

The common school and its dunces: Parents, homework, and the inheritance of the “vie collective”¹

La escuela común y sus zoquetes: Padres, deberes y la herencia de la “vie collective”

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Abstract

The separation between family and school as pedagogical sites as classically understood has been compromised by the demands of the intensive parenting culture and the increased focus on parental engagement in children’s schooling. While the defence of the common school and its separation from the familial and social order provides important reminders of the specificity of school practices and their democratic import, it overlooks the reality of the figure of the parent who needs to find a way to engage with them today. A key aspect of this is the support of children’s homework. Today, where children are required to do it, parents are encouraged not only to provide support but also evidence of this. Through a discussion of what we see and what we hear in the film *Deux Cancre* [Two Dunces] we explore the idea and experience of the common school in terms that recentre a political, pedagogical understanding of the parent.

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Keywords: homework, common school, parents, inheritance.

Resumen

La separación entre la familia y la escuela como lugares pedagógicos, tal como se entendía tradicionalmente, se ha visto comprometida por las exigencias de la cultura de la crianza intensiva y un mayor interés de los padres por participar en la vida escolar de los niños. Si bien la defensa de la escuela común y su separación del orden familiar y social proporciona importantes recordatorios de la especificidad de las prácticas escolares y su importancia democrática, pasa por alto la realidad de la figura paterna que necesita encontrar una manera de comprometerse con ellas hoy en día. Un aspecto clave es la ayuda en los deberes de los niños. Hoy en día, cuando se pide a los niños que hagan deberes, se anima a los padres no solo a que les ayuden sino también a que den pruebas de ello. Partiendo del debate de lo que vemos y oímos en la película *Deux Cancres* [comercializada en España como *La hora de los deberes* pero cuya traducción literal es "Dos zoquetes")], analizamos la idea y la experiencia de la escuela común en términos que reestablecen una comprensión política y pedagógica de la paternidad.

Palabras clave: deberes, escuela común, padres, herencia

Introduction

In recent years, the common school has needed to be defended. In the context of nations repositioning themselves within a global knowledge economy, with the accompanying demands of competitiveness and accountability, schools are often seen as inefficient, failing to close gaps, failing to solve inequalities, failing to meet the needs of a diverse, rapidly changing economy. While the *idea* of the common school and its defence may be key to the very affirmation of equality and democracy, our experience of school and its practices may not bear this out. The idea of the common school as leading out from the space and structure of the family and as a suspension of the order of society (cf. e.g., Masschelein and Simons, 2015) is compromised not only by the instrumentalisation and personalisation that characterises education today, but also by

the way in which parental engagement with schooling is seen to be essential to a child's outcomes and is used as a marker of school quality. This has been a growing trend in recent decades. For example, in the UK, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 required that all maintained schools (i.e., those publicly funded by the local authority) adopt a home-school agreement (Ofsted, 2011). The UK Department for Education commissioned a review of best practice in 2010 on the basis that the "large and positive impact on children's learning" of parental engagement made identifying the most effective interventions a priority (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). In the USA, the Department for Education has a dedicated Family and Community Engagement team, as "family engagement is becoming an integral part of education reform efforts."² Similar initiatives are also found, for example, in Australia³ and the EU,⁴ and the need for such policy is recognised by the OECD.⁵

Within the frameworks provided by such policies, it is clear that the parent is addressed in specific ways, or at least a specific figure of the parent is presupposed, subject to the instrumentalising demands of the knowledge economy. Parents are addressed and asked to understand themselves today in terms of what has been critically identified as an intensive "parenting culture" (Lee et al., 2014). This phenomenon is characterised by an increased policy focus on parents, motivated by the "assumption that there is a direct causal link between the quality of parenting and social outcomes" (Furedi, 2014, p. ix), and the transformation of raising children into "a cultural accomplishment that can be cultivated to produce positive outcomes" (ibid.) through, for example, parenting classes, making expertise available to the general public via the mass media, and by embedding parental engagement in the expectations of what a good school looks like. This cultural change goes hand in hand with what has been referred to as the 'schoolification' (see Moss and Bennett, 2006) of children's lives, as a focus on reaching set learning milestones and the notion of 'school readiness' increasingly shapes early years education and care. As argued elsewhere, this constitutes a reduction of the figure of the parent, of their experience of raising

² <https://www.ed.gov/parent-and-family-engagement>

³ <https://www.dese.gov.au/supporting-family-school-community-partnerships-learning/family-school-partnerships/parent-engagement-learning>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/experts-groups/2014-2015/school/france-parental-involvement_en.pdf

⁵ <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/revieweducationpolicies/#!node=41727&filter=all>

children (see e.g., Faircloth, 2020), to, as Daly (2014) puts it, a “parenter” who exists to do things to and for a child in order to maximise future learning outcomes. The ‘parenting’ account of raising children overlooks or denies the existence of the parent as a political, pedagogical figure (see Hodgson and Ramaekers, 2019).

