

# Governing through Trust: Community-based link workers and parental engagement in education

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This article seeks to further understandings of contemporary patterns of parental government. It explores the politicisation of family life by examining a pilot programme tasked with enhancing parental engagement in education amongst 'hard-to-reach' families within the white British community of a large inner-London borough. Focusing on the programme's signature device – the deployment of community-based 'link workers' to bridge home and school – 'governmentality' (Foucault, 2009) is used as a theoretical lens through which to foreground the link workers' role in governing parents. We draw on qualitative data collected from link workers, parents, and school leaders, to argue that link workers represent a mode of governmentality that privileges the instrumental use of trust to achieve strategic objectives, rather than coercive authority. The aim being to produce responsible, self-disciplined parents who act freely in accordance with normative expectations as to what constitutes 'good' parenting and effective parental support. As such, the article highlights the link workers' role in (re)producing the ideal, neoliberal parent. However, governing through trust comes at the cost of being unable to firmly secure desired outcomes. We thereby conclude that this gentle art of parental government affords parents some latitude in resisting institutional agendas.

**Keywords:** parental engagement; parenting support; governmentality, education

## Introduction

Parenting has emerged as a key policy domain in twenty-first century Britain (Cameron, 2016; DfES, 2007; Home Office, 1998) and parents have become subject to increasing levels of public scrutiny. This article explores the politicisation of family life by examining a pilot programme tasked with enhancing parental engagement in education amongst 'hard-to-reach' families within the white British community of a large inner-London borough.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the programme's signature device – the deployment of community-based 'link workers' to bridge home and school – 'governmentality' (Foucault, 2009) is used as a lens through which to foreground the link workers' role in governing parents. We draw on qualitative data collected from link workers, parents, and school leaders, to argue that link workers represent a mode of governmentality that privileges the instrumental use of trust to achieve strategic objectives, rather than coercion. The aim being to produce responsible, self-disciplined parents who act freely in accordance with normative expectations as to what constitutes 'good' parenting and effective parental support. The article thereby highlights the link workers' role in (re)producing the ideal, neoliberal parent.

The article begins by theoretically framing the research and surveying the political discourse surrounding parenting. We then provide an overview of the programme and research methodology. Next, we introduce the trust-based model of parental government. Three techniques for generating trust and trustworthiness are identified – community connectedness; distancing; and contrived conviviality – and we detail their use in helping link workers remodel parents' conduct. The last section focuses on parents' subversion of the programme. We conclude that governing through trust comes at the cost of being unable to firmly secure desired outcomes and hence that this gentle art of parental government affords parents some latitude in resisting institutional agendas.

## Governing the Family

In his lecture course of 1977-78, Foucault affords the family a leading role in the birth of modern governmentality and biopower (Foucault, 2009). Formerly construed as a model for good government, the eighteenth century sees a new figure of the family take hold: the family as a 'fundamental relay' and 'privileged instrument' for the government of the population (ibid: 104-5). One governs the population by governing *through* the family (Donzelot, 1979). This notion of governing through the family, of regulating, directing, and intervening in family life to accomplish strategic political ends, remains a cornerstone of contemporary family policy.

'Government' in this context refers to the strategic orchestration of power relations to structure the possible field of individual/collective action: the 'conduct of conducts' (Foucault, 2002). It extends beyond political rule to encompass the plethora of sites in which conduct is regulated, be that, for instance, the workplace, the school, or, indeed, the family. Government is also deeply entwined in processes of subjectivation. As Nikolas Rose comments, '[o]ur personalities, subjectivities, and 'relationships' are not private matters if this implies that they are not the object of power [...] they are intensely governed' (1999a: 1). The concept of governmentality thus weaves rationalities of government and processes of subject-formation into a 'single analytical perspective' (Lemke, 2010: 34); illuminating connections between strategies for managing 'large scale characteristics of territories or populations' and 'micro-technologies for the management of conduct in specific individuals in particular locales and practices' (Rose, 1999b: 5).

These micro-technologies enable the state to 'govern at a distance' (Rose, 1999b). Operating in multiple settings and through multiple authorities, liberal rule is accomplished by heterarchical modes of governance that aim to 'strategically influence others' agendas and internal processes of decision-making, while avoiding the need to become directly involved in their 'raw operations' (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017). This mode of governance is epitomised by the behaviour change agenda in UK politics, and, in particular, the prominence of 'nudge' (Jones, Pykett & Whitehead, 2013; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Strategies associated with 'nudge' are commonplace in family policy (Hartas, 2014). Essentially, they involve steering citizens to make the right kinds of choices. By utilising 'gentle forms of power to incentivize people to make good decisions' (Jones, Pykett & Whitehead, 2013: 168), authorities intervene in citizens' lives without, putatively, undermining their liberty. 'Nudge', then, governs at a distance, employing 'non-coercive suggestions' (ibid: 18) to modify citizens' behaviour.

