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From Active to Activist Parenting: Educational Struggle and the Injuries of Institutionalized Misrecognition

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Introduction

> We don't want to be waging this war; we do it because it's the right thing, we have no choice morally. I can't sleep at night because it makes me feel sick. I said, 'I can either be Adrian Mole[1] or you can be Erin Brockovich.'[2] You can either sit there and cry about it and write in your diary and have a breakdown over how terrible the world and the situation and the reality … and just let that swarm you, or you can actually go: 'No. I am going to question this; I am going to get answers; and I want to make this right.' (Molly, Crowley Parents Campaign)[3]

We open this chapter with Molly's account of her determination to resist the forced academization of her children's school, as it exemplifies the resolve demonstrated by parents across our study when faced with the uncertainty and anxiety arising from policy developments affecting their families and communities. As with the majority of participating parents, Molly had no prior history of activism; instead, doubts over changes to her children's education, changes over which she had little say and no control, compelled her to act. This chapter is about parents, like Molly, who respond to uncertainty by challenging rather than acquiescing to the demands of authority. Counter to discourses of families as consumers, this chapter focuses on 'active' parents reinventing themselves as parent-activists and the adversity they encountered in struggling to defend their interests.

Since the 1980s, education policy in England has promoted a culture of parenting oriented towards personal responsibility, individualism and the

pursuit of family advantage (Olmedo and Wilkins 2017). Key to this has been the construction of a normative ideal of active and involved parenting that enjoins parents to become responsible consumers of educational services (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1996); to provide ancillary educational support through the 'professional labour' of parental involvement (Crozier 2005) and to promote 'school readiness' by cultivating effective home learning environments (Allen 2011; HM Government 2019). Norms of active parenting tend, however, to privilege the individual family unit and scarcely extend to consider parents' collective interests. Nor are all forms of active involvement equally welcome. In practice, acceptable involvement often simply equates to 'passive acceptance of the status quo' (Crozier 2005: 43). We argue for an alternative understanding: one that recognizes parental activism as a legitimate and powerful form of collective parental involvement in education.

The chapter reports on a small-scale qualitative study of three high-profile parent-led campaign groups: Crowley Parents Campaign (CPC), Eastborough Anti-Academisation Coalition (EAC), and Protect Children's Education (PCE). Of these campaigns the latter targeted national funding cuts to education, whilst the first two sought to challenge academization within their respective locales. Academy schools were first introduced in England in 2000 and have been significantly expanded since, with the latest figures reporting that 44 per cent of mainstream schools are currently academies, alongside 41 per cent of alternative provision and special schools that serve children with special educational needs or those who are otherwise unable to attend mainstream schools due, for instance, to exclusion or illness (HM Government 2022). Academies are administratively independent from local education authorities and operate as not-for-profit companies often under sponsorship of other organizations (e.g. faith groups or businesses) and as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs).[4] Academies have greater discretion over the governance and day-to-day operation of schools, including teachers' pay and conditions, curricula, school hours and term dates. Currently, there are two routes through which academization is pursued. In the case of voluntary conversion, school governing bodies can apply for academy status, in which case they are encouraged to join or form a MAT. Under the Academies Act (2010), however, schools can also be forced to convert and join a MAT if they are deemed liable to intervention. Of the two anti-academization campaigns considered in this chapter – CPC and EAC – the first concerns a case of forced conversion and the latter voluntary conversion.

Our specific focus in this chapter is: firstly, to detail how parental activism disrupts dominant norms of parental involvement and subverts the individualism

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and self-interest woven into the ideal of the active parent and, secondly, to explore parents' experiences of engaging with authorities, with particular emphasis on the conflicts and uncertainties reported by anti-academization campaigners. In explicating the latter issue, we centre on the emotions of activism (Jasper 2018) and develop our account of parents' struggles through Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition in order to foreground the powerful feelings conflict generates and the injustice of marginalizing parents' interests.

The chapter begins by outlining the normative ideal of active and involved parenting, the research on which the study is based and the motivations and goals of the campaign groups. It then proceeds to examine the emotional fallout of parents' struggles and calls for us to rethink the normative parameters of parental involvement. We argue not only that educational activism should be acknowledged as parental involvement, but that in the interests of social justice, more must be done to recognize parents' collective right to meaningfully contribute to decision-making within education.