In this article we explore the idea and experience of the common school in terms that recentre this political, pedagogical understanding of the parent. On this view, irrespective of any particular construction of the good parent, any parent always finds herself situated “between child and world”, and thus unavoidably represents or, in Cavell’s terms, makes themselves exemplary of (1979, p. 178), the socio-cultural meanings that shape their lives, into which they introduce their children.⁶ This raises questions, then, about the nature of that exemplarity, the forms it takes on a daily basis, and the responsibility entailed in the implied assumption of authority in the act of passing on (Cf. Cavell, 1979, p. 178). In what follows we are not bluntly rejecting the specific figure of the parent presupposed by policies on parental engagement in schools. Rather, we hope to bring out that the demands made by such policies, the expectations they set about what kind of parent one is supposed to be, are demands that a parent somehow needs to relate to. After all, such expectations are part of today’s world, the very world for which parents, at least in many Western contexts, are asked to assume responsibility. So, as parents, we find ourselves subject to multiple demands wherein rejection of the prevailing construction of the good parent is an option, but it’s only one of the options. The parenting account of raising children is, after all, neither totalising nor exhaustive.

This discussion of the competing demands of adulthood and parenthood that follows takes its cue specifically from the presentation of the experience of doing homework in the film, *Deux Cancre*.⁷ The film, we argue, articulates aspects of the experience of being a parent of a child who is attending school, in terms of the demands on one’s time, how this may ask us to confront our inheritance of the common school, and the experience of ordering, and outcasting, the experience of school seems to entail. By exploring these aspects, we hope to capture a more

⁶ We are situating ourselves in a tradition of thinking about the pedagogical relationship as an intergenerational relationship as expressed by educational philosophers and philosophers such as Schleiermacher, Mollenhauer, Langeveld, Buber, Arendt, Savater, Stiegler, and Buber, among others.

⁷ http://www.film-documentaire.fr/4DACTION/w_fiche_film/48900_1

nuanced account of raising children, and of being involved in, or asked to be engaged in, one's child's education, than we find in discussions about the educational responsibilities of parents vis-à-vis the school and their children's education or in sociological critiques of the parenting culture. This confronts us with the question of the form of the common school we are asked to – and willing to – pass on and the relationship between public and private that takes shape in the relationship between family and school.

In what follows we first describe “what we see” and “what we hear” in the film. In the section *What We See* we further contextualise the film's presentation of homework practices in terms of the contemporary parenting culture and debates on homework,⁸ and bring out how Ludovic, the father in the film, is in some ways exemplary of this culture. In *What We Hear*, we elaborate on other aspects of what is presented in the film, by focusing predominantly on the voiceovers, in which Ludovic gives his account of his personal experience of school (his inheritance of it), of being a parent, and of supporting his child with his homework, and in which he seems also to present a critique of the manner of our formal schooling. In the sections that follow we then explore the apparent tension, or contradiction, between these two registers of the film – of engaging with the practice of homework yet having deep reservations about it – to elaborate on our accounts of raising children and the (idea of the) common school. When brought together, the father's own experiences of school and his inheritance of it, his efforts to comply with the demands of good parenting and of the school today, and his son's experience of school serve as a reminder that the common school also creates an (its) outside, hence outsiders (“dunces”), within its “vie collective.”⁹ The presentation of this experience in the film leads to consideration of the intergenerational relationship, the responsibility of the older generation for the passing on of the idea of the common school, and the inherent tension that exists in the figure of the parent.

⁸ We acknowledge that attitudes to and policies on homework differ internationally. Hence the discussion here relates to those contexts where homework is frequently set by schools and is an assumed part of children's education, as depicted in the film.

⁹ This is an expression already used by the father, Ludovic, to describe the school as a “new community life”. We will come back to it below.

What we see

The film *Deux Cancre* presents the experience of a father, Ludovic (Vieuille, the film's director), supporting his son, Angelo, with his homework. Much of the film is spent looking at the two of them from across the kitchen table, as they sit side by side struggling with maths, grammar, English, Occasionally the daughter or mother is to one side of, or in the back of, the shot. Occasionally the father is in the adjoining kitchen as he prepares dinner while also helping his son. But the main focus is on the interaction of father and son with the tasks assigned by the school. From Angelo's body language and frustrated responses, we can see that he struggles to grasp a lot of the material assigned and to focus on the task at hand. Hence, his father seems often at the limit of his patience, not only with his son's wandering attention but also with his own struggles with the material. His attempts to explain it are often frustrated by what he perceives to be, unclear instructions from the teacher. Yet he is equally frustrated by Angelo's apparent failure to engage with the process and to retain information he and Angelo's mother have spent hours trying to explain and revise.