The practice of employing 'non-coercive suggestions' or 'non-coercive enticements' (Baez & Talburt, 2008) as micro-technologies for regulating parental conduct is central to our understanding of link worker-parent interactions. Their analysis highlights the relationship between neoliberal political rationalities (responsibilising parent-citizens), local policy objectives (improving home-school relations), and subject-formation (fostering self-disciplined agency). However, governing at a distance is complex and complicated. Translating policy from one context to another can lead to 'displacement and dislocation' (Clarke *et al.*, 2015: 16). This uncertainty means service providers/users can subvert policy, disrupting official intentions (Barnes & Prior, 2009). Drawing on the notion of 'counter-agency' (Prior, 2009) – the capacity of citizens to act in ways other than those officially prescribed – we hence explore the 'unintended consequences' resulting from link worker-parent interactions. First, however, we turn to the wider political discourse surrounding parenting.

## The Politics of Parenting

In 2016, the then British Prime Minister outlined the importance of parenting to the future prosperity of the nation. 'Families', he urged, 'are the best anti-poverty measure ever

invented. They are a welfare, education and counselling system all wrapped up into one' (Cameron, 2016). This contention exemplifies 'the new politics of parenting' (Gillies, 2008). At the core of this politics is the invocation of a causal relationship between parenting, child outcomes, and the future prosperity of the nation; with 'good' parenting key to upward social mobility and 'bad' parenting damaging for both families and society at large (Dermot, 2012). The degrading image of the 'feckless parent' – or more precisely mother, since it is mothers who remain most closely associated with childrearing in the public imagination (Gillies, 2007; Vincent, 2012) – has garnered considerable traction in this context and stands as a potent symbol of Britain's alleged social and moral decline (Jensen & Tyler, 2012). But, normative constructions of parenting are scarcely neutral. They tend to be refracted through the prism of social class, with disadvantaged mothers bearing the brunt of public scorn (Jensen, 2018). The normative ideal of the 'good' parent, in this regard, is a discursive position invariably occupied by the white middle-class mother (Gillies, 2007; Lawler, 2000). And those who cannot, or perhaps will not, conform to this ideal are marginalised as abject and aberrant anti-parents (Tyler, 2008; de Benedictis, 2012). The resurgence of 'cycles of deprivation' discourse further compounds this derisory representation of disadvantaged families (Welshman, 2013).

Whilst the administration of family life has long been a concern of the state (Donzelot, 1979), the current juncture is distinctive for having reconceptualised parenting as an urgent 'national priority' (Allen, 2011; Family and Childcare Trust, 2015; Field, 2010). Many areas of domestic life, from lifestyle choices to intrafamilial relationships – areas previously considered outside state interference – are reconfigured as matters of legitimate public interest (Gillies, 2011; Edwards & Gillies, 2012). That parenting has accrued such significance for policy-makers owes much to the influence of neoliberalism upon social policy. The neoliberal emphasis on maximising individual freedoms, and fetishising entrepreneurship, competition, and the market (Harvey, 2005), has profoundly shaped the political rationality underpinning contemporary family policy. Central to this is an unwavering faith in individual responsibility and a concomitant focalisation 'on individual characteristics and dispositions as pathways to social advancement' (Hartas, 2014: 5). The future success or failings of an individual are attributable, on this account, to individual (de)merits and (in)appropriate life choices and investments. This recasts families as incubators of human capital and obscures the constraints that systemic and structural barriers place on life chances. Parents' choices and investments are construed as *the* key determinants of children's future prospects, thereby transmuting parenting from an intimate, private relationship into a question of competence and public accountability (Gillies, 2011).

Conceptualised in this way, government is vested with ensuring parents make the right choices; choices that will help families break out of the 'cycle of deprivation'. By monitoring parents' life-choices and instilling desirable traits and skills, government insinuates itself into family life. Parenting becomes a political duty. Contemporary parental government is thus infused (and enthused) by a faith in cultural solutions to socio-economic problems. And if parenting is a matter of competence, then it becomes liable to expert intervention. In this contemporary tutelary complex (Donzelot, 1997) parents must be taught requisite skills and competencies by those armed with epistemological and moral authority.

