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# ‘The children have only got one education and you have to make sure it’s a good one’: parenting and parent–school relations in a neoliberal age

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws on data from 20 years of qualitative projects with parents to discuss and analyse four issues. The first is the apparent responsibilities of parents to deliver both the school and home setting which will provide ‘the best’ for their children. Second, the gendering of parental responsibilities. Third, I investigate how class and ethnicity shape parents’ relationships with educational institutions. Drawing on Bourdieu’s conceptual framework, I consider how parents’ habitus and the forms and volumes of capital they both possess and can activate inform their struggles for position in the field of schooling. Fourth, I seek to complicate the binary between middle-class and working-class parents with the former commonly assumed to be powerful and effective in the field of schooling, and the latter powerless and ineffective. I conclude by considering the direction of future research on home–school relations.

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## Introduction

The words of a white working-class London-based mother, cited in the title, sum up the sense of responsibility many parents feel towards their children’s schooling. Yet, this is almost always accompanied by a sense of unease as to how best to ‘make sure’ children receive a ‘good’ education. This paper examines parents’ responses to this dilemma drawing on data from my 20 years of research with parents. The data are from qualitative projects based on semi-structured interviews with parents from a range of class backgrounds and ethnic origins, and were collected as part of research into parent–school relationships in primary and secondary schools (e.g. Vincent 1996, 2001); parents’ social relationships with others unlike themselves (in terms of class and/or ethnicity) (Vincent, Neal, and Iqbal 2016); middle-class and working-class parents choosing childcare (Vincent and Ball 2006; Vincent, Ball, and Braun 2010) and the educational strategies of Black (Caribbean-origin) middle-class parents (Vincent et al. 2012a; Rollock et al. 2015). Considering this varied data set, I identify and consider four themes that arise. First, I analyse the messages, shaped by a neoliberal climate, about the responsibilities of

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parents to deliver both the school and home setting which will provide ‘the best’ for their children. Second, I will discuss the fundamental argument that ‘parent’ is, in practice, rarely the gender-neutral term that it appears to be. I argue, using examples from my research, that parenting responsibilities still fall most heavily upon women, and particularly upon working-class women. Third, and turning to focus in particular on parents’ relationships with schools and early years settings, I investigate how class and ethnicity shape parents’ relationships with educational institutions, deploying data from several qualitative research projects with multi-ethnic groups of parents of pre-school, primary and secondary aged children. Drawing on Bourdieu’s conceptual framework, I consider how parental habitus and the forms and volumes of capital they both possess and can activate inform their struggles for position in the field of schooling. Fourth, I seek to complicate the binary between middle-class and working-class parents, with the former commonly assumed to be powerful and effective in the field of schooling, and the latter powerless and ineffective. I attempt a more nuanced understanding of class position and how this influences parents’ relationships with schools in two ways, first by drawing attention to class fractions and the apparently forgotten ‘intermediate’ class, and second by drawing on notions of intersectionality, and mapping out the potential intersections of class and ethnicity. These four themes seem to me to address key issues regarding the direction of contemporary parenting and home–school relations, and the role of class, gender and ethnicity in shaping both parental experiences of policy and lived interaction with schools. I conclude by considering the direction of future research on home–school relations.

### Theme 1. Learning how to parent

Over the last 20 years in England, public policy has focused on families, with state intervention into what was once seen as a private sphere being increasingly accepted (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014, 107). Thus, parenting classes, parenting orders and parenting ‘warmth’ have all featured on recent policy agendas. As a result, parenting in England is presented in policy as *the* way to ensure the child’s success, and parents, mothers in particular, are firmly positioned as the individuals responsible for the child’s emotional, social, educational, and physical development. Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson note that Labour, coalition, and Conservative governments have been active in this sphere, and discuss the different governments’ championing of parenting classes, analysing this as the way the state seeks to develop the context in which the future ‘citizen-workers’ are raised. Policy interventions under ex-Prime Minister Cameron included a trial attempt to universalise parenting classes through CANParent<sup>1</sup> – and an emphasis on the importance of the home environment. Parenting classes are indicative of a ‘roll out’ form of neoliberalism which reconstitutes neoliberalism in ‘a more socially interventionist and ameliorative form’ (Peck and Tickell 2002, 388). However, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) argue that this emphasis on intervention into the family through parenting classes is seemingly at odds with the government’s strategy of ensuring local authorities reduce local state services (including those for families and children) in the name of austerity, thereby signalling a return to the 1980s ‘roll back’ form of neoliberalism, which sought to heavily reduce the welfare state. An insistence on parental responsibility

and self-sufficiency is, of course, a discourse with some utility when welfare state support services are being reduced. Hence, the emphasis on parenting quality. For example:

What matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing, but the warmth of their parenting. (David Cameron, Prime Minister 2010–2016, speech to Demos, January 2010)

What parents do is more important than who they are. (Allen Report 2011, xiv)

Cameron's speech and Allen's report focus attention on what all parents could apparently do to provide not only a consistent and authoritative parenting style, but also support for their child's intellectual development, through ensuring a home environment conducive to learning. Thus, as Hartas (2015) notes, citing the 2011 Patterson report for think-tank Centreforum, parenting is positioned as 'an active weapon for counteracting disadvantage'. Such a position acts to minimise the effect of the social and economic conditions in which parents are bringing up their children, as if poverty, including mental health issues (more prevalent amongst the poor, see <http://www.poverty.org.uk/62/index.shtml>, also Morgan et al. 2007) and low-quality and/or overcrowded and insecure housing, does not impact on family life (Hartas 2015). Drawing on quantitative large-scale data (from the Millennium Cohort Study, specifically data relating to children's school performance at 7), Hartas adds to the work of Sullivan et al. (2010) and Peruzzi (2013) to evidence the argument that there is a 'significant contribution of families' socio-economic background (i.e. family income and maternal qualifications) to children's schooling outcomes' (Hartas 2015, 31). Given these data, she strongly criticises the marginalisation of the material contexts of parenting, arguing that 'parental support for learning and warmth are re-coded as a commodity to maximise children's human capital' (Hartas 2015, 22; also Boddy et al. 2016). Dermott and Yamashita make a similar point in relation to guidance on parenting, compared in England and Japan.

Focusing on advice offered in relation to education and food, we note that in both Japan and the UK the relationship between money and the ability to perform idealised parenting practices is rarely mentioned. (Dermott and Yamashita 2014)

Arguments highlighting the power of parenting focus on the soft skills of parents, their characters, their aspirations, and their temperament. This acts to 'name the crisis as moral' (Jensen 2010), with blame falling on individual parents who fail rather than their economic circumstances.

This discourse of the power of parenting assumes a causal relationship between parenting and outcomes. As Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) argue, this encourages an approach to parenting which is technical, about learning skills. Yet, as they argue, parenting a child is more than the outcome of skills and techniques, learnt and perfected from television nannies, social media, and parenting courses; it is a complex mixture of decisions, actions, and emotions.

In affluent countries, parenting, mothering especially, has moved decisively beyond providing food, shelter, and love. This shift has been referred to as 'intensive mothering' (Hays 1996) or 'intentional parenting' (Arendell 2001). The parenting practices of the affluent middle classes have been described by Annette Lareau as 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2003); that is, 'becoming a parent means getting engaged in a project called

child' (Karsten 2015, 568). As a middle-class London father said to me recently, this means putting the children at the centre of the family's activities:

You asking that question [about his friendships] it suddenly popped into my head that the whole idea of parenting, for me as a parent, or my idea of being a parent was that I was going to have children with the focus of children. So subsequently I have allowed my friendships to go, my hobbies to decline as it were, my focus is my children. The flipside is that there are people who have children but carry on with their relationships, with their friendships, with their hobbies [...] Those, I suppose like me, White middle class, do have a very definitive focus on their children and will, not necessarily drop everything for it, but that is – my social calendar is dictated by my children, which birthday parties they have got to go to (white middle-class father, Junction school, London).<sup>2</sup>