Normative discourses of active and involved parenting

Neoliberalism has redefined relationships among citizens, public institutions and the state. We see this in Britain and elsewhere, for instance, in the coupling of public sector marketization and welfare-reduction strategies with programmes of active citizenship geared towards broadening citizens' responsibilities (Newman and Tonkens 2011). Discourses of active parenting are fundamental to this model of citizenship, representing a key avenue through which citizens are pressed to fulfil their obligations in post-welfare contexts. In education and family policy this is reflected in the flawed conviction that parents are the ultimate determinants of children's future outcomes and a corresponding fixation on *what parents do* rather than the structural conditions shaping family life (Jensen 2018). Indeed, the refrain that 'it is what parents do that matters, not who they are' has echoed across political administrations (Allen 2011; DfES 2006; DfE 2018). According to this rhetoric, parents must respond to an increasingly uncertain educational landscape by striving to provide optimal developmental environments so that even the most unfortunate family circumstances can be overcome. In other terms, as former UK prime minister David Cameron articulated: 'what matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting' (Cameron [2010], cited in Jensen 2010: 2).

Active parenting is primarily constructed in educational contexts through policy and practice around parental involvement.[5] Although concern in the UK regarding parents' role vis-à-vis education dates back to the Plowden Report (1967), parents have come under increasing pressure over recent decades to 'inhabit and perform certain responsibilities and obligations in order that they might become more "active" and "effective" as parents' (Olmedo and Wilkins 2017: 577). One effect of expanding parental responsibilities has been to blur boundaries between home and school, with parents expected to adopt the role of surrogate educators (Crozier 2019). From the purview of neoliberal economic rationalities, this transforms parenting into an instrumental, goal-oriented activity in which it becomes reconceived as a matter of human capital development centred on making good choices and investments in children's development to maximize later dividends (Rosen 2018). Hence parents are increasingly encouraged to strategically nurture their children's talents through the provision of extra-curricular activities (Vincent and Maxwell 2016) or turn even the most mundane aspects of everyday life, such as riding the bus or grocery shopping, into educationally enriching experiences (HM Government 2019).

Education policy contrives to sanction an ideal of active and involved parenting. The active parent, on this account, exercises choice in the educational marketplace, supports schools and undertakes pedagogical work at home and maximizes their child's potential by carefully crafting their repertoire of talents and abilities. The obvious flipside to this logic, however, is the spectre of the inactive and irresponsible parent. Crozier (2019) argues that whereas white middle-class parents are routinely perceived as active regardless of their actual involvement, the engagement of parents from working-class and minoritized backgrounds is often misrecognized or misrepresented. This suggests that normative constructions of active parenting cohere around white middle-class forms of participation that can result in greater institutional scrutiny of non-dominant parents, thereby further entrenching their marginal status.

Alongside these problematic exclusions, active parenting also privileges the individual family unit. Like active citizenship discourse more generally, which de-collectivizes citizenship and valourizes individual responsibility (Newman and Tonkens 2011), active parenting promotes individualism (Crozier 2019; Vincent 2000). Any sense that parents might realize collective aspirations through concerted action is occluded by the overwhelming tendency to posit parents as self-interested individuals solely concerned with securing competitive advantage for their families:

> The injunction to choose is translated into an injunction on behaviour – the need to be calculating, moralizing (acting in the best interests of the child), self-regarding and committed to pursuing competitive familial advantage above consideration for any notion [of] public interest, public orientation, public ethos, fairness or equity. (Olmedo and Wilkins 2017: 579)

Our data reveal a different story. This is a story about parents collectively defending their common interests and pursuing a vision of educational justice that disrupts the imperatives of neoliberal individualism. These are active parents, parents deeply invested in their children's education and the well-being of their communities, who channel incredible energy into fighting for what they believe is right. Yet the authorities' hostile reaction to parents engaged in anti-academization struggles suggests that active parenting ideals do not extend to genuine opportunities to influence policy or shape institutional practice. There appears to be something paradoxical then about active parenting discourse: parents are to be active, just not too active. Focusing primarily on the experiences of anti-academization activists, the analysis that follows traces their struggle to be heard and the resistance they encountered.

The study

This chapter reports on qualitative data collected between 2018 and 2020 from a sample of three parent-led campaign groups:

Protect Children's Education (PCE)

PCE was formed in 2017 to oppose national funding cuts to education. The campaign is notable for combining innovative online activism with more traditional methods and for having spawned a network of regional groups all operating under PCE 'branding'. Our focus, however, is on the original, founding group based in a large city in the south of England. Despite the campaign having waned somewhat in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and other pressures, PCE remains active and continues to maintain a social media presence.

