

Constructions of Parents and Languages of Parenting

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Introduction

In the UK and Europe, home-school collaboration, as several theorists have noted, is “regarded as an essential requirement for the social and intellectual development of children [and] parents are expected to be extensively involved in their children’s schooling”¹. The recent UK policy document “Every Parent Matters,”² outlines the way in which the government can “enable parents to play a full and positive part in their children’s learning and development”, and promotes the use of “home-school agreements” that outline parents’ responsibilities towards their child’s schooling, through for example ensuring that they complete their homework on time. Annette Lareau has documented a similar trend in the US, which she captures in the insight that “parents are no longer merely expected to give their children love, intimacy and security and to safeguard their physical health and development”, but are expected to “stimulate and take responsibility for the intellectual development of their children”.³

While Lareau, in this quote, is identifying two contrasting approaches, and has developed an important account of the social and cultural context in which they operate⁴, my concern here is the increasing tendency, in both policy and popular literature, to talk about parenting in terms of “jobs” or “roles”. Both “providing love, intimacy and security”, and “stimulating intellectual development”, when conceived in these terms, constrict our way of thinking about parents and, I argue, fail to capture the ethical and conceptual complexity of the parent-child relationship. Amongst other things, there is a sense, I suggest, in which this relationship is educational. Yet it is so not in the sense in which “education” is used in most literature on parents. Indeed, the dominance of the logic and language of schooling has contributed to the difficulty in articulating a different, philosophically richer understanding of being a parent. In the following discussion, I explore some problems with the current discourse on parenting and suggest some tentative steps towards developing a different language in which to talk about the parent-child relationship and particularly its educational significance.

Home-School Relations: Sociological Critiques

Sociologists enquiring into “home-school relations” have researched the ways in which children negotiate the boundaries between the home and the school⁵. They have shown how these relations cannot be simplistically defined but are influenced by a complex intertwining of factors such as class, age, gender and ethnicity. At the same time, they argue that the official, public discourse of the school has come increasingly to interfere in the sphere of the home. Other theorists have gone even farther in this critique, talking about the “curricularization” of “non-school activities of childhood”⁶ - a phenomenon that they attribute to the growing trend of home-school collaboration. What I wish to explore here is the idea that not only is there a kind of activity that goes on within the home that can be regarded as having educational value (Alldred, for example⁷, mentions activities such as learning domestic skills and learning about ethnic and religious practices); but that parents’ interaction with their children is *already* educational. It is hard to capture the sense in which this is so because the language and logic of public education - i.e. schooling - affects the way we think about education. Indeed, the term “education” is often conflated with “schooling” in both policy and academic literature – even by those critical of the current policy trends. Thus, Gillies⁸ states that “involvement in a child’s education is viewed as a key parental responsibility.”

What she actually means is “involvement in a child’s schooling”, but the implication that “education” is what happens outside the home distracts our attention from the fact that parents are already, by virtue of being parents, facing questions, dilemmas and situations, in their daily interaction with their children, that are educational in the sense that they involve a deep concern with the kind of person their child will become. Yet the conceptual and ethical complexity of this interaction is, I suggest, occluded by the restrictive way in which parents are described in both policy discourse and popular literature on parenting.

The following example illustrates some of the problems and complexities masked by the conceptualization of parents’ role as “supporting their children’s education” that underlies a great deal of policy discourse.

“Support Your Child’s Learning”

My son comes home from school with some Religious Education homework⁹. They have been learning the story of Isaac, Jacob and Esau and, in exploring Esau’s response to Isaac’s giving Jacob his blessing, have been discussing the point that he was, apparently, fairly angry. Their assignment is to produce a “pamphlet” explaining “Why it is important to control your anger”. We are both tired and irritable, but after relaxing for a bit and having a snack, I encourage my son to sit down and do his homework. I tell him I will help. Immediately I am conflicted about this assignment. Perhaps it is my

philosophical training which makes me so perverse, but I can't help asking him: "Do you think it really is important to control your anger?"

"That's not the homework", he interrupts impatiently. "I just have to give five reasons why it is."

This only makes me more determined: "But aren't there times", I persist, ""When, if you're really angry, and you've got a good reason for being angry, it's not such a good idea to bottle it up...?"

He is infuriated: "That's NOT the homework. We didn't DO that in class. We just have to make a list of reasons".

