosophy for Children
50 (P4C); a scheme developed by Matthew Lipman and provided in schools in the UK, through
51 SAPERE (2013; 2015a). More recently SAPERE (2015b) have 'extended the 'C' to include
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3 colleges and communities' rather than denoting just children. Lipman built on the work of
4
5 John Dewey arguing that all inquiry must be social (Dewey, 1922; Evans, 2012; Lipman, 2003).
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7 Lipman (2003: 94) promoted 'non adversarial deliberations and shared cognitions'; dialogue
8
9 within a group building an argument rather than a partisan debate. The non-adversarial
10
11 nature of Community Philosophy was attractive to participants and the headteacher, who
12
13 feared the project might become a 'moaning shop'. Participants liked the idea of exploring
14
15 issues and developing arguments and in turn actions that might arise from the discussions.
16
17 For example, in one meeting, the importance of being able to speak informally with teachers
18
19 was explored in depth and the participants agreed to meet with the headteacher to explore
20
21 how this might work in practice.
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23
24 These meetings were held in an adjacent community centre and with no staff from the
25
26 school present. Whilst there was initially some interest from parents, numbers soon
27
28 dwindled and three regular participants attended meetings, with a handful of other parents
29
30 attending different meetings throughout the project. Participants said the difficulty in
31
32 maintaining numbers, was due to the expectation to *do* something in the meetings. It was
33
34 argued that supporting each other, and sharing stories as part of the meeting was important,
35
36 thus, after continual reflection and negotiation, formal Community Philosophy was gradually
37
38 dropped, although the group still maintained an attitude of enquiry but with a stronger
39
40 emphasis on support for parents. After five meetings and falling numbers, the remaining
41
42 participants asked to meet with the headteacher to explore some of the issues raised in our
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44 discussions.
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47 48 **Relationships**

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51 A common theme throughout the meetings was for easier and more informal communication
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53 and relationships with the school, rather than more meetings or formal initiatives such as
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55 Community Philosophy. One of the most memorable moments of the project was the
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3 excitement of a participant reporting that the headteacher had come out of his office to say
4 hello to some of the parents; this had more impact than a variety of official initiatives to work
5 with parents. The meetings with the headteacher have since explored different options as to
6 how this might work, but health and safety issues are often cited as a barrier to simple
7 parent-school relationships being built. In an attempt to counter the barriers to
8 communication, the headteacher has instigated a new project in which surveys will be used
9 regularly via email and social media.
10

11
12 Whilst home-school partnerships are claimed by the school, and parents' voices are sought
13 via surveys, it is difficult for parents to access staff. It is a one-sided power relationship with
14 staff being able to open or shut the door, to agree and arrange meetings. As Lareau (1989:
15 35) identifies it is more convenient for teachers to maintain a 'professional -client
16 relationship' rather than a partnership in which 'power and control is equally distributed.'
17 Parents are expected to choose the school, respond to questionnaires and feedback when
18 asked. They are not expected to instigate relationships or question what is occurring within
19 the wider running of the school. For example, whilst there are new events to teach parents
20 how to help their child with maths, there is no space to question the new maths initiative.
21

22
23 In opposition to voice being relegated to choice and survey response, Couldry argues that
24 narrative is essential (2010); not only does one need to tell their story, 'to give account' but
25 that account needs to be heard. If it is possible for interactions between staff and parents in
26 a more open and equal way, it might be possible as Dewey (1922:101) argues, for a
27 breakdown of 'those barriers of class, race, and national territory which keep men [and
28 women] from perceiving the full import of their activity'. If staff and parents could
29 understand their impact on others, especially regarding the education of the children, it
30 might make for the partnership espoused by schools.
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3 It is essential to consider how parents and schools relate to each other, if we are to move
4 beyond the instrumentalisation of parents in education. Macmurray (2012: 667ff) argued
5 that education was not simply about creating functional citizens but to enable children to
6
7 'learn to be human'. For this to happen, children need to relate to others within a complex
8
9 community; a school. I would argue that children need to see adults relating to each other
10
11 too. As the headteacher of the school I worked with stated, 'for a child to see a parent talking
12
13 to a teacher- it's nice but quite rare.'

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18 Informal opportunities to relate, enable the contemplation of each other that Macmurray
19
20 advocates (1950; 1961), which leads to the taking in to account of our impact upon each
21
22 other that Dewey (1922) promoted. Telling our stories and hearing others stories, beyond
23
24 choosing boxes in surveys allows for 'the relation of fellowship' rather than the 'relation of
25
26 master and servant' (Macmurray, 1950: 29). It is through contemplating each other and
27
28 taking each other into account, Macmurray (1950) argues that we can make effective
29
30 decisions as to how to live, take action, and reflect on the consequences of that action. This,
31
32 not choosing at the ballot box he argued, is democratic living.