Programmes like the one reported upon here exemplify this broader policy-shift towards the micro-management of family life, where modifying parental attitudes and aptitudes is advanced as a magic bullet to counter stagnating social mobility, growing inequality, and narrowing economic prospects (Jensen, 2010; Hartas, 2014). Indeed, they are the joint at which wider attempts to regulate the population converge with local efforts to direct individual conduct. And the link worker is a prominent agent in this regime of parental government.

## Overview of the Programme

The pilot programme is characteristic of the wider parenting support agenda in family policy (Churchill & Clarke, 2010; Lewis, 2011; Daly, 2015). It has its own peculiar inflections but shares much in common with the programmes reviewed by Daly and Bray (2015). Running throughout the 2014-15 school year, the programme targeted white British working-class families with the aim of improving pupils' academic performance by changing parents' attitudes towards education and enhancing their skills and competencies. Schools selected parents on the basis that their children were in receipt of free school meals and they were deemed to be particularly 'hard-to-reach'. Parents could also opt in. Despite acknowledging the complex factors affecting educational achievement, the organisers decided to focus on: 'the misalignment between parents and schools'. The programme thus sought to improve home-school relations. It was envisioned that this could be achieved by increasing parental involvement in schools, improving 'at home good parenting', and by raising awareness of the challenges faced by these families.

Two 'link workers' were hired to deliver on these objectives. Their remit included: building relationships with families; facilitating events; holding drop-in sessions; offering guidance and support; and providing advocacy in schools. The programme was intended to be a 'parent-led process', with link workers facilitating parents' demands for particular services. This was a central plank in a 'bottom-up approach' to parenting support provision. As such, participation was voluntary. As one of the project organisers averred, 'we're not a statutory authority to involve parents, so it's going to be voluntary; but that's how we want it'.

The support offered to parents extended to activities oriented to helping them find employment. Hence, this was a broad conception of parenting support. Activities focused on enhancing parents' skills and competencies – their *aptitudes* – as well as altering their aspirations and expectations – their *attitudes*. The programme also sought to foster community between parents and provided opportunities for peer-support. This accords with Daly and Bray's conclusion that 'parenting support is more than polysemic, it is multi-expectational in that it plays host to a very high promise and takes forward widely differing sets of policy orientations and goals' (2015: 640). At the very least, it is suggestive of the amorphous nature of the programme.

## The Study

This article draws on data collected during the evaluation of the pilot. A mixed-methods approach employing qualitative methods of data collection was adopted. The overall aims were to report on the programme's effectiveness in improving engagement; to highlight critical factors in determining the success or failure of particular strategies; and to offer recommendations to inform future planning, development, and delivery. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, group interviews, focus groups, and observations. Data were collected from staff and parents at participating schools (three secondary schools and five 'feeder' primary schools), the two link workers, and staff from the local authority responsible for managing the programme.

In total, eleven parents were interviewed during the evaluation. The link workers categorised parents on a 'ladder of engagement' (e.g. 'resistant'; 'disengaged'; 'open'; or, 'interested') and the sample was selected from participants across these categories. The research team collected data from school and local authority staff in the initial phases of programme, and from parents and link workers throughout. The data includes: 19 parent interviews (including two focus groups); 19 interviews with school staff (including five group interviews); two group interviews with local authority staff; and paired and individual interviews with both link workers. The resulting dataset was thematically analysed in a parallel process where data was mined according to categories essential to the evaluation, on one hand, and more openly coded on the other. It was through the open-coding that the persistent theme of trust emerged. Standard ethical procedures were followed throughout. Informed consent was obtained, and all participants were allocated pseudonyms.

## The Gentle Way in Parental Government

The programme is notable for its 'gentle' approach to governing parents. Eschewing coercion, it favours the strategic use of *trust*. Sanctions are replaced by a series of 'nudges' or 'non-coercive enticements' aimed at fostering cooperation and commitment (Baez & Talburt, 2008). Non-coercive enticements constitute calculated techniques for promoting desirable conduct which operate through modifying aspirations, interests, and inclinations rather than suppressing them. Compulsion gives way to gentle encouragement; to tactics and techniques that capitalise on the emotional and affective dimensions of parenting.

