

MIDDLE-CLASSNESS AND WHITENESS IN
PARENTS' RESPONSES TO
MULTICULTURALISM: A STUDY OF ONE
SCHOOL

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Since its founding in 1941 until the 1980s, "Pincrest" School was dominated by children from "Baywoods," an economically privileged and largely Jewish neighbourhood. In the late 1980s, the population of the school changed to include children of immigrants in an adjacent neighbourhood, "Kerrydale." Seeking to protect their children's cultural capital and class advantages, the Baywoods parents' response involved the construction of fundamental difference and concerns about effects on school quality. The responses were interrupted by dilemma and ambivalence. They are read through the intersections of middle-class formation and whiteness in terms of three dimensions: practice, relationality, and maintenance.

Key words: Jews, immigrants, public school, parents, exclusion, social class, ethnicity

Depuis sa création en 1941 jusque dans les années 1990, l'école « Pincrest » accueillait principalement des enfants de « Baywoods », un quartier habité par des familles à l'aise et surtout par des Juifs. À la fin des années 1980, la population de l'école a changé à la suite de l'intégration d'enfants d'immigrants provenant de « Kerrydale », un quartier voisin. Cherchant à protéger le capital culturel de leurs enfants et les avantages de leur classe sociale, les parents de Baywoods ont réagi en invoquant la notion de différence fondamentale et en se préoccupant des effets possibles sur la qualité de l'école. Dilemmes et ambivalence ont toutefois interrompu le processus. Les réactions des parents sont interprétées dans le contexte du lien entre la formation de la classe moyenne et la blancheur et ce, à trois niveaux : la pratique, les relations et le maintien de la reproduction du groupe.

Mots clés : Juifs, immigrants, école publique, parents, exclusion, classe sociale, ethnicité

Although not entirely a recent phenomenon in critical methods, “studying up” or what Leslie Roman (1993) describes as the examination of “cultural practices, social relations, and material conditions that structure the daily experiences and expectations of powerful groups” (p. 29) resonates with current directions in sociological research. Studies on loci of power embodied in whiteness, masculinity, and the middle class have generated much interest. The research project described in this article emerged from this approach. It primarily explores the perspectives of a group of parents in an urban neighbourhood I call “Baywoods” whose children attend “Pinecrest,” a public elementary school. These parents could be characterized as economically privileged if the phenomenon can be determined through income, residential property values, and professional and executive occupations. The participants are also identifiably white (but their Jewishness may call for some qualification of that term), and most are women. Rather than illustrate a single dimension of studying up, my research project weaves two dimensions together, suggestive of an intersectional approach. I refer here to the term as described by Stasiulus (1999): “Intersectional theorizing understood the social reality of women and men, and the dynamics of their social, cultural, economic, and political contexts to be *multiply, simultaneously, and interactively* determined by various significant *axes of social organization*” (p. 347, original emphasis). Yet Anthias (2005) distinguishes the fact of intersections in inequality from the processes by which inequality occurs. Specifically, she wants to separate “the notions of social position (concrete position vis-à-vis a range of social resources such as economic, cultural and political) and social positioning (how we articulate, understand, and interact with these positions, e.g., contesting, challenging, defining)” (p. 33). Thus the story here not only describes the particularities of a powerful group; it also conveys something of the exercise of their power.

In the late 1980s, the population of the school changed to reflect the shape of immigrant settlement in its adjacent neighbourhood, “Kerrydale.” Within the space of a few years, Pinecrest made a transition from monocultural to multicultural. How did Baywoods parents respond? My interviews revealed how they constructed fundamental differences between the groups of children. They also worried about effects on school quality as they sought to protect their children’s cultural capital and

class advantages. This process was not always smooth; it was interrupted by dilemma and ambivalence. I read the parents' responses through the intersections of middle classness and whiteness in terms of three themes: practice, relationality, and maintenance in the face of perceived threats to the group's reproduction. These themes are taken up below through the performance of middle-class parenting¹ in dilemma over social values and doing the right thing by one's children. A Canadian study in a literature dominated (and inspired) by British sociology of education, this study fortifies understandings of the reproduction of forms of exclusion in schools and in the communities that surround them.