33 34 35 36 **Problematic consensus and dissensual agency**

37
38 As the research project continued, participants became increasingly frustrated with the
39
40 apparent need to be harmonious and the non-adversarial nature of Community Philosophy.
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42 Early on a participant left the project saying that they did not like critique of the school as it
43
44 was disloyal. Other participants felt that critique was necessary to improve a situation. At a
45
46 later meeting, a participant expressed anger and frustration at how they had been treated by
47
48 the school but also other parents. The original design of meetings was aimed to prevent such
49
50 an outburst, but we had dropped the precise format by this point. The meeting was very
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52 uncomfortable for many of us, however, it led to personal reflection on behalf of several
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54 participants and changes in behaviour and thought. After this meeting, participants
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3 expressed the need for more grit in the oyster, and more adversarial debate rather than
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5 trying to work towards some form of consensus by the end of each meeting.
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8 The topic of supporting children's education was discussed at one meeting. Several
9
10 participants were quite vociferous that parents must read with their children every night.
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12 One felt sad for children whose parents didn't read with them. One felt angry that some
13
14 parents seemingly neglected their children through such lack of support. Then another
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16 participant retorted that she felt her child was so exhausted after school, it was her
17
18 responsibility as a good mother to not read with their child but to get them to sleep. The
19
20 group then started to explore the concept of withholding support as being supportive. This
21
22 intervention by one mother had challenged others as to their assumptions about what makes
23
24 for the 'best and wisest' parent. This led to further discussions about how different parents
25
26 might have different needs, priorities and values for a wide range of reasons. There was no
27
28 consensus as to the best form of support.
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30
31 Macmurray (1961) argues for the need of a habit of social cooperation that is developed
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33 from the experienced cooperation within families and school. In *Conditions of Freedom*,
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35 Macmurray (1950) extends this argument to a plea for a 'universal fellowship' united in
36
37 values and friendship. Glass (2008) points out that Dewey's thinking, and I would argue
38
39 Macmurray's thinking assumes that everyone's values are similar. However, as the
40
41 homework discussion illustrates in a micro sense, there are myriad values and ways of
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43 parenting. The ongoing Brexit debate in the UK, provides a glimpse as to how divergent
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45 values and political stances can be in the macro. Consensus is not possible, and not
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47 necessarily desirable.
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51 In the light of participants arguing for more opportunities to informally relate to teachers and
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53 the failure to sustain regular Community Philosophy meetings, it could be assumed that
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55 Community Philosophy has no role in the democratic life of a school. However, I would argue
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3 that while the format was not necessarily appropriate or successful, the opportunity for
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5 philosophical thinking about the wider issues of education beyond an individual child's
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7 progress, is important for the school community. But such an opportunity does not need to
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9 be formalised as with Community Philosophy. Some of the participants are planning to meet
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11 together in a café before they next meet with the headteacher. They said this will give them
12
13 space to question and think about what they want to say rather than turn up to a meeting
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15 and feel they should agree with everything that is being said. As one participant stated, 'I feel
16
17 a bit ambushed when I go in, I feel I have to be nice and get on side. I think I am the only one
18
19 who feels this but it turns out I am not.' The participants are now creating their own space in
20
21 which to question the order of things. Other parents are doing that on their own and making
22
23 their way to the headteacher to question things. The headteacher has reported other parents
24
25 doing similar and that he is now welcoming parents into the school who take issue with
26
27 policy and practice, whereas previously they had been kept at a distance.
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31 Rancière (1999) argues that a 'common sense' pervades, in which there is a sense of place
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33 and role. Within education, it might be assumed that the parents place is outside of school;
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35 at home. The role of a parent is to choose wisely and support the school and child
36
37 appropriately. Rancière (2010: 46) argues that the simplest way to exclude people from the
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39 demos is to 'assert that they belonged to the 'domestic space' rather than public space in
40
41 which acceptable public voices are permitted to govern. This place and role, according to
42
43 Rancière (1999: 29) is allotted by the police; he explains the 'police' as 'an order of bodies
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45 that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying. . .'
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49 Returning to the earlier discussion of the English parent's protest against primary testing, one
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51 may consider the framing of parents by Gibb (TES, 2016) and Young (Young T 2016) as
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53 policing. This episode, along with other pronouncements about parental aspirations,
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55 contributed to the order of apparent 'common sense' regarding instrumentalist, obedient
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3 parenting. Furthermore, Rancière (2010) argued that certain people are deemed capable of
4 membership of the police order and others are not. Those whom are excluded have their
5 voices rendered as simply noise. The treatment of the parents' protest' by Gibb and Young
6 could be argued to be rendering parent's voices as noise, incapable of making coherent
7 common sense arguments.
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14 Returning to my doctoral research, we can see how a 'common sense' had developed
15 regarding what a supportive parent looked like. But more importantly a participant who did
16 not share the 'common sense' spoke out and ruptured the consensus. Rancière (1999; 2010)
17 argues that this speaking out and rupturing the common sense is the political act. It is this
18 speaking out against the common sense, and the assumption that 'I have the capability of
19 speaking as you do' that establishes the assumption of equality and assumption of humanity
20 (Bingham et al., 2010). This act of rupture or dissensus provides a counter to Ramaekers and
21 Suissa's (2011) concern that positioning parents as followers of instructions removes their
22 moral agency. It is essential that parents question the 'common sense' and disrupt the status
23 quo if they are to maintain their agency.
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36 Our original desire to use a non-adversarial form of discussion and aim for deliberative
37 consensus was partly to avoid conflict. From the headteacher's point of view, it was possibly
38 to maintain a general supportive consensus for the school. However, Rosanvallon (2008: 313)
39 maintains that conflict is essential to democratic life:
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45 Conflict is inevitable in such a project, because debate brings to light the
46 actual transfer of resources that takes place among individuals, groups,
47 and regions, reveals hidden legacies of the past, and discloses implicit
48 regulations. Such a debate has nothing in common with the calm, almost
49 technical kind of discussion envisioned by certain theorists of deliberative
50 democracy. However difficult the exercise, it is nevertheless essential as a
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3 way of gaining *practical experience of the general will*. (Original
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5 emphasis).

