

# Engaging disengagement: a political view of school disengagement

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## Abstract

Engagement and participation are placed in the core of democratic citizenship. Lower levels of civic and political engagement among younger people pervade many countries and have given rise to a major concern. Student disengagement from schooling is another major, pervading concern. Whereas school is deemed a crucial means to incorporate students into society, a consequence of such disengagement is exclusion from school. In addition, measures taken to develop involvement among the young are insufficient. Linkages between these two forms of disengagement will be explored. School engagement is considered to be multi-dimensional. This contribution will argue for a broadened understanding of student engagement and its counterpart, disengagement, that considers their political character. Firstly, democratic citizenship will be briefly delineated whilst emphasising the relevance of engagement to it. An analysis and problematisation of mainstream discourse on relevant forms of engagement and disengagement will follow. Using a framework drawing on French philosopher Jacques Rancière, school disengagement is then proposed as a form of political agency in education, schools and its broader environment. To conclude, implications for school leadership (and student involvement in it) will be raised.

**Keywords:** citizenship, democracy; engagement/disengagement in education, Jacques Rancière

## Introduction

Particularly because of their significant influence on a knowledge-based economy, education, and the institutions that provide it, are expected to take on a more central positive role in many societies around the world. As a consequence, the search for efficiency has been brought to the foreground and there is a growing demand for accountability. However, the fulfilment of such expectations is being challenged and, hence, considerable attention has been turned to failures. In general, the incorporation of younger people in education (but also in other vital spheres such as labour market, welfare or society) is proving to be problematic and measures taken to deal with this situation have been recognised as needing significant improvements (e.g., European Commission, 2012).

One major challenge is concerned with student disengagement. For instance, dropping out and early school leaving have been equated with a lack of student engagement (e.g., McMahan & Zyngier, 2009) and, moreover, considered to be “the final stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement from school” (National Research Council & National Academy of Education, 2011, p. 61). Rates of stu-

dents leaving school are considered to be too high and, in whatever way, high enough to hinder economic growth and social cohesion. Therefore, early school leaving has become a major concern in policy making across the world in these years. Specifically, it is a major issue in the European Union policy agenda to the point that one of the five headline targets (and the only one referred to education) set in the Europe 2020 Strategy “tackles the problem of early school leavers by reducing the dropout rate to 10% in 2020 from the initial 15% (European Commission, 2010, p. 11). This problem is particularly acute in the case of Spain where the rates of early school leaving have been much more significant: 31.2% in 2009, 28.4 in 2010, 26.5% in 2011, 24.9% in 2012 and 23,5 in 2013 (source: EUROSTAT and Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, Spain<sup>2</sup>). Initiatives and measures have been developed in order to prevent and ameliorate disengagement, although satisfaction with them has been limited. For instance, the latest European Commission’s Annual Growth Survey, which takes stock of the situation and sets out broad policy priorities for the coming year, recognises that “the EU is still lagging behind its 2020 targets on tertiary educational levels and reducing early school drop-outs” and, hence, action is needed to improve education and skills performance (European Commission, 2013, p. 13).

Yet the so-called ‘student disengagement’ might be a deeper and more widespread problem. Reschly and Christenson (2012) assert that the successful completion of secondary education is much more than the dropout problem as it involves meeting the defined academic, social, and behavioural standards to succeed in school (p. 4). However, student engagement is not necessarily implied by success in school. Although the phenomenon of student disengagement among able and high-achieving students has drawn significantly less attention, there is evidence that success is pursued and achieved by alienated, savvy students (Demerath, 2009; Demerath, Lynch, Milner, Peters & Davidson, 2010) or that success is resisted by able or high-achieving students (Olafson, 2006). Moreover, disaffection with education might be concealed by students themselves (Fish-

er, 2011). In addition, there is evidence that teachers are likely to stress engagement in schooling (by emphasising engagement in behavioural and psychological aspects which privilege involvement in the classroom order and social and affective outcomes) rather than engagement in learning (Harris, 2011).

Student engagement and disengagement, thus, seem to be a serious issue in the double sense that is worrying enough and requires careful consideration, and will be the focus of attention in this article. However, they will be considered to be connected with other forms of engagement: particularly, civic and political engagement. This article intends to argue for a broadened understanding of student engagement and its alleged counterpart, disengagement, which considers their political character. First, the concept of citizenship and, in particular, its civic-republican version will be briefly outlined in order to contextualise the focus of the paper (section 2). The notion of active citizenship will then serve to analyse and illustrate the relevance of engagement to citizenship (section 3). An analysis of student engagement and its connections with civic engagement will follow (section 4). Using a framework drawing of a French philosopher, Jacques Ranciere, student engagement is analysed (section 5) and disengagement is finally proposed as an alternative form of ‘political engagement’ in education, schools and its environment (section 6). To conclude, the major points will be highlighted and implications for school leadership (and student involvement in it) will be raised (section 7). This contribution extends the analysis applied by Gershon (2012) to students at risk to student engagement and disengagement and aims to deepen our understanding of substantive conflictual phenomena currently affecting school education.