The suggestion is made here that a particular social group – the white middle classes – are more likely to focus on their children in this way. Implicit in the response is the idea that this sacrificial approach to parenting (letting adult friendships and hobbies go) is more than a simple description of the position many time-pressurised parents find themselves in, but has additional claims to a moral good. This is the way one *ought* to parent, with the children's activities prioritised before all else. Lareau's (2003) very valuable contribution of 'concerted cultivation' describes this way of parenting, which includes involving children in paid-for extra-curricular activities, and also encouraging a particular style of talk with debate and discussion, both within the family and without (Lareau describes how middle-class children are encouraged to ask questions when visiting a doctor, and begin to develop a conversational relationship of equals with professionals). She also identifies the cost for parents, especially mothers – financial costs, but also of time, labour, and effort – of this approach which prioritises the child's development before all else. The use of activities (sport, art, music, drama, and so on) aims to develop a portfolio of skills and talents – what I have called elsewhere a Renaissance Child<sup>3</sup> (Vincent and Ball 2007). Lareau has argued that concerted cultivation is a classed style of child-rearing, prevalent amongst the professional middle classes. However, in a later study, Bennett, Lutz, and Jayaram (2012) argued that working-class parents were also enthusiastic concerning such activities, but that they were constrained in the options available to their children. Working-class respondents relied far more heavily on cheaper activities, provided by schools and churches, rather than private providers, and there were also lower rates of working-class participation in elite cultural activities (such as orchestra). Some working-class respondents saw activities as important, not necessarily for the skills learnt, but for giving their children access to safe spaces in their neighbourhoods. Bennett, Lutz, and Jayaram (2012) concluded that the differences between the social classes are therefore not so much a question of class cultures (i.e. what parents understood to be important) as 'class related conditions in which they find themselves' (152) (i.e. what they were able to provide given the resources available to them).

In writing elsewhere about intensive mothering/parenting, involving practices of concerted cultivation, together with colleagues (Vincent and Ball 2007, Vincent et al. 2013 and Vincent and Maxwell 2016), I have argued that in affluent countries of the Global North,<sup>4</sup> we are moving towards the normalisation of this approach as a parenting strategy for all. This normalisation imposes particular forms of behaviour on parents, especially mothers, requiring them to develop self-sufficient, self-regulating children who achieve in a range of academic and non-academic areas. Paying for piano lessons, sports coaching, drama

classes, and so on is a strategic response to many parents' perception of their responsibility to develop and 'make up' an individual, with a range of talents and skills. As Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart say, 'parenting becomes a source of risk and anxiety as what happens is viewed as the product of individual, autonomous choices' (2011, 26). Neoliberal thought has reached into the private domain to promote the ideal subject as entrepreneurial (Lazzarato 2009). This involves calculation, rationality, and an adoption of responsibility to be self-governing (Olmedo 2008) (and in the case of dependent children, to accept parental responsibility for all aspects of a child's development). Those who do not wish to or cannot comply with these imperatives are at risk of censure. The majority of activities, even those provided at schools, have some associated costs and parental labour, so children from the poorest families are likely to be excluded.

The power of the discourse of intensive mothering comes from its promulgation and presence. We can see the assumptions that inform it set out in parenting books, TV programmes, the huge range of market opportunities to buy goods and services to develop your child (Thomson et al. 2011). Several studies of social media discuss the extent to which these normative assumptions are developed, discussed, contested in parenting websites and blogs. Gambles (2010) writing about the largest UK parenting website, *mumsnet*, argues that despite its successful public campaigns, a lot of *mumsnet* conversations do – with varying degrees of support and empathy – promote private solutions, promote changing individual maternal behaviour, rather than critiquing the wider social and material contexts in which mothering takes place. Mothers are expected to work to improve themselves. Again, context disappears. Similarly, Jensen commented about the TV programme *Supernanny*,<sup>5</sup> that it featured 'the relentless individualisation of every family problem at the expense of and in the place of context' (2010, 182). So, the question posed to parents is 'what kind of a parent are you?' and, once again, not 'in what conditions are you parenting?' (Jensen 2010). This is not to say, however, that there is no resistance to these discourses. Jensen (2013) argues further that *mumsnet* conversations reveal posters positioning themselves 'at a tangent to ideal motherhood, switching between parenting as a life project and its inevitable but containable failure' (Elliott, Squire, and O'Connell 2016). Recognising the likelihood of – even celebrating – the intermittent, occasional failure, however, does not constitute a rejection of dominant mothering practices. Elliott, Squire, and O'Connell (2016) examine in detail two blogs written by mothers and argue that at various different points, both bloggers reproduce *and* transgress normative discourses about families and mothering. Both Jensen's and Elliott and colleagues' examples suggest instances of resistance to an intensive mothering discourse, but not outright refusal. The ironic self-identity of bad mother in these contexts is a partial and performative subjectivity adopted voluntarily by parents in the spirit of self-mockery, and on the implicit understanding that one is *not really* failing' (Jensen 2013, 141).

As I have indicated above, the demands of intensive parenting fall to different degrees upon mothers and fathers, and it is to this issue that I now turn.

