

School-based parents' groups - a politics of voice and representation?

Abstract

In this paper we consider two discussion-based parents' forums at two secondary schools. We ask whether such forums can be considered as part of the small, local associative mechanisms which theorists claim have the potential to encourage a more vibrant and interactive public conversation concerning state provided welfare services. We conclude that they cannot – at least in any simple way. However, a study of the forums does raise several interesting issues to do with parents' relationships with schools, the differential resources particular class fractions bring to bear in developing their relations with teachers, and the responses of the schools to parental voices.

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Access to higher education and good jobs emerges as the most important element in securing children's futures (and thus of 'putting the family first'). Yet all the respondents see this as involving their children gaining advantages over others.....what is missing from these accounts is an attempt to describe what might be done about any injustice that is recognised, or how the life-chances of the others' might be better protected. Equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship do not emerge as public issues in these versions of access to higher education and good jobs, Instead we have accounts of how to do the best for one's children in a situation of scarcity of both these resources, (Jordan, Redley & James 1994 p.197)

I think it goes right back to the family and they [the parent body] put the children first, right the way through life they put the children first, and they recognise that to get a good job in the end they've got to have qualifications and they want a good school (headteacher, Carson School)

Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of the motivations, perceptions and priorities of parents who regularly attend parents' forums at two schools, Willow School, a girl's comprehensive school in North Park LEA and Carson, a mixed comprehensive in Castlehill LEA. We have previously argued (eg Martin & Vincent 1999) that such parents' forums were, potentially, examples of the type of locally-sited participative organisation feted in the literature on what can loosely be called deliberative democracy. This is an extensive literature which does not reduce easily to a single standpoint. Nevertheless a consensus exists around the need to broaden the definition of the political, and extend participation and agency into the social arena, in an effort to achieve the 'democratisation of everyday life' (Phillips 1993 p.80; Pateman 1989). Many writers within this field agree on the importance of active participation at the local level, participation, that is, in arenas which stress dialogue between differently situated groups. Thus when Benhabib refers to the importance of a 'public sphere of mutually interlocking and overlapping networks and associations of deliberation, contestation and argumentation' (1996 p74), she is specifically locating small

associative groups as one element within this public conversation. Similarly Iris Young talks of 'neighbourhood assemblies' as the basic unit of democratic participation' (1990 p.252), and Nancy Fraser of the importance of encouraging 'multiple publics' (1997 p.80). Anna Yeatman uses the term 'little polities' to describe a space in which a relationship can be constructed between service delivers and service users in order to introduce a 'politics of voice and representation' into state provided welfare services (1994 p.110). In our project, we have adopted the term 'little polities' with reference to school-based parent groups.

Our overarching aim in focusing on these 'little polities' is to consider the relationship between the theoretical construction of such local, associative groups and their empirical 'reality', at least in two secondary school sites. Within this, our aims are three-fold. First to consider the extent to which the forums provide sites for parents and teachers to engage in the process of deliberation and dialogue concerning the purposes of education in general and the nature of schooling in specific sites. Our second aim is to explore the motivations of the regular attendees at forum meetings. What is it that galvanises this small group of mothers, and an even smaller number of fathers, to spend their evenings in classrooms at Willow and Carson Schools? Third, as part of our discussion of motivations and experiences, we highlight the influence of the differing middle class fractions to which the parents belong. There is not space here for an adequate description of debates around the differences within the middle-classes (see for example, Dunleavy 1980, Perkin 1989, Butler & Savage 1995), but we seek to offer at least a partial illustration of the connections between the social location of the different class fractions and their relationships with the education system.

The data discussed in this paper is drawn from a larger project involving six schools¹ (see Martin and Vincent 1999 for further details). Here we specifically focus on those parents who regularly attended the parents' forums in the two secondary schools, Willow and Carson, in which we spent an extended period of time. Such discussion-based forums are relatively unusual in schools, the more common format for a Parent-Teacher Association being the organisation of social and fundraising events. The data presented here consists of interviews with 21 of these parents (9 of whom were interviewed twice) as well as our fieldnotes taken at forum meetings, and interviews with the headteachers and senior management at both schools.

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The gendered imbalance of parent participation in the forums is clear – 16 women and 5 men. Several commentators have argued that mothers often become involved in groups when the issues at stake are to do with their children (Dominelli 1995; for an analysis of 'motherist' politics see Orleck 1997). Dominelli argues that activism around 'family issues' has often been labelled as 'soft' and therefore accorded secondary status by male community activists. Similarly when asked about the gender imbalance at meetings, women at Willow often commented that there were more men involved in the Willow forum than had been the case at equivalent primary school PTAs. As one said, men get involved at secondary school when the 'stakes get higher' (Louise). The more even level of male-female involvement at Carson is interesting (see below). We suggest however, that this is a result of the nature of the activities undertaken by the group, and does not necessarily reflect men's involvement in the daily care of their own children, which was, by their own testimony, something for which the women took responsibility. We now turn to a consideration of each forum in turn, and subsequently attempt to highlight more general issues to do with lay participation and voice within schools.

The parents' forum at Carson School

Carson School is a mixed 11-16 secondary school in Castlehill LEA. In 1998, it had 1,125 pupils. Like Willow, described below, it is a very popular institution. Carson regularly admits about 18% extra district pupils. It is, in contrast with Willow, a largely white school, with just under 4% of its pupils coming from minority ethnic backgrounds. The low rate of eligibility for free school meals (just under 9% in 1998), may suggest some degree of homogeneity in family income terms. In 1998, 56.7% of Carson pupils achieved 5 or more GCSE grades of A*-C and 97.3% achieved 5 or more grades A*-G. The school sets from Year 8, and is proud of its system of pastoral care as well as its academic achievement. The headteacher of 15 years (a white woman) has instituted the school motto, 'Progress through partnership'.

The school hosts a group, to which all parents nominally belong, known as the Carson School Association (CSA) run by a committee of ten parents (5 women and 5 men) who meet once a month. Their main focus is fundraising, and they arrange social events for parents and staff and discos for the students. The meetings are also attended by the head and three deputies. The CSA also has an education sub-committee which was the focus of the research. It is intended to act as a broadly representative forum for parents, with two parents from each year group meeting once a term with heads of year, tutors, the headteacher and members of the Senior Management Team (SMT). However, there is no mechanism to elect parents

members of the Education sub-committee from amongst the parent body and so, in effect, the parent members are those who also sit on the main CSA committee, (8 in total, there was no representation for one year group). Parents can place items on the agenda, but the meetings are used primarily by the headteacher to discuss issues on which she wishes to consult parents. Despite the fact that the education sub-committee replicates the CSA membership, the headteacher sees the group as representative of the wider parent body.