#### 1. What is citizenship?: an ad hoc summarisation

Citizenship is a complex notion embodying multiple, diverse and sometimes subtle aspects which are intertwined and even overlap one another. Nevertheless, they are neither tightly coupled nor balanced:

<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tsdsc410>; also at <http://www.mecd.gob.es/servicios-al-ciudadano-mecd/estadisticas/educacion/mercado-laboral/explotacion-de-las-variables.html> (in Spanish).

sometimes some aspects gain autonomy and prominence whilst other aspects lose them. In addition, it is not a settled and uncontested notion, but a dynamic one which is subject to contestation and criticism. A complete and exhaustive analysis of the notion of citizenship exceeds the scope of this contribution. In what follows, a brief, ad hoc introduction will be offered to situate the focus of the paper by providing an overview of what is ordinarily regarded as its major dimensions.

Although agreement is not unanimous, a set of basic components have been identified at the core of citizenship. First and foremost, citizenship still is, and will probably remain, what it has long been: a political **status** (Smith, 2002, p. 114). It means that citizenship constitutes and defines, in a formal and even legal way, the position of persons in relation to a polity (namely, a political community or organization). Specifically, it positions them as members of such a polity. The site of such membership still continues to be ordinarily the nation-state, but other sites are becoming increasingly prominent at other levels as well (both beyond and within nation-states). Interestingly, schools have also been conceived as polities (Slater and Boyd, 1999). More recently, Scheerens (2011) has proposed to consider school “as a context to exercise ‘school citizenship’ - a context which constitutes a “micro-cosmos of society” and, thus, can singularly serve “as a bridge to societal citizenship and state citizenship” (pp. 201-202).

Secondly, this status “brings with it a reciprocal set of **rights and duties**” (Kivisto & Faist, 2007, p.1). Citizenship entails entitlement to, and possession of, rights: rights to non-interference, originally, and more recently to other goods as well (Bosniak, 2006, p. 19). Following the classical framework proposed by Marshall (1950), these rights include not just civil and political rights but also the so-called social rights, including the right to education – according to him, a “genuine social right of citizenship”, “regarded, not as the right of the child to go to school, but as the right of the adult citizen to have been educated” (p. 25). As implied, access to these rights depends on possessing the status of citizenship. However, it is worth to note that the status of citizenship and its associated rights

“are not always convergent” (Bosniak, 2006, p. 15). In addition to rights, citizenship status brings with it obligations and responsibilities as well. Although connections between rights and duties are not either as straightforward as at first they may appear (e.g., Lister, 2003, pp. 21-23), the link between them is often attributed to the aforementioned reciprocal relationship between rights and duties: in a few words, rights attributed to each citizen are to be exercised and this exercising requires the fulfilment of correlative duties by the other citizens. This shared set of rights and responsibilities equalizes them – even in spite of other inequalities (for instance inequalities of wealth).

Nevertheless, the prominence of duties is not always striking. In the liberal tradition of citizenship, individual rights associated with status are the cornerstone, and remarkable obligations should not be established for citizens, especially if they lead to interference with the enjoyment of rights<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, duties become particularly prominent in the civic republican tradition of citizenship (without eschewing rights). Heater (1999) asserts that “the whole republican tradition is based upon the premise that citizens recognize and understand what their duties are and have a sense of moral obligation instilled into them to discharge these responsibilities” (p. 64). Being crucial not only to this particular approach to citizenship but also to citizenship overall, this aspect merits further explanation (however brief), which will be relevant to the focus of this paper. Among the hallmarks associated with this approach to citizenship are these others: common good, active participation, and civic virtue (e.g., Peterson, 2011). In short, members of the polity are to contribute to its common good by actively participating in its life by practising their civic virtues. In other words, the common good requires a good common enterprise (beyond a set of merely formal rights and its corresponding duties) which, in turn, requires good citizens. Given its crucial role in relation to the common good, active participation becomes a duty to be fulfilled, and, given its crucial role to active participation, civic virtues become duties as well. The notion of civic virtue is slippery but evokes an articulated set of intellectu-

<sup>3</sup> Note that even non-interference itself however requires fulfilment of minimal duties.

al, moral and behavioural qualities, including (good) knowledge and experience, judgement, dispositions, commitment, sentiments, attachments and conduct (wisdom, loyalty, patriotism are some examples) (for a recent comprehensive, however brief, treatment, see Ben-Porath, 2013 and corresponding commentaries in Costa, 2013). These qualities need to be developed and cultivated and education (in particular, education through active involvement) is expected to have a crucial role here. This characterisation of duties according to the civic republican tradition leads us to another basic component of citizenship: as citizens are not merely (equal) subjects but (equal) free, virtuous and active agents, citizenship has also been conceived of as the practice of active, engaged (and engaging) **participation** in the life of the polity (e.g., Bosniak, 2006). In the following section, this dimension of citizenship will be explored analytically with a focus on the notion of ‘active citizenship’.