## Theme 2. The morality of mothering

As the quote above from the London father suggests, many men are more actively involved with their own children than their fathers were with them (Dermott 2008). However, O'Brien et al. (2016) point to the long legacy in England of a 'mother-focused

employment policy' and the relatively late arrival of statutory paternity leave (in 2003) to explain the dominance and continuation of the gendered male breadwinner/female carer roles. Thus, men's primary contribution to the family remains that of breadwinner (e.g. Doucet 2006; Miller 2011; Edwards and Caballero 2015), despite cultural appreciation of involved fathers. In an earlier study with London-based middle-class fathers, it was clear that they were in search of an emotionally intimate relationship with their children, but less concerned with submerging themselves in the details of the organisation and management of children's lives, a range of tasks still largely delegated to mothers. In a follow-up study with working-class families with young children in the same areas of London, we (Stephen Ball, Annette Braun, and myself) found the same dominance of the provider discourse for men, and a lack of alternatives.

Neither the middle nor the working-class families presented a serious challenge to a traditional understanding of practiced family relationships with mothers centre-stage and fathers on the periphery. Fathers were portrayed by the mothers as 'helping out' with the numerous daily tasks of caring for young children and became 'good men' for doing so. In turn, men in both studies took up their posts on the sidelines of daily childcare tasks. This is in line with the continuing prevalence and pervasiveness of the discourses that stress the fundamental and central role played by mothers in bringing up children, as evoked in the class-crossing messages of 'intensive mothering', and coupled with the powerful ideologies of fathers as financial providers and the primacy of the breadwinner model of fathering. (Braun, Vincent, and Ball 2010, 33)

Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart (2011) argue that parenting is differently intensive for men, as the men in their research describe risks and anxieties in relation to financial provision. However, I would argue a particular public ferocity is retained for women who 'fail' their mothering responsibilities (also Klett-Davis 2007; May 2008). There is indeed condemnation around absent fathers – think of the terms 'feckless fathers', 'deadbeat dads' – yet women with children are discursively positioned as mothers first. If they are in paid work, the identity of worker is additional; it is not necessarily voluntary as many women have little or no option but to work, and of course, many women choose to work and are highly invested in their careers, but this identity is an addendum to that of mother. For men, as noted above, the situation is largely reversed, the adoption of an identity as 'involved father' is virtuous, but also optional.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the moral imperative of being a 'good' mother remains acute for mothers in general, for working-class and poor women particularly, adhering to an identity as respectable and responsible mothers can prove difficult (Skeggs 1997). Elliott, Powell, and Brenton's (2015) American study of low-income Black single mothers notes that their respondents emphasised the role of 'sacrifice, self-reliance and protection in their mothering practices' (355). However, the women's awareness of the gap between their ideal, and the structural and material constraints in their lives as they juggled insecure employment, poor housing, and institutional racism impacted on their own well-being. 'Their mothering largely involved fending off the dangers, insecurities and vagaries of poverty, racism and sexism' (366).

Intensive mothering is much easier, made more possible, if the mother has resources: the ability to work flexibly and with autonomy, the ability to pay for regular, reliable childcare, a secure and spacious place to live, and so on, what Elliott et al. call 'privatised mothering'. They do not define the term but I am suggesting that it signals mothering



underpinned and secured by economic resources and a lack of dependency on diminishing state provision.

In an earlier paper on working-class mothers and childcare, we noted the way ‘public political discourses have always surged and seethed around the lives of working-class mothers’ (Vincent, Ball, and Braun 2010, 123). We focused on a set of contemporary and contradictory political discourses that worked on and through the lives of the working-class mothers in our research and thereby created tensions and impossibilities within their lives. The mothers were required to avoid benefits, to be financially independent and economically active, but also to care for their young children, and to have a presence at their children’s school. For the participant lone mothers in particular, the contradictory requirements of being simultaneously a ‘good’ mother *and* a ‘good’ citizen sometimes appeared impossible, and induced guilt. Teachers may equate parental presence with parental interest. Indeed, for many parents, nurseries and primary schools are the first public sites from which the private sphere of the family is (partially) viewed. Judgements may be made on issues from the contents of lunch boxes to children’s behaviour via parental demeanour. Of course, forming opinions is a two-way process, as parents will generate views on the school and members of staff. But whilst parents can utilise their power of voice (via complaints to the headteacher, governing body, the school inspectorate, Ofsted, for example) and ultimately exit, teachers (sometimes reluctantly) have greater disciplinary powers as a mediator between the family and other state institutions. This process has of course increased exponentially with teachers’ responsibilities for safeguarding children and their duties under the Prevent Strategy.<sup>7</sup> I turn now to focus in more detail on parents’ relationships with schools.