The organisers were adamant it would not be imposed upon parents. Efforts were made to elicit their participation, but involvement remained voluntary. This meant that alternative methods had to be employed to guarantee parents' involvement. And this is where trust comes into play:

I think the first stage is trust and relationship-building [...] because *you can't get people to access services or do anything really unless you have their trust*. And we felt that you [the link workers] being able to say you're not a school, you're just there for them, to support them as a resource for them, makes a huge difference in how parents will view it. (Project Organiser; emphasis added)

If the project is to achieve its aim of producing responsible parents fully in tune with the needs of their children's education, then parents must trust that the intentions behind the project are sincere and, furthermore, consider the link workers themselves to be trustworthy. The key point is that fostering trust is central to the programmes' design, not tacked on as an afterthought. This approach chimes with wider literature on the importance of trust in facilitating effective home-school relations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Strier & Katz, 2016). It also resonates with research specifically related to engaging 'hard to reach' groups (Osgood, *et al.*, 2013).

In terms of the programme trust is conceived as a wholly instrumental good. Its value derives solely from the extent to which it helps accomplish programme goals. 'If they trust you', one headteacher opined, 'they will listen to the message'. Framed in this way, there is a sense of uneven power relations between schools and parents; the latter being positioned as passive recipients of school directives (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Schools determine which messages are important, how they should be delivered, and how they should be received. But a dialogic approach to home-school interaction, which enables parents to play an active role in shaping policies and practices, can break down barriers by offering meaningful opportunities for collaboration (Vincent, 2017). The link workers' challenge was thus to develop parents as co-participants in a genuine dialogue, realigning home and school in the process. But many of the parents reported lacking trust in schools and wider social services. To achieve programme goals, then, techniques had to be employed to rebuild this trust and cultivate the trustworthiness of the link workers.

## Manufacturing Trust

To cultivate is to nurture and develop something for a specific end. The link workers cultivate the impression of trustworthiness precisely *in order to* gain parents trust and *through this* ensure the latter internalise programme aims. The putative trustworthiness of the link workers was also key to parents' positive reception of the programme. There were three main techniques by which the link workers cultivated trustworthiness. First, they operationalised 'community connectedness' (Howland *et al.*, 2006) by presenting themselves as community insiders. Second, they explicitly distanced themselves from the source of

parental anxieties. And, third, they employ 'contrived conviviality': the practice of deliberately nurturing affinity with service-users in order to gain their confidence. Each is addressed in turn.

### *Community Connectedness*

In an effort to bolster trust the decision was taken to base the link workers within the community rather than schools. They utilised local resources and met with parents in familiar places. The link workers also shared similar backgrounds to the parents. They were each white British and working-class in origin and had strong ties to the Borough. As such, they constituted community 'insiders'. They were able to draw upon the credibility and capital of belonging to the same community as the parents themselves and hence had a platform for building empathy and understanding. The link workers were thus perfectly positioned to serve as stage directors in a class choreography aimed at remodelling working-class parenting practices (Kenway *et al.*, 2017).

Similar techniques have been employed elsewhere. In their accounts of parent liaisons in American schools, for instance, Sanders (2008), Martinez-Cosio and Iannacone (2007), and Howland *et al.* (2006) outline the benefits of employing representatives of the community as 'cultural brokers' between home and school. '[B]ridging the gap between families and schools', Howland *et al.* write, 'is best accomplished by persons that have an intimate knowledge of the community in which the families they serve live' (2006: 63). The schools in our study clearly valued this approach:

They're white British but also if anybody can engage the parents, more than [the Head teacher], more than me, they can. They know them, they live in the flats near them, they know exactly what goes on and they have more input than we would ever be able to have because we don't live here, we're not part of this community. (Project Lead, Primary)

The emphasis is placed squarely here on community connectedness. The link workers' proximity to participating parents, spatially and culturally, affords them a degree of access to parents' lives that, according to this account at least, is impossible for schools. Link workers are better placed, it is suggested, to mobilise parents, due precisely to their status as community insiders.