BACKGROUND AND METHOD

Pinecrest is an elementary public school (kindergarten to grade 6) situated in the heart of Baywoods, a neighbourhood located in a large Canadian city. Approved by City Council in 1936, the municipal plan for Baywoods recommended lot sizes, street layout, and public services appropriate for a high-class residential area.² By the 1960s, the neighbourhood had become solidly Jewish; today, many of the stores on the commercial strip carry products for the Jewish market. From the school's founding in 1941 until the late 1980s, the children at Pinecrest had a great deal in common: they were generally high socio-economic status (SES) and Jewish.³ The demographic profile of the school changed along with immigration patterns in the city particularly affecting Kerrydale, an adjacent neighbourhood in the Pinecrest catchment area. Kerrydale consists of a large cluster of high-rise apartment buildings. Among its residents are many new immigrants who reflect the diversity of Canadian immigration patterns. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, in 2000, the city received 108,034 immigrants (including refugees). The rich diversity is revealed through the list of the top 10 source countries from which 60 per cent of all Canadian immigrants arrive: China, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Korea, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Russia, and Jamaica (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2001). The other 40 per cent of immigrants come from over 100 different countries.

This migration predictably affects city schools. According to the district school board, at the time of this study (2000), 51 per cent of the students at Pinecrest spoke a primary language other than English and 28 per cent of students had lived in Canada for five years or fewer. In income, ethnicity, first-language use, and duration of residency in Canada, therefore, the differences between the residents of Baywoods and Kerrydale were great.⁴ Table 1 illustrates these differences. For the Baywoods parents, the contrast was significant. The homogeneity of Baywoods defines the collective memory of some of the families there. Remarkably, over half (13) of the participants as well as six of the non-interviewed partners spent their childhood in or near Baywoods. Three participants were living in the same houses in which they or their partners had grown up, making their children the third generation in the same house. Where Baywoods was homogeneous in most respects, Kerrydale was heterogeneous. The dominant ethnicity in Baywoods was Jewish (71%) while in Kerrydale, the largest groups were Southern European (19%) and Eastern European (19%). The rest were from countries in Asia, the Pacific, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

Table 1
A Comparison of Baywoods and Kerrydale Based on Statistics Canada
2001 Census data (using PCensus for MapPoint)

	Baywoods	Kerrydale
Population	3,348	1,442
Canadian Citizenship	93%	64%
Immigrant Population	21%	65%
Household Income	\$159,121	\$52,607
English as a first language	79%	38%
Jewish ethnicity	71%	10%
University degree obtained	60%	35%

I designed this research project to explore the practices and perspectives of the Baywoods parents as the dominant members of the school community. After a pilot interview with a Baywoods parent whom I knew, I recruited the rest through flyers posted in the neigh-

bourhood and through snowball sampling in which I asked early participants for additional contacts. After our initial contact, my research assistant, Jessica Ringrose, and I interviewed everyone who was available and who consented to an interview. We concluded the data collection after some remarks became noticeably repetitive indicating saturation of themes. We conducted 25 personal interviews with 26 parents;⁵ 20 of these were members of the white, high SES, Jewish group. Interviews, about two hours in duration, were conducted in the participants' homes. Transcribed verbatim, the data were analyzed using HyperQual software. Participants' ages ranged from 31 to 51. Sixteen of the participants had full-time occupations: four in business, four in healthcare, three in education, two in childcare, one in clerical work, one in social services, and one in the trades. Six participants had part-time employment and three of the women were full-time homemakers, although combinations of these occurred. The occupation of one parent was unknown. Only two of the participants were men; twenty were married, three were separated, two were divorced.