### Theme 3. Strategies for schooling

Using a Foucauldian analysis, Collet-Sabe (2016, internal project paper) analyses the discourse deployed by Spanish teachers about parents. He reminds us, referring to the work of Donzelot and others, that state education in many countries was established as bringing ‘light, reason, civility, knowledge’ (6/7) to children and thus, schools were established ‘against’ families, particularly poor families from whom children were ‘rescued’, and that traces of this attitude remain. Similarly, American researchers Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001, 75) speak of the ‘socially constructed scripts’ that institutionalise parent–teacher relations (cited in Loder-Jackson et al. 2015, 227). These lay down relatively narrow parameters for ‘good’ parent behaviour in the eyes of teachers, and parents can overstep these boundaries by displaying either too much or too little interest (Vincent 1996). The particularities of the local context are important, and I would draw attention here to the recently increased performative climate in England within which primary school teachers in particular work – and for long hours (see DfE 2014) – and which must impact on the time and energy they have available for home–school initiatives.

A body of sociological research on parent–teacher relationships draws on Bourdieu (e.g. Lareau 1989, 2003; Vincent 2001; Vincent and Martin 2002; Vincent et al. 2012a; Reay 2000, 2004; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003) in order to understand parents’ struggles for position in the field of schooling. I will only rehearse the arguments briefly here. Bourdieu argues that the practices and attitudes of individuals are shaped by their *habitus*, or dispositions, a ‘social inheritance’ that conditions an individual’s tastes, orientations, and



expectations. Thus, to give an example, some parents will understand themselves as potential educators of their children, feeling confident in supporting their child's learning at school and also confident interacting with the teachers. The habitus of others will lead them to consider the teachers as the 'experts', and home and school as separate spheres. Habitus is a product of early socialisation, first of all within the family and then within other spheres, such as school. Many parents, with whom I have talked over the years, attest to how their own sense of themselves as learners has been shaped by their own schooling experiences. These experiences are, of course, classed and raced. The respondents in the Black middle-class project, for example, often recalled the prejudice of low expectations (Gillborn et al. 2013). To give just one example, one of the respondents who wanted to study law was advised by a school careers adviser, 'to consider shop work [...] I didn't know any lawyers, certainly not any Black ones, never heard of any Black ones ... I became a solicitor but it was with no advice or guidance at all'.

However, habitus is not a determinist concept and it is also common for parents with poor schooling experiences to express a strong intention to help their children succeed at school. For example, in our project exploring the educational strategies of the Black middle classes, parents' determination to protect their children against what they understood as a risk of still-pervasive low teacher expectations of black children, especially boys, informed their often carefully thought out educational strategies (Vincent et al. 2012a). 'Strategies' is here used to describe a mixture of conscious decisions and unconscious feelings – the latter arising from the habitus – identifying what action is right and possible in particular situations (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). So, parental strategies with regard to education are informed by the forms and volumes of capitals they possess and their ability to activate those capitals in the field of schooling. Parents may bring to bear economic capitals (e.g. private education, tutoring, extra-curricular activities, moving house to be near a school perceived as 'good'), social capital (e.g. networks containing teachers and other educational professionals who can provide help and advice), and cultural capital (knowledge of the education system, confidence, a sense of entitlement, what Lareau (2008) calls 'generic class resources'). However, Lareau also suggests that 'the activation of capital' may not be effective for some parents in some situations and so parents do not achieve the desired outcome (Lareau 2003, 196). I give two examples here. In an earlier study on the exercise of parental voice in schools (with Stewart Ranson and Jane Martin), we wrote about the parent forum in 'Willow', a London secondary school. The forum was established as a discussion group for parents to debate school issues and a point of contact between the school's senior team and the parents. The majority of the regular parent attendees had professional jobs, often in education or related public sector areas, and had high levels of knowledge of the contemporary education system, all suggestive of forms and volumes of cultural, social, and economic capital which should have allowed them to be very effective in getting their voice heard. Yet, what struck us was their hesitancy and deference in relation to the school on those occasions where they tried to intervene regarding their own child. For this group of parents, both involved in and broadly supportive of the school, making effective critical comments that were taken on board by the school, was difficult (Vincent and Martin 2000). For some parents, if 'voice' fails to work, 'exit' is usually possible, although not without cost. We have used the example of Felicia from the Black middle-classes project to illustrate this. Felicia became aware that her son was suffering racist abuse from his peers at his