There is a remaining dimension, which has been primarily highlighted by communitarian approaches to citizenship and will not be treated here (although it would not be out of place): **identity**. Citizenship has also to do with “the way in which people experience themselves in collective terms”; in other words, it has to do with experiences of belonging, identity, commitment and solidarity (Bosniak, 2006, pp. 20 and 26). To be clear, experiencing citizenship also means having a feeling of belonging to the larger community (probably communities) of citizens, showing commitment and solidarity and, in the end, identifying with it (or them).

## 2. Active citizenship: exploring the practical and experiential dimension of citizenship

Like ‘citizenship’, the so-called ‘active citizenship’ is a variegated, overarching notion which lacks a univocal meaning (e.g., Kennedy, 2007). It is particularly akin to the view of citizenship endorsed by the civic republican tradition (e.g., Burchell, 2002 or, more recently, Birdwell, Scott, & Horley, 2013), although it cannot be considered to be its exclusive province and, in fact, can be linked to other approaches to citizenship (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007). More than twenty years ago, Turner (1990) differentiated between passive and active forms of citizenship.

Rather than dichotomous categories, both forms represent the end points of a continuum, particularly if attention is directed to real life (Schugurensky, 2010). In the first case, the position of citizens in relation to the polity (i.e. the state) and its implications (for instance, rights attributed to them) are primarily an effect of the action of the polity, conceived of as an external powerful entity. Thus, citizens are passive in relation to the polity. But, in the second case, that position and its corresponding implications are (allegedly) brought about by citizens themselves. Citizens would shape citizenship, which would need to be understood as a fluid process that stand in a dialectical relationship to outcomes (Lister, 2003). Citizens would be then active in relation to their polity, which might even be considered as an evolving achievement of them. In a few words, citizens are conceptualised as subjects in the first case and as agents in the second case (Turner, 1990, p. 209). Active citizens are thus characterised by agency.

Several other terms are ordinarily used to refer to active citizenship: among the most common are ‘participation’, ‘involvement’ and ‘engagement’. Setting aside that they are not always clearly defined, the available definitions are varied, their boundaries are not well demarcated and their use is not consistent. Firstly, it has been emphasised that the first one is virtually an all-embracing term: “As a concept, participation is an empty vessel that can be filled with almost anything” (Theis, 2010, p. 344). Nevertheless, a minimal delineation is suggested. Agency is not attributed merely on an individual basis. Neither an individual nor even any gathering of them accrue the capacity to act and produce changes. Ultimately, agency is rather attributed to citizens (not necessarily all the citizens) taken as a whole or unity (e.g., a broader whole made up of narrower wholes including individuals). Hence, each individual or group (or narrower whole) has *a part*, and takes part. Accordingly, **participation** becomes “the key idea” of active citizenship (Biesta, 2009, p. 148) and, moreover, has often been equated with it. For instance, the report titled Final study summary and policy recommendations resulting from the study Participatory Citizenship in the European Union, which is commissioned by the European Commission to inform the Europe 2020 strategy regarding policies and actions related to cit-

izenship, recommends the use of the terminology “participatory citizenship” (in place of active citizenship) to emphasise that “citizenship should not only be understood as a legal concept but one with a core participatory element” (Hoskins & Kerr, 2012, p. 18).

Secondly, **involvement** is often used virtually as synonymous with ‘participation’. Nevertheless, there is something else in that word: it refers to the fact or condition of participating in something (*Oxford dictionary of English, 2010*). It is a derivative of the verb ‘to involve’, which means [to] “have or include something as a necessary or integral part or result” [italics added] and derives from the Latin term ‘involvere’ (‘in-’, into and ‘volvere’, to roll), which, in turn, means to roll up, to cover, to surround, to entangle,... (*Oxford dictionary of English, 2010*). This indicates that participation does not happen in a vacuum. There is something into which a part is to be incorporated. If the part is not incorporated into it, the sense of this participation dilutes. The sense of the whole entity (or entities) into which the part is incorporated is likely to dilute as well. Therefore, it is common to state that citizens are to participate *in* public life and the affairs of the polity. For instance, in the summary country report corresponding to England included in the published report of an international comparative study on informal learning for active citizenship at school, Thomas, Peng, & Yee (2009) have characterised active citizenship as “a person’s involvement in public life and affairs, all that society expect of a citizen – voting in elections and general forms of social and moral behaviours” (p. 106). They add that “research indicates an increasing agreement to conceptualize citizenship as the three Cs *within* [italics added] *the school context, that is citizenship in the curriculum, active citizenship in the school culture, and active citizenship through links with the wider community*” (p. 106, citing Cleaver, Ireland, Kerr, & Lopes, 2005). Involvement would then consist of active participation in life and affairs of a polity.