In my work, I assumed that the Baywoods parents were a powerful group in the school community. I explored how power operated among them, how it was expressed and secured, and how it affected and was affected by the changes that had taken place at the school. I learned about their responses to the developments at Pinecrest, theorized about how they conceptualized or problematized the changing character of the school, and traced the tensions that might exist in their responses. Data were collected on their observations of the school, their evaluation of its programs, their involvement with school activities, their school choice, and their views on their children's needs. I also asked them to describe problems they observed at the school regarding the staff, students, or interactions between groups.

The 25 interview participants had 58 children among them and of these, all but three attended Pinecrest for their elementary years at some time between 1985 and 2001. Two of the three children who never attended Pinecrest attended another public elementary school nearby and one had been sent to a Jewish day school. Of the 55 children at Pinecrest, four attended elite private schools for at least some of their elementary grades, one moved to Pinecrest from a Jewish day school,

and two more had applied to elite private elementary schools but were not admitted. Two had been switched from other public elementary schools. One child had attended three different schools by grade 6: one elite private school and two different public schools; a few others had moved between various private schools and the public system between intermediate levels and secondary school (grades 9 to 13, now to grade 12).

What proportion of my interview participants chose to leave Pinecrest? Although a small minority, 4 of the 58 children had actually attended some kind of private school at the elementary level, two more had applied but were not accepted as noted above. This number increases if I count the 14 children from the eight families who said that they *would have* chosen private schools in hindsight or if they could have afforded to do so for one or more of their children. Finally, four children left Pinecrest for another public elementary school. Therefore, of the 58 children who were entitled to attend Pinecrest as their neighbourhood school, 41 per cent did not or would not have attended given their parents' preferences. In contrast, 7 families of the 24 in total (29%) said resolutely that they would not consider private school for their children. Of the 25 participants, I would count 8 as critics of Pinecrest since its "sudden multiculturalism," 10 as supporters, and 7 as ambivalent. Exploring these positions inspires possible explanations of the parents' responses.

As the powerful group, the Baywoods parents preserved a sense of their morality through their distance – psychic if not physical – from their Kerrydale neighbours. And they were distant, too, from the impact of their school choices upon all the students at Pinecrest School. The parents operated within this tension: school is regarded as a community institution serving the public interest *and* as a quasi-political site where public and private claims are contested. Emerging from their claims upon education as a public good, the Baywoods parents were sensitive to the value of multiculturalism in their children's lives. Yet, emerging from their claims upon school as a private choice, the parents were anxious to "protect" their children to the neglect of the needs of other children. This tension remains unresolved for them.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The Practice, Relationality, and Maintenance of Middle-Classness

I begin with a cultural perspective on middle-classness. Distinct from questions of “who” belongs to the middle-class (as represented by Goldthorpe, 1980) or even “what” is the middle-class (as represented by Wright, 1989), this perspective stresses the practices of the middle-class. The concept of cultural capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu receives special attention (see Ball, 2003; Lareau, 1989; Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). In its “objectified” state, Bourdieu (1986) explains that cultural capital is the acquisition of those cultural goods valued as the “distinction” of the privileged class, and that these become components of one’s *habitus*, durable systems of attitudes and dispositions that develop through history and generate practices. Class is not understood in the abstract. Nor is it a static or discrete category. It is approached instead in terms of “the situated realizations, of class and class reproduction” and “as it happens” (Ball, 2003, pp. 6, 174) bridging a structuralist and culturalist perspective. As a structural phenomenon, class bears upon material conditions and the production and distribution of rewards and resources. As a cultural practice, class positions are achieved and enacted as lived reality.

Class is also understood relationally. That is, class becomes itself through differentiation and exclusion (see Savage, 2000) and through active identification or gestures of belonging (Ball, 2003). As Anthias (2005) points out, group membership involves the maintenance of boundaries. Defining *we* is premised on constructing otherness. The concepts of cultural and social capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu are frequently used for analyzing the school choice among the middle class particularly for its relevance to studies of social inequality. As Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz (1996) note, choice is thoroughly social; it depends not just on cultural capital but on the activation of cultural capital. One must be able to choose to reap the economic, social, and symbolic benefits conferred by social class. Middle-class parents are more likely to animate their cultural capital through a variety of means, including direct involvement with the school, the provision of supplementary educational programs, better contacts with teachers and administrators,