His experience will be familiar to many parents. At the end of a long day of work and school, parent and child need to sit together to ensure the set homework is completed. Where the practice exists, today it is expected not only that children will do their homework and will often receive a form of sanction if they do not, but also that parents will actively participate in the process of completing it, either through one-to-one support, or by checking it and signing a homework book to verify that it has been completed.¹⁰

¹⁰ For example: "Children and parents should be very clear about what is to be completed at home. The Upper KS2 children [ages 9-11] have diaries where they list their homework. They are expected to have these signed by parents after completing and showing work at home. Signing the diary or the piece of homework lets teachers know that parents have supervised or checked work. If parents are not happy with the finished standard of homework, they should not avoid signing the diary, but rather write a quick note to the teacher instead" (St Mary's Catholic Primary School Homework Policy, July 2020).

As a further example, the Toronto District School board in Canada advises:

"Parents/guardians are a key part of finding homework success. Some tips on what you can do to support your child include:

- Set a time for homework and provide a quiet space away from distractions
- Practice math, reading and writing daily and encourage your child to help you read and write everyday items such as recipes, newspapers or shopping lists
- Show interest and talk about what happened at school
- Praise and encourage your child to ask for help when needed

So, we see Ludovic checking the teacher's instructions on the task, ensuring that Angelo is aware of the negative feedback he has received from his teachers and, therefore, of the need to concentrate and make progress. We see Ludovic showing Angelo how to seek additional information where needed, in a dictionary or online, and giving space for Angelo to think and to answer for himself. We see him pointing to words and exercises in textbooks and notebooks, while explaining what he is pointing at, or asking questions about it. We see him demonstrating a maths exercise by writing it down for Angelo. We see him testing Angelo, as he helps him to revise his course material. We see Angelo sitting at the table by himself, talking to his father who is in the kitchen, out of shot, preparing dinner, while asking him questions to check whether he is still focused on his homework. We see that the practice of (supporting) homework takes place among the many other things a parent does: making dinner, mediating sibling arguments, and so on. We also see Ludovic's frustration at the lack of progress Angelo makes, and the time it takes.

Frustration at, and outright resistance to, the imposition of school on family time by the setting of homework has grown in recent years, as pressures on both parents and children - and concern for work-life balance - have increased (see e.g., Gill and Schlossman, 2004; Buell, 2008; Richter and Andresen, 2012; links to media reports on parental resistant to homework are provided below¹¹). Where the practice of homework exists, resistance to it is by no means specific to the overworked, competitive, late neoliberal period. In the US in particular, active bans were introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in some states as parents and progressive education reformers sought to challenge the imposition of the school on the life of the family and the freedom to choose how to use its time (Gill and Schlossman, 2003). Often, it was not that parents did not want their children to learn outside of school, but rather that they wanted to retain the freedom to choose what, when, and how they did so. Alternatively, progressive educators argued that it was an imposition on the natural needs of the child for play and rest, and was leading to exhaustion and physical and mental degradation. By the late

■ Keep in touch with teachers and ask about completed homework" (<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Elementary-School/Get-Involved/Homework>)

¹¹ See e.g. Pidd (2009) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/18/canada-homework-milley>; Luke (2015) <https://www.timescolonist.com/life/homework-how-much-is-too-much-1.1961263>

20th century, however, the dissent had seemingly been outweighed by the demands of the capitalist economy and the need to ensure optimal examination outcomes for all (see e.g., Martin, 2017; Fargion, 2021). As indicated above, resistance to homework does still exist, though this seems to lead to further guidance on efficiency and effectiveness than a move away from the practice.

In recent years scholars have convincingly shown how an intensive parenting culture is enmeshed in neoliberal ideologies, and how it perpetuates a normative idea of what it means to be a good parent, one that is by and large based on middle-class conceptions of family life and parent-child relationships (see e.g., Jensen, 2010). Recently, Fargion (2021) has succinctly summarized the relevant features of this culture of parenting as follows:

In short, parents seem tasked with devoting huge amounts of time and money to their children's education, both checking and supporting their school performance and organizing extracurricular activities, as well as with being able to control and guide their offspring. In this view, all aspects of children's lives require careful planning and organization so as to provide optimal opportunities for development, thus guaranteeing high results in school and success in a competitive society. (Fargion, 2021, pp. 3-4)

In this discourse the good parent appears not only as a learning facilitator, whose relationship with their child is framed in terms of the development and use of appropriate skills and approaches, but also, as Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) note, as taking the position of the expert. The parent is asked to see the child as if from an external, third person perspective. Fargion expresses this as enacting a "decontextualized performance, with targets to be reached, and necessary competences to be learned" (Fargion, 2021, p. 1). This framing of raising children as parenting, then, is seen to detach what we do from one's personal registers and private concerns, and hence has been seen as "depersonalized" and "depoliticized" (see Ramaekers and Hodgson, 2020). In taking responsibility for the work of the school, the good parent is one who sidelines or translates her private and personal concerns, in view of performing and prioritizing certain school practices within the context of her (private) home.