Eastborough Anti-Academisation Coalition (EAC)

EAC was established in late 2017 to consolidate opposition to academization in a large outer-London borough. The group primarily comprised parent and teaching union activists from three primary schools facing imminent threat of conversion: Old Leaf, Grovelands and Fenside. Key participants from EAC were interviewed after the school campaigns had concluded, but whilst the coalition

itself was still active to a degree. By 2020, EAC ceased to exist although many members had moved on to further advocacy work in the community.

Crowley Parents Campaign (CPC)

CPC was formed by parents seeking to prevent the conversion of Stonefield Primary School in Crowley, a town bordering London. Between 2017 and 2019 they rana rancorous campaign that attracted significant media attention and resulted in one of the most protracted academy conversions on record. Interviews were conducted with the two parents driving the campaign, both during the conversion process and after the school formally converted to academy status.

Data used in this chapter were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations. In total, sixteen parents participated in the study: seven each from PCE and EAC, and the two parents driving CPC. A further interview was conducted with a figure from EAC who helped coordinate the campaign. In most cases, those interviewed self-identified as core members with lead roles in the respective campaigns. The sample was a purposive one – we decided to focus on the three parent-led campaigns listed earlier as each had a distinct focus, methods of campaigning and levels of publicity. For each, we initially approached key informants, and through them, recruited parents to the study. The majority of our interviewees were female, and participants from EAC and PCE indicated this was true for membership of the campaigns more broadly. The predominance of mothers in the campaign groups is perhaps indicative of the persistence of gendered divisions of labour around schooling (see Reay 2006), although this is not a line of questioning that we pursue here. The socio-economic backgrounds of parents were complex and varied across the campaigns. The EAC campaign brought together parents from a range of ethnically diverse, often working-class backgrounds. PCE's membership consisted mostly of white, middle-class parents with professional employment histories, whilst the two parents interviewed from CPC had varying social and ethnic backgrounds. Data were also collected from three 'campaign advocates' (individuals involved in promoting and advising educational campaigns). Of these, one had coordinated a parent-led campaign, one was a campaign manager for a prominent teaching union and the other volunteered for a nationwide network coordinating opposition to academization. However, it is the data collected from parent activists that we predominantly draw upon here. Ethical approval was secured in advance and standard ethical procedures were followed throughout. All relevant proper names have been assigned pseudonyms to

protect the identities of participants, including the names of the campaign groups themselves.

The study was centrally concerned with the experiences, motivations and meaning-making activities of families engaged in educational activism. We sought to investigate the goals and organizational structures of the campaigns, the emotions, values and motivations driving parents' activism, and the affinities and dynamics among parents, children and other key actors. However, it is important to note that our account is partial and one-sided. We report here solely on parents' experiences of fighting their campaigns. We have no independent means of verifying the events reported and offer no account of the perspectives of other protagonists. What is certain, however, is that this is how parents *felt* about events and it is precisely the affective dimension of parents' activism that the study sought to explore in large part. Our aim is to do justice to parents' experiences, to their feelings of disenfranchisement and their anger at being silenced and ignored. It is in this spirit that we trace their struggle for recognition.

Activist parenting

Activism, as we understand it, is the practice of engaging in concerted action aimed at securing social and political change. It can involve protest, direct action and organized campaigning, but may also adopt more implicit, less confrontational forms (Horton and Kraftl 2009). Our specific concern here is with educational activism – activism that is explicitly centred on educational policies, practices or institutions and, in our case, led by parents.

Although parental activism in education has attracted substantial scholarly interest in other national contexts, particularly the United States (e.g. Cortez 2013; Fennimore 2017; Jasis 2013; Stitzlein 2015; Warren and Mapp 2011), it represents an under-researched field in Britain. Despite some notable recent work (Sibley-White 2019; Stevenson 2016), the most extensive treatment of the topic remains Carol Vincent's (2000) study of parent-centred organizations. In this work, Vincent observed that parental activism appeared to be a relatively uncommon phenomenon, but much has changed in the intervening years, and parent-led campaigns have become a more visible feature of the educational landscape. This is attributable in part to the growth of social media as an organizing tool (Heron-Hruby and Landon-Hays 2014), but it is also a likely consequence of the sweeping reforms imposed on the sector over this period.

The relentless pursuit of marketization through the expansion of the academies and free school programmes, greater emphasis on high-stakes testing and an attendant narrowing of school curricula, policies and practices surrounding Special Educational Needs (SEND) provision, and significant cuts to educational spending have all contributed to producing uncertainty and anxiety in the sector and provoked considerable opposition from parents.