and efforts to achieve confluence between the school culture and that of their home (Lareau, 1989; Wells & Oakes, 1998). More generally, the act of school-choosing itself is attached to class positions (and class positioning). As stated by Strathern, in *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century*, this “demonstrates how choosing is a particularly middle-class way of operating in the world . . .” (as cited in Skeggs, 2004). Choice is embedded in class relations, assuming its universality obscures the class location of the chooser and the inequalities of condition that make choosing more possible for a chooser.

Finally, class is subject to economic and social forces that prevent its stability. Its reproduction is not assured and people are actively engaged in maintaining themselves in their classed location. Indeed, class is highlighted in times of crisis when the issue of its reproduction is in question. This dynamic is of particular relevance in discussions of schooling. Parents invest their children with class and their desire to maintain class. Ball (2003) explains that “middle-class ontologies are founded upon incompleteness, they are about becoming, about the developmental self, about making something of yourself, realizing yourself, realizing your potential” (p. 163). Parents’ decisions about schools embody that moment at which they would make their children into a classed subject. They fight to preserve their advantage against a threat posed by competition from others (Dehli, 2000).

The Practice, Relationality, and Maintenance of Whiteness

Just as oppression is seen as intersectional, the exercise of power must also be critiqued intersectionally. This observation became quite apparent when I listened to the Baywoods parents; it was not simple racism, nor ethnocentrism I heard, nor even exclusion based on social class differences. The way that these dimensions came together, presented itself as the most accurate way of describing the parents’ positions and practices. As noted, this article adapts Stasiulus’ and Anthias’ intersectional theorizing. Therefore, it is to the literature on both middle-classness and whiteness I turn.⁶ I propose that these three dimensions of middle-classness – practice, relationality, and maintenance – may also be applied to an analysis of whiteness. Critical whiteness studies refer to the emerging corpus of writing that takes white racialization and the exer-

cise of domination and privilege as its departure point in anti-racism.⁷ Whiteness has a dual, even paradoxical meaning. On the one hand, it confers meaning upon the white body demarcated through geography (the West) and history (imperialism). On the other hand, its evocation in critical whiteness studies theorizes the replacement of white racialization as objective fact with white racialization as a process of domination in social relations. An effective way to negotiate this dualism is to focus not on who is "white" or what is "whiteness," but how whiteness works.

Several contributors to critical whiteness studies have described mechanisms through which power is practised among whites. Hurtado and Stewart (2004), for example, describe such dynamics as the creation of social distance from others' difficult circumstances, the denial of personal circumstances conferring racial privilege, white racial privilege acknowledged only with its loss, superiority ascribed to a "normalcy" and "neutrality" unattainable by racialized others, and an unrecognized solidarity. Gabriel (1998) specifies in whiteness the processes of exnomination (refusing to name itself), naturalization (against whom others require definition), and universalization (taking its peculiarity as representative of all). Frankenberg (1993) asserts that whiteness operates as a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.

The second dimension, *relationality*, is a salient theme in the literature on whiteness. In critical whiteness studies generally, racism involves participation in systems of domination, the rewards for which are distributed inequitably among groups constructed as racially different. Benefits accrue to those groups who occupy a social location of power or who engage in the performance of power. As Toni Morrison (1993) points out in her extraordinary statement, qualities attributed to whiteness are possible only in relation to their absence in a racialized other. White privilege, a normalized identity, status, rewards, and dominance are contingent upon an epistemological frame that situates others as different relative to these characteristics. Critical whiteness studies expose the often unacknowledged but mutual contingencies of privilege and oppression.