Note that if citizens act and they do *not* take part *in* what is considered to be the polity, their action (that is, their part) might be considered irrelevant, if not deleterious. Such ‘parts’ are then likely to be dismissed as parts of it. To illustrate this, it is worth noting that

youth participation according to the EU framework has accordingly become more related to the existing, established institutions and structures, whereas initially it was to some extent accepted that participation is likely to lead to uncertain change and new forms of societies (Muniglia, Cuconato, Loncle, & Walther, 2012). Moreover, such *res publica*, or ‘public thing’, will not make sense if it is not integrative enough. An important additional implication of this understanding of involvement is that incorporation into the affairs and life of the polity will require from its parts that they fit together. Crick (2002) has written that “citizenship has meant, since the time of the Greeks and the Romans, people acting together<sup>4</sup>” (p. 5).

Would mechanic or coerced involvement be accepted as instances of desirable, authentic ‘active citizenship’? The term ‘engagement’ might assist in identifying a possible answer to this question. According to the *Oxford dictionary of English* (2010), ‘to engage in’ and ‘to be engaged in’ also denote participation or involvement. However, it is worth adding that the term ‘to engage’ derives from the French ‘engager’, which originally meant to pawn or pledge something. An engagement, thus, evokes a promise or an agreement, usually for a particular purpose. Kytte (2004) states that, in accordance with this origin, most definitions imply “some form or degree of deep, personal commitment” (p. xii) (words not included in the second edition of this book). What are these standard meanings suggesting with regard to engagement in a polity’s life? Engagement would imply not only action or even action relevant to a polity but also purposeful action; moreover, it would imply dedication to that action, underpinned by sustained, impelling motives, which lead to such a situation that action turns out to be experienced as required. Combined with conjoint involvement of citizens in the life of the polity, engagement further implies that they consent and agree to act in accordance with the polity (see Arneil, 2002).

In particular, civic engagement has become a topic worthy of attention in the realm of education, although there is a significant variability in its conceptualisations (e.g., Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010). It has become increasingly accepted that its scope includes the so-called civic behaviour

<sup>4</sup> And, interestingly, he adds: “...effectively to achieve a reasonably important common purpose”. This is an aspect which will be linked with ‘engagement’

(namely, the acts associated with participation, such as voting or obeying rules) but also that it is not limited to them. It has been conceived of as “a deeper, more substantive engagement” (Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010, p. 736) that also includes (a) dedication to those acts (that is, resources such as skills and knowledge are confidently devoted to such acts), (b) motivation (that is, motivation and even obligation is experienced to act in this committed way), and (c) connection with and attachment to the polity and its institutions. The influential conceptualisations proposed by Flanagan (e.g., Flanagan & Faison, 2001), Sherrod (e.g., Sherrod, 2007 and Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2008) or Zaff and associates (Zaff et al., 2010) are convergent with this characterisation just outlined briefly (see also Sherrod et al., 2010). In addition, the conceptualisation of civic engagement adopted in the *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS)* is likewise in line with it (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010).

### 3. ‘Student engagement’: Another form of incorporation?

The notion of engagement has indeed been extensively used in the realm of education. Special attention is drawn to one of its uses: the so-called ‘student engagement’, which is a comprehensive notion embracing multiple, sometimes overlapping aspects. In a newly published review, Lawson and Lawson (2013) state their adherence to a broader conceptualisation of student engagement that “widens the dominant social-psychological lens of engagement research to include salient socio-cultural and sociological features and processes” (p. 433) and endorse including not only engagement in non-classroom settings but also engagement in non-school settings influencing one another. In what follows, the notion of student engagement will be outlined in order to highlight parallels and connections with political and civic engagement<sup>5</sup>, which may, in turn, be associated with conceptions of citizenship.

Not only civic engagement but also student engagement have been characterised as multidimen-

sional and multifaceted (e.g., Sherrod et al., 2010; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Reschly and Christenson, 2012). Such complexity has been reduced by identifying a number of basic components that evoke those foregrounded for civic engagement. Experts are not unanimous in this regard, but the following not sharply demarcated dimensions have been ordinarily identified, including the first and third ones at the minimum (also Finn & Zimmer, 2012):

- *Behavioural engagement* “draws on the idea of participation” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60) and specifically refers to positive behaviour related directly to the learning process, including that implying “involvement in learning and academic tasks” (e.g., attention, asking and answering questions in the classroom, completing assignments in the classroom and at home or participating in school governance) (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 62).