I use [the education sub-committee] as a sounding board. Firstly to hear their views and two, of course, to give them information. Now some people say, 'Oh, it is a waste of time because it is such a small group of people', but I don't think that matters because they represent other parents. I'm sure they come from all different backgrounds or different years and you get a good cross-section even if it is only small (headteacher, Carson School)

The meetings we observed often began with a short presentation by staff of new pieces of equipment used in the school. Topics discussed included changes to the format of the pupil progress report cards, the new home school agreements, proposals for homework folders for Year 7 (all tabled by the school) and price of school meals, the sex education programme and the provision of lockers (all tabled by parents). One of us (JM) attended 3 out of 10 meetings of the CSA and 4 out of 4 meetings of the education sub-committee.

The profile of the parents who regularly attended CSA meetings can be described in the following way (see appendix 1 for more details). We interviewed eight people (all white), five women and three men, including two couples. Five (four women and one man) were re-interviewed. Three parents worked for the public sector, and five in the private sector². The women mostly worked part-time, and we did not get a sense of shared domestic responsibilities between parents. In general, CSA parents had left the education system earlier than the forum parents at Willow. One man had a degree, acquired by a non-traditional route, whilst the others had no post-16 education, although several had professional qualifications (eg nurse training). All owned their own houses and lived in a relatively small suburban area around the school. This group's occupations included associative professionals (eg nurses) and also semi and routine occupations (Rose & O'Reilley 1998).

² As part of the debates concerning how best to understand and explore differentiation within the middle class(es), Dunleavy (1980) and Perkin (1989) argue that the most significant cleavage is between public and private sectors of employment.

The Carson 'regulars': experiences and motivations

Experiences

One key difference between the forums at the two schools, and one which greatly affected the experiences of participants, was the social relations between members. Unlike the Willow parents, the Carson parents had, over a number of years, developed friendships with each other, and saw each other outside of school events. Indeed one social event arranged by the CSA committee was intended to be for committee members and their friends only! The parents frequently retired to the pub after meetings and this enabled them to present themselves as a fairly cohesive and coherent group in their deliberations with staff, although as is clear in the following extract some individuals were more assertive than others.

I think sometimes [the headteacher] had her own way and I got the impression very quickly that at the end of the meeting there would be three or four who said, 'We've thought that for years' 'Well, why didn't you say?' 'Well, you can't really, she's the headmistress'. I've got the confidence to stand up and say, 'I don't think we should do that' [Gives a specific example to do with the destination of the funds raised] Once or twice now, if there was anything to be argued in there, you would see people, Jill [for instance], look at me as if to say, 'Come on Richard, say something' (Richard, white father)

Not everyone was possessed of Richard's self confidence. One mother blamed herself for the lack of response from the school to a particular issue which she had raised.

I wanted to put a point over about the lockers in the school, because I am concerned really that they haven't got anywhere of their own to put personal things..I thought I had cracked it, but I obviously hadn't, because this time they just sort of put pegs up in some classrooms and that's as far as I actually got....I suppose I don't put myself over very well. I think that's something to do with it, perhaps. If I put myself over a little bit better I might achieve something (Joanne, white mother)

The issues addressed were described by one CSA member as 'small', and they were certainly less central to the curriculum than those on the agenda at the Willow forum. But parent members were very vocal. Fieldnotes from the CSA meetings and data from interview transcripts reveals the immense detail with which parents discussed the organisation of fundraising events, and the servicing of school events. At the

education sub-committee, lockers, sex education, school meals and uniform³ were all discussed often vigorously. Despite the large numbers of staff present at education sub-committee meetings, the parent members could be quite assertive in pressing their points, and were not easily deflected by the teachers' comments. However, since minutes of the meeting were not circulated, it was harder for parents to ask for feedback at subsequent meetings and consequently easier for contentious items to get 'lost'. In a few pages of the transcript of his interview with us, Clive, the CSA chair, comments on the lack of action around several concerns which he and other parents had recently tabled for discussion, namely, the price of school meals, the provision of sex education leaflets and the workings of the school clocks!

What tends to happen in the school situation is that people want to gloss over problems don't they? At the end of the day nothing changed..... I honestly thought following that meeting the catering staff would adjust [the prices]... They said there was leaflets [on sex education] pinned up in the school, but I haven't seen themWe were talking about quality one meeting...I said, 'well, how can we talk about quality when we can't even get the clocks to tell the right time?' and everyone went 'what do you mean?' and I said every class you go into the clocks have stopped or they are telling the wrong time, and to me that's wrong'They said they would get [the caretaker] to change the batteries in the clocks but they are still the same (Clive, white father)

When asked by the interviewer about this apparent lack of response from the school, Clive responded,

I think there has to be some common ground between you at the start. If you're poles apart at the start you don't get very far, do you..I think they [the staff] have to be part way there before they'll agree to it

Clive describes a situation which Bachrach & Baratz refer to as a 'mobilisation of bias', 'a set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals and institutional procedures' (1970, p.43) that operate to benefit one group (in this case, the staff) whilst silencing another (the parents). Bachrach & Baratz argue that a mobilisation of bias is sustained by non-decision-making, by which potential challenges to the status quo are discouraged, diverted, and if opposition does persist, directly opposed.

³ The latter became a flashpoint at the school, involving local and national media coverage, after the imposition of a uniform rule seeking to regulate the appearance of female pupils.

Another very active CSA parent, Crystal, was equally clear that the support and fundraising work done by the CSA parents were often taken for granted by the teachers, and that as a group, they were not always fully consulted by the school. It is interesting that both Crystal and Clive's clear perception of a partial and somewhat grudging response from the school did not appear to lessen their commitment to Carson. Clive and Jill Robinson in particular, but other parents as well, contributed large amounts of their time and effort to the school on a regular basis.

They do, they do over and above what everyone else does, they really do. Clive donates a lot of his own money and time and we have Open Nights or Fashion Shows where, okay, we'll go and sell the drinks and refreshments or whatever, but Jill, she'll stand and bake apple pies all afternoon to take with her (Stella, white mother)

CSA parents had helped to organise a Year 11 prom night, and had done all the catering for this event.

The flowers were delivered here on Tuesday afternoon. I started the flowers [organising them into table decorations and corsages] on the Wednesday night, finished them off on the Thursday morning, was at Jill's for 10.00 to help her cook food ready for the buffet. And I'd done all the table arrangements because I'd got up so early (Crystal)

Motivations

Being a parent member of the CSA forum seems on the evidence so far to be a thankless task; there is a great amount of work to be done both in attending meetings and planning and executing fundraising activities, and the school then appears lukewarm in its gratitude as well as engaging only superficially with parents' opinions! How can we explain, then, the continued dedication and loyalty of the core group? The parents offered a number of reasons for their involvement. One was getting to know the teachers and developing a social relationship with them which then made the child's school seem less distant. Another is gaining information about the school, without seeming to trespass on to their teenage child's territory in order to do so. However, although these reasons were mentioned briefly by parents (on four occasions), there were two other main reasons which were spoken about at greater length: the first was supporting the school and giving something back to the institution educating their children (see also Martin & Vincent 1999), and the second, the enjoyment that the parents got from their involvement in various activities.