### *Distancing Mechanisms*

As a technique for cultivating trustworthiness, community connectedness is insufficient. Since many of the parents lacked trust in schools and wider social services, it was also necessary for the link workers to allay parents' unease by dissociating themselves from the source of their concerns. Various mechanisms were employed for this purpose, including: asserting their independence; accentuating the parent-led nature of the programme; meeting parents in informal settings; providing holistic non-programme specific support, such as impromptu childcare; and, advocacy work. This helped to underline the distance between the link workers and the sources of parents' anxieties. Parents, moreover, appreciated this approach. They spoke of feeling championed and supported by the link workers. Or, as one parent put it, its 'just nice to have someone watch your back'. There is a direct link, then, between these 'distancing mechanisms' and building trust:

I just think we're good with people really. We're not threatening in any way [...] I think also that they know that we're not working for the schools or any you know, they know we're working for [the Borough], but we put that across that we're not any sort of agency or social services or you know straight away, that breaks down barriers [...] We're just doing really well with gaining their trust [...] they just open up. (Denise, Link Worker)

Being perceived as independent helps convey trustworthiness and build trust with parents. Not only is it crucial in 'breaking down barriers', it also affects the quality of parents' trust. Parents 'open up' and in doing so become more receptive to the link workers' influence. This is particularly important in cases where parents' dealings with schools are predominantly negative. For it is here that 'the role of an independent arbiter who is afforded the time to establish a relationship with a parent is helpful in building confidence and conveying positive messages about the student and their schooling' (Rose, 2008: 10). Parenting support programmes are most effective when they build rapport with parents (Cullen, Cullen & Lindsay, 2013; Wainwright & Marandet, 2013) and the techniques employed by the link workers help in this endeavour.

As a technique for cultivating trustworthiness, the use of distancing mechanisms dovetails with community connectedness, consolidating the strengths of each. By presenting themselves as non-threatening 'insiders', by distancing themselves from the source of parents' anxieties and asserting their commonalities, the link workers lay the foundations for positive and productive relationships.

### *Contrived Conviviality*

The third technique is 'contrived conviviality'. It has been acknowledged elsewhere that effective interventions are undergirded by positive relationships (Cullen, Cullen & Lindsay, 2013). And the link workers placed a high premium on their ability to establish meaningful relationships with parents. Even to the extent that some felt secure enough to disclose their 'deepest, darkest secrets'. Trust facilitates such disclosures and relies on the link workers' informal, empathic, and amiable approach. Indeed, there was a clear recognition that a personable approach was integral to their success:

I think just that friendly approach that we've got with them, although it is a client and a work relationship, I think that we've just built up very, very close relationships with them. They see me and [the other Link Worker] as friends really rather than just this organisation, this project, the leaders of this project. I think they see us more than that. (Denise, Link Worker)

This 'friendly approach' is *contrived*. It is contrived insofar as it is deliberately pursued to: a) be disarming and help win the trust of parents; and, b) make parents more receptive to the link workers' agenda. Conviviality, in other words, is put to strategic use. This approach recalls techniques employed in other contemporary family learning initiatives (Wainwright & Marandet, 2013) and the 'friendship with a purpose' adopted by post-war social workers (Starkey, 2000). As in Starkey's (2000) work, however, the relationship remains largely one-sided. Whilst parents may consider link workers as 'friends' and as 'more than' representatives of the project, the latter maintain professional distance. They still regard the parents as 'clients' and, indeed, have a responsibility to report on their engagement (the aforementioned 'ladder of engagement'). In this regard, it is a manufactured relationship. It has been engineered to increase the likelihood of parents altering their conduct in desirable ways.

Nevertheless, it proved a successful strategy. Parents praised the link workers for their sincerity and kindness. Qualities readily taken as evidence of their trustworthiness. As one parent remarked: 'you feel you can trust them and that you can depend upon them'. Moreover, by adopting a personable and non-threatening approach, the link workers unsettled the hierarchy between service-provider/service-user, creating a more horizontal relationship in which parents felt respected as equal partners:

[Y]ou feel like you're not being looked down on, you're on a level with someone. And whereas other services you always feel like we're supporting you because you can't do this or because you're not capable of doing this on your own or whatever. (Lily, Parent)

Contrived conviviality is pivotal to fostering trust in parent-link worker interactions. It furnishes parents with optimism about the link workers' goodwill and underlines their apparent trustworthiness. Alongside the other techniques, it creates the conditions for trust to flourish.

The deployment of this cluster of techniques is not arbitrary. It forms part of a deliberate strategy to convey the apparent trustworthiness of the link workers in order to gain parents' trust. It matters less in this context whether the link workers actually are trustworthy than it does that the parents perceive them to be so. Which is not to say that there might be no coincidence between the two. The link workers may well be trustworthy, and it might make for a more convincing display of their apparent trustworthiness if they are. But from the perspective of capitalising on trustworthiness, in the sense of instrumentally activating nascent trust-relations in order to mobilise parents to engage with programme aims, this is beside the point. A perception of trustworthiness – so long as it is carefully managed and maintained – is itself sufficient. By gaining the trust of parents, link workers lay the groundwork for interventions aimed at shaping parental conduct in the direction of responsible, self-disciplined agency. As such, these techniques form a crucial part of the armoury of this gentle way of parental government.