Lastly, middle-classness and whiteness intersect at the market in a way that has particular implications for the maintenance of middle-class boundaries (Dehli, 2000; Whitty, 2001b). This begs the question of the

relationship between whiteness and social class. In the paragraphs above, I have framed whiteness as a practice of domination and a consolidation of privilege in relation with disadvantage. However, nothing in that frame determines an intersection with middle-classness unless Stasiulus' (1999) approach to intersectionality joins that of Anthias' (2005) who sees "ethnicity, gender and class, first, as crosscutting and mutually reinforcing systems of domination and subordination . . . secondly, ethnicity, gender and class may construct multiple, uneven and contradictory social patterns of domination and subordination . . ." (pp. 36-37 [original emphasis]). Middle-classness and whiteness so clearly reinforce each other that they are usually conflated in the literature on school choice. With their link to Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital, researchers in the UK and USA write almost exclusively about the choices of white, middle-class parents in relation to others marked by difference in both these respects (see Ball, 2003; Brantlinger, 2003). Lareau and Horvat (1999) include whiteness as an element in cultural capital providing advantages to middle-class parents; Gillborn (2005) discusses UK education reforms toward privatization as an act of white supremacy. The link between class and whiteness in school choice is reflected in cultural approaches to class and whiteness more generally. In the social history of European immigrants, the advantages of whiteness were conferred through entry into the middle-class (Roediger, 1991).

School Choice and Neo-Liberalism

To return to the question of how middle-class parents struggle to maintain their whiteness, school choice turns out to be a particularly good illustration. Because the discourse of economic orthodoxy and political neo-liberalism permeates institutional life, the school becomes another product for sale in the marketplace. For Ball (2003), such reforms ("financial and organizational . . . and symbolic") facilitate "a reorientation of the education system as a whole to the needs, concerns and interests of middle-class parents. They work to embed class thinking into the policies of schools" (p. 49). Whitty (2001a) concurs: "Much of my own work . . . has demonstrated empirically that education reforms couched in the rhetoric of choice, difference and diversity often turn out

to be sophisticated ways of reproducing existing hierarchies of class and race" (p. 289). Parents' practice of middle-class whiteness erects a differentiation between *us* and *them* in which schools are evaluated and compared. Because the individualism and competitiveness of the market stimulates the desire of middle-class parents to secure a future for their children in unpredictable conditions (Brown, 1997), whiteness converges with middle-classness to bring about ultimate advantage. These relationships structure the presentation of the data that follows. The practice of class and whiteness may be linked to the exclusion of difference; relationality corresponds to the question of school quality; and the theme of maintenance emerges in the parents' management of school choice and competition.

THE PRACTICE OF CLASS AND WHITENESS: THE EXCLUSION OF DIFFERENCE

In the literature discussed above, middle-classness is constituted as practice and accomplished through both material and symbolic means. A manifestation of their performance of class and whiteness is the Baywoods parents' construction of social difference. The invention of boundaries around *our* children and *theirs* enables these parents to claim distinct qualities and needs. They evaluate the educational services available at Pinecrest in terms of their children's individualities and assess the correspondence between individual requirement and the services offered. However, they do not make assessments on the basis of the school's manifest content. Parents observe the social environment for its prospects for (or threats to) their child's ostensible needs. The culture of the school – significantly in the makeup of the children there – is at least as important if not more important than public measures of achievement. The difference represented by the Kerrydale children – despite its enormous diversity – is problematic for some participants and valued by others. Among the latter, the interactions with the students from Kerrydale carry social benefits for their children. Helen,⁸ a critic of Pinecrest, values multiculturalism in elementary school because it exposes her children to realities of urban life (presumably centred around race and ethnic diversity) rather than postponing the experience until university. Multiculturalism becomes something of a learning opportunity. Anne

says that she “just thought it was, like, good for my kids to see that not everybody can speak English.” She continues, “I think, like, eyes just open up. And, yeah, there’s kids that have come from, like, war-torn countries and look how they’re doing in school and that’s great and they’re part of a community – I say it’s great. I think it’s great for everybody to see that. And be a part of it.” Anne evinces here a stereotype of the battered refugee. The children from Kerrydale thus provide her children with a lesson in global perspectives. Despite these speakers’ benevolence, their practice of middle-classness and whiteness produces a social distance and neutrality. Hearing others’ oppression takes on a heuristic value. Commodified to satisfy a white, middle-class desire, their identity is maintained through a consumption of the difference they attribute to the Kerrydale children. It has become a means by which their children can improve themselves and thus acquire the (multi)cultural capital required for success in today’s world.