private school. She activated her considerable stock of cultural capital in her initial interactions with the school. However, her refusal to back down from naming racism led the school to deny her any legitimacy, making Felicia's cultural capital redundant in this situation. This example shows clearly that failure to activate capital is not, as might be assumed, a parental failure. Indeed, we used the example of Felicia to draw attention to the damage caused by White institutions who actively refuse to recognise the class resources of Black middle-class parents (Vincent et al. 2012b).

In order to (partially) address this issue of the different forms and volumes of capital which parents bring with them into a relationship with the school, I have argued previously that a more dialogic home-school relationship is required, looking especially at one-to-one parent teacher meetings as a site for development (Vincent 2014). Currently, we have a system where confidence and a sense of entitlement allow some parents to demand and receive teacher time and attention, whilst others speak to teachers rarely. One mother in my first empirical study of parent-teacher relationships hypothesised that the sand-tray in the early years classroom was because children from the inner-city area did not often get to visit to the seaside. Her reasoning, in the absence of any information about learning through play, is perfectly logical, but also provides a glimpse of the myriad misunderstandings possible when pedagogies go unexplained (Vincent 1996, 98). Thus, I have suggested focusing attention on the seemingly mundane moment of parent-teacher conversations. Changes in the way that these are conducted would include a discussion about, but also – and importantly – beyond the child's attainment, to include their relationships with teacher and peers, and their home life, interests and enthusiasms. The aim is to construct a living, dynamic relationship, a dialogue of equals, between teachers and parents, and one which focuses in particular on developing a conversation with those parents who appear to lack the particular social and cultural resources to allow themselves to be easily heard in school. The difficulty of finding a space and a language in which to conduct such conversations cannot be underestimated. However, an expectation of a more dialogic relationship between teachers and parents would lessen the dependence on an individual parent's will and capacity to scrutinise their child's school career independently.

#### Theme 4. Intersections and fractions

Much of the research on parental choice and parent-teacher interactions, including much of my own, revolves around a binary: middle-class parents are positioned as seeing education as a priority, sometimes anxious, but always informed, confident, networked, with plentiful supplies of capitals in forms and volumes that are valuable in the field of schooling. They form networks with others like themselves to the extent that some (primary) schools can be said to be 'colonised' by the middle classes (Butler and Robson 2003). In popular discourse, middle-class parents can be engaged, but also overly so, and thus given to 'pushy', entitled behaviour, and/or 'helicopter parenting'.<sup>8</sup> Working-class parents, on the other hand, are presented in academic work as aspiring, but sometimes poorly informed, trying to engage with an education system that appears distant to them. In popular discourse, they are disengaged, uninformed, uninterested, and prone to aggressive/inappropriate behaviour (for example, turning up to school in night wear<sup>9</sup>).

The binary distinction overlooks at least two points. The first is the idea of class fractions, that middle-class and working-class parents – usually defined as such by occupation – are not homogeneous groupings. Class theory influenced by Bourdieu has moved much more towards a focus on lifestyle and social networks in addition to occupation and income as ways of defining class position. The work of Mike Savage and colleagues has been influential here, especially in promoting the notion of the changing nature of class. The Great British Class Survey with which the team has been associated, and the subsequent analysis, has had critics (e.g. Bradley 2014) but it has succeeded, in my view, in promoting beyond academic circles the notion that the established ‘centrality of the boundary between the middle and working classes’ is inadequate (Savage 2015, 26). Additionally, it is worth noting that some class positions are largely overlooked in research. The key example here is the ‘intermediate’ class, those who hold occupations referred to by the UK National Statistics Socio-Economic Classifications as ‘intermediate’ (e.g. clerical/administrative/sales positions which offer ‘forms of employment regulation [that] combine aspects from both the service relationship and the labour contract’ para 2.9, ONS 2010). We know little about this large group in relation to their values and behaviours around parenting and education, and whether these are distinctive from those of the middle and working classes.