- *Cognitive engagement* refers, in general, to students’ ‘psychological’ qualities and investments in academic tasks. According to Lawson & Lawson (2013), it comprises two (related but different) aspects: cognitive engagement in a strict sense (including, for instance, making meaning of the material presented to them or their thoughts about teaching or schools) but also the willingness (or eagerness) to and dispositions toward school work (including, for instance, the effort required to understand or persistence to cope with challenges and difficulties), which overlaps the former category<sup>6</sup> and even the following one.

- *Affective engagement* refers to social and emotional responses or feelings of ‘attachment’ and ‘connection’. It is also differentiated in two aspects: on the one hand, the affective engagement in relation to academic pursuits (e.g., interest, enjoyment or anxiety during academic activity) and, on the other hand, feelings of belonging, identification, and relatedness to their school peers, teachers, and the school overall. According to Finn & Zimmer (2012), this component is that which provides motivation for the investments the others require. By the way,

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, evidence has been raised to suggest that early school leavers are “less active citizens” (European Commission, 2011, p. 3; see also National Research Council & National Academy of Education, 2011, p. 13).

<sup>6</sup> Regarding this overlapping see Lawson & Lawson (2013, p. 465, note 2).

Fredricks et al. (2004) hold that “the idea of commitment, or investment,” is “central to the common understanding of the term engagement” (p. 61).

Although there is lack of agreement on whether student engagement and disengagement constitute just a single continuum or they are two separate continua (Reschly & Christenson, 2012), disengaged students would be those who do not participate actively in class and school activities leading to learning or even exhibit behaviour considered to be inappropriate, exhibit *disruptive* behaviour, do not become cognitively involved in such activities, are not willing to participate, and do not develop or maintain a sense of school belonging (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004 and Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Lawson and Lawson (2013) outline an alternative conception of engagement that, nevertheless, builds on previous developments (for a similar approach, see also Deakin Crick, 2012). As it was mentioned, their framework emphasises that there are different environments relevant to engagement (classroom, school, community) which influence one another. In any of these environments, engagement is particularly affected by the interplay of interacting elements, which reflect a complex set of interactions and transactions between people and their environment. These authors propose to distribute such elements into a set of four sophisticated categories referred as “the ,ABCs’ of the engagement process” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 442):

- *Acts*. Each of them is conceived of as ‘states of experience’ of individuals as they participate in discrete activities at particular moments in time, being implied that conventional indicators in every conventional dimension of engagement (behavioural, cognitive and emotional) are included within this category.

- *Benefits and competencies*. Quality experiences when participating in activities at particular moments in time are expected to have an influence on proximal beneficial outcomes received from engagement in every conventional dimension (including ‘social and social-cultural benefits’ such as a sense of belonging and relatedness to peers, teachers and school). Moreover, these benefits are, in turn, likely to be translated into enhancements (that is, compe-

tence development), which, furthermore, may help to sustain engagement itself. These benefits leading to enhancements would spread across the conventional dimensions of engagement (e.g., enhancements in performance, enhanced interest or enhanced sense of belonging to peers, teachers or school).

- *Dispositions*. These are considered to be dynamic drivers for future engagement experiences. They include students’ motivations and attachments, but also past-present identities, and aspirations for the future (interestingly, who students are and what they want to become - and not become - are also considered to be such drivers).

- *Conditions and contexts*. The development of engagement dispositions is thought to be highly influenced by surrounding conditions and contexts, which especially include characteristics of students themselves and other key actors, internal and external contexts, and specific places and discursive practices associated with them. Regardless of significant differences between them, both frameworks do not therefore deviate significantly from the basic pattern identifiable in civic engagement and, further, in active citizenship: participative action, dedication to it, motivation to act and to commit resources, and connection to what is taken for granted and, thus, expected in a surrounding environment (whose influence shifts to the foreground in the second framework). The following section begins with a recap including further details on these connections, in order to demonstrate that the pattern may match what French philosopher Jacques Rancière has referred to as ‘police’. From there, his view of (democratic) ‘politics’, as opposed to ‘police’, will be outlined and presented as the basis for an alternative understanding of student ‘engaged disengagement’.

#### 4. The ordering of engagement

As presented above, citizenship has been equated with membership bringing with it a formal legal status together with rights and duties, which, in their practice, members are expected to conform to. These rights and duties are likely to be universalistic and to pursue a standard of equality (Janoski & Gran, 2002). Nevertheless, there is also likely to be instances which will reveal not only that there are

non-citizens but also that there are citizens which are not full citizens (e.g., children). In addition, citizenship has also been understood as a broader good civic practice; that is, practice that, in order for it to be good, needs to contribute to the common good and, hence, cannot to be at odds with it - rather, it needs to be in accordance and even infused with it. This practice needs to be committed to, engaged with the common good. It involves citizens and, accordingly, they need to be good (active, committed, engaged) as well – in accordance with such common good, which is to pervade their character as well. And, in order to be good and, thus, incorporated into the polity, they will unendingly need to be educated as required. But, in spite of such education, there are still likely to be those who deviate from all that ‘goodness’.