"Yes, but I'm just trying to understand what the question means. Does it mean that it's OK to be angry, to *feel* anger, as long as you don't express it in a violent way, or do you think it means that you should learn not to get angry in the first place?"

"Yes, that you shouldn't show your anger. I don't know. *Whatever.*"

I sink into a disproportionate sense of despondency. What I felt could have been a really interesting and intellectually stimulating discussion, has turned into a stressful round of bickering. What is more, I am conflicted over how to respond. On the one hand, I want my son to be intellectually challenged by the ideas he encounters at school. I don't want him to get into the habit of just producing work he knows will get a solid grade, without questioning the wider aspects of the topic; I want him to be able to engage in rational argument, not just avoid conflict. And I feel that my role as parent has been somehow redefined and constricted by the omnipotent presence of School, personified in the RE teacher.

Of course, in one sense, this conflict could be read as simply another aspect of the radical critique of schooling and the argument that, regardless of the educational aims and values explicitly articulated in the official curriculum, children are actually learning something else at school: how to conform; obedience; or, perhaps, putting a more positive gloss on it, how to cope in life without getting into trouble, and the important lesson that sometimes you have to do things you don't like. All of this is no doubt true, but what I want to focus on here is not this conflict between the effects of schooling and the aims of public education, but the conflict between the official discourse on "parenting" and an alternative, possibly richer understanding of what it means to be a parent.¹⁰

Policy discourse on parents in the UK, while making much of the point that parents are responsible for their children's development into flourishing adults, at the same time clearly implies that "education" is what goes on at school. Parents, in the language running through the official documents, are to "support their children's education" by being adjuncts to the aims of education determined at the

national level and implemented by public schooling. (The same assumption lies behind toys marketed with the label “Supports the National Curriculum”).

The tensions described above reveal the inadequacy of any simple requirement on parents to “support” their children’s schooling. Indeed, researchers from several fields have identified significant problems with this policy trend.

For example, sociologists have addressed the construction of a “good parent” that lies behind the home-school partnership discourse¹¹, and the gendered and classed aspects of such a construction. Indeed, as the above example shows, my acting as the kind of parent who can sit down with my son, understand his homework, and engage with it (never mind ask meta-philosophical questions about the situation), reflects my embeddedness within a particular socio-economic and cultural context.

But leaving aside these sociological points about my own position, what this example shows is that the policy language is inadequate not only because it reflects problematic social and cultural assumptions about what constitutes a “good parent”. Nor is the problem that this discourse represents an intrusion of state control into the private world of the home. This seems to be the gist of the critique suggested by researchers like Hallam¹², who points out that often homework, apart from having dubious educational benefit, can have a destructive effect on the relationship between parents and children, generating conflicts and tension. The implication here is that the parent-child relationship, conceived as something *other* than educational - a realm perhaps more appropriately described in terms of trust, love and intimacy - is somehow contaminated by the demand on the parent to act as an “educator”.

A similar image is suggested Vincent and Tomlinson’s critique in their informative review of home-school relations¹³, where they argue that the “soft” rhetoric of partnership that dominates at school level “acts to conceal a continuing professional concern to control the manner and degree of parental involvement”. As they point out, this is developing into an “overt, harder-edged attempt to direct family life and the behaviour of children and their parents. [...] In effect, the parent is coopted to help achieve the purposes and resolve the problems of the school without any real participation in the definition and diagnosis of those purposes and problems”. Yet attempting to achieve a more genuine and greater involvement of parents in discussion about the public aims of schooling does not address the complexity at the heart of being a parent. Even a parent who had participated significantly in the running of their child’s school may find themselves in dilemmas (such as the above) over how to act as a parent. What I want to argue is that such dilemmas are educational in the sense that the parent-child relationship is already saturated with educational, ethical and philosophical questions: questions about how to live well,

what values to defend and why, and what it means to care about and influence the kind of person another human being will become.

We have a language in which to talk about education in the public realm: a language of aims, value, roles and objectives. But is there not another way we can talk of education, and in which we can conceive parenting as itself an educational act in the sense suggested here?

Educating the Emotions: Philosophical Perspectives

In order to tease out the way in which complex conceptual and ethical issues play a central role in any such educational encounter, I would like to turn now to some philosophical work on a particular theme - the education of the emotions – suggested by the above example.