I like to think that I am putting something back. It improves the education system for the little bit of help I give, it benefits the children and the school, not just my own [children]. I think that is a worthwhile job, I look at it as something I like doing. (Clive, white father and CSA chair)

Well we felt, because like the school had taken him on, we thought well, like it is only fair that we ought to try and do something towards the school. So we decided, well, me and the wife decided to join some sort of association, combined with the school (Peter, white father and CSA treasurer)

You do get to hear and your opinion is asked on things. I mean it's no good complaining about things if you're not there to do anything about it either...It does benefit the children..... [Also] I think you do enjoy it. You do get a sense of satisfaction when we sort of say 'look what we've bought' (Stella, white mother)

I knew Jill, I knew Jill just to say hello to and just to talk to, because we've both got friends who know one another. But I didn't know Clive before the committee, now we all go out to meals together. We go out for meals with Jill and Clive and my husband (Crystal, white mother).

The inter-mingling of motivations based on altruism (giving something back to the school, supporting the education of all children in the school) and those based on self-interest (enjoyment, a sense of purpose and satisfaction) were also reflected in the Willow parents' reasons for attending their school forum (see below).

Supporting the school?

Interestingly enough, it was from Clive and Jill Robinson in particular that we received the most sustained critique of schooling. In their second interview they offered criticisms of teachers, teacher-pupil relationships, and the treatment which lower achieving children receive at the hands of the education system. We give just two brief examples here. The first quote describes their criticism of a school ceremony where the children were awarded their GCSE certificates, and the grades announced. Clive and Jill argued that it was 'humiliating' for children with lower grades to go up on stage under this procedure. The second quote concerns responsibility for the children's learning.

Clive: I think if you have got a bright pupil in the school, I think, the school likes that don't they? They say so and so got 7'A' pluses and that sounds great ...[But] at the end of the day whether you get a D or an E it is still a pass. I think to highlight people when they've done well and put down people when they've done less well is wrong

Jill: Because they've done their best, they can't do no more, you've either got it or you haven't.

Clive: Myself I think it's all down to the teachers like... Teachers will say, well if I have argued with the teachers they'll say, 'well what have you done about it? You're with them longer than us' ... My argument is that when I have been at work all day I haven't got time to teach. I help them with their problems, but ... at the end of my working day I am stressed out I have had problems all day and when I come home I just want to unwind..

Clive and Jill displayed what seemed to be an unusually forceful and outspoken attitude for such strong supporters of the school. Their critique of schooling given to us, did not, however, seem to intersect with or interfere with their commitment to the CSA and the considerable amount of support they offered the school. We suggest a number of reasons. Partly Clive and Jill felt that as schools go, Carson was quite a good one. They appealed to get a place at the school, and were very supportive of the head, if not of the teaching profession as a whole or of other individual teachers. Second, as the earlier quote and a comparison the couple made between two of their daughters suggests, Clive and Jill saw children's ability as broadly fixed and innate (for other examples of mainly working class parents adopting this view, see Carspecken 1990, Gewirtz et al 1995). This does not mean that they felt that the teaching the children received was irrelevant however, but rather they developed an argument, echoed by other CSA parents, that professional teachers are the ones who have command over the education process, that the guidance and encouragement of children's intellectual development is in their hands, and this is therefore not an area for particular parental involvement or even close parental scrutiny. As parents, Clive and Jill felt that they ought to be able to trust the professionals to educate their children effectively. Their own role lies in the moral and social education of their children, something about which they spoke at length. This stance clearly contrasts with that of the Willow forum parents who saw the monitoring and surveillance of their child's progress as a key part of their relationship with the school (see below). As the quotations illustrate, Clive and Jill have occasionally voiced their opinions in the school context. But a more common focus for their intervention was specific

queries, limited in scope, and mainly on welfare issues. Other parents at Carson also spoke of the 'correctness' of leaving the educational decision-making to the professionals.

When they went grant maintained at [a local primary school] we had a guy from the LEA and he was recommending the school couldn't stand alone on grant-maintained status, it would be a problem. Then we had three parent governors stand up and say they thought it could. And with all due respect, I wanted to know on what basis they could say that, when there was a professional educated guy from the LEA telling me no....They had like a two million pound budget, and I just had to ask the question, when was the last time this housewife, and I know her personally, she was just a housewife, had any responsibility over two million pounds. What gave her the belief she could handle it?...I believe in leaving it to the professionals.....[But] I have looked at the Carson [governing body] and there are some quite respectable people on there, probably well-educated, and I think it does balance it up to have some real people on...people like Davina and Clive (Richard, white father).

The CSA parents therefore chose to stay within particular boundaries. They liked to feel they could 'have a say', but for the most part they confined their interventions to non-academic issues. Their disappointment at not seeing their views being implemented was balanced by the continuing sense of satisfaction and enjoyment they experienced from organising successfully within the separate sphere of fundraising. We suggest that this orientation is strongly class related, or, to be more accurate, related to the particular class fraction to which most of the CSA parents belong. This is a class fraction which has experienced some success in income and occupational terms, despite a relative lack of success in educational terms. Education is valued. But their own educational experiences have not, for the most part, bequeathed them with the sense of commonality that exists for the professional, middle class Willow parents between their assumptions, priorities, knowledge-base and those of the school.

The parents' forum at Willow School

Willow is an 11-18 girls comprehensive in North Park LEA, with approximately 12500 students. As the only single sex comprehensive in the LEA and given its geographical situation close to the centre of the borough, it recruits from across a wide area, and has approximately 80 feeder primary schools both within and beyond North Park LEA. It has a mixed race and a mixed social class population with 30% receiving free school meals. The main ethnic groups which make up the pupil

population comprise white (UK), Turkish, African/Caribbean and Bangladeshi students⁴. In 1998 the school achieved 43% A*-C passes at GCSE, the second highest in the LEA. The school's headteacher, a white woman, and other senior staff speak of their belief in Willow as 'a genuine comprehensive' with a full ability range. The school has a commitment to mixed ability teaching, which it maintains as a core belief, although with some trimming in recent years (setting in Yr. 10 to meet the demands of GCSE tiering, mentoring sessions for those perceived to be 'most able' from Yr. 8, and after-school extension classes). The headteacher, at one parents forum meeting, spoke of her pride in the A-G passrate (95%) and about the importance of not letting that slip as the school worked to raise the A-C rate (See Gilborn & Youdell 1999, for examples of schools focusing their energies on students at the C/D borderline).

The school's parents' forum evolved from being a purely fund raising body at the end of the 1980s to its present discussion based format. This was apparently at the instigation of a senior teacher responsible for home-school liaison at the time. Meetings now start with short reports from the headteacher and occasionally a parent governor, and then proceed to a particular topic, previously suggested by parents. As at Carson, the meetings are run by a parent chair. Topics for discussion at recent forum meetings have included drugs, maths, fund-raising and post-16 provision. Meetings are held twice a term. One of us (CV) attended six out of the eight held in 1998-9.