In a similar way, students (like teachers and school leaders) are members of schools and classrooms nested in them. Students (but also teachers and school leaders) are expected to enact prescribed roles, which often include compliance (e.g., conforming to rules and procedures) (see Deakin Crick, 2012 and Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 445). Interestingly, roles required from students have been conceptualised, in the words of Florio and Schultz (1979, p. 237), as a set of “shifting rights and duties distributed among members of a group”. When conceptualising student engagement, Reeve (2012) however stresses the importance of what he has referred to as ‘agentic engagement’ on the basis of the incorporation of ‘agency’ “as a fourth aspect of engagement” (together with the behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions) (p. 162; also Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Lawson & Lawson (2013) also draw attention to it as associated with “more authentic and action-oriented (e.g., behavioural) forms of engagement” (p. 445). Reeve defines it as “students’ intentional, proactive, and constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive”, by creating, enhancing, and personalising the conditions and circumstances under which they learn. (Reeve, 2012, p. 161). According to him, this form of engagement enriches the learning experience “*rather than just passively receive it as a given*” [italics added] (Reeve, 2012, p. 150). However, the possibility of *constructing it actively as a given* is not excluded but quite the contrary. In fact, Reeve suggests the following example:

*For instance, upon hearing the learning objective for the day (e.g., “Today, class, we are going to learn about Mendel’s experiments on heredity.”), an agentially engaged student might offer input, make a suggestion, express a preference, contribute something helpful, seek clarification, request an example, ask for a say in how problems will be solved, or a 100 other constructive and personalizing acts that functionally enhance the conditions under which the student learns (p. 161).*

Note that the learning objective, the contents and the students-*qua*-achievers are *givens*. If this happens, the students would be actively participating, on the condition that they do so according to how it is assumed they are to participate. If they do not participate as taken-for-granted, students’ (and even teachers’) responses may be ignored, discounted or, directly, ‘not sensed’ (heard, seen). As recently expressed by the authors of a study on student participation in everyday school life (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012):

*According to observations and interviews, children’s voices in terms of having a say, and in terms of democratic participation in decision-making, are suppressed in classroom management and the making of school and classroom rules, as well as in classroom instruction and school work. When the pupils start going to school, there is already a set of explicit school and classroom rules, which they are expected to comply with (p. 48).*

Underlying those distinctions, a ‘hierarchy of capacity’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 27) defining and separating teachers from students may be identified. Moreover, actions aiming “to reduce the gulf separating” them effect such reduction “on condition that it is constantly re-created” (Rancière, 2009, p. 8). Alternatively, students’ decisions and actions are considered to be disruptive.

These views of membership fit into what Rancière calls ‘police’ that refers not to a repressive force but to an order (including a distribution of roles) (Clarke, 2013, p. 14). In his words, it is a configurational ordering of the ‘tangible reality’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 28) or, in more specific terms, *an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and say-*

able that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise (Rancière, 1999, p. 29).

This police order is likely to be primarily associated with formal orders like the state and its institutions. However, he asserts that it is beyond this realm: “The distribution of places and roles that defines a police regime stems as much from the assumed spontaneity of social relations as from the rigidity of state functions” (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). In whatever way, perceptible elements (what is seen, what is heard, what is said, what is done, what there is, and so on) are arranged and combined in a particular way.

Such a configuration of the perceptible ‘inscribes’ certain elements whilst it does not inscribe other elements. Thus, the ‘police’ can be conceived of as a particular “configuration of inclusion and exclusion” (Gunnflo & Selberg, 2010, p. 175). As stated by Bingham and Biesta (2010), such configurational order is “all-inclusive”, because “everyone has a particular place, role or position in it” (p. 34). “In this matching of functions, places, and ways of being, there is no place for any void”, writes Rancière (2010, p. 36). But, on the other hand, this ‘all-inclusiveness’ however coalesces with “exclusion of what ‘there is not’” (Rancière, 2010, p. 36) and, therefore, does not have a part (this including to have a part other than the part allocated) (May, 2010, p. 71). A ‘partition’ happens, and it “should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, that which separates and excludes; on the other, that which allows participation” (Rancière, 2010, p. 36). Two other related features of a police order deserve attention. First, this separation is often operated on the basis of a (fluid) distinction between those with (higher) capacities and those with no or less capacities. A police order presupposes inequality. Sometimes it is recognised that they “all are by nature equal” but it is also assumed that this contravene the “natural order of things”, requiring that the most capable rule over the less capable: recognised equality then needs to be “subordinated” to such order (May, 2008, p. 44). If there is an equality here, and in many cases there is one, it remains what May calls a “passive equality”; that is, an equality “distributed to rather than created by those who are its object” (May, 2008, p. 44). At the end, the police order still presupposes inequali-

ty. Second, this configuration is consensual and, thus, the ‘police’ can be conceptualised as “...the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution” (Rancière 1999, p. 28).

## 7. Disengagement as democratic, political engagement?

In Rancière’s view, most of what is normally understood as politics can be thought of as ‘the police’ (see Davis, 2010, p. 76). But ‘politics’, in his view, is not a police order. Moreover, in his work there is a radical “opposition” between ‘police’ and ‘politics’ (Davis, 2010, p. 74). To put it in Rancière’s words, politics is “an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing” (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). It is just “the mode of acting that perturbs” the police order (Rancière, 2004b, p. 226) “by supplementing it with a part of those without part” (Rancière, 2010, p. 36). First and foremost, politics is acting. But any act is not necessarily ‘political’. According to the republican, political (more than legal) understanding of citizenship, citizenship is active, engaged participation in the public affairs in order to realise the common good. This is not political according to Rancière. Political action consists in disruption. According to Rancière, “the essence of the political is **dissensus**” [italics added] (2000, p. 124; also Tanke, 2011, p. 61). Hence, politics is at odds with consensus. Moreover, “consensus is the reduction of politics to the police” and, thus, it means the “cancellation” of politics (Rancière, 2010, p. 42). This crucial notion is further delineated as follows:

1. *What is the matter of such dissensus?* It is not an opposition or conflict of interests, opinions or values either (for instance, Rancière, 2004c, p. 304). According to Rancière himself, it is “a dispute about what is given” [italics added] (Rancière, 2004c, p. 304); thus, it affects “the givens of a particular situation, of what is seen and what might be said, on the question of who is qualified to see or say what is given” [italics added] (Rancière, 2000, p. 124). In other words, “it is not a quarrel over which solutions to apply to a situation but a dispute over the situation itself” (Rancière 2004a, p. 6).

2. *What are specifically the elements of this dispute?* Rancière speaks of politics as “made up of relationships between worlds” (Rancière, 1999, p. 42). Dissensus and, thus, politics oppose the world as given (the police order) with postulates of *another world* (Tanke 2011). In general terms, these two worlds are the world taken under the assumption of inequality and the world arisen from the assumption of equality, respectively. Dissensus and, thus, politics emerge from confronting the former one and the latter one. However equality is “not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance” (Rancière, 1991, p. 138). Of course, this presupposition cannot be proven beyond contention. Equality presupposed from the onset can and is to be verified and expressed: that is, it is confirmed by producing proofs once again, and manifestations are given for them (Citton, 2010). Through these demonstrations that process inequality and enact equality, dissensus opens an interpretation of sense which contests exclusion (Tanke, 2011; Schaap, 2011).

3. *Finally, what does it turn to happen?* Rancière (2004c) has written: “This is what I call a dissensus: putting two worlds in one and the same world” (p.304). The police order is supplemented with parts which are no parts within it; that is, people whose existence is refused to be identified in the police order and, therefore, who have no share in the decision-making process ordering their lives - although they are coming to arise as having no part. These people assert their existence by presupposing and asserting the equality of anyone with anyone and, when doing this, they come into being as political subjects. “Politics is a matter of subjects”, states Rancière (1999, p. 35). For him, the terms ‘man’ and ‘citizen’ are not “definite collectivities” and “do not designate collections of individuals”; rather, they are “political subjects” (Rancière, 2004c, p. 303). And this process of emancipation which consists of coming to be politically is what he has called ‘subjectivation’ or ‘subjectification’. Rancière (1999) himself defines it as “the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the

reconfiguration of the field of experience” (p. 35).

Tanke (2011, pp. 67-68) distinguishes two closely related moves in this important process of **subjectification**: disidentification and creation of a new subjectivity. On the one hand, those referred to as the part with no part are not taking up an existing identity (i.e. a way of being identifiable that is established within the existing police order) (also Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 33). On the contrary, subjectivation involves disidentification or “removal from the naturalness of a place” (Rancière, 1999, p. 36; see also Rancière, 1992, p. 61); that is, the eventual subjects of politics separate themselves from the identities defined by the existing natural order. For instance, children and younger people are no longer the compliant students or, alternatively, even the active, engaged students that are expected to be in schools and its classrooms<sup>7</sup>. But, whilst this very process happens, there is no replacement of an identity for another one. There is a ‘transformation of identities’ defined in the police order into “instances of experience of a dispute” (Rancière, 1999, p. 36). In consequence, there is in no way “a form of ,culture’, of some collective ethos capable of finding a voice” but “a multiplicity” (Rancière, 1999, p. 36) or, stated in another way, “a crossing of identities”, this entailing “an impossible identification” (Rancière, 1992, p. 61). This very process opens up “a subject space” (Rancière, 1999, p. 36) and, then, “inscribes a subject name *as being different from any identified part*” [italics added] (Rancière, 1999, p. 37). Hence, subjectification can be considered to ‘supplement’ “the existing order of things” “because it adds something to this order”; and precisely for this reason, the supplement also “recomposes” or “reconfigures” such order (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 33). For Rancière, the ‘*demos*’ (or people) is a name for that ,part of those who have no part’ [*une part des sans-part*], which comes into being as political subject (e.g., Rancière 1999, pp. 8-9, 11 and 35; also Rancière, 2010) and, hence, that “through which the specificity of politics occurs” (Rancière, 1999, p. 72).

Bingham & Biesta (2010, p. 74) remind us that democracy points to the inclusion of the *demos* (“which ultimately means the whole *demos*”), or people, into the ruling (*kratein*) of the society. After highlighting

<sup>7</sup> In their typology of student engagement dispositions, Lawson and Lawson (2013) include ,disidentification’, which is the most negatively-laden category because it describes “students’ avoidance or disengagement tendencies”, or “why students may choose to not engage in particular activities and/or activity settings” (p. 451).

that ‘democracy’ “was a term invented by its opponents”, Rancière equates *demos* not with *the* whole but with a part: not a disadvantaged part recognised as such a part in the police order but simply such a ‘part-having-no-part’, i.e. “the people who do not count” but “who partakes in what he has no part in” (Rancière, 2010, p. 32). The insertion of this *demos* from the former position into a new configuration under the assumption of equality is conceived of as democracy by Rancière. Two consequences can be highlighted. On the one hand, he notes that ‘equality of anyone with anyone’ comes to be “absence of *arkhe*” (Rancière 1999, p. 15). Democracy is marked by the fact that it rests on the absence of a foundation (birth, wealth, virtue or even citizenship according to orthodox views) as the basis for the right to rule; democracy is just “founded in opposition to the activity of determining membership on the basis of principles” (Tanke, 2011, p. 53). On the other hand, in absence of *arkhe* or foundation, the disruption of the police order emerges. For him, this is a central characteristic of democracy: “Democracy is the name of a singular interruption” of the police order (Hewlett, 2007, p. 109). A *demos* “contests the assumptions about who belongs, what capacities they possess, and what roles they can occupy” and “the means by which the *demos* achieves this is equality” (Tanke, 2011, p. 44). Democracy comes to be a “contingent force” that “resides in the egalitarian and creative power of the *demos*” (Means, 2011, pp. 29 and 32).

## 6. Concluding remarks

Two major conclusions are highlighted. Firstly, the institutional character of school matters. The phenomena of engagement and disengagement may be anchored to it. Schools have been considered to be ‘institutionalized organisations’; namely, organisations particularly dependent on their institutional environments (e.g., Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Meyer & Rowan, 2006). This means that these organisations significantly depend on incorporating surrounding legitimately instituted elements such as assumptions, beliefs, ideologies, norms themselves, rules or expectations of behaviour, because such incorporation is indeed the basis of their legitimation, which, in turn, leaves the prospect of survival and even suc-

cess - whilst, in this way, supporting and sustaining the underpinning institutions. Notwithstanding significant changes affecting (formally) democratic citizenship and schooling, the former is still a core institution, and the latter is still among its key carriers (e.g., Boli, Ramirez & Meyer, 1985 and, more recently, Fischman & Haas, 2012; Kamens, 2012). Moreover, not only both have not yet been able to overcome inequality but both have been considered to be contributing to it. Adopting the lens provided by Rancière, (received) citizenship and schools may then be viewed as components of a broader ‘police order’ (e.g., Simons & Masschelein, 2010).

Secondly, institutions may be disrupted by students (among others) ‘disengaging’ from them whilst trying to make a difference to their lives, being implied that it may be a form of ‘political engagement’ contributing to democracy – a sounder yet more complex one. A number of scholars have endorsed a critical stance on student engagement (e.g., Vibert & Shields, 2003, McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Fielding, 2006; Zyngier, 2007; McMahon & Portelli, 2012). According to this perspective, student engagement is understood as everyday joint active participation of students (together with other agents) in learning and school to challenge ingrained inequalities and injustices and to make transformations in education and beyond. Some of them have provided more or less detailed descriptions of these forms of engagement (for instance, Fielding, 2006 and Fielding and Moss, 2011, pp. 75-80; Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2008 and Smyth, 2012; Zyngier, 2007, 2012). This contribution aims to add to this literature by foregrounding disengagement as leading to deep transformations; that is, new forms of insertion of new ways of being, doing, and speaking premised on the supposition of equality: this is ‘subjectification’ (see Shaw, 2012). Accordingly, disengagement does need to be viewed necessarily as a detrimental and negative (mere) epiphenomenon to be ameliorated. It is worth reminding that that ‘disengagement’ means ‘the action or process of withdrawing from involvement in an activity, situation, or group’ but also refers to ‘the process of becoming released’ (Oxford Dictionary of English).

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