Broad class groupings such as ‘middle class’ and ‘working class’ are, of course, not homogeneous. Research on middle-class fractions discusses, for example, the relationship between class fractions and place of residence (Jackson and Butler 2015), school and child-care choice (Vincent and Ball 2006; Reay et al. 2011), and orientation to children’s education (Irwin and Elley 2011). Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins (2014) have argued in their study of American, mainly upper middle-class students applying to elite higher education institutions, that as selective higher education is now understood as a viable destination by an increasing number of people – a broad band of middle-class families – what we are seeing in the US is ‘tensions *within* a social class’ (193) (the middle classes), as a particularly privileged segment act to accrue and preserve its own advantages in insecure economic times. Forms of differentiation change in response to the desire of the more established and secure sections of the middle classes to maintain and reproduce their advantage (as the Weis et al. study shows). Research on working-class differentiation is more limited (Vincent, Ball, and Braun 2008), although recent empirical work has focused on the construction of identity in relation to education (Ingram 2011; Stahl and Dale 2013; Weis 2013).

The second point on the limitations of the middle-/working-class binary is that although the intersection of gender and class in relation to mothering and schooling has been the focus of academic attention (e.g. see examples above, discussed under Theme 2), race/ethnicity is missing from the somewhat simplistic accounts of the middle-class and working-class relationships with schooling described above. There are two further observations here. The first is that, despite some studies in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. Crozier and Davies 2007; Byrne and De Tona 2012, 2014; Guo 2012 Bhopal 2014; Pattillo 2015), there is still relatively few accounts – particularly sociological accounts – about the ways in which different minority ethnic groups – both established populations and more recent migrants – choose and interact with schools. My second observation is the need to more fully explore how race/ethnicity interacts with other dimensions of identity to shape relationships with schools (also Theodorou and

Symeou 2013). This was one of the drivers for our research into the educational strategies of the Black middle classes, to understand the intersection of class and race in determining parental priorities and actions around the education of their children. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of intersectionality, and so it is enough to say here that in a seminal paper, Crenshaw (1991) emphasised that identities are not reducible to just one dimension; that a theoretical focus on, say, class can simplify and reduce, and through reduction, miss and misrepresent the experiences of, for example, Black working-class women, and the inter-related roles of class, race, and gender in their lives. In contrast, intersectionality theory seeks to understand the complexity of social identity by focusing on gender, class, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation – ‘the great axes of social differentiation’ (Bilge 2010, 58) to which we might also add age and religion – and ‘postulat[ing] their interplay in the production and reproduction of social inequalities’ (Bilge 2010, 58). Intersectionality emphasises fluidity, and the importance of different locales, situations, spaces, times, different dispositions and subjectivities, for understanding particular interactions and identities. All identities can be conceived of as consisting of intersectional dimensions, although the focus has more often been on marginality, rather than privilege (Nash 2008).

A challenge in the analysis of the research with Black middle-class parents was to hold *both* class and race in productive tension, trying to understand the workings of both, and their points of interdependence for the respondents, in particular situations. In our published work, we have illustrated and analysed the way in which parents carry out what can be thought of as intersectional work, drawing on the range of economic, cultural, and social resources available to them (Vincent et al. 2012b; Rollock et al. 2015). The respondents in our project invested time and energy in the development of their children as successful learners, confident in their identity as young Black men and women. They worked to defend their children and themselves from racism, stereotyping, and seemingly entrenched low expectations. In order to avoid/resist misrepresentations of themselves and their children, parents deployed a range of strategies. When meeting teachers, they considered their dress, their demeanour, carefully managed the presentation of their concerns and strategically deployed their knowledge to present themselves as ‘other’ than the negative, and stereotypical perceptions of Black working-class parents’ behaviours and attitudes, which they felt informed the perceptions held by white teachers of black parents.

A more general challenge for researchers is how to use an intersectional analysis, yet also define the limits of their enquiry in a way that allows focus, without simplifying and flattening social reality. We (Iqbal, Neal, and Vincent 2016) faced this in a recent project, exploring the way in which social class and ethnicity affect the friendships made, maintained or avoided by adults and children living in highly diverse London localities. Whilst planning the project, we were aware that gender and religion were also likely to be key dimensions affecting how the adults and children interacted, and indeed, so it proved. We argued that we could defend our focus on class and ethnicity as one that could provide us with some analytical focus and coherence, and root our analysis in the ‘specific ontologies of each set of social relations’ (Bilge 2010, 68), whilst being open to the myriad points of intersection which compose an individual identity. However, the degree to which this is a persuasive argument is for others to judge.