## Challenging Conduct

In the previous section the 'how' of trust was addressed, accounting for the techniques by which trust is secured. This section attends to the 'why' – to the ends to which these efforts are directed. Through pastoral guidance and pedagogical support parents become subject to interventions designed to induce responsibility and generate self-disciplined agency: essentially, this is work conducted on the attitudes of parents, on one hand, and their aptitudes on the other.

For government to be effective, Rose (1999b) contends, it must discharge its objectives into the micro-locals of everyday life without undermining the autonomy of citizens. This is achieved through a process of *translation* whereby constructive alignments are established between the agendas, goals, and objectives of those who would govern and the personal aspirations and ambitions of those subject to government. Norms of 'good' parenting must be translated into parents' own dispositions and inclinations. Link workers operate across institutional lines to facilitate this process. They act as relays between 'the calculations of authorities and the aspirations of free citizens' (Rose, 1999b: 49). Techniques for cultivating trustworthiness and establishing trust are means for converting governmental prerogatives into personal projects. Creating the responsible, self-governing and self-disciplining parent becomes a matter of engineering the right attitudes and aptitudes.

In our study, interventions with parents extended beyond educational support to encompass future economic prospects. The link workers encouraged aptitudes that would enhance parents' ability to support their children's learning and to prepare them for re-entry into employment and/or training, on the presumption that educationally and economically active parents are better role models. This aspect of the programme was couched in a discourse of empowerment. The parameters of choice are firmly circumscribed, though. Parents can choose which activities to pursue, but they are not free to choose just anything; they must make the right choices. Empowerment is thus restricted to making choices within conditional limits and is itself a strategy of government; a sanctioned means for producing the kind of active citizen demanded by neoliberalism (Dean, 2010).

Attitudinal change was also expected of parents. Link workers challenged parent's attitudes, exhorting them to take greater responsibility for the educational performance of their children and to take measures to address it:

it's just about communication and body language and, you know, the language they use; not going in aggressively [...] They do tend to blame the schools for whatever's going wrong and



we're trying to get them to look at, you know, it's not just down to the school for your child. We're trying to say to them it's not just down to the school it's everyone's business. (Denise, Link Worker)

Becoming responsible, then, requires both external direction *and* inward-looking self-examination. Having gained their trust, link workers steer parents away from attitudes perceived as deficient and promote more appropriate forms of comportment. The parents are schooled in responsibility. They are primed to recognise their obligations and counselled to scrutinise their own conduct, to practise self-government.

However, it is dominant norms of 'good' parenting that structure and direct this government of the self (Jensen, 2018; Wainwright & Marandet, 2017). Norms invariably modelled on middle-class parenting practices (Gewirtz, 2001; Lawler, 2000). The 'good' parent is the responsible parent: the parent for whom childrearing represents a future investment, who carefully plots and plans to ensure that their child has the best possible outcomes (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). It is at this point that the government of others and self-government converge. As a political strategy for restructuring public services and welfare provision, responsabilisation is translated into the micro-locales of everyday practice as an exercise of the self, as a component of ethical self-making. And the link worker is emblematic of a new wave of quasi-professionals that make such translation possible.

There is a sense of the emergence of responsible, self-disciplined agency in the following:

I feel that they *are* looking at their self a little bit and they *are*, you know, and they're *not* flying in school like a bull in a china shop which maybe they might have before. They're learning to control their emotions and they *are* having – and they also realise now, you know, how important it is as well for their kids to get a good education. Some of them are really supporting them with their homework as they didn't do before. Just got slightly different outlook to what they had at the beginning. Even reading for instance, one mum says I never used to read for pleasure; some of them are reading now. (Denise, Link Worker)

The link worker's report suggests parents are undertaking necessary work on the self - not only enhancing opportunities for family learning, but effecting underlying character change. They are refashioning themselves into responsible agents. Their aspirations have changed: they now recognise the value of education. Their critical self-awareness and self-control has increased: they are now 'looking at themselves' more closely; they are exercising greater 'control' over their emotions. Their impulsiveness, evoked by metaphors connoting lack of restraint, has been tempered and tamed. In short, they now possess the requisite attitudes and aptitudes for becoming better citizen-parent-educators. Precisely the kind of culture change advocated in policy discourse (Paterson, 2011; Family and Childcare Trust, 2015).