Philosophers of education have recently developed a nuanced treatment of some of these issues, particularly around the question of teaching justified anger. Thus Kristjan Kristjansson offers an insightful and lucid account of how, following Aristotle, the emotions are “imbued with reason”¹⁴. On the basis of this account, Kristjansson points out the flaws in the simplistic notion of controlling the emotions suggested by much of the literature on “emotional intelligence”. Graham Haydon, in a similar vein¹⁵, remarks that “it is a familiar philosophical thesis that any emotion involves a cognitive element which is a judgement or perception.” In the case of anger, “there is a judgement or a perception that an offence has indeed been committed [and] the judgement is in a certain way internal to the emotion itself.”¹⁶ So, as Kristjansson argues in his critique of writers on emotional intelligence who pay lip service to Aristotle while distorting his view, talk of “controlling emotions” creates a false picture whereby reason is separate from affect and desire.

An essential aspect of learning about anger, then, is learning to articulate, defend and understand the evaluative judgements involved in the experience of anger, and their normative salience. Thus, in the example above, it would be crucial to ask whether Esau was justified in being angry with his father and, by extension, his brother. Yet as Kristjansson points out, such a discussion always takes place against the complex and messy background of a particular human life. So we would need to know a lot more about Esau’s relationship with his father, the values of the society in which they lived, and his desires, in order to fully address this issue. It may be a bit much to require this of a Year 8 class, but it is certainly not impossible.

Yet while this alternative account has clear educational implications, it cannot be easily wedded to an understanding of education that is formulated in terms of general aims and outcomes. It is, as Kristjansson suggests, only against the rich background of human emotions and lived experiences that

any attempt to enquire into the moral value of the emotions and their educability make sense. And Kristjansson offers some examples of cases where children may experience anger in a school setting, for example in feeling discriminated against by the teacher. In doing so, he warns against “over-intellectualizing, by tearing the cognitive part of character regulation away from its affective and social fabric”¹⁷. Yet clearly the “affective and social fabric” experienced within the school is of a very particular and, in a sense artificially restricted type. Were we to place this enquiry within the fabric of the home, we may come up with very different insights.

Interestingly, Alldred et al, in their studies of the way children understand and negotiate the boundaries between school-life and home-life, describe how, for the many children interviewed, home, in contrast to the school, was perceived as a space associated with both intimacy and freedom from restraint¹⁸. Strikingly, they mention not just freedom in relation to activities like eating and watching television, but to do with getting angry. And surely in the context of a family, where the child has been part of a network of intimate relationships from birth, questions about anger, its ethical significance, its justification and its role within one’s life and character take on a very different dimension from that suggested by the school context. Yet Kristjansson does not mention the home at all and, in fact, assumes that the “we” in the title question “Can We Teach Justified Anger?” is the public “we” of policy makers, curriculum planners and teachers. Surely, though, the family, with its intimate and lasting emotional ties and relationships is a natural space for such “education of the emotions”?

It is undoubtedly true that we “learn” emotions in the home environment; from an early age, this is where we experience at close and often terrifying range, our own and others’ emotional reactions to events around us, the effect our own emotions have on others, and their significance in our lives. Yet as Aristotle showed, the human emotions involve issues of human agency, choice, values and character. Thus I cannot try to teach my son about appropriate emotional responses, much less discuss their moral aspect, without reflecting on my own emotions. What makes me angry? Do I always “control” it? How have I shown anger in the context of my relationship with my son? What do I think is worth getting angry about, and why, and do I want him to come to share these beliefs?

These questions, while very different from the kind of questions that concern designers of school curricula, are no less educationally important. Yet in offering us a philosophically rich picture of the question of how and whether the emotions can be taught, philosophers of education seem to have excluded parents from the picture.

In doing so they have thus, perhaps unwittingly, contributed to the image created by the policy discourse on home-school partnerships, in which, as reflected in the commonly occurring phrase

“enabling parents to support their children’s learning”, it is in school that real learning and education take place.

This image not only prevents us from capturing the sense in which the parent-child relationship is already educational, but contributes to the appeal of an account of whatever it is that parents are doing that is expressed as something distinct, with its own logic and aims. This something is “parenting”. And, in the same way that the public discourse of schooling imposes a notion of “good education” and “the aims of education”, the discourse of “parenting” implies an understanding of “good parenting”, “bad parenting” and “the aims of parenting”.