The increase in the school’s ethnic diversity was identified specifically and unequivocally by eight of the participants (Heidi, Sharon, Gail, Helen, Barb, Fern, Tracy, Miriam). Here are two relevant interview excerpts. The first is Fern for whom the Kerrydale students represent an absolute difference. Her position represents the far end of the spectrum. During the interviews, some of my participants expressed self-consciousness about making remarks that would “sound racist.” At least two participants requested that we turn off the tape recorder so their explicitly racist remarks would not be recorded. The richest of the interview excerpts on the meaning of difference constructs, by turns, a child with abject ignorance of Western education, disruptive in behaviour, neglected at home, and traumatized by the refugee experience.

So the teacher was dealing with not just children from a different culture—like, if you came from France or something—she was dealing with someone who has never even been exposed to books before. And so, they’re light years behind children that have been to kindergarten and junior kindergarten and all that kind of stuff. And that’s very hard for a teacher. I mean, they, you know, she’s dealing with kids at that level and there’s several behavioural problems. (Fern)

I mean, I don’t want my kid to associate with kids whose parents don’t care whether their kids do well at school, who don’t care about whether [she] is, you

know, filthy dirty. You know? So, if it turns out that there's a school where—I know this sounds like so awful – but anyhow, you know, if parents sort of perceive that these new Canadians are careless about their kids or are—and I don't know that that's necessarily so – but if that's the perception that the majority of the kids – and it's 51 per cent [ESL] now – so, if a lot of those kids are coming from homes where the parents have maybe been so traumatized because of escaping from wherever they were that they don't have – they're so busy trying to make a living here that their kids are kind of neglected in some way or whatever – that's not a common, a common, that's not a common thing for my kids to – that's not a common experience. (Barb)

In the first excerpt above, Fern claims that the children from Kerrydale are markedly behind, even backward in their adaptation to life at Pinecrest. Their deficits begin, she asserts, from their earliest years and their cumulative effects are detrimental for her children who have more than adequate preparation for the demands of elementary school. This situation together with the children's "behavioural" problems leads Fern to conclude that such classrooms are inappropriate for children like hers because, among other things, teachers cannot cope with the diverse needs. Next, Barb links defilement and neglect with the "other" embodied in the Kerrydale children and their families. Note her self-doubt and her privileging of perception over knowledge. This notwithstanding, she places her beliefs in a context. The problems derive from the families' violent refugee past and current dire straits as they struggle to get by in the city. These conditions, for Barb, are simply more than she can tolerate. For these mothers, the practice of middle-class whiteness reveals what Gabriel (1998) calls naturalization of social location and personal circumstances. Further, the superior status embedded in these parents' remarks is given meaning through their reflection in the Kerrydale families. Finally, in their rejection of difference, these mothers attempt to strictly control the social interactions of their children. Theirs is a frantic gesture to maintain their white, middle-class identities in the face of a threat.

In this study, there were parents who appreciate Pinecrest for its cultural diversity and those who object to it. There were parents like Diane, Melinda, and Anne who regarded the Kerrydale children as different but positive nonetheless for the learning opportunities they

could provide their children. These parents supported Pinecrest as inclusionary. Then, parents like Fern, Barb, and Wendy preferred the school to be exclusionary and have, in some cases, removed their children from it. Between these two positions lies another. Some of the parents placed limits on the amount of diversity they would accept. That is, they presented the desire for balance as a benign, even optimal compromise. Yet their desire for control over the process indicates their insistence on shaping the school environment in ways conducive to their values. Tracy admitted to feeling like “[a] minority here . . . like, inundated with immigrants . . . I think we should give them a chance. But I would like to see a little bit more of a balance. That’s all.” The preference for balance registers a preference for exclusion. The following excerpt is illustrative. Note Tracy’s downward shift from 80 per cent to 70 per cent as an acceptable level of immigrants in the classroom and her survey of her daughter’s happiness as contingent upon the degree of diversity there.