The normal attendance varied between about 15 and 20. The 'regulars' were mainly but not exclusively women, and mainly, but not exclusively white. The data presented here is based on interviews conducted with 13 parents, two men and 11 women, four of whom, (all women) were later re-interviewed. Apart from two African/Caribbean mothers, all the interviewees are white. The sample of 13 parents can be described in the following way (see also appendix 1): nine of the 13 are public sector workers, two of the women are lone parents, all the parents apart from two own their own houses. Seven live in mixed social class or predominantly working class areas where, in this inner-urban area, housing is considerably cheaper than in neighbouring districts. The racial and gender imbalance of the group is clear; the two African/Caribbean mothers are often the only non-white parents attending meetings, something which both of them mentioned as key in defining their experiences of the parents' forum (see below). The majority of regulars have a high level of knowledge about education; they are either involved in education or related public sector employment (eg

⁴ Figures for 1997-8 gave the ethnic breakdown as follows: 25% ESWI, 16% Black Caribbean, 12% Black African, 9% Bangladeshi, 7.5% Indian, 4% Pakistani, and 24% other ethnic groups.

librarians) or they have a strong interest in and background knowledge of educational issues. In comparison to Carson, there is a greater representation of higher-educated public sector 'caring' professionals in the forum.

The profile of regular members was described by one parent governor in interview as the archetypal 'committee people'. Widening the boundaries of membership and participation presents schools with seemingly intractable problems. Willow's headteacher, like Carson's, had side-stepped this problem by accepting the limited membership of the group.

I see it very much as a touchstone for us...We're between 20 and 30 at most, but I do think the issues that come up there are ones parents are concerned about. It's an articulate, largely middle class group. Some of them are immensely supportive, some of them come to criticise and they come and go. There are a sort of permanent group that go right the way through, and they're always there, come what may, but I do think they express the concerns of the moment (headteacher, Willow School)

The Willow 'regulars': experiences and motivations

Experiences

Despite the headteacher's characterisation of the group as middle class, the forum meetings are not experienced uniformly by all those who attend.

There are times when I'm sitting there and wanted to say something, but thought 'God, how am I going to put this? Is this going to sound stupid?'.....It is formal [at the meetings]..I've been going quite a few times and I still feel uncomfortable. There's about two people there, the head is one of them, who is actually quite chatty and welcoming and friendly, the others are a bit uncomfortable (Chantel, African/Caribbean mother, and treasurer of forum)

As I say. we make it very informal, we don't have strict meeting type procedures, and I think, oh this is patronising, but I think a lot of parents and carers probably find it easier to ask a hard question of the head you know in a forum like that (John, white father and Chair of forum)

Feelings of confidence and of having a voice varied between individuals, even within such an apparently homogeneous group. Clearly confidence does not possess a uniform meaning, but is dependent on the specificities of a particular context. This

raises the problem, sometimes glossed over by theorists, of fostering democratic association between groups and individuals who are comfortable in different contexts. For some, confidence is clearly mediated by the racial profile of the group. Chantel and Olivia both speak of being uncomfortable if they are 'the only black face in the room' (Chantel), although both said that this made them even more determined to attend meetings. Olivia clearly sees attendance as an obligation and one she is ambivalent about.

One of the parents said something once, and I thought to myself it's true really, because when you look round the room I was probably the only black one that was there and there was an Indian lady that was there...and I thought I have to be a bit more committed sort of thing, because she was saying look at the ratio, because of the ratio of the different ethnic minorities in this school, but when it comes to this sort of meeting, and anything else to do, like the car boot sale, it's mostly the English side that is there.(Olivia, African/Caribbean mother)

Several mothers commented that they disliked speaking in public, were worried about looking foolish, and would say very little at forum meetings. This was, to some extent, mediated by the individual's occupation. Those who worked in education or related areas were familiar with the jargon used, and had some prior idea of the issues involved in the debates.

There appeared to be an implicit understanding amongst the current group of 'regulars' that they were for the most part supportive of the school, and willing to play by rules which privileged professional knowledge and understanding. Thus, as we explain below, they asked questions and occasionally made suggestions, but would generally accept staff explanations of 'the way things are'. There were relatively few challenging voices. Those parents who had enough confidence, anxiety or anger to speak out without having accrued the appropriate knowledge and attitudes 'stuck out like a sore thumb',

A parent who knew very little, and I'm not, you know, she would just, you know, didn't have much...it almost completely dominated. You got the impression that everyone was being very understanding on the surface, but you know, thinking 'oh goodness.....' But yeah it was right that this person was there trying to sort of grapple with ideas, but then is there the time for..? I mean I think this was someone who probably doesn't come to meetings and

who had very little understanding ...Basically she wanted streaming. I think that's how it was, and you know coming up with all these notions which were Willow, that is ...fully comprehensive...I don't know, it just means you need to spend time with people explaining these issues and what works at Willow, and what works anywhere, and parents don't understand. I think it is highlighted because the nucleus of people who come to meetings are committed people who are used to meetings..familiar with the jargon, so it's just, and then someone who perhaps come along who doesn't, you know, sticks out like a sore thumb, and you then you're half thinking, oh goodness, let's get on with the real issues, but that is the real issue (Trisha, white mother)

An instance of voice?

However, given enough persistence, such illicit⁵ voices could have some effect. It would be inaccurate to give the impression that the forum was not, on occasion, used as a channel for parental dissent and dissatisfaction. One of the main and recurrent issues to feature in forum discussions, according to John, the chair at the time, was the teaching of maths. The school used SMILE maths, a system based on individual students working their way through a series of cards; it was one which some parents disliked, and their concern tended to encapsulate wider anxieties about mixed ability.

The same parent persistently, in any other business, or whatever possible opportunity brought up his anxiety about maths. [He] was always treated very, mainly actually, was treated very sympathetically, but I know he felt that he was banging his head against a brick wall. In fact he had more impact than he was realising, it was like a seething thing where you suddenly thought, oh I suppose we'd better address this, so it was all a bit sort of, at first, oh here he goes again, I'd better minute it again, but then you realised he was making a point....he came for about three years chipping away at that (Paul, deputy head)

Just prior to the research period, the parents' forum held a session on maths when senior staff explained and justified the use of SMILE. The meeting was quite disputatious, with parents mostly expressing concern, but with a small number positive about SMILE. During the research period however (1998-9), the use of SMILE had become less of a contentious issue, as the school was moving towards using the system more selectively and introducing more whole-class teaching, largely in response to changes in personnel in the school, and the need to respond to the

⁵ Thanks to Stephen Ball for suggesting this term.

demands of GCSE tiering. Parental dissatisfaction and concern was just one element within this nexus of elements, all of which were encouraging change.

They were about to overhaul, you know, they were thinking about it and would continue to re-think specially as they were about to appoint a new Head of Maths, so that was an issue, and the fact that they were prepared to mix the type of teaching in the maths curriculum. I felt that was a very balanced sort of outcome...I think they were already mixing [teaching styles] but I think they really will use that [the views expressed in the forum meeting] to inform opinion about more, you know, any future changes. Yeah, that's the impression I got (Sian, white mother)

We cited Clive from Carson earlier saying that parental opinions were far more likely to influence the school, if the staff were already 'half way there'. This appears to describe the partial role parental opinion played in influencing developments within maths teaching at Willow.