We see nothing unusual, then, in Ludovic's focus on his child given today's intensive parenting culture in which ensuring optimal educational outcomes and meeting the learning needs (of both oneself and one's child) are the job of parenting. Indeed, in the contemporary context of intensive parenting and active home-school engagement, the time and attention Ludovic gives to supporting his son's education is, arguably, exemplary. As indicated, the active engagement of parents is seen as key today in ensuring optimal educational outcomes. Whereas, traditionally, the home is the primary site of socialisation and school the site of initiation into particular forms of knowledge and conduct, today's conceptualisations of good parenting have blurred these distinctions. (From an educational point of view, parental involvement is, in this sense, an important indicator of social investment (cf. e.g. Hartas, 2015) and the home is recast as a learning environment in the study of factors affecting social and educational outcomes (see e.g. Hartas, 2012)). We see Ludovic taking seriously this responsibility, wanting to contribute to his child's educational outcomes, wanting to perform according to expectations, and continuing to invest in his son's education in spite of this effort being unrecognised by the school. Comments from Angelo's teachers, which we refer to later, testify to this.

What we hear

The presentation of the time and effort given to supporting Angelo with his homework is overlaid with Ludovic's voiceover, in which he laments, that despite the time he and Angelo spend, his son does not make progress or meet expectations. The following transcription of a scene captures this.¹²

L: Right ... so what shall we start with? You're on measurements?
[L reads a maths exercise from a sheet of paper; at the same time A yawns] "Convert these periods of time into minutes. One hour equals

¹² L = Ludovic, the father; A = Angelo, the son; dialogue between L and A are in normal font, voiceovers in italics. Sentences between square brackets are descriptions provided by the authors of this article.

sixty minutes.”

L: Sixty minutes. According to Miss Troquet, my son's schoolteacher, homework should not take more than 10 or 15 minutes.

Coax him down from his room: 8 minutes. Sit down, then run back upstairs for the satchel: 2 minutes. Get out exercise book, pencil case, books: 30 seconds. Read instructions, figure out what needs to be done: at least 5 minutes. With Miss Troquet's projected 15 minutes expired we finally get down to work.

60 minutes.

The average time taken to complete my son Angelo's homework. The days go by to the rhythm of that hour spent together. An hour that never ceases to extend a working day. An hour that passes, presses, escapes, then it's gone. An hour that sometimes isn't enough.

At first it is unclear whether Ludovic's frustration is with his child, or with the teacher's expectation that the work could be completed in 10 to 15 minutes. As they work together to try to make sense of the material, it becomes clearer that it is both, but also that Ludovic has deeper concerns about himself and about the form of schooling to which his son is (and he was) subject.

A: But there's this verb ... I don't know.

L: Which verb?

A: Être [To be].

L: Think of an example of its future tense.

A: "J'ai" [I have].

L: No, that's the present tense of "avoir" [to have] ... At the moment, for example, you can say: "I am home." Supposing we were talking about tomorrow?

A: "I will be at home."

L: I will be at home. Yet again, after school, we will be at home for your daily session. You will try to conjugate, calculate, learn your lessons ... You are still a small boy and every day we get to know each other a little better.

L: Your father – me – doesn't know how to go about your homework. How to assimilate these lessons into your fantasy world? Your schoolbooks aren't much fun, though.

We could read Ludovic's film as, frankly, indulgent. His concerns over his son's lack of progress and the time he invests are clearly a reflection on his own failings at school and his anxieties not only for his son's future but also for his son's love for him, as we hear:

L: Feeling a prisoner of the classroom again through my children's homework is unbearable. Making this film was like the urge to doodle in class, a selfish form of escape, a way of fleeing at all costs. Only, this film has become homework for me to do. Angelo clings to fractions and grammatical rules as if to an elusive lifebelt, in the improbable fear that he won't be loved. I think that I have become like him. I cling to this film like a lifebelt in the fear of not being loved by my little boy because of homework. Both of us cling on but, inexorably, fatigue always gains the upper hand.

