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Parental public pedagogies: The perspective of two case studies?

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Abstract

Research objectives and problem(s): The aim of this article is to analyze parental public pedagogies from the perspective of two case studies.

Research methods: This case study adopts a qualitative case study design and uses narrative interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Process of argumentation: The article begins with a discussion of the theoretical foundations of public space, public pedagogies, and issues related to parental involvement. This is followed by a presentation of the research design, the findings, and a discussion of the forms of public pedagogies demonstrated in both cases.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The people at the center of both case studies interrupt and disrupt the public space of which they are a part. Their interruptions express disagreement with what Gert J. J. Biesta describes as an “egological” form of existence: one focused solely on the individual self. Through their ongoing engagement with subjectivity, both participants—as parent and as teacher—develop a pedagogy of interruption.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The article concludes with reflections, including forward-looking ones, drawing attention to the role of networks of parent–researchers in public space in strengthening the subjective representations of both parents and researchers.

Keywords:

parents, public space,
public pedagogy,
parental public
pedagogy,
interruption

Introduction

The concept for this text emerged in response to an invitation to participate in the international conference *“Word in Education,” 11th Edition: Family, School and Local Community – Educational Partnership*, held at Ignatianum University in Krakow on September 26–28, 2024.

Initially, I wanted to prepare my conference presentation in a way that would engage potential researchers in the proposed issue of parental public pedagogy and encourage them—by becoming researchers who support one another within the research networks presented—to help disseminate this idea. Later, while drafting the article and keeping these aims in mind, I focused on describing the forms of parental public pedagogies that emerged from my research. Above all, it is through these research results that I hope to achieve these goals.

I have organized the argument in this text on the basis of the research results presented below. In general, the milestones are as follows:

1. Parents create their own pedagogies, and these are forms of public pedagogies.
2. Parents do so in cooperation with teachers and local communities.
3. This cooperation responds to current challenges, which often takes the form of jointly practiced public pedagogy that is sensitive to social and cultural contexts.

With this in mind, I will structure the text by moving from a presentation of the concept of public pedagogy to a discussion of the methodological aspects of my research, followed by the research findings and prospective conclusions that emphasize the importance of networks of scholars studying parents in schools, society, and related contexts.

My research-based presentation of parental public pedagogies is inspired by two studies. The first focused on Dorota Łoboda, a well-known leader of the parental movement in Poland (a case at the national level). The second examined the work of a teacher, Krzysztof Rześniowiecki, who won the Gdańsk “Teacher of the Year” competition (a case at the local level).

In developing the research conclusions about the important role played by networks of researchers working with and among parents, I will conclude by presenting examples of such associations, including the International Network of Scholars on School, Family, and Community Partnerships (INET) (traditionally based in the US, but essentially global); the European Research Network About Parents in Education (ERNAPE) (conventionally European, yet in practice global); and the Polish Research Network Parents in Education – ERNAPE-PL.

To conclude this introduction, the most important aim of this text is to present the “parental public pedagogy” that I have observed—offered here in an outline form, grounded in empirical research and inspired by it. Because carrying out this intention requires substantial theoretical reflection, the text ultimately takes the form of a research-based theoretical essay that sketches the concept of parental public pedagogy.

In this text, I focus on manifestations of parental pedagogy in the public spaces of schools and their social environments, linking these manifestations to Gert J. J. Biesta’s concept of public pedagogy and thereby shaping the contours of the concept proposed here.

Starting point: The concept of public pedagogy

The concept of public pedagogy is based on the premise that pedagogy—centered on the subject and on education—focuses on events that take place in public space, *between people*. What happens between people in the public space that they co-create has both an educational and a political character (cf. Dewey 1916; Giroux 1998, 2003; Biesta 2012, 2014, 2017). Such pedagogy raises questions about the relationships that constitute it—relationships that “take place” (Biesta 2017, pp. 14–15; cf. 2012, 2013). One of the main creators of contemporary concepts of public pedagogy, Gert J. J. Biesta, argues that we do not simply exist in the world but constantly move toward it, and it is *there*—in public space—that we establish and maintain relationships with others. These relationships co-create the public sphere (Biesta 2012; 2014, 2017).

In light of my previous studies on “the public” in the context of parental engagement as power (Mendel 2020a, 2020b; 2022) and my recognition of the role of space and place (cf. Mendel 2019), I adopted Biesta’s approach as essential to my understanding of public pedagogy.