Motivations

However, changing policy was not amongst the main reasons cited by parents for attending forum meetings. Instead the regulars cited four reasons: getting information; monitoring the school provision; getting access to staff and other parents and the appropriate fulfilment of mothering responsibilities. These were not exclusive, with several individuals citing several sources of motivation. The first reason given, as at Carson, was a desire to know what was going on in school, from a more direct source than the somewhat haphazard contributions offered by their children. The forum therefore presented some mothers with a channel through which they could oversee and guide the children's educational prospects (see Reay & Ball 1998 for an account of monitoring practices instigated by middle class parents).

I like to know what's going on, and at secondary school, it's so odd because you don't... At secondary school, they just go off in the morning and come home in the evening, and there's absolutely no contact with the school at all, and it's so nice just being able to go into school and see the staff, and as I said, to know what's going on really (Jennifer, white mother)

However, attendance at the forum did not mean that the parents felt more fully informed about their own child's academic progress. Jennifer continues,

When Alison got her report, there was no, although they always say, oh you can contact the, you know, her tutor, or the head of year, or whoever, by the time you get the report it's getting near the end of the year in any case, and it just doesn't seem possible to contact anyone about it really, or to discuss it really (Jennifer)

The uncertainty and anxiety implicit in the majority of the mothers' accounts of their relationships with the school, articulates with the second reason given for attendance at forum meetings: the need, as they see it, to attempt to monitor the school provision. Unlike the CSA parents, they do not trust the school to get on with it. This does not necessarily stem from any particular concerns about Willow. Rather, Claire described 'the shortcomings of any ordinary comprehensive in London',

The thing is one of the reasons why I go to the [forum] is so that I know what's happening in the school and I feel reassured you know, I know about all the problems, like the fact that there aren't enough maths and science teachers nation-wide and in London, it's acute. It's a problem at Willow...I mean you've got to be aware of all these things and try and, if necessary, to get a tutor for your child or whatever. But if your child gets into one of those [selective] schools you don't have to bother. I'd be surprised if I went to many PTA meetings if my child was in a school like that...I would go to some things obviously, I'd support the school [but] you wouldn't have to bother. I mean they don't have any trouble recruiting anyone...So from that point of view you could just think 'oh, phew. Sit back and relax' You wouldn't have to worry (Claire, white mother)

Claire went on to comment on the experiences of a friend with children at a neighbouring school 'who missed out on a lot of things with her eldest son, because I think she just didn't realise what was happening in the school'. Chantel, too, is determined not to repeat the mistakes, as she sees them, that she made at primary school. She had received consistently good reports from her daughter's teacher concerning her progress and ability and was then disappointed when she received the Key Stage 2 SATs results, feeling her daughter could have done much better.

They keep telling you your child's doing well, and unless your child has a behavioural problem or something like that, then they'll call you in, but if not they just sail through and it's only at the end its 'well, why if you're doing so well, why haven't you got top marks?' I think, sometimes the children that are

OK they just leave them and concentrate on perhaps parents who are a bit more pushy and I do think you need to have your finger in, get in there (Chantel, African/Caribbean mother p.6)

Chantel gave this as her major reason for attending forum meetings, even though she found them a fairly uncomfortable and impersonal experience. They provided one way in which she and Claire, quoted above, could attempt to affect a 'monitoring and repair' sequence on their children's secondary schooling (Reay 1998; Griffith & Smith 1990) Attendance at forum meetings is a much more distant and fallible strategy of monitoring and repair than the more direct means undertaken by some of the women participating in Diane Reay's (1998) research in primary schools, but the more complex secondary curriculum and the less open organisation of the school (parent volunteers in the classroom for example are rare at secondary school) restrict their options. Attendance at forum meetings not only alerts parents to school wide issues, it provides them with a point of access to the staff, the third reason given for attendance. Four women specifically mentioned the importance of building social relationships with teachers and being seen to be interested.

Once you show a bit of interest, when you go and complain or have a concern about your child and whatever going on, they probably would take notice of you and say 'oh, well she has made an effort sort of thing, so let's try and see if we can help out'. I'm not going because of that reason, but....people might be complaining about this and that and then you [the school] would say 'well, I've never seen her here anyway, so what is she complaining about?' (Olivia, African/Caribbean mother)

Forum meetings were generally seen by the school and the parents who participate as arenas for talking about issues in general rather than dealing with individual cases (see below). However, the forum parents were relatively good at understanding and negotiating the boundaries of 'appropriate' parental behaviour – how and when to speak on particular issues, what channels to go through, who to speak to, using the greater familiarity that accrues to their relationship with senior staff through meeting them at the forum . Attendance could, for example, provide opportunities for 'having a word' with the senior staff, a strategy which resonated through one transcript where a mother described it as her response to three different issues. The forum however was not very effective in providing access to other parents. Meetings, in contrast to those at Carson, were rather impersonal and curiously unsocial. Those women who did know each other had links from another source, often primary school. At the

beginning of every meeting everyone introduced themselves, but there was little time for socialising. As the meetings finished late, no-one was encouraged to stay around. As Chantel commented rather forlornly at one meeting 'I've been coming for a year now and I still don't know anyone'⁶. Iris Young (1996) notes the importance of 'bodies and the care for bodies' for the ideal of communicative democracy. She criticises some theorists of deliberative democracy for not acknowledging the importance of,

Discussion [which] is also wrapped in non-linguistic gestures that bring people together warmly, seeing conditions for amiability: smiles, handshakes, hugs, the giving and taking of food and drink, (1996 p.129)

Discussion, at Willow, circulated round the teachers: a parent would ask a question or make a comment to which one of the staff members or possibly the chair would respond. One parent directly addressing another was an uncommon event.

Being a professional middle class mother

As we noted earlier, getting to know the staff and finding out what was going in the school were also mentioned by Carson parents as reasons for attending the parents' forum. The other two reasons given by Willow parents – monitoring school provision and fulfilling mothering responsibilities - were not mentioned by their Carson counterparts, and these motivations are, we suggest, informed by the class fraction to which the Willow parents belong. As referred to earlier, they felt a need to monitor school provision, which the Carson parents did not see as part of their role, except in relation to their children's welfare. Nor did the Carson mothers suggest as the Willow mothers did that involvement with the children's education at all stages construed a major part of the mothering role (see also Griffith & Smith 1990; David et al 1993; Reay 1998). Clearly, attendance at meetings is not the type of strategy that all mothers would wish to or be able to adopt. However, in contrast to the views of the CSA mothers, attendance at meetings is understood by the women at Willow as a disposition shared by 'people like us', part of the habitus of middle class professional mothers. In answer to a question about why such a small group of parents attended forum meetings, two women responded as follows,

I've gone since my daughter was in nursery school, when she was 3, so I've been going to PTA meetings now, for I don't know 10 or 11 years... You've got to have it in that way that you will go. I mean there are other more attractive

⁶ In response to concern about the lack of Year 7 parents joining the forum, and Chantel's remark which was given as an explanation, the meetings now feature a 10 minute refreshment break in the middle to encourage socialising.