Of course, Ludovic's experience of school is not universal, so again we could dismiss this as his personal issue, one that he is projecting on to his struggling son. We could also read Ludovic's film as echoing the 20th century progressive reformers, and today's child-centred educators, in its critique not only of the intrusion of the school into the time and space of the family but also of the way in which Angelo's particular needs are not met, his interest not captured, by the standard curriculum and pedagogy.

At various points in the documentary we can hear Ludovic's voiceover lamenting this:

But the strict rules of grammar and conjugation lock his imagination into a regulatory framework.

You know, there are rules. At home, at school, at work. Everywhere. To live together, you need rules. To avoid accidents, you need to know the highway code. There are lots of codes: the penal code, the civil code, good-driving codes. If you don't know these codes, you don't get through. You stay where you are. You don't move forward. Or you hit a wall.

How to render a perfectly clear sentence murky by deconstructing it grammatically? How to tell my son that when his mom says "Papa et Angelo", the word "et" [meaning "and"], slipped in to show we are together, this tiny two-letter word, an "e" and a "t", is now a "coordinating conjunction".

One suggestion here seems to be that the demands of formal grammar do not take account of the way Angelo learns. The comments from teachers, written daily in the "Liaison Book" that provides a means of home-school communication, indicate no sympathy, only disappointment with Angelo's failure to comply with these demands:

Must work harder ...
Not enough "progress" ...
I don't like you.
Angelo hardly busting a gut!
Angelo not working ... either in class or at home.
4 grades, including 3 zeros!
Worrying grades ...
Disastrous results, inappropriate attitude in class.

At times we are shown pages from Angelo's exercise book in which he has made elaborate sketches and doodles. The act of doodling in class, which Ludovic likens to the urge to make this film, is generally seen as a sign of distraction, a lack of engagement, and not listening. Matthew Battles writes:

While our current sense of doodle is relatively new, it is an old word. In his Dictionary of the English Language, Samuel Johnson defines a doodle as "a trifler, an idler," calling it a mere "cant word" and suggesting that it derives from the expression "do little." Later dictionaries, however, trace it from the Portuguese doudo, for foolish, or more plausibly from the Low German dudel, as in dudeltopf, a nightcap (an etymology that crosses aptly with that of "dunce cap," so named for the medieval Scholastic philosopher Duns Scotus, whose aversion to classicism earned the derision of Renaissance schoolmasters). (2003, p. 106)

'Dunce' is how Ludovic refers to himself – in his voiceover he says: "*Everyday, the homework session reminds me of what a dunce I was*" – and to the two of them in the title of the film (*Deux Cancre*). (The term also appears in a radio news bulletin heard while Ludovic is doing the school run in the car: "the dunce's cap awarded by the OECD to our neighbors". Will France follow the same route? A study of the

academic performance of 15-year-olds in 65 countries is “worrying and unacceptable” says Education Minister Vincent Peillon, while PM Jean-Marc Ayrault has pleaded for “electric shock treatment”, giving a sense of the discourse of educational achievement and competition in which contemporary schooling takes place).

It is clear that Ludovic strongly sympathises with his son’s struggles. Accompanying the images of the teachers’ comments given above we hear Ludovic:

How to make my son understand that it isn't him being assessed, rather knowledge, temporarily gained, then churned out, with grades that reflect pupils' weaknesses rather than their progress.

While not a rejection of “school” as such, the way Ludovic describes and depicts the school tends to be negative. It is presented as austere, formal, orderly, and devoid of people. When we are shown the images of empty school corridors and playgrounds, we hear Ludovic’s voiceover say:

On my kids' first day at school, my throat tightened, suffocating me, at the sight of rows of coat pegs ... the odour of glossy-floored corridors polished by the feet of hundreds of children trying to find their place in this new community life.

Arguably the concerns and anxieties that Ludovic expresses are not specific to schooling today; the competitive, performance culture is but an aspect of the latest iteration of the school system he has inherited. But it is nonetheless noteworthy that a father reminisces on it in these terms – “dunce” – bringing out a register, both for himself and his son, of finding it difficult, of being set apart from “cette [...] vie collective” (translated in the film’s subtitles as “community life”) implied by the common school. We will come back to this below.

Coming to terms with our inheritance: the dunce(s) and the common school

In this section we further explore the apparent tension, noted above, between ‘what we see’ and ‘what we hear’: between Ludovic’s experience

of supporting school practices through homework and feeling resistant to them because of his own, and now his son's, experience of them. But rather than seeing this as a contrast, or alternatively taking what we hear in the voiceover as providing an interpretation of what we see (as is common in the documentary genre), we suggest that the very tension between 'what we see' and 'what we hear' presents something of the experience of a parent faced with the reality of (his child going to) school; of what it means to be a parent of a child who attends school. Rather than offer a psychologized reading of Ludovic's expressed anxieties, we suggest that his questioning and reflections touch upon an existential register of the relationship a parent has with their child(ren). We explore this below in terms of parental ambivalence, our relationship to our inheritance, and the idea of the dunce and the common school.