Biesta sees public space, constituted through politically and educationally formed relationships (and sensitive to aesthetic relations), as the very space of public pedagogy. Public space *is* the space of public pedagogy. He defines public pedagogy as an expression of the relationship (or intersection of influences) between education and politics. At the same time, he emphasizes the obvious fact that pedagogical approaches are present not only in institutional education but also outside it, taking over its functions and assuming various forms (Biesta 2014). Therefore, public pedagogy involves and concerns everyone, regardless of age, status, etc. Within this framework, Biesta identifies three types of public pedagogy:

1. Pedagogy for the public — a “top-down,” dedicated pedagogy directed at people whom we believe ought to be taught how to be or act in public space (Biesta 2012, pp. 683–697).
2. Pedagogy of the public — an “instructors’ pedagogy,” the pedagogy of those who shape public space but, contrary to their declared intentions, risk objectifying others by teaching them how to achieve freedom out of a supposed concern for their freedom (Biesta 2012, pp. 695–696).
3. Pedagogy as concern for “publicness” — that is, for togetherness, commonality, and good coexistence; also described as “public pedagogy in the interest of publicness,” which Biesta treats as the preferred and recommended form (Biesta 2012, pp. 683–697).

Given my research interests, I focused most on the third type. Biesta describes this pedagogy as being together in the public space “where action is possible and freedom can appear” (Biesta 2012, p. 693). Following Hannah Arendt, the author repeats this statement multiple times, treating it as a kind of signpost for this optimal version of public pedagogy (Biesta 2012).

If this preferred form of public pedagogy is to be grounded in the possibility of action and freedom, then the possibility of interruption must play a key role. Interruption is understood as an intentional act, undertaken out of concern for the quality of shared space: an expression of *dissensus*. What might such interruptions look like? How might they be practiced?

Biesta's thinking confirms the assumptions—following Jacques Rancière (2005)—about the effectiveness of interruption (or, in Rancière's terms, fissures, ruptures, disruptions) that interfere with the existing public space, that is, the current and seemingly unacceptable configuration of relationships that constitute the public sphere. Assuming that becoming part of public space, and thus co-creating it, depends on the quality of interpersonal bonds, Biesta points to the constant possibility of educational interruption; for example, an interruption enacted through the staging of one's disagreement, a public performance of what is unacceptable within the shared space. Such interruption means "to introduce an incommensurable element—an event, an experience and an object—that can act both as a test and as a reminder of publicness" (Biesta 2012, p. 697).

On research design: Methodological points

With this in mind, I assumed that public pedagogy exists wherever interruptions take place in public space. Therefore, in my research, whose aim was to identify these enacted, parental public pedagogies, I was attentive to interruptions in all their possible forms and variations.

The research on which I base my argument consists of two case studies (the first conducted in 2020, the second in 2023), both of which use narrative interviewing (individual and group) and document analysis. The results of the first study have been published (Mendel 2023). Maintaining the qualitative orientation of this work, I focused on producing a description well-grounded in the material gathered in both cases, from 2020 and 2023. The specific aims for me were:

- 1/ to describe the generalized experience of the research participants' educational and political activities in public space;
- 2/ to present an image of what striving for the common good and democratic equality in a shared space looks like.

With these aims in mind, I posed the following key question: Do the respondents interrupt the relationally understood public space and, if so, in what way (how, where, etc.)?

In the first case, I concentrated on the activity of Dorota Łoboda, a mother of two daughters and a well-known leader of the “Parents Against Education Reform” movement. This movement brings together over a million participants, active across the country and protesting in various forms against the government’s reform initiatives. Łoboda also runs the “Parents Have a Voice” foundation as its president. She is active in the feminist movement as well and serves on the Program Council of the nationwide “Congress of Women.” Recently, she was elected to the Polish Parliament (Sejm).

I conducted my interview with Łoboda in May 2020 (by phone due to pandemic restrictions), having obtained her consent to publish the interview and her name. The transcript of that interview served as the main research material for this case study. In the original study, I also analyzed additional documents, such as parliamentary materials on parent-proposed solutions, minutes from parliamentary sessions, and press and online articles concerning parental activities in the context of Polish education and society. In this article, I keep that material in mind as background, but I rely chiefly on the interview data.