We argue that it is through engaging in collective action to defend common interests that parent-activists disrupt dominant norms of active and involved parenting and the individualism around which they cohere. As we explore shortly, our data reveal a closer binding between universal and particular concerns than was evident in Vincent's (2000) study, where parents' action tended to centre on securing improvements for individual children and families. It also presents a more radical challenge to neoliberal orthodoxy than is suggested by Sibley-White's (2019) conclusion that *Let Our Kids Be Kids*, a campaign opposing high-stakes testing in primary schools, which ultimately remained complicit with the underlying logic of the regime being contested.

Of all the campaign groups comprising our study, PCE was perhaps the most straightforwardly altruistic in outlook. Whilst members acknowledged that funding cuts would inevitably impinge upon their children's education and that repealing them was therefore to their own benefit, it was the desire to protect education provision for all that really galvanized the campaign:

> The desire to make a change, the desire to make a difference, the desire to do something not for my children because they're always going to be okay, even if I end up having to home school, they'll be fine. I earn enough money to send them off to dance classes and study textiles and drama. It costs probably £200 to £300 a term extra for me to do that; I can afford the £1,000 plus per school year, but most families can't and so, this is for a campaign that is saying, 'Every child matters and we're doing this for the community, not for ourselves' and it's that passion, that drive to change something. (Lynn, PCE)

Universal and particular concerns also coincided within the anti-academization campaigns. Parents were clearly anxious about the implications of academization for their own children's education, but this was often framed as a collective issue affecting all families as well as the wider community. For EAC campaigners these anxieties translated into general opposition to the very principle of academization and a demand for greater community participation in education:

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> I think that for us it's about inclusion, it's about democracy, it's about listening to parents, it's about being together and work together as a community to improve anything that affected us, rather than just getting a few people who don't know us to make those decisions. It's about democracy. It's about true democracy in the way our educational system is run. So, I think, yeah, that's what we're fighting for, that's the key. (Floyd, EAC)

The CPC campaign, on the other hand, mainly concentrated on the decision to pursue conversion at Stonefield primary and the suitability of the academy trust awarded the school. The lead campaigners, Molly and Mina, were adamant they were not opposing academization per se, they simply wanted parents (and staff) to be afforded a genuine say in the future direction of the school. As Mina explained, 'We want the right education and the right trust for our school because we understand the bigger picture and we feel Amphora Academy Trust are not right for us.' Even here, though, parents' efforts were often couched in a demand for greater parental voice in education more generally and clearly sought to improve circumstances for the whole school community.

It would be a mistake, then, to view the campaigns as motivated primarily by self-interest. Of course, individual families had something to gain from the campaigns – should they prove successful at least – but collective aspirations and wider educational goals equally played a part. Moreover, once the pressures of campaigning are considered – the demands on time and energy, the strain on family life and the danger of becoming alienated from powerful institutional figures responsible for your children's education – we see that actively opposing policy might actually work *against* families' immediate interests. It would undoubtedly have been easier, less risky and less stressful for parents to simply acquiesce, but, as Molly indicated in the quote with which we opened the chapter, parents felt morally compelled to act.

Struggling for recognition

In this section, we explore how parent-activists in our study were involved in a struggle for recognition. Each campaign engendered different relationships with those in positions of power, which resulted in different levels and types of conflict. The extent of conflict in each case was largely determined by the degree of alignment between parents' interests and those of the authorities, with conflict figuring much more prominently in the reports of anti-academization activists

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(EAC and CPC) than in the school funding campaign (PCE). Indeed, working collaboratively with schools was a key aspect of PCE strategy, and consideration was given throughout to avoid alienating headteachers: 'I think we've always been if the heads don't like it, if the heads aren't on side with this, then we're not going to do it' (Yara). The overriding image presented was one of working in concert *with* school leadership.

Anti-academization activists, in contrast, were often pitted against an array of forces with vested interests in pursuing conversion, from school leadership and governing bodies, through to local authorities and the Department for Education itself. The urgency of the threat posed by academization and its proximity to families' everyday lives further exacerbated tensions and uncertainties. As David, one of the 'campaign advocates' we interviewed, noted:

> Fighting against academisation is extremely difficult … Fights against academisation are on a school-by-school basis and what you have to have and what you have to do, and it isn't easy, you literally have to confront the governors and the head of the school to which your children go to and that's difficult.

It is this combination of diametrically opposed interests and the proximity and urgency of the issue that helps explain the prevalence of conflict within the anti-academization campaigns. Whilst prejudice may also have been a factor, insofar as some EAC campaigners suggested the authorities held patronizing views of parents and the local area, it is unlikely they would have encountered such opposition had their campaigns been less antithetical to the interests of the authorities.