things in life to do, and if you haven't already got it in your mind that that's something you do right from the start...when your children are at secondary school and you haven't gone before why should you go now?.....I think you start off when you've had a baby and you go to NCT [National Childbirth Trust] meetings. (Claire, white mother)

It's something that you do, I mean it's either something that you do or not do, so I've been to playgroup meetings, infant school meetings, junior school meetings, so you just keep going, go to every school meeting! (Louise, white mother)

For many of these mothers, attendance at school meetings is a strategy. It allows them to display their support for the school and their interest in their children's education, but in a way that avoids being assigned to an ancillary role and given gendered domestic tasks, such as washing paint bottles or preparing food as the CSA women do, or indeed being purely limited to fundraising. The Willow mothers are for the most part in professional jobs, and the culture of meetings - the notion of having minutes and following an agenda, of having discussions chaired, of privileging 'speech that is formal and general...dispassionate and disembodied' (Young 1996 p.124) - is familiar to them in a way it is not to most of the Carson parents. Therefore, with some exceptions, they appear confident and at ease in forum meetings, 'certain of possessing cultural legitimacy' (Bourdieu 1984 p.66) and as a result ready to seek information and make suggestions. However, as we noted earlier a certain deference to the professionals is visible in the attitudes of this group, and their confidence in interacting with them cannot be overstated. There *were* certainly occasions on which individual parents at Willow managed to affect change in the curriculum provision open to their daughters, or to their social experience of school (meaning peer group relations for example), and our research found very few examples of this sort of success accruing to those who lacked the particular cultural capital of middle class professional parents (Vincent et al 1999). Vic gives one example;

[My daughter] didn't have such a good maths teacher at the primary school, then she's ended up not having such a good maths teacher at secondary school. When I mentioned that to one of the deputy heads he immediately said, 'look we can do things about that'. The man who was then Head of Maths, he was in touch with me, so they immediately you know, expressed their concern and said, you know, 'we'll send extra homework for her', so I could not praise the senior staff enough in that sense (Vic, white parent governor)

Another member of the parents' forum described an apparent example of successful collective action on the part of other parents whose daughters were 'high flyers',

I spoke to another parent in another classroom who said that the parents got together and said 'we're not prepared to have this [maths] teacher for another year', but the class that my daughter was in, I didn't know as many parents in that class, and of course we hadn't got together, and I didn't realise how bad the situation was...[The other class] they [then] had a different teacher...who was one of the ones people think very highly of in the school, and as a result this particular girl I know she actually did maths a year early. ..So they moved very quickly...I think in that particular class I would imagine they had more children of, more higher ability children as well. I feel in the class that my daughter was in, there weren't as many as in other groups (Dora, white mother)

However, we would argue that the women who regularly attended the parents' forum appeared aware of the constraints in their positioning as mothers. Our data does not suggest the same degree of 'self-certainty' (Bourdieu op cit.) in relation to the school that Diane Reay's (1998) middle classes mothers at Oak Park possessed (for examples of middle class agency, see also Ball & Vincent 2000). Forum members at Willow School do not inevitably experience the education system as 'malleable' (Butler 1995). The dominant picture drawn from transcripts is one where parents' interactions with the school are touched by uncertainty, of trying out strategies, of compromise. To take just two examples, the mother quoted here describes her daughter's struggle to do a particular advanced level course in the school's sixth form consortium,

The AS level maths doesn't seem to be offered now even though it was advertised, so we are actually taking this up with the school, because if necessarily she will do this independently [with a private tutor, the family have employed in the past] [.....] My husband left a message on [the voice mail system] for him to be contacted at his school or at home, this must be 2 weeks ago now, we haven't had a reply to that, so now we shall write in because we're obviously loosing time on this (Dora)

In this example, the family clearly have the resources with which to compensate for the possible lack of provision, but it is interesting that Dora's immediate response to the situation is to establish a fall-back position, to obtain the syllabus so that her

daughter can follow the course privately. She speaks only of clarifying the situation with the school, of finding out whether the course is available, rather than displaying any anger, irritation or determination to get her daughter taught within the sixth form consortium.

Another woman, one of the parents' forum's most loyal supporters, described how her youngest daughter had been away from school for several months, after she had been bullied.

CV: Were the teachers aware your youngest daughter was being bullied?

Mother : Oh yes, I kept on at them.....I had a struggle with her being at home because you'd ring up the school and leave messages on their voice mail but they don't listen to them, so days would go by and I'd send one of the other kids in to actually go to the teacher and say 'hey listen to your voice mail'...I was trying to get help for a long while (Jean, white mother)

A politics of voice and representation?

On this reading attendance at the Willow forum meetings is an individual not a collective experience for those parents who attend. Indeed, unlike the Carson parents, they use only an individualist repertoire to explain their involvement. As Jordan, Redley & James note,

What is characteristic of such accounts is their ethic of self-reliance and self responsibility and the prioritisation of particular others over membership of the wider community (1994, p.29)

Later, Jordan and colleagues describe the parenting actions of their sample of middle class respondents in a way that seems to echo the actions and motivations of parents at Willow's forum,

They act as parents to do their best for their individual children, but they neither speak nor act as citizens to try and influence collective decisions about the future of their children's generation (1994, p.193)

Indeed, this description also applies to the Carson parents. Although they employ a more collective repertoire to explain their involvement with the school, their participation is limited to the safe sphere of fundraising or to particular welfare issues.

This is interesting in view of Jordan et al's explanation for the lack of involvement of parents *qua* citizens in education. This, they suggest, is an exemplar of a wider trend resulting in a passive polity which views collective action as futile. Such passivity is tightly bound up with dominant understandings of the citizen's relationship to the public domain over the last half century. Two particular influences can be identified: first, the social democratic emphasis on the specialist knowledge of professional service delivers which created the public as *clients* in a polity characterised by passivity, dependency, and fragmentation. More recently, neo-liberalism has sought to turn the public domain into a market in which an atomised public exercise competitive *consumer* choice. These two identities are not necessarily antithetical. As this data suggests, both sets of parents situate themselves and are situated as clients *and* consumers. What is neglected is the possibility of deliberation between citizens concerning collective issues. Instead, individual citizens are encouraged to construct private solutions to public matters. The manner in which individuals do this will of course be influenced by their social locations, and the type of resources (cultural, social and material) to which they have access, and our discussion of the differences between the Willow and Carson parents is intended to provide one illustration of this process.

Thus in neither Carson nor Willow is deliberation and debate with the teaching staff understood by parents as a potential means of contributing to a 'good' education for the students. For the Carson parents, as a group, attaining a 'good' education for your children is a matter of ensuring they gain entry to a 'good' school, one that is both disciplined and where the pupils achieve academically. All the CSA parents had made a positive choice to send their children to Carson, one family had appealed successfully for a place, and another had moved into the area. They then left the education of their children to the teachers. Even when they were dissatisfied in some respects, they did not appear to see themselves as able to intervene in the educational process. Only one CSA couple, Stella and Richard, had made such an intervention - requesting their child be moved to a higher set for maths. CSA parents positioned themselves as supportive of the school – one mother whose daughter was sent home for contravening a new and briefly contentious school regulation on uniform did not attend a CSA meeting held during the controversy, unable to reconcile her previous role as 'good' parent with her new, albeit temporary, position as rebel. The group found a role for themselves which played to what they felt they could do best – the organisation and preparation for social events, and from this, they accumulated considerable personal satisfaction and enjoyment.