It bothers me to a certain extent but not enough that I would pull my child out of Pinecrest. Because she has lots of – when you look in your [School Year] Book, you’ll see she has lots of friends who are Canadian and she’s fine. As long as she gets that balance – as long as it’s not 80 per cent of immigrants, then I’m happy . . . I don’t want her in a class with 70 per cent of immigrants. (Tracy)

The fragility of class boundaries is shown here. The middle-class parents leaned heavily upon their own members to remind themselves of where they stood and against whom they stood. The middle class knows itself in relation to what it strives not to be. Parents who might have taken middle-class homogeneity for granted were able to name it once they faced the alternative. Thus the school is a venue for the learning white, middle-class identities (Byrne, 2006). To get that lesson right, these parents vigilantly ensured the optimal amount of exposure to cultural diversity. Although exposure is good in principle, the risk is overexposure. Parents expressed their desire to set the terms of achieving the best “mix” as they practised their class (and race) position. Academic standards, security, and stability become the spoken features of the school. Race and class persisted as the unspoken features.

THE RELATIONALITY OF CLASS AND WHITENESS: THE QUESTION OF SCHOOL QUALITY

The most conspicuous instance of the power among the Baywoods parents is manifest in the problem of the quality of education. Other researchers (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003) identify this theme as well and because it avoids the socially unacceptable language of social difference, it is often analyzed as a code for exclusion (Holme, 2002). In my study, supporters and detractors alike identified this reason as key to explain why parents wanted to remove their children from Pinecrest. With the entrance of students from Kerrydale, Baywoods parents expressed their concerns in terms of the educational impact on their children. Coded as “getting ahead” through enriched educational programs or as a desire to maintain a “higher level” of education than that perceived to be available at Pinecrest, problems appear to be indisputable and consensual. The following interview excerpts are evocative.

When you have kids that are not intelligent (laughs) or not as coming from families where education is not a priority. It's a cultural thing. Education to a great extent – education is a cultural thing. . . . You've got all these immigrant kids coming into the school – which is turning the school more into, like, an inner-city school. Which right away, in our minds, makes us think that the quality of the education's not gonna be the same. You don't have the same calibre of kids in the classroom. You know, you want your kids to be in a class where they're being challenged. How can they be challenged when [for] three quarters of the kids in the class, English is a second language? (Miriam)

I know the majority of the group of friends that I knew. . . . We always talked about what the change was in the school at Pinecrest. How sorry we were to see that the school had gone in this direction, whether we were gonna continue to send our children to this area; what the level of education and instruction and what the problems were. Administratively and socially and academically. (Sharon)

For both Miriam and Sharon, the boundary separating *us* from *them* was rigid. Miriam conflated the difference embodied by Kerrydale families with a lack of intelligence and academic ambition. Sharon lamented the loss of the Pinecrest she knew as a child. In this, she evokes solidarity

with peers because she attributed a range of problems to the children at Pinecrest who represented an undesirable change in the school culture. Given a choice among the group so strictly circumscribed by these two mothers, what parent would opt for such a school? The commitment they have in erecting this rigid difference reflects their rejection of the school and justifies their fierce insistence that doing so is in the best interests of their children. The new marketplace of schools provides an appealing array of alternatives in which avoidance of undesirable children can be assured. The raced and classed identities of Miriam's and Sharon's children are more likely to be maintained when such choices are considered.