Parents across the campaigns, particularly those engaged in anti-academization struggles, were fighting to be heard and fighting for the right to meaningfully contribute to key decisions affecting their children's futures. In *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995), Honneth argues that it is precisely the denial of recognition which motivates social struggle and propels social change. 'Motives for social resistance and rebellion', he writes, 'are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition' (Honneth 1995: 163). Honneth's starting point is that individual self-realization and identity-formation are crucially dependent upon intersubjective regard: it is only through the process of being recognized by others that we recognize ourselves and can develop the practical relation to self, which secures our sense of ourselves as fully individuated beings. Mutual recognition thus constitutes the normative core of social interaction, and it is the experience of misrecognition (*Mißachtung*), the experience of having

recognition denied or withheld, Honneth suggests, that drives social conflict and, with it, social change.

Honneth's contention that struggles for recognition drive progressive societal change has been much debated (see Fraser and Honneth 2003). However, it is not our intention to enter into this debate here. Instead, we draw on Honneth's ideas about recognition as a tool for illuminating and deepening our understanding of parent-activists' accounts, focusing in particular on the profoundly affective nature of experiences of misrecognition. Honneth writes, for instance, that 'all social integration depends on reliable forms of mutual recognition, whose insufficiencies and deficits are always tied to *feelings of misrecognition*', and that 'the experience of disrespect is always accompanied by *affective sensations* that are, in principle, capable of revealing to individuals the fact that certain forms of recognition are being withheld from them' (Honneth 2003b: 245; Honneth 1995: 136; emphasis added).

That misrecognition felt, not simply cognized, is central to our analysis. It is now firmly acknowledged that emotions play a fundamental role in social movements and protest activity (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001; Jasper 2018). Emotions spur us to action and sustain our involvement, they nurture solidarities and shape our aims and goals. Not only were our data replete with emotion talk, interviews themselves were often punctuated with affect as parents relived key events. This was particularly acute in connection with anti-academization activists' contemptuous treatment by the authorities. Parents were angry, upset, outraged and aggrieved. They felt ignored and excluded; disregarded and belittled. Such feelings are symptomatic of the injuries of misrecognition. They also served, however, as motivation for parents to continue their fight.

The EAC and CPC campaigns originated with inquisitive parents seeking information about why academization was being pursued and what it would entail. In each case, however, their efforts were frustrated. Consultation processes were invariably represented as bogus, designed to legitimate preordained decisions without any genuine intention of hearing parents' views. There were even suspicions that they were intentionally rigged to prevent participation:

> What happened is, consultations – which are meant to be *meaningful*, right? – were pretty much done as a paper exercise and the schools were essentially just trying to get through the consultation process without having to actually consult anyone. So, meetings were held that were sort of at strange times, they weren't well communicated, and so you had really poor turnouts. (Mark, Old Leaf Primary, EAC)

Such experiences are not unique. Martinez-Cosio (2010) and Stevenson (2016) also highlight how ostensibly participatory processes can be used to contain and control parents. Parents' experiences at Grovelands Primary School (EAC) were particularly telling in this regard. Despite the school serving a multi-ethnic population from a wide variety of linguistic backgrounds, consultation took place entirely in English, and although interpreters were supplied, albeit at the behest of parents, it was generally felt they were utilized in ways that stifled discussion:

> They were very patronising in that we had parents there who had language issues, the interpreters wouldn't sit with the parents, they were standing on the side, and it was just … the whole thing was just … it was just mismanaged, it was just poor. It was a poor excuse for a consultation exercise. (Isra, Grovelands Primary, EAC)

Forestalling debate and the disregard this displays for parents' interests, constitutes, for Honneth, a form of misrecognition he captures in terms of the denial of rights. On this account, denying parents the right to speak or air dissenting views deprives them of the status of equal partners to interaction with equally valid rights claims, thereby violating 'the intersubjective expectation to be recognized as a subject capable of forming moral judgements' (Honneth 1995: 133–4).

Another form of misrecognition concerns the negation of individual self-worth and value. Often manifested through insult and belittlement, this involves 'evaluative forms of disrespect' that 'downgrade individual forms of life and manners of belief as inferior or deficient, [robbing] the subjects in question of every opportunity to attribute social value to their own abilities' (Honneth 1995: 134). Many parents reported feeling undermined by the authorities in an effort to discredit their campaigns and comments like the following were not uncommon:

> But I think, you know, at every opportunity, they tried to make us inferior by the wording they used on their reports, on their letters; you know, 'Some parents …', 'A few …', 'A small number of parents'. No, we're not small actually, but you know, I felt like that was a sort of manipulative and quite bullying tactic that they were using within their sort of letters to make us seem insignificant. And they did – they used the word 'insignificant' (Aalia, Grovelands Primary, EAC)