The Job of Parenting

The predominance of the parenting discourse makes it tempting to cast the problems thrown up by my above example as a question about what is the right thing to do *as a parent*. Should I retreat and just let my son get on with his homework? Should I try to lead the conversation around to issues in our own relationship? Should I encourage him to question the messages conveyed by his school?

However, most popular literature on parenting, in aiming to answer such questions, does not resolve, but merely displaces the conceptual and ethical problems described above. So, for example, in the latest parenting book to hit the shelves, Stephen Briers informs us that “psychology is the key to good parenting”¹⁹. Briers is alarmed at the recent fashion for parenting guides and programs aimed at getting children to be well-behaved, and his book, “Superpowers for Parents: The Psychology of Great Parenting and Happy Children; a Handy Guide to Therapy Techniques”²⁰ is meant to counter this. Interestingly, the emotions, and particularly, anger, feature heavily in Briers’ account, which explicitly refers to the importance of “emotional literacy”.

At first glance, his approach does look like a welcome departure from the all-too-familiar talk of the “naughty step” and other behavior-reinforcement techniques popularized by parenting gurus such as TV’s “Supernanny”. Children’s emotional well-being and their capacity for empathy, Briers argues, are as important as intellectual attainment. Who could dispute that?

But a closer look at Briers’ work suggests that it is rife with the same conceptual problems highlighted by Kristjansson. Briers is explicit that “the purpose of getting your child to be more in touch with their emotions (and those of others) is to help them manage them” (an approach obviously in tune with the homework assignment described above). Yet, as discussed above, this approach fails to take account of the intertwining of cognitive and evaluative aspects in any philosophically informed account of the emotions.

Likewise, Briers' language implies that the aims and ends of the process of bringing up a child are self-evident and determined independently of the relationship one has with one's child. The goal of this process, it is assumed, is to produce a well-balanced, emotionally stable and happy child. The sub-text here is that this child will be "successful" and "do well". Such an approach thus conveniently dove-tails with the requirement for "good parenting" running through current government policy. In fact, a close look at the language in which Briers talks about parents and parenting reveals a far greater similarity with the kinds of approaches he is so at pains to reject. In the course of an interview, he twice refers to "a parent's job". Who has set the requirements for and criteria for success in this "job" is not clear, but Briers spells them out. Beyond suggesting that it is our job as parents to be child psychologists, he offers reassuring guidelines as to how we can be certain that we are doing the job properly. For example, in explaining the importance of listening to children, he suggests that being a "good listener" requires maintaining eye contact for roughly a third of the time.

Another aspect of the "job", according to Briers, is to "maintain healthy mental habits," and "point out unhelpful ways of thinking". Well, I certainly tried to do this in my interaction with my son over his homework assignment. In my view (and apparently in Briers'), learning to see the complexity of what might, at first glance, appear to be a question with an obvious answer and drawing connections between different aspects of an issue are surely "healthy mental habits". Avoiding intellectual conflict and taking the easy way out of a task are "unhelpful ways of thinking". Yet my attempt to pursue this path is at odds with my role as defined by the official discourse. If I constantly undermine the teacher's authority and subvert her carefully thought-out lesson plans, I am not "doing my job" as a parent from the point of view of the school. In fact, I would actually be in violation of the "home-school agreement" which charged me with responsibility for supporting my child's learning by, amongst other things, assuring he does his homework.

The more I try to follow Briers' advice, in fact, the more I seem to have failed. Parents, he tells us, need to "exercise high levels of self-control...Children will take their cues as much from what they observe in your behaviour as from the content of your words"²¹. Reading this is likely to make parents feel that they have failed in their job as parents if they keep getting angry with their child and other members of the family. But to talk about learning by example in this fairly simplistic way, as discussed, fails to do justice to the ethical and philosophical complexity of any rigorous understanding of the emotions. The point is not to use reason to control the passions, but to understand that the emotions involve perceptions and judgements about who one is and what one values. Briers' one-dimensional notion of parents' "job" does not capture this richness and thus side-steps the conceptual and ethical questions at the heart of what it means to be a parent and, as a parent, to grapple with the daily experience

of such perceptions and judgements. His book is thus yet another example of how the language of “parenting” leaves no room for thinking of parents as educators in the broad, ethical sense, which goes beyond merely modelling good behaviour or applying standards.