Parental ambivalence

The many things we see and hear (Ludovic's "doings" and "sayings", to use Schatzki's (2002) terms), rather than being contradictory, give an account of what constitutes the practice of a parent supporting his child's schooling. Ludovic's doings and sayings capture the ambivalence of this experience of having to relate to his child as a pupil/student. As indicated above, being a parent inevitably has a representational dimension. Understood as always situated between their child ("beginners", Cavell says [1979]) and some form of communal life ("forms of life"), a parent inevitably, unavoidably, represents something of this communal life, or more generally of the socio-cultural meanings that shape their lives and into which they introduce their children. But what comes out clearly in Ludovic's sayings and doings, and what brings out an existential depth to this parental 'in-betweenness', is that one is never entirely one or the other (for child or world; private or public, if you will). The experience of this figure of pedagogical representation is constituted by a myriad of competing wants, intentions, questions, hesitations, actions, and so on, shaped not only by the demands of child, school, and society but also by one's inheritance of what these are. Simultaneously wanting to help your child with his/her homework, resenting the need to do so, feeling frustrated at the lack of time after school to properly help your child with his/her homework, wanting your child to perform well at school,

questioning the use of it all, wanting your child to feel ok and to be happy, wavering between your understanding of your child's needs and the (reasonableness of) expectations of the school, between your wish to relieve your child of his/her suffering and your grasp of the necessity of some form of schooling, etc.

Relating to our inheritance

In the voiceover we hear Ludovic expressing his own anxieties: his son's struggles lead him to recollect his own negative experiences of school. It could, then, be read as a parent's lament, that expresses a desire to (over)protect his own child (as an example of what is referred to in the literature as 'cotton wool parenting'; see, e.g., O'Malley, 2015) because of his own experiences. Again, if we read the film as a personal indulgence on Ludovic's part, we might feel like saying that he should deal with his own issues himself, and not burden his children with them. But this, individual, psychologised interpretation risks overlooking the depth of what it means to "deal with one's issues", and in particular how this is inherent to what it means to lead a grown-up life. As we grow up, and throughout our adult life, we cannot avoid finding some sort of relationship with our inheritance (even if that relation is one of avoidance). As Mollenhauer succinctly put this: the generation that is growing up is not only burdened with the heritage of the social structure, it is also obliged to determine its relation to/rapport with this cultural heritage (Cf. Mollenhauer, 1985). This only intensifies when raising children oneself, for two main reasons. First, because the child is being initiated into forms of life we must take responsibility for and can be called upon to account for (Cf. Cavell, 1979, p. 178; Cf. also Arendt, 2006). Second, because this child can, at any moment of his upbringing, refuse to follow us, throw their upbringing back in our face (Cf. Mollenhauer, 1985), and hence confront us with what we take for granted as "natural", throwing us back upon ourselves (Cf. Cavell, 1979, pp. 124-125).

Cavell has expressed this, in terms of teaching, in a way that helpfully shifts this sense of anxiety: "The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education" (Cavell, 1979, p. 125). Ludovic's anxiety is due not only in finding his knowledge lacking and his ability to convey to his son what he does know, but also to facing the

limits of his willingness to consent to the practices of schooling. In one particular scene Angelo says: "I can't stand maths." Ludovic responds by saying: "Once you understand, it's more fun." But we then immediately hear him say in the voiceover: "Hypocrite! My mind could barely be less scientific. Must the emancipation of my son involve disciplines that he hasn't chosen?" In the voiceover Ludovic criticizes himself for his dishonesty towards his son. (Or perhaps it's not dishonesty, but an example of the truths we tell our children, as part of their socialization, as part of somehow trying to motivate his son, trying to meet the demands of the school, trying to meet the expectations of what a good parent is). This is not a dismissal of school, or a direct criticism of what is on the curriculum, or a plea for personalized learning (whatever that may mean). What the voiceover conveys, we suggest, is a realization that Ludovic's immediate response to Angelo, "Once you understand, it's more fun", was an evasion of a particular call to engage in "serious communication", evidenced by his self-rebuke "Hypocrite!". The (implicit) question, "Why do we need to do maths?", is a question that requires "serious communication", similar in nature to questions Cavell offers as examples: "Why do we eat animals? or Why are some people poor and others rich? or What is God? or Why do I have to go to school? or Do you love black people as much as white people? or Who owns the land? or Why is there anything at all? or How did God get here?" (Cavell, 1979, p. 125). In the face of these questions, serious questions, "[we] may find [our] answers thin, [we] may feel run out of reasons without being willing to say, "This is what I do" (what I say, what I sense, what I know), and honor that" (Ibid.). Not least because we – Ludovic – continue to have these questions ourselves. We may ignore that we only have thin answers and proceed—hence possibly denying the other's interest—or we may, as Cavell seems to suggest, take the opportunity to engage in "serious communication", no matter how uncomfortable that may be, and to "ask why we do what we do, judge as we judge, how we have arrived at these crossroads" (Cavell, 1979, p. 125).