Such condescending treatment, moreover, was a source of considerable frustration for parents:

> That's the thing, who did they think we are that we don't have a clue about how things work. That's the other thing. I think they were so hellbent on their own ideas and initiatives, that they just forgot that we are also professionals, that we have an understanding of how things work. (Isra, Grovelands Primary, EAC)

Contempt and condescension function as mechanisms for withholding recognition. To show contempt for someone or to view them condescendingly is to assert one's superiority over the presumed inferiority of the other. But it can also carry a darker inflection, morphing in some cases into outright intimidation:

> Because they've done, bullied me, in governors where they all ganged up on me [and] it was really hard. Seven governors against you. Everybody shouting at you, not allowing you to speak. Not trying to get your points across. You emailing them, they're not listening to you. It's, it's really hard as a person to go through that, you know. I've fled from a bloody dictatorship, you get me. I thought we had democracy in this country and I'm seeing that as really unfair to what, the way they were treating me. (Floyd, Fenside Primary, EAC)

For Floyd, as for other parents, feeling disrespected elicited intense and sometimes painful emotions. Indeed, this was one of several instances in Floyd's interview where he became visibly angry and upset – the gravity of his feelings accentuated here through comparison with the experience of fleeing political violence. This reminds us that the research interview is an affective practice in its own right (Wetherell 2012). In recounting their emotions participants were often also reliving them. In cases like this, where there is a doubling of emotion, as recounted and relived, we see just how deep injuries of misrecognition can cut.

Similar experiences were reported by CPC campaigners. Molly and Mina's forensic investigation of the academization process surrounding Stonefield primary brought them into direct conflict with the local authority, the incoming academy trust, the Regional Schools Commissioner, and the Department for Education. Although the pair relished their notoriety to a degree, it also came at a cost:

> This is where the DfE … and I know why they hate me so much, yeah, and it is a personal thing, because I've seen emails about myself, yeah. Like, 'Shut this woman up', and all that, yeah? What did she [senior figure in the local authority] call me? 'That fucking FOI[6] woman', yeah? You know, like, that's horrible. If I was actually a bit more of a, like, all airy fairy, I'd find that really offensive, that could be a bit damaging to someone's character really, you know like if someone was saying that about you. (Molly, CPC)

Again, we get a sense here for the wounds that misrecognition can inflict, the damage it can cause to an individual's integrity and self-worth. Even Molly's apparent stoicism was belied, for instance, by acute doubts, fears and insecurities: 'I think they're listening to my calls and that … and they're looking at me emails.'

However, one of the most pronounced examples of contempt concerned parents' vilification as 'troublemakers' and 'bullies':

> [Senior leadership at the school] were actually trying to portray us as troublemakers and, do you know, as bullies. We were called bullies. We were called all sorts. (Aalia, Grovelands primary, EAC)

> And I can tell you now: when they … when we found out we were classed as anti-academy boisterous parents I was quite taken aback by that. I was like, 'No, I'm not that; I just don't think Amphora Academy Trust is right for my school.' (Mina, CPC)

Conferring pathologized identities onto parents is an act of 'affective-discursive positioning' (Wetherell 2012) that delegitimizes parents' feelings and discredits their struggle whilst simultaneously working to secure a hegemonic affective order in which parents are expected to display compliant attitudes. Parents' feelings thus constitute 'outlaw emotions' incompatible with the dominant order (Jaggar 1989). Yet, parents resisted this positioning. Some, like Mina, sought to reclaim value by appealing to the justice of their actions: 'We're two mums who just wanted some unjust done right. We've annoyed so many people just because they've always got away with it, could think they could keep getting away with it.' Others harnessed their anger as fuel to further propel their campaigns, thereby demonstrating how counterproductive contempt can be. As Aalia commented, 'it just became this thing of feeling so downtrodden that nobody's listening and then you think, "Right, I'm going to shout louder now. I'm going to scream even more if you're gonna do that." And that's what we did and that kept us going.'

Wider research on parental activism indicates that the experiences documented here are by no means uncommon, which confirms the sense that active parenting appears desirable only insofar as it aligns with dominant interests (Cortez 2013; Fennimore 2017; Mediratta and Karp 2003; Pazey 2020; Stevenson 2016). McKay and Garrat (2013: 743) suggest, for instance, that 'the degree to which the voice of the parent is fully incorporated into decision-making is largely contingent upon the extent to which what is being said actually conforms to the received discourse and the normalising gaze of prevailing authorities and

professionals'. When parents challenge the dominant narrative, on the other hand, when they transition from being active parents to parent-activists, they are instead pathologized as confrontational troublemakers (Stevenson 2016). Our argument is that we need to rethink the narrow and loaded construction of active and involved parenting in ways that can recognize and appreciate the power of collective parental involvement and through doing so secure genuine spaces for parental participation in decision-making structures within education.