In the second case study, I focused on a high school art teacher who won a local “Teacher of the Year” competition. “Krzysztof Rzeźniowiecki is a passionate and dedicated teacher. He works wonderfully with parents,” as the award laudation stated. The aim of the Gdańsk Teacher of the Year competition is to select educators who are creative and effective leaders in their local environment—those who inspire the entire community, especially the educational community, and who undertake important and valuable work for the benefit of Gdańsk and its residents,

particularly in the spirit of citizenship, solidarity, responsibility for the common good, and freedom. In 2023, awards were given for achievements in the area of Dialogue (<https://www.trojmiasto.pl/nauka/Gdancscy-nauczyciele-i-dyrektorzy-roku-2023-wybrani-kto-wygral-n183902.html>, accessed 20-08-2024).

All of this encouraged me to use this case study to examine public pedagogy and the interruptions that Rzeźniowiecki may enact within it. To do so, I visited and observed the school several times and conducted individual and focus-group interviews with him and his colleagues, including the principal and other teachers, as well as with the students that he teaches. Through them, I was also able to gain insight into parents' roles and relationships with the school.

Findings: Case 1. Dorota Łoboda (cf. Mendel 2023)

Let us begin with Łoboda's beginnings and the path that she traveled through education, politics, and a fragile community toward resistance. As she said:

I felt that parents didn't have enough influence and that we, as parents, could offer a lot to the school and help make it a more child-friendly place. And that's really where it all started. (...) I had the sense that our fragile community, something we had managed to build in my daughters' school, would simply collapse under the pressure of what the authorities had imposed on us, and I was deeply convinced that these schools would change for the worse after the reform.

Parents in this movement came together in opposition to decisions made at the political level: decisions that shape school life and steer society in a controversial direction. Resistance became the primary foundation of this movement. Łoboda and other parents (acting in alliance with teachers) disrupted the existing public space; there were fissures and ruptures that interfered with that space. What did this interruption look like?

And this social activity of mine also sort of entered wider waters then; I started organizing **demonstrations**. And then it somehow just naturally turned out that I would be running in local government elections, because this role of educational activist and social activist really leads you up against a wall at some point, right? (all emphases in interview excerpts are mine)

The demonstration was the first and most frequently used form of interruption by Łoboda. Her public pedagogy could be described as a *pedagogy of demonstration*: a pedagogy of manifesting opposition to “what the authorities impose on us.” As she said:

the conditions we’re living in, especially in Poland right now, make (...) a large group of parents rebel against what the authorities impose on us and what we see happening in schools. And of course, this didn’t start with the Law and Justice government. (...) And the way it is—in my opinion—is that people are much more active when they’re fighting against something, unfortunately. I regret that, because I would like us to be active in doing something positive. But on the other hand, the greatest surge of energy always comes when someone tries to impose something on us and we **rebel**.

In this way, Łoboda conceptualizes rebellion through the lens of politics and the pedagogy of interruption. On the one hand, she speaks about the conditions that make the existing public space unacceptable—where the authorities’ imposition of particular educational frameworks and content amounts to a denial of citizens’ freedom. On the other hand, she stresses the educational power of resisting such imposition, which results in “building a movement of people who do not agree” and “growing up in rebellion.”

Findings: Case 2. Krzysztof Rześniowiecki

The character of this teacher is captured well in the following excerpt from an interview with the principal of the school where he works:

he's not only a teacher and school pedagogue—he's **actually the spirit that holds our school together**. How does he do it? He has an extraordinary talent for writing. I don't know if you know this, but he's on Wikipedia. Students always joke that "We have to meet the guy who wrote Tabaluga," which is an animated series which he wrote the lyrics for. (...) He doesn't brag about it, but he's written a lot of lyrics for cartoons and various songs. So sometimes when we have a school quiz and the question is, "Who wrote the song in Tabaluga?" well, they all know it was Rześniowiecki. And whenever we have any kind of school celebration (...), it's always: "Krzysiu, write something for us." Not even two hours go by and Krzysiek shows up with... well, practically a poem! (...) Krzysiek is simply invaluable! (...) **And everybody knows him, too. Like I said, everyone crosses paths with him. And all the parents come into contact with him. When we ask about a student, he always knows, he knows the name, and he'll say, "Oh yes, yes. That parent wrote to me. I wrote back about this." He's just... well, that's... a personality! (...) He's really an absolutely outstanding personality.** (Interview with the school principal)