The Willow parents, more firmly located within the professional middle class spectrum, did not trust the school to the same degree. They had also chosen to send their daughters to Willow (although several considered it the only viable option in the area). They displayed considerable professional sympathy in their relations with the teachers, but they were also in pursuit of clear goals – high academic attainment which would allow entry into respected higher education institutions. Engaged in a process of *risk assessment*, they concluded that the stakes were too high to allow the handing over of their child's education to the school, without maintaining sustained involvement on their part which included, but was not limited to, attendance at forum meetings. However, as noted earlier, their good relations with staff did not guarantee success in realising specific issues concerning their children's education, and they pursued a somewhat uneasy path between client passivity and the exercise of individual voice.

The forums therefore were far from being instances of collective participation, part of the process by which theorists suggest everyday life can be democratised. Rather they appear simply as sites for the consolidation of self interest. Certainly, that self-interest appears very different in the two schools. In Willow it is clearly about maximising the likelihood of educational success on the part of one's own child. In Carson, self-interest is more about the enjoyment and sense of satisfaction that accrues to the adults.

To a great extent, of course, this situation derives from the parents having few opportunities to become involved in decision-making concerning collective issues. Denied, but also denying themselves, participation in a wider political agenda, then what remains is surely what Robertson (1999) calls the 'politics of individualism'. One example of this was provided by events in Willow School, concerning the handling of a controversial initiative designed to alter some aspects of the school's funding⁷. There are two related points here. One is that parents' views on the proposed changes were not sought nor in the most part offered in any elaborated form. The wider parent body received little information from the school, although the council produced and distributed a leaflet. At the forum meeting where the funding changes were discussed, the regular attendees appeared concerned about the plans, but the exchange consisted mostly of explanations from staff of the background to the initiative. The second point is that views offered in interview by staff and parents reveal the operation of the 'politics of individualism'. Principled opposition to the changes (particularly on the part of staff) was tempered by feelings of fatalism and

⁷ Details are being kept deliberately vague to ensure the anonymity of the school.

powerlessness amongst teachers and parents. Additionally both groups were swayed by their awareness of the immediate financial benefits the changes would bring for current teachers and students, although the long term future appeared uncertain (the 'politics of individualism').

Geoff Whitty, Sally Power and David Halpin (1998) and Michelle Fine (1993) write of the importance of finding areas of dialogue and consensus between schools and parents, rather than, as so often happens, positioning the two as enemies. However, Kari Dehli's (1998, 1999) recent papers show how unusual and how severe the circumstances have to be for parent-teacher alliance against state authority⁸.

Although the funding proposals affecting Willow School appeared on the surface to be an issue that could provide a focus for joint parent-teacher debate, and potentially, a point of consensus, the way in which it was handled and presented by educational professionals suggested that there was a negligible role for parents or ordinary classroom teachers to play. The changes were presented by senior managers (as indeed they were presented to them by council officers and members) as inevitable, with the priority being for the governing body to try to achieve as good a deal as possible for the school. This short history offers a further illustration of the way in which 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.

Conclusion

A number of points arise from the proceeding discussion. First, we have been prompted to look in detail at the operating of a school-based parents' group by commentators concerned to rejuvenate participative and deliberative forms of citizenship. To this end they highlight the capacities of small-scale local groups. In these analyses, such groups are positioned as generating and extending the agency of their members and thereby having the potential to make a significant contribution to a vibrant public 'conversation'. To some extent, Willow and Carson Schools' parents' forums seems to typify the empirical shortcomings of the grandiose rhetoric of some theoreticians. Willow attracts a small group of 'elite participationists' (Elster 1989), in

⁸ Dehli writes about a teachers strike, in response to punitive federal legislation, in Ontario, Canada. Their action was supported by parents, and led to some reformulation of the relationships between parent and teacher once both parties had a shared identity as activists. However, Dehli shows that as soon as strike collapsed, the old set power relations between teachers and parents re-asserted themselves, leading to formal and more distant relationships.

the main, white, middle class professional women, who engage in an individualist repertoire to explain their participation. Carson similarly has an elite group which operates in the limited realm of fundraising, rarely engaging in wider issues. Neither group connect to the wider parent body. Indeed in Carson, none of the other parents we interviewed had even heard of the CSA's education sub-committee.

Part of the explanation for the constrained and limited roles played by the forums is the relative impermeability of Carson and Willow schools to parental voices. This is our second point. Despite both schools establishing and supporting their respective parents' forum, it was difficult for any controversial parental views to get a hearing. The discussions over maths teaching at Willow came nearest, with the school showing itself ready to justify and explain its approach to maths. However, the changes that were already taking place within the department were planned and implemented over the heads of parents, their views playing into the process only in a limited manner⁹. By and large, and this was particularly the case at Carson, parents were captured by the school's agenda, and rarely challenged that position. We referred earlier to Bachrach & Baratz's theory of the 'mobilisation of bias' and 'non-decision-making'. Of particular relevance to the forums is their reference to Philip Selznick's critique, somewhat sweeping in its cynicism, of 'participatory democracy' which is, he claims, a particularly potent way of discouraging challenges as it gives 'the illusion of a voice without the voice itself' (cited in Bachrach & Baratz 1970, p. 44-45). Indeed, the schools were slow to respond to even small changes that parents suggested. The parents who attended forum meetings were, perhaps surprisingly, not greatly disgruntled by this. At Willow, parents exhibited a great deal of professional sympathy for teachers' workloads, and had, in any case, their own agendas – monitoring the progress of their daughters. At Carson, parents had developed a realm of their own – fundraising, the autonomy of which they tried to protect. On other issues, particularly welfare issues, they would give their view and make suggestions. Curricular and organisational topics remained the preserve of the staff.

These contrasting reactions on the part of parents can also be analysed in terms of the differing resources, attitudes and assumptions which they brought to their relationships with schools, our third point in this concluding discussion. Few of the Carson parents had prolonged their stay in education, and their present occupations were often the result of having worked their way up within an organisation (Clive, Peter, Joanna, Davina, Richard). As a result they maintained a distance between themselves and the details of the schooling process. This distance is inscribed in the

⁹ It is of course necessary to recognise that some teachers themselves feel deprofessionalised by increasing centralised control (Ball 1997; Gewirtz 1997)

interview transcripts. The Carson parents talked at length about fundraising and the CSA meetings. However, when asked about their relationship with the school in terms of their own children, their accounts were more general and less detailed than those proffered by the Willow parents. The Carson group have elements in common with the 'semi-skilled' group of school choosers described by Gewirtz et al (1995), a mixed class group which Sharon Gewirtz, Stephen Ball and Richard Bowe describe using Bourdieu's terms as 'outsiders' to education (1995 p.43). The Willow parents generally, having been more successful in the education system, were more at ease with the educational process and interested in the details of developments within the school as well as seeing their involvement in the forum as part of their involvement with their daughters' educational progress. In interview, they discussed at length their perceptions of forum meetings, but also their interactions with the school over their own daughters, and the range of tactics and strategies they would employ to make their point. Maintaining a close link between themselves and their child's school career is to them, part of being a 'good' parent, or to be more accurate given the gender imbalance of these groups, a 'good' mother. For the CSA mothers, however, being a 'good mother involved supporting and attending fund-raising meetings. Their educational involvement tended to be limited to attendance at parent-teacher consultation evenings, rather than the on-going monitoring the Willow mothers practiced.