Rethinking parental involvement

In the context of uncertain education policy landscapes, parental involvement is framed in terms of a relatively narrow range of pedagogical behaviours, for example supporting learning; relationships with schools and the quality of the home learning environment. To fully appreciate its potential, however, it needs extending to encompass parents' collective efforts to influence education policy and provision. Parental activism, in other words, *is* a form of parental involvement, albeit one that disrupts traditional models (Fennimore 2017). It might even be considered parental involvement par excellence. These are parents deeply invested in their children's education, who devote considerable time and energy to fighting for what they believe is right, often at significant cost to themselves. Moreover, as many parents conveyed, their actions are themselves educational, teaching children about democratic processes and the value of civic engagement, amongst other things. In many respects it thus represents the very epitome of active and involved parenting.

A broadened conception of parental involvement would recognize parents' right to collectively contribute to decision-making processes within education and legitimate action undertaken to secure that right, at least insofar as the goals in question prove morally defensible.[7] This requires thinking beyond the individualism and instrumentalism enshrined within current languages of parenting to evoke instead an alternative ethico-political horizon of childrearing, one shaped by and through parents' conception of the kind of people they themselves want to be and the moral example they wish to set for their children (Ramaekers and Suissa 2011). The present study affords a glimpse of such an alternative, with parent-activists demonstrating the power of parenting for the common good rather than mere self-interest.

Rethinking parental involvement also requires challenging ingrained perspectives on the role of parents vis-à-vis education. Despite expanded

opportunities for exercising 'choice' and the rhetoric around increasing parents' power and 'voice' (DfE 2016), we remain in a situation where parents have limited scope for genuinely influencing education policy and practice, as the recent dilution of school governing bodies' accountability to parents exemplifies (Belger 2021). Following Wright (2012), we might argue, then, that active parenting is built on a 'fantasy of empowerment'. Its promise is a chimera, a simulacrum of empowerment that masks proliferating responsibilities without any corresponding expansion of rights. Moreover, the construction of active parenting around the model of the individual family unit inevitably excludes consideration of parents' collective interests. Little has changed in this regard from Vincent and Martin's (2000: 474) observation that 'parents are located within a discourse that defines them as passive where collective issues are concerned, and active only in terms of fulfilling their individual responsibilities around their own children'. To the extent that policy does address parents collectively this is often limited to forms of parent blame, where social and educational problems come to be located in the perceived inadequacies of certain family structures and cultures – as we find in the explanation offered for racial inequalities in contemporary Britain by the Sewell Report (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021). A different narrative is needed, one that affirms parents' collective rights not merely their individual responsibilities. Moving in this direction means opening up deliberative fora that are genuinely participatory and imbued with an 'emotional morality' underscored by 'recognition and respect for the emotional content of experiences and values and the authentic expression of these as a necessary part of dialogue on issues that are directly relevant to such experiences and values' (Barnes 2008: 473). It is precisely this element that was missing in anti-academization campaigners' dealings with the authorities. A necessary step towards genuinely empowering parents both individually and collectively is therefore to establish deliberative structures that recognize not only parents' right to speak and contribute, but their right to feel, so that fears, concerns and anxieties, for example, might be disclosed without recrimination.

Parent Carer Forums (PCFs) offer an instructive example of both the potential and limitations of formally recognized participatory structures. Originally established by parents of disabled children in the mid-2000s to provide mutual support and lobby for greater voice in SEND policies and procedures, PCFs subsequently acquired official recognition and funding from central government. Whilst the formalization of PCFs has created expanded opportunities for parents to contribute to SEND policy, such as 2015 Code of

Practice, it also binds groups to legal requirements that may ultimately work against parents' interests by restricting campaigning activity and the pursuit of wider social justice agendas (Runswick-Cole and Ryan 2019; Smith 2019). Given the risk that formalization may serve to nullify more progressive and far-reaching demands, the challenge, then, is to devise participatory structures that are flexible enough to accommodate both voice *and* action. There must be spaces, in other words, for parents to meaningfully contribute to policy without thereby relinquishing advocacy and activism.