## Conclusion

To return to the words of the mother cited in the title of the paper ‘making sure children get a good education’ is an uncertain process for most – even leaving aside the contested question of what constitutes a ‘good’ education. Parents respond to this in different ways (Symeou 2007). Some may buy a private education – with all the resources, access to networks, and a high chance of returns – that that suggests (Kenway, Fahey, and Koh 2013). Some may seek to manage the ‘risk’ (the risk being that the child’s potential may not be fully realised) through high levels of monitoring and intervention (Vincent and Martin 2000; James et al. 2010). Others may simply hope for the best (Vincent 2001). There are gaps in our knowledge as I have indicated above. One is the persistence of the binary of middle class and working class in analyses of parental involvement that obscures class fractions and a consideration of who might be understood as ‘intermediate’ class. Second, a more thorough understanding is required of how intersectional dimensions of identity (class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and so on) shape both parenting and parental involvement with schools, and, third, the way in which neoliberal discourses on parental responsibility and self-sufficiency are taken up and contested by different social groups. What is clear is that the category of ‘the parent’ presented as such, in broad and apparently neutral terms, hides a wide range of behaviours, privileges, and disadvantages. Parental ability to exercise agency varies, as agency is a ‘socio-culturally mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn 2013, 240). An understanding of these socially structured constraints and opportunities is crucial if we are to understand the transmission of cultural capital within the family: what Bourdieu calls ‘the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment’, that is the awareness ‘that ability or talent is itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital’ (2004, 17).

Therefore, as I see it, there is a need to develop further analyses of family life with regard to parenting and parental involvement with schools. That is analyses of how the individual habitus is affected by having children. Boterman and Bridge (2015) write of the way habitus is rearticulated (to various degrees) in relation to entering the new field of parenthood, and of how families develop particular practices, assumptions, expectations. Exploring ‘families as realised social fictions’ (Burke, Emmerich, and Ingram 2013, 172), the stories families tell about themselves – how ‘we’ do things here, what ‘we’ value, how ‘we’ spend time – will allow us to analyse how their understandings shape and affect parental involvement with education.

## Notes

1. CANParent trials ran from 2012 to 2014 (with a later period of extension) in three areas of England with different demographics. The aim of the trial was to stimulate a market in universal parenting classes. Parents of children aged up to five (later six) were given a voucher to ‘spend’ on classes offered by a range of providers. There was a low take up (about 4% of the eligible population) but high degree of satisfaction reported amongst those who did participate (over 90% of participants were mothers) (Lindsay et al. 2014). Cameron seemingly had had plans to continue with the aim of universalising such classes. See, for example, Cameron’s speech in January 2016 on ‘life chances’. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-on-life-chances>. The direction on families and parenting by Theresa May’s Conservative government remains unclear at the time of writing (December 2016).

2. This ESRC-funded project explored the way in which social class and ethnicity affected the friendships of adults and children living in super diverse areas in London (see e.g. Vincent, Neal, and Iqbal 2016 for more details).
3. Renaissance child is an adaptation of the idea of Renaissance man – used to refer to men with a range of talents and knowledge across a wide range of areas. The term refers back, of course, to the Italian Renaissance, starting in the late middle ages.
4. The literature drawn on here is largely Anglo-American but see also, for example, Karsten's (2015) work in Hong Kong, Bach's (2014) in Denmark, Stefansen and Aarseth (2011) on middle-class parenting to 'enrich intimacy' in Norway, and Cho (2015) on extra-curricular music activities in Korea.
5. Supernanny is a reality TV show, first broadcast in 2004, in which Jo Frost, the 'supernanny', was shown helping families with their children's behavior. The series also has a website: <http://www.supernanny.co.uk/>
6. O'Brien et al. (2016) note the need for more research on fathers from minority ethnic groups.
7. 'From 1 July 2015, all schools [and registered childcare providers] are subject to a duty under section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, in the exercise of their functions, to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. This duty is known as the Prevent duty' (Department for Education 2015, 4; Coppock and McGovern 2014).
8. Helicopter parenting is a popular term that describes parents who hover closely around their older children, trying to micro-manage their lives.
9. The letter of a headteacher in Darlington who wrote to parents in January 2016 asking them not to wear nightwear when visiting the school was widely commented on in the media, see for example, <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/27/wave-support-schools-ban-parents-wearing-pyjamas-skerne-park-darlington>

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