And yet, this focus on changing parenting cultures evades the difficult material and social conditions facing disadvantaged families and the constraints these conditions place on prospects for educational achievement and social mobility (Hartas, 2014). Moreover, parents are induced to adapt to schools in ways that reinforce existing power differentials:

But it's about helping them to find the right way of going into the school and working that out and saying it in the right way so that they're not just seen as being really aggro or really bothersome. But it's like ok you genuinely have a request or a concern and this is how you need to take that to the school so that you're listened to and so that the school engage with you. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

The 'right way' of engaging with schools is, of course, determined by the schools themselves and parents must accommodate if they are to be heard. The onus is on adapting to the requirements of schools rather than institutional change (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Dahlstedt, 2009). Becoming responsible on this account means becoming less resistant to, and more compliant with, authorities.

Having detailed the alignment between contemporary modes of parental government and neoliberal political rationalities, it is important, however, not to lose sight of the benefits of parenting support programmes. Family interventions can enhance as well as constrain (Pestaña, 2012). Indeed, parents valued the programme and the opportunities it provided, particularly for building peer-support networks, and their rapport with the link workers certainly influenced this reception. More generally, the extra allocation of resources to marginalised groups in this era of austerity, whilst scarcely sufficient, is welcome nonetheless. However, it is difficult to uncouple support from control in parenting interventions (Henricson, 2012). The more extensive the support, the more intensive the regulation; particularly in a context where public policy is constrained by constant pressures to maximise impact and generate cost-effective returns (Gillies, Edwards & Horsley, 2017). This insuperability lies at the heart of the parenting support agenda. It is also important to acknowledge parents' agency, and, indeed, that of front-line staff delivering services (Barnes & Prior, 2009). In the closing section, we hence explore the scope that remains within the programme for subversive 'counter-agency' (Prior, 2009).

## Room for Resistance?

Neoliberalism functions through the production of a certain kind of subject – the acquisitive, calculating, 'free', and responsible subject; a subject perpetually accruing capital through self-investment (Brown, 2015). The 'ambitions of regulation' are hence inscribed into 'the very interior of our existence and experience as subjects' (Rose, 1999a: 11). For Popkewitz and Bloch, this makes possibilities for resistance 'more distant and less plausible' (2001: 109). However, governing through trust has a constitutive openness which means resistance cannot be entirely foreclosed. Translation is not a given. There is always the possibility of *mistranslation*. Or, to frame this another way, 'government is a congenitally failing operation' (Miller & Rose, 2008: 71): between a plan, its implementation, and its expected outcomes, uncertainty remains (Clarke *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, for programmes that rely on mobilising the energies and agency of subjects there is always the danger that they might 'overrun' or exceed prescribed limits (Dean, 2010: 196).

These processes are evident in an exchange between Lily and Alex; two mothers who participated in the focus groups. Both spoke favourably of the project. Alex recounted, for instance, how the project had afforded her greater confidence in dealing with teachers:

I used to sit there really silent and just listen to it all and then I'd go home and think why didn't I say that? [...] I would just sit there and fill myself up in a sweat because there were so many of them and it was – oh, I was just sitting and waiting for it to be finished and agreeing with everything they say. Whereas now I don't, I listen to it and I'll question them on certain things. (Alex)

Similarly, Lily reported no longer feeling 'baffled' by the school system and having greater confidence in dealing with 'officials':

I used to find that I would be *very* quiet and just let people tell me things rather than giving my own opinion about stuff, which was really difficult. You know like I'd come away maybe before and think: 'oh shit, I wish I'd had the guts to say that'. And now actually, you know, my opinion is as valid as a lot of these professionals and it's, you know, promoted. (Lily)

Both parents assert their self-worth *in opposition to* those with official status. And it is suggested that this is precisely what the programme promotes. It is perceived as a desirable outcome of their empowerment. But, and this is crucial, this reversal of power does not automatically translate into closer alignment with schools.

The following exchange illustrates Lily and Alex's resurgent sense of power and the repercussions this has for their relationship with their children's school:

**In terms of the relationship with your school and your children's education, do you think your relationship with the school has changed since being involved with the project?**

Alex: Yeah, they don't like me more!

Lily: But I don't care!