There is also a pragmatic point to be raised here. If increasing parental involvement is a strategic educational goal, then the intransigence and hostility encountered by anti-academization campaigners strikes a cautionary note. In some cases, like CPC, academization destroyed previously strong relationships between the parent body and the school. In other cases, it had the effect of alienating individual parents. This was represented most acutely in Floyd's account of feeling victimized by the leadership at Fenside (EAC): 'I can't go near the school, I feel traumatised, you know. It's like a war-zone for me.' The fact that campaigning served to create a stronger, more unified and more coordinated parent body at each of the schools suggests there is much to be gained from working constructively with parents, but it also indicates the potential that can be lost through opposition:

> Surely you would want parents that are actually caring, passionate, and proactive? All this fucking energy we're putting into this position we could've raised thousands for that school. All the extra things; we could've had, I could have had bake sales, we could have had a new library, we could've had all sorts of stuff; but no, we're trying to fight the government. (Molly, CPC)

Jasis (2013) maintains that parental activism can create new avenues for collaboration, but for this to happen, he argues, it is important that 'concerned parents not be seen as threats to established school norms or to the perceived power status of teachers and administrators'; instead, schools must recognize 'the value of welcoming parents at the education table as indispensable, knowledgeable, and contributing partners in the schooling of their children' (128). Although the bitter experiences of anti-academization campaigners indicates we may be some distance from realizing this goal, loosening the hold of individualism by recognizing parents' collective rights constitutes a step in the right direction through which we might begin to release the transformative democratic potential of parental involvement (Crozier 2019).

Conclusion

Educational activism has come under increased critical scrutiny of late (Spielman 2021). Yet, as our data indicate, it can be a legitimate response to the uncertainty and insecurity generated by policy developments affecting children's education, particularly when parents are confronted with obstacles that frustrate meaningful discussion. That parents' efforts were not recognized as a token of their involvement, that they and their claims were disregarded, is indicative of the narrowness of dominant models of active parenting, which paradoxically delegitimize action challenging the status quo even where that action arises from and is evidence of parents' investment in their children's education. Policy primes parents to pursue self-interest and familial advantage through instrumental engagement with the education system whilst simultaneously discouraging collective solutions to the challenges they encounter. The campaigns featured here, however, reveal the promise of collective parental involvement. Parent-activists' resoluteness in the face of institutionalized misrecognition demonstrates the progressive potential of a cohesive and coordinated parent body actively invested in shaping education policy, with strong parental networks acting as a buffer against uncertainty and strengthening the school community. To harness this potential, though, we need to rethink the normative parameters of parental involvement. We need a model that recognizes parents' collective rights and values their contribution. We need a system that secures deliberative spaces for parents to genuinely contribute to decision-making processes and we need authorities receptive to and respectful of parents' feelings.

We close this chapter on a celebratory note. Despite their challenges, the families involved in each campaign secured some notable successes, suggesting that parental activism can lead to system-level change, not merely benefits for individual campaigners (Vincent 2000). The data have also shown how families are able to subvert and challenge dominant discourses of individualism and self-interest by working together for the collective good. The pressure exerted by PCE activists, for example, helped establish school funding as a key election issue and arguably influenced the decision to inject additional funding into schools following the 2017 general election. EAC, for its part, had a considerable impact on the local educational landscape, thwarting two planned conversions and securing a commitment from the local authority to desist from pursuing further academization within the borough. Even though CPC failed in its immediate goal of blocking conversion, it nevertheless had an impact in terms of developing a methodology for combatting academization that campaign groups

around the country have emulated as well as purportedly influencing the DfE's own guidance and practices around academization. These successes speak to the power of parental activism and the value of working with rather than against parents and families.

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Notes

1 An introspective, intellectual character appearing in a series of novels written by Sue Townsend.
2 An American environmental activist renowned for successfully campaigning against several large-scale corporations.
3 Throughout the chapter, pseudonyms have been allocated to all research participants, schools and parental campaigns.
4 The recent schools White Paper – 'Opportunity for All: Strong Schools with Great Teachers for Your Child' (HM Government, 2022) – has renewed the drive to turn all English schools into academies by enabling local authorities to establish their own MATs.
5 Parental involvement refers here to both involvement with schools and parents' engagement in supporting children's learning.
6 This is a reference to the statutory right of access to public information that is enshrined in the Freedom of Public Information Act 2000; something that Molly and Mina were particularly adept at using throughout the campaign in order to stall the conversion process.
7 As Honneth observes, not every demand for recognition can be considered morally legitimate: 'we generally only judge the objectives of such struggles positively when they point in the direction of social development that we can understand as approximating our ideas of a good or just society' (Honneth 2003a: 171–2).

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