The Teacher of the Year competition materials detail many of Rześniowiecki's activities, including: an annual inaugural letter to the parents of first-year students; around twenty **letters** each school year on pedagogical and supportive themes over the past four years; the establishment of a "**telephone bridge**" with parents in 2019; annual **art installations** at the school; **exhibitions of students' work**; **field trips to art exhibitions** as a platform for dialogue about art; and yearly meetings with students at a **team-building camp**, which he has attended for thirty years (<https://www.trojmiasto.pl/nauka/Gdancscy-nauczyciele-i-dyrektorzy-roku-2023-wybrani-kto-wygral-n183902.html>, accessed 20-08-2024).

The interruptions initiated by Rześniowiecki are illustrated most strikingly in his concept of telephone bridging, which he titled *“The Bridge.”* The starting point for these interruptions was his disagreement with the conditions created by the pandemic, specifically, with how the pandemic altered the nature of relationships.

I came up with the name (“The Bridge”) so that it would sound like something. But when the pandemic came and the lockdowns started (...) well, you know... And an actual conversation, even over the phone, hearing someone’s voice, is somehow so much more valuable than just typing on a keyboard. **I had to come up with something.** I decided to use my database—I have an accessible database of parents who put their phone numbers in there themselves—to make daily check-in calls, I don’t know, to two or three people from each class, to the parents of students in each class, to ask how they were doing, how the parent and the student were coping, how the family was coping, how they were feeling, what their situation was, and what they might expect from us, etc. And I always got such warm, friendly reactions from the parents. They were happy that someone cared about them. I even heard in one conversation, “You’re the only teacher who even asked how we’re feeling. Because even during pre-pandemic school no one ever asked us that.” And that gave me the courage to keep this *Bridge* going, to send parents the signal that we’re here, that we’re living teachers, that we think about you, that if something happens, have the courage to call or reach out.

Rześniowiecki’s interruptions became inspirations for others. His public pedagogy engages parents and other participants in the social world that he inhabits. Moreover, his method provokes and encourages parental interruptions: their own practice of parental public pedagogy.

In interviews, he repeatedly said, “Let’s get to know each other; let’s do something together.” Other teachers, the principal, and students quoted these words often. Rześniowiecki had a clear vision of parents participating in the life of the school and the local community, and he

refused to let that vision remain hypothetical. Instead, he mobilized everyone around him to bring it to life:

Recently, Mr. Rześniowiecki said (...) that parents should share their hobbies. For example, they send links, and we know where these parents perform at concerts. So it's like we also know something more about these parents (...) This helps us a lot in our work. (Interview with the school principal)

Thanks to Rześniowiecki, it has become standard practice for everyone to exhibit in the school's exhibition spaces: students, parents, and teachers. It is normal. The school gallery sometimes extends beyond the school, and sometimes exhibitions come into the school from the outside. It is mainly the parents who organize themselves, and as a result, both the school and the city have a richer calendar of artistic and cultural events. But **all of this began with Rześniowiecki's initiatives** or inspirations (paraphrase: group interview).

Discussion and Conclusions

Dorota Łoboda and Krzysztof Rześniowiecki interrupt and they do so on the basis of their belief in the constant possibility of educational interruption, through actions that resemble staging their own disagreement, by introducing "an incommensurable element ... that can act both as a test and as a reminder of publicness" (Biesta 2012, p. 697). With their consistent focus on subjectivity, Łoboda as a parent and Rześniowiecki as a teacher both appear to develop what Biesta calls a pedagogy of interruption (Biesta 2012; 2013; 2017). Their interruptions expressed their disagreement with what Biesta terms the "*egological*" form of existence—one focused on the individual self (cf. Biesta 2017, p. 14). They moved beyond the egological way of being together in a public space. They turned their interruptions into socially shared activity, extending far beyond their immediate surroundings. Their actions demonstrated a capacity to spread

and take root; they inspired other teachers, parents, students, and local communities and contributed to the collective construction of a better public space for all.

In light of the discussion and the analysis of these two cases, several conclusions emerge:

1. **Parents interrupt—and in doing so, they create their own public pedagogies.**
2. **They do so in cooperation with teachers and local communities.**
In some cases, it is the teacher, such as Rześniowiecki, who inspires parental public pedagogy, resulting in a jointly practiced form of public pedagogy.