The question of school quality is not restricted to Pinecrest critics like Miriam and Sharon. Even supporters of the school like Gail, Elaine, and Anne suggested that the demands of Kerrydale students diminished teachers' ability to respond to those students from Baywoods who had a higher level of skill. In the following quotation, Gail explained this predicament, but by associating the Kerrydale children with a plethora of problems. For Gail, the risk was her children's exclusion from the teacher's attention because they were simply unlikely to require as much of her time. Rhonda stated this position more forcefully; she, Heidi, and Barb made the same point, but from their critical perspective. The consequence of a teacher's distribution of her attention in such classrooms was, for these parents, a neglect of the more academically capable children like theirs. The particular status and privilege of white, middle-classness is like precious cargo on a ship threatened with hijacking. To preserve its integrity, these parents sought the utmost in its care. The safest bet is, of course, away from Pinecrest to a safer place where such considerations are obviated through self-selection of passengers.

For the classroom teacher, especially when you have a school where the program is inclusionary, you have a teacher dealing with kids whose English is not their first language and they have learning disabilities and they have emotional problems, behavioural problems. There's a lot for that teacher to cope with and I think that the kid that's just sort of sailing along, sort of doesn't get the attention.
(Gail)

[The teacher] was stretched to the limit and she had three to five ESL kids in her class who were only taken out an hour or two a day. So, that's where I do agree with the parents. That you're asking the classroom teacher to be all things to all people and you're not providing the resources for her to do that. And is the higher level child gonna pay a price for that. Is the quality of education gonna decline? Yes. (Rhonda)

[F]rankly because of the make-up of the Pinecrest now with so many children coming from lower class area (sic). You know, from outside . . . they do have many more, like I said, ethnicities and I think it does – I'm not saying these children aren't smart because you know, they can be smart as well. But it just slows down a classroom. (Heidi)

[B]oth my kids were very bright and I don't feel they are challenged enough by all the teachers. . . . I wanted something extra for my kids. . . . And they were motivated to learn and so it would have been nice had the teachers been able to provide some enrichment. You know, either make their projects a little bit more interesting or complicated or expect more. (Barb)

Barb expected that Pinecrest teachers have lower expectations of the other students to whom they assigned less interesting projects. Her evaluation of her own children as smart, dovetails with some of the other parents' demands for enriched learning for their gifted children. (Yet her expectations were misplaced: When her son was assessed for gifted programming, Barb reported that "what they said was that in fact he wasn't quite as brilliant as I thought.") Several of the Baywoods parents believed that their children qualify as gifted students. Of the 58 children among the interviewed participants, 10 (17%) were either attending programs for gifted students or had been tested for this qualification. One was in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program at a public school. Yet provisions for their capable children were, according to these parents, precisely where Pinecrest fell short. Holme (2002) discusses parallel findings in her group of 42 parents engaged in school choice.

[M]ost of these parents believed that their children were in some sense gifted and needed an academic environment with other high-achieving kids in order to be stimulated. By equating children of color with low academic achievement, these parents are able to express their concerns about diversity not in terms of

racial or class prejudice, but in terms of concerns about the academic and social needs of their own children. (p. 195)

Similar dynamics are at work among the Baywoods parents.

I have described some participants' concerns about deteriorating quality of education, insufficient teaching to their academically strong children, and the teachers' preoccupation with ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students and students with behavioural problems. Yet supporters of the school did not share these concerns. An example of a Baywoods parent who questioned the deterioration of educational standards for their children is Diane. On the one hand, she observed that "the immigrant population moving into the school has moved the Jewish population out." Yet, she rejected the assumption of deteriorating quality of the school as demonstrated by the school board's published report of province-wide testing in grades 3 and 6. She said that she had neither proof nor knowledge of worsening conditions. She also rejected the assumption that teaching in a classroom with ESOL students necessarily held back the others.

When we started in kindergarten and I looked at the grouping in my kid's class – my son, it would have been – now, I think he had maybe five Jewish kids within that class. And there were definitely children of obvious colour and different background[s]. A number of kids where English was a second language. I spoke to the kindergarten teacher and. . . I asked her if it was ever a problem for her and she told me right up front that generally the children who came in without English before Christmas were already caught up in the classroom. And after that she didn't need the resource teacher anymore. They were able to function with the rest of the kids. And that she often found that the immigrant population's children worked a lot harder to catch up than the [Baywoods] children. So, to me, that was