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8 Rosanvallon (2008) further argues that democracy needs to be kept in check; it is necessary
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10 for people to disagree, for people to question the order of things; 'a counter policy'. Within
11
12 the school it is essential that we do not try to maintain a harmonious consensus, requiring
13
14 passive parents. Ranciere (1999: 77) defines dissensus, 'a division inserted in 'common
15
16 sense': a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as
17
18 given'. Dissensus is vital if we are to move beyond technical democracy but to continually
19
20 debate and shape the 'form and ends of education in society' (Biesta, 2016: 55).
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23 However, Rancière's concept of dissensus whilst helpful, might imply a solitary initiative
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25 rather than a social action, which in the light of the participants' need for relation and
26
27 sharing stories might be problematic. However, reading his argument alongside Macmurray
28
29 is helpful. Macmurray (1961: 61) argues that the 'unit of the personal is not the 'I' but the
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31 'You and I' and that it when we interact with each other we come into full being and realise
32
33 our subjectivity. Whilst Rancière's subjectivity is gained when the political act is made, this
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35 act follows from the initial premise, that 'I am equal to you' and will act as if this is true
36
37 (Rancière, 1991;1999;2014). Thus, Rancière could also be said to be assuming that the unit of
38
39 the personal is 'You and I'. Whilst Macmurray reminds of the need to pay attention to our
40
41 relationship with others, Rancière ensures that good relationships do not come at the cost of
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43 democracy and voice, but rather welcome dissensus.
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46 47 **Conclusion**

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49 Throughout this article I have referred to attempts to define the 'best and wisest parent'.
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51 Dewey (2013: 19) declared that 'What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child,
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53 that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow
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55 and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy'. However as I have argued sometimes
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3 the concept of 'best and wisest parent' is problematic, with it often being assumed as
4
5 'common sense'. This necessitates, the need for relationships between parents and between
6
7 staff and parents, which allow for narrative and agency of all parties. As Biesta (2016: 71)
8
9 argues, the accountability culture, has made relationships between schools and parents
10
11 distrustful from both sides. There need to be 'mutual, reciprocal and democratic
12
13 relationships. . .based upon the shared concern for the common educational good.' To have a
14
15 democratic form of education necessitates different views of this common good, and
16
17 different understandings of the 'best and wisest parent'. It is vital that this does not become
18
19 a 'common sense', rendering some people voiceless or lacking agency.
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23 In conclusion, I have demonstrated that neoliberal education systems have colonised
24
25 democratic voice, by promoting choice, supportive consensus and detailed parenting
26
27 structures which remove agency. This colonisation has instrumentalised and individualised
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29 parents in education, thus domesticating parent engagement rather than understanding and
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31 shaping of education as a joint enterprise between parents, educators and society.
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35 If children are to learn from Dewey's (1922) broad range of experiences, then it is necessary
36
37 to recognise and embrace the heterogenous array of family lives and values. The very
38
39 involvement of parents in questioning and debating the wider aspects of education
40
41 necessitates pluralism and dissensus. Negotiating the tensions involved in this endeavour
42
43 requires contemplating one another in a Macmurrayian sense and providing space and time
44
45 for relationships. Nevertheless, this must not demand passive harmony and 'common sense'.
46
47 Indeed, there may be many contrary best and wise parents that trouble the common sense.
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49 This should be welcomed for the democratic life of not only schools but of society. Thus, a
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51 school that is prepared to relate to parents and prepared for dissensus is one providing a
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53 counter to the neoliberal discourse of silent compliance.
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For Peer Review