Of course, this is not something that can be resolved within the relationship between Angelo and Ludovic, or in general between any particular child and her parent. (What else can you do, as a parent, at such a moment? What serious options do you really have? Coming to the end of one's reasons, to the point of literally saying "This is just how it is", seems unavoidable. Because (if we consent to the idea of the common

school) school is unavoidable. (And maybe this in itself is an educational experience for Angelo, the child, that is: learning that some things just are as they are?) Depending on your relationship with your child you may be able to answer these questions satisfactorily. But, at least at that very moment, things will not change. (Angelo will still have to do his maths, no matter what Ludovic says, or how Ludovic feels about it being on the curriculum.)

The dunce(s) and the common school

The questions “why we do what we do, judge as we judge, how we have arrived at these crossroads” (Cavell, 1979, p. 125) become all the more pressing in the face of Ludovic’s accounting for himself and his son as “dunces” (“cancres”, in French). His use of the term indicates a sense of not belonging to “cette [...] vie collective” of the school. In the film we are shown scenes in which it is clear that Angelo has no clue at all what he is doing, or of what his father is trying to explain. He doesn’t – yet – share in the experiences of “typically developing” children, he cannot find himself at home in the collective life form “school”. Ludovic’s reference to school as a form of collective or communal life seems to register his sense of, and appreciation of, the formative aspects of education as being different from how human beings are formed in other settings (e.g., the family). At the same time, however, it also registers his sense that those who are not (or do not seem to be) susceptible to such “formation”, or at least not as easily as other children (“typically developing” children), are in danger of being designated as “different”: “not enough ... not working ... disastrous ... inappropriate” were terms Angelo’s teachers used. (And, clearly, *that* experience is also a kind of “formation”).

Western forms of education and schooling have a long history of ways of dealing with “Angelo”: designating a place in the order by labelling, rendering “special”, or even pathologizing their behavior. At a certain point in the film, we see a leaflet on a school notice-board, “Specialized Help for Challenging Pupils [French: *Elèves en Difficultés*]. Information for teachers. For help with challenging pupils, fill in the form ...”, which seems to emphasize Ludovic’s sense of Angelo not being an ordinary pupil in the eyes of his teachers (reaffirmed by the teachers’ comments in the *Liaison Book*). The fact that Ludovic is showing this in his film

could be read as a mere private concern of a lamenting parent not able to accept his son's academic failure, or even as placing blame with the teachers. But rather than absorb this into an already existing critique of the exclusive nature of the standard school system, we take this as opening up the question of the nature of the common in the common school. Ludovic's account of his and his son's experiences of being "dunces", of having to relate to the "vie collective" of the school (as a parent and a former pupil, and as a pupil), invites us to consider again what is "common" in the common school given the common experience of its practices as exclusive and alienating.

Cavell makes this point forcefully when discussing an example that Wittgenstein gives about a child not being able to learn a series of numerals and this child then being "treated as a lunatic" because he's not able to follow the suggestive gestures of the teacher's demonstrative behaviour (Cf. Wittgenstein, 1958; *Brown Book*, p. 931, in Cavell, 1979, p. 112). He raises some pertinent questions, which are helpful for our purpose:

What is ample evidence for lunacy? Not being able to keep up in school over a period of years? We may not call it lunacy, our gradations are not so crude; but the children are certainly treated differently because of it, and set apart. And sometimes the ostracism is based on the way a member dresses or on what he does not possess or on the words he uses. Is this more rational? How does it happen? (Cavell, 1979, p. 112)

Both Ludovic's and Angelo's experiences with (the) school touch upon exactly this, we argue. Ludovic is not calling his son and himself "lunatics", clearly, and our concern here is not with current issues relating to the ability of schools to recognize and provide for neurodiversity. Our focus remains on the figure of the parent. It is the father who refers to the both of them as dunces, and in doing so he is – implicitly – raising questions similar to Cavell's, we suggest. Recall the scene, described above, in which the teachers' comments about Angelo are shown. Here are clear instances of making "gradations" and children being "treated differently". It is in instances like these, specifically when taken together with Ludovic's continued efforts to support his son in doing his homework and not achieving sufficiently satisfying outcomes, that the matter of the "common" in the common school surfaces in a specific sense, or at least

a certain experience of it: it becomes uncannily clear that for some the inheritance of the “common” in the common school is the experience of being separated out within it.