Our fourth point is that, given this formulation the Willow parents seem to attend the forum meetings only for their own self-serving ends. They appear as classic examples of middle class parents exploiting their knowledge and skills, their positional advantages, in pursuit of selfish, self-serving, self-interested ends (see Ball & Vincent 2000). We have three caveats here. The first is the need to acknowledge, even centre, the importance of the particular and the private in determining what is regarded as a legitimate motivation for participation (Mouffe, 1993). Suppressing particularity, rendering individual concerns invalid, will as Mansbridge (1990) argues, detract from people's willingness to participate. It is this exclusion of the particular and the personal as a legitimate set of concerns in public domains that make certain traditions within civic republicanism appear so austere (Marquand 1994). In addition, and our second caveat, we suggest that self-interest is incomplete as an explanation for participation, that there are other elements at play here, or to be more precise self-interest can be more widely conceived. As Jayne Mansbridge argues (1990), duty, love (or empathy), two commonly recognised forms of altruism, and self interest intermingle in our actions in ways that are difficult to sort out; 'when people think about what they want, they think about more than just their narrow self-interest. When

they define their own interests and when they act to pursue those interests, they often give great weight both to their moral principles and to the interests of others (1990 p.ix). The motivations of the Willow parents can be understood in terms of the wider definition of self-interest posited by Mansbridge above. As at Carson, parents' attendance at forum meetings, taking up positions within the group (eg treasurer, chair etc.), their fundraising (this was a low priority at Willow compared to Carson, but one in which forum parents were involved), their volunteering to help out with other tasks (attending open days/evenings for new families), all these require a commitment of time and effort. Yet the fulfillment of these obligations are not required to complete mothers' 'monitoring and repair' work with regard to their daughter's education. Several professional middle class parents in our wider sample of parents at Willow achieved this apparently quite effectively without any contact with the forum. Instead they initiated and maintained regular contact with staff and employed tutors to compensate for any gaps they perceive in the provision offered by the school. The Willow forum parents spoke of a sense of commitment and loyalty to the school as a whole, as well as seeing the forum as a mechanism through which their individual concerns can be addressed. Third, the way in which Willow parents frame and act on their concerns certainly illustrates their ability to operate in the school context relative to that of other groups of parents, but also, and more interestingly, reveals their deference, their uncertainty, their hesitancy in relation to the school. As characteristics of the way in which this particular fragment of the middle class relates to educational institutions, these traits may be overlooked in the concern of researchers to differentiate analytically between skilled, advantaged middle class groups and others.

A final point, moving beyond immediate engagement with the data, is that parents' use of individualist repertoires is unsurprising and perhaps inevitable. As the description of the funding changes at Willow highlights, the traditional lack of citizen involvement in the decision-making processes which inform the development of public sector institutions mitigates against citizens' realisations of their collective agency. As Ian Loveland notes, decentralisation and the confinement of local government 'have reduced the size of the collectivity almost to vanishing point: the parents at a single school or the tenants of single housing estate become the first tier of sub-central government' (1999 p.310). These 'micro-collectives', fragile, local arenas, will collapse under the weight of expectations if they are seen as responsible for the creation of instances of locally based agency and activity, and thereby the sole mechanism for rejuvenating the public sphere. They will be partial, particular and narrowly-focused in their concerns, attributes which are not, we suggest, following Mansbridge, negative in themselves - and indeed they could be seen as necessary for

fostering participation among a greater number of potential actors - but they are not sufficient. Such groups will attract a limited number of people with the cultural resources and the inclination to attend. Local initiatives alone will be unable to transform the dominant understanding of the purposes of engagement with others: to defend one's own position, and that of immediate others, and minimise and manage the risk to 'our' life chances without having to be concerned about 'them'. Moves towards extending political equality require the extension of economic equality if more people are to feel able and willing to participate in the public domain (Phillips 1999). If we are to transform experiences of citizenship from passivity to that of active public deliberation, issues of cultural recognition and material redistribution have both to be addressed, despite the tensions between them (see Fraser 1997). A revitalised public sphere will not be achieved through the development of atomised 'little polities' alone.

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Appendix 1: The parent respondents

Carson

NB: all the Carson parents are white and all attended meetings regularly

Parents	Occupation	Housing tenure	Education
Stella and Richard	Engineering (Mr) (private sector) P/t Nursing (Mrs)	O/o	Degree (Mr) Post-16 - nursing training (Mrs)
Peter (CSA treasurer)	Sales rep.	O/o	No post-16 education
Davina (CSA sec.and parent governor)	P/t work for Barclays at branch level, responsible for new business accounts.	O/o	CSEs, then started secretarial work at Bank,
Clive (CSA chair) and Jenny Robinson	Senior supervisor at Diaries (Mr) P/t School cleaner (Mrs)	O/o (ex Council)	Both left at 15, Colin w/o qualifications Colin did C& G later
Joanna	P/t Staff nurse	O/o	O levels then secretarial course and work, then nursing training
Crystal	Small scale factory work	O/o	

Willow

Name	Occupation	Ethnicity	Housing tenure	Education	Regular / Irregular attendee
Louise	P/t special needs assistant	White	O/O	Degree	R
Claire	P/t librarian	White	O/O	Degree	R
Chantel	P/t school secretary	African/Caribbean	O/O (ex Council)	1 A level	R (treasurer of forum)
Jennifer	Manager in local authority housing dept.	White	O/O		I
Jean	Computer programmer	White	O/O		R
Trisha	Adult educator	White	O/O	Degree	R
Margaret	Administrator in local government finance dept.	African/Caribbean	?		R
John	Self-employed editor	White	O/O		R (chair of forum)
Sian	Primary school teacher	White	O/O	Degree	R
Vic	Middle management - private sector, motor trade federation	White	Housing association		I (parent governor)
Dora	P/t social worker	White	O/O		R
Deborah	Librarian	White	O/O		I
Ruth	Laboratory technician (supervisor)	White	O/O		R (vice-chair)

NB:

As much of this data as collected in phase one of the research project, we do not have for all the forum respondents, the systematic information the respondents' ethnicity, housing tenure, educational histories and jobs, which we collected in phase two, when working with a larger group of parents from Willow and Carson. Although we do not have therefore the sort of data which would help us to identify a very

precise social class location, the available data does reveal some interesting characteristics concerning the forum parents considered as a whole.

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