Questions such as whether anger can and should be controlled, what this means, and whether it is teachable, make no sense, as Aristotle argued, outside the context of a rich lived human life. Taking this insight further, it is the quality of one’s engagement with this rich context, perhaps what Nussbaum describes as our “ethical vulnerability”²² - and not the tidy resolution of dilemmas or the formulation of guiding principles - that lie at the heart of this struggle to live well. Perhaps, then, being a “good parent” may be less about doing the right thing and more about developing an awareness of and ethical sensitivity to these issues.

So the conflict illustrated above is not just a conflict over which job should take precedence: My job as parent-cum-child-psychologist, responsible for the future emotional well-being of my child, or my job as parent-cum-school-supporter, responsible for assuring that my child progresses successfully through the system.

The answer, of course, is that any serious philosophical enquiry into these questions exposes the inadequacy of conceiving of parenting as a “job”. The flaw is not in any particular definition of what this job consists in, but in the very attempt to conceive it as a job at all, for in doing so, one does an injustice to the multiple aims, desires, values and challenges which constitute part of being a parent - as opposed to “parenting”.

Conclusion

The above discussion suggests that the question *how to be a parent* is significantly different from the question *how to parent*. While the latter question is inevitably linked to a reductive notion of “parenting”, the former, I suggest, can be construed as part of the general philosophical question of “how to live”, and, as such, is as conceptually, ethically and educationally complex and rich. It is difficult, though, to ask this question, much less to begin to formulate an answer to it, in a language that is saturated with an instrumental logic and cut off from philosophical enquiry. Including parents in philosophical discussions about education – asking, in fact, the prior question of who the “we” is who is doing the educating - may be a first step towards enriching the discourse on “parenting”. This, though, is just one strand in a far larger project, the contours of which I have only begun to sketch in the current paper.

- 1 Kjersti Ericsson and Guri Larsen, "Adults as Resources and Adults as Burdens: the Strategies of Children in the Age of Home-School Collaboration," in *Children, Home and School; Regulation, Autonomy or Connection?*, ed. Rosalind Edwards (London: Routledge, 2002), 93.
- 2 Department for Education and Skills, 2007.
- 3 Annette Lareau, *Home Advantage, Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education* (Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1989), 172.
- 4 See Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods; Class, Race and Family Life* (London: University of California Press, 2003).
- 5 See Pam Alldred et al, "Minding the Gap: Children and Young People Negotiating Relations Between Home and School", in Edwards, ed. *Children, Home and School*.
- 6 Judith Ennuew, "Time for Children and Time for Adults", in J. Qvotrup et al (eds) *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), 127.
- 7 Alldred, "Minding the Gap".
- 8 Val Gillies, "Working Class Mothers and School Life: Exploring the Role of Emotional Capital", *Gender and Education*, 18, no. 3 (2006): 281-293.
- 9 RE is a statutory subject on the UK National Curriculum.
- 10 I have explored the contrast between "parenting" and "being a parent" elsewhere: see Judith Suissa, "Untangling the Mother-Knot", *Ethics and Education*, 1, no. 1 (2006): 65-77.
- 11 See for example Val Gillies, "Working Class Mothers and School Life", and Carol Vincent and Sally Tomlinson, "Home-School Relations: 'the Swarming of Disciplinary Mechanisms'?", *British Educational Research Journal*, 23, no. 3 (1997).
- 12 Susan Hallam, *Homework: The Evidence* (London: Institute of Education, 2004).
- 13 Vincent and Tomlinson, "Home-School Relationships"
- 14 Kristjan Kristjansson, "Can We Teach Justified Anger?", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 39, no. 4 (2005), 671-689.
- 15 Graham Haydon, "Is There Virtue in Anger?", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 33, no. 1 (1999) 59-66.
- 16 Ibid
- 17 Kristjansson, "Can We Teach Justified Anger?", 687.
- 18 Alldred, "Minding the Gap".
- 19 Sally Williams, interview with Stephen Briers, *The Guardian*, 4.10.08.
- 20 Stephen Briers (London: Prentice-Hall Life, 2008).
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness; Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).