*Laughter*

Alex: Because I voice my opinion with huge confidence and they don't like it, but I don't care.

**And how do you know they don't like it?**

Alex: Oh, you can tell, oh believe me you can tell! They sort of just body language, they come back a little bit in their chairs rather than – throwing things at me verbally and me just sitting there and taking it, I now have a response back and say but hold on a minute, and then I'll question them on whatever it is that they've just thrown at me.

Lily: And I'll refer this matter to the project, you know!

In Lily and Alex's case the project has served less to realign home and school than it has afforded them tools for more forcefully defining and defending their own interests. If they have adopted 'the right way' of engaging with schools, this has not led to greater receptivity on their part. On the contrary, antagonism persists, but its character has shifted. The schools 'like' them even less now they are prepared to defend their corner, and they feel considerably more confident in doing so, even appearing to enjoy exercising power. More than that, they use the programme as leverage to legitimate their recalcitrance.

This exchange is significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that the effects of such interventions cannot be entirely contained; 'unintended consequences' are inevitable as policy is translated from one context to another (Clarke et al., 2015). And, second, it reveals the fragility of this mode of governmentality. Governing through trust comes at the cost of being unable to firmly secure desired outcomes. This is because parents are not directly subject to the authority of schools or link workers; they are simply nudged to act in certain ways. As a result, resistance is always possible. Governing through trust structures the possible field of parental action but does not strictly determine or delimit it. In fact, the very strategies pursued by the programme free parents to challenge schools in ways not intended or desired by its organisers. Examples like this highlight the ambiguities surrounding parental engagement and raise questions about what is really being sought in efforts to realign home and school. Empowering parents and encouraging active involvement can release effects that are inconsistent with pre-packaged plans about what constitutes effective parental engagement.

Some parents exercised counter-agency by resisting programme goals, whilst others refused to participate. Regarding the link workers, however, there was little overt evidence of subversion; at least in terms of Prior's (2009) typology of counter-agency. The inchoateness of the programme – link workers reported being given a 'very unclear' remit and a 'blank page' to construct their role – afforded such latitude that it limited the scope for subversion. Nevertheless, there was evidence of *redirection*. Extending Prior's typology to include the (mis)application of available resources, we can say that whilst the link workers did not directly subvert programme goals, they did redirect resources (their time) into endeavours unlikely to warrant formal approval: providing childcare; taking children to/collecting them from school. Their willingness to provide this additional support exemplifies their dedication to the role and their understanding of, and empathy for, the complex issues parents faced; a sensitivity rooted in their own class background and personal histories. It also highlights the tenuous nature of parenting support (Martinez-Cosio, Martinez Iannacone, 2007). Operating

between home and school, link workers balance competing demands; serving the needs of both parents and policy. Ultimately, this proved impossible to maintain and by the end of the programme they had become incorporated in schools as auxiliary staff, radically transforming their role in the process.

## Conclusion

Liberal-democratic states govern at a distance by aligning citizens' conduct with wider political rationalities. The family is key to this 'conduct of conduct', serving as a privileged instrument for managing social risk and moulding responsible citizens (Foucault, 2009; Rose, 1999a). Our intention has been to deepen understandings of governmentality and the contemporary politics of parenting by scrutinising an innovative regime for governing parents in educational settings. One that eschews coercion and makes strategic use of trust to translate political imperatives into parental aspirations. As a technology of government, link workers utilise nudges and 'non-coercive enticements' to shape parent subjectivities. Through micro-technologies like contrived conviviality, distancing, and community connectedness, they seek to manufacture responsible self-disciplined agency in parents. Link workers are lay technicians of the soul. They have no professional status or standing, they are not 'experts' in any formal sense, but they are able to capitalise on personal qualities and an intimate knowledge of the community to steer parents' conduct in desired directions. Through their work on attitudes and aptitudes they promote the neoliberal parental subject.

Governing through trust may not be as crude as punitive methods for regulating family life, but it is a form of control nonetheless. This is not to suggest that the parenting support agenda is entirely pernicious. It can provide much needed assistance to parents struggling in difficult circumstances and represents a welcome allocation of resources. Rather, this article raises concerns about the tendency of interventions to pathologise disadvantaged parents and to escalate the excessive micro-management of intimate family life. However, if governing through trust is a form of control, then it is a gentle way to govern parents; a mode of governmentality that is able to align the family with social, political, and economic imperatives whilst still preserving its autonomy and allowing space for subversion and resistance.

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