Responsibility for what brings us together and what thus also, potentially, separates us cannot be discarded, but needs to be assumed, accounted for, collectively. Ludovic takes his responsibility seriously: affirming his consent for the idea of the common school in his investment in the sciences, maths, and grammar his son is set, yet struggling to consent fully to its practices, which precisely order the next generation in terms of their meeting certain requirements of the *vie collective* of the school. At times, following Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein, we will see that some do things differently than we do, or that they are different from us, and we could then just leave it at that. Or, thinking about Angelo, we might feel as teachers that we have done what we should do: we’ve given our feedback on his efforts and we’ve made clear that he is a “challenging pupil”. Cavell’s suggestion seems to be that we are sometimes very quick, too hasty, in calling someone “mad” or “different” (thus incomprehensible), etc. In dealing with these examples of “lunacy” he reminds us that “if I say ‘They are crazy’ or ‘incomprehensible’ then that is not a fact but my fate for them” (Cavell, 1979, p. 118). Thus, our judgement entails a responsibility, for the ordering of the social that ensues. Here it calls upon us to account for why we organize our “*vie collective*” in this way, and not otherwise. The pedagogical responsibility of the teacher is different to that of the parent, of course. But as grown-ups, responsibility for this “fate” is a shared one.

Conclusion

In today’s ordering of the home-school relationship, the need for parental engagement, and the intensive parenting culture that shapes how we understand what it means to be a good parent, taking responsibility is, to a degree, instrumentalised. The logic of parental engagement is that it is an investment in my child’s learning that will pay dividends in terms of attainment. Not only is the substantive content reinforced (e.g., the Maths, English, being learned) by this parental support but so too are positive attitudes to learning.

The limitations of the common school as “mainstream” education in terms of inclusion are well known and this is not the line of inquiry we have taken here. Nor have we adopted the approach that what is common in the common school is the collective exposure to things, texts, ideas, as a site of suspension from the social order. Our focus on the position of the parent in the understanding of school’s contribution to the construction of common goods is intended to draw attention to their position, situated between child and world, wherein the common school and its practices are part of the world that we, generally, seek to pass on to our children. Our experiences of it and our commitments to it will vary, and thus we see the tension as played out in the film *Deux Cancres*. The film, through its focus on the practice of homework, and the relationship between school, parent, and child this constitutes, draws attention to the general tension (between instrumentalised education, including parenting, and what is left out of the picture in such accounts of education and upbringing) and the specific tensions in the parent-child relationship, between our own experiences, values, and beliefs, and our responsibility for initiating our children in the expectations of the *vie collective* as it is.

Angelo, as we have seen, makes little progress, despite the time his father invests in doing homework with him. The French term for homework, *devoirs*, implies an obligation. The verb *devoir* means “to must” and derives from the Latin *dēbere*, which is close to the Spanish term *deberes*: something you owe, an obligation, a debt. The hope, or expectation, is that the child’s debt is repaid, so to speak, by paying attention and making progress in their understanding and ability. Parental engagement in the practice of homework, particularly in the manner shown by Ludovic, seems premised on the idea that the additional investment, of time and effort, will pay off. Progress will be made. But the balance is never paid. Here, again, we see a tension in Ludovic’s experience. He wants nothing more than the investment to pay off. For Angelo to be able to pay the debt, to progress, to understand the very currency with which they are working. But Ludovic is not calculating the time as being wasted: he values the very fact that they do spend time together, each day getting to know each other a little better.

The separation of family life and school life, and the notion of education as leading out (*educere*) from one to the other is compromised by the parenting understanding of raising children that focuses so

heavily on learning outcomes and the accountability placed on schools to encourage parental engagement for the benefit of attainment. The separation becomes hard to conceive of when a home-school contract exists. Though we may wish to defend this separation and the specificity of the school as an educational space that enables suspension of the social order and the newness and potentiality of the new generation, there remains a grown-up responsibility to not only pass on and defend the idea of the common school but also to question it and the "fate" of those who don't or can't recognise its value or the currency with which it operates. Such questioning is, perhaps disappointingly, not oriented to a resolution – "this is what an inclusive school is"; "this is what schooling for the future is" – but serves as a reminder not only that the parent is a political, pedagogical figure, but also that the question of the common school is a collective, educational one.

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