Parental public pedagogies do not arise in isolation as the product of a single person's interruption. This is also evident in the relationships formed during research, such as during interviews. As I know from both respondents at the center of these case studies, my appearance in their professional lives mattered to them:

Thank you very much. **This conversation with you today is very important to me. I am very willing to cooperate**, so if I can help you with anything or be useful, please let me know. (Interview with D. Łoboda)

Well, **in general it is important to me, and I am very pleased that the University of Gdańsk—that you are interested in me, that you came to the school and really took an interest in our school** so attentively. (Interview with K. Rześniowiecki)

This research observation seems to support a prospective conclusion: the researcher and the researched jointly create subjective representations. For those being studied, parents and teachers implementing their public pedagogies, this becomes a space of mutual support. A researcher who takes interest in parents or teachers in the public sphere strengthens their subjective presence in that space.

Conversely, for researchers studying parents (in public space, “parents in education” etc.), support takes the form of organizations: research networks, associations, and collaborative communities. With this in mind, I will present examples of such networks, which provide the groundwork for such support. The research presented here seems to lead naturally to a recommendation: strengthen these networks.

International Network of Scholars on School, Family, and Community Partnerships – INET. In 1991, Joyce L. Epstein and the late Don Davies founded this network. Every other year, INET meets during the American (World) Educational Research Association conferences (AERA, WERA), bringing together researchers from many countries—more than 300 scholars from over 30 nations—to share their studies on all aspects of family and community engagement. INET organizes its International Roundtables on School, Family, and Community Partnerships (co-sponsored by the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University; the Family, School, Community Partnerships Special Interest Group (SIG) of AERA; and the Johns Hopkins University School of Education). INET works in close cooperation with the European Research Network About Parents in Education (ERNAPE). The conferences of both organizations are held every two years, alternating between them (e.g., ERNAPE 2025, INET 2026).

European Research Network About Parents in Education – ERNAPE (www.ernape.org). In October 1993, with financial support from the European Commission, a group of researchers working on issues related to parents in education across different parts of Europe met in Glasgow to debate how to strengthen connections across Europe, exchange knowledge about evolving research, and stimulate studies on parents in education at all levels — including intercultural European research. The group decided to establish ERNAPE, the European Research Network About Parents in Education. The term “parents in education” encompasses parents’ relationships to school systems as well as parents’ and families’ contributions to children’s learning outside of school. ERNAPE is open, with ongoing membership through participation (attending conferences makes you a network member).

ERNAPE is relevant to anyone conducting research in education, educational administration, educational psychology, educational sociology, and related fields. It is also of interest to parents, teachers, and their organizations. ERNAPE is an independent body, unaffiliated with any political, religious, or ideological groups. Its journal, the *International Journal about Parents in Education* (www.ijpe.eu), invites researchers, parents, and teachers to publish scientific articles.

Polish Research Network About Parents in Education (Polska Sieć Badawcza Rodzice w Edukacji) – ERNAPE-PL (www.ernape.pl – since 2026: <https://ernapepl.ug.edu.pl>). In 2017, under the patronage and with the organizational support of the Social Pedagogy Team of the Committee of Pedagogical Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), my invitation to join a research network bringing together scholars working on parenting issues was circulated. For years, I had wanted to create such a network in Poland, organizing it as a national branch of the European one, ERNAPE-PL. The invitation prompted numerous applications from Polish researchers. The first conference was held in Gdańsk in the spring of 2018, where the foundations for further cooperation were laid in the form of submitted declarations. Currently, the fourth conference—this time an extended and unusual edition—is underway, consisting of webinars and collaboration among researchers within four thematic “study circles” (May–December 2024). The network is open (ongoing invitation) and continues to grow. It brings together researchers, both academics and practitioners, who connect their research interests with parents and education. At present, several dozen people collaborate in research (with nearly 70 sharing their data on the network’s website). ERNAPE-PL is expanding, making use of the opportunities offered by ERNAPE, such as conferences, the *International Journal About Parents in Education* (IJPE), and other forms of scientific exchange and cooperation. The network was established at the University of Gdańsk (Institute of Pedagogy: Department of Social Pedagogy), which remains its main institutional home. Thanks to effective cooperation with Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw, since 2024 these two universities have jointly served as ERNAPE-PL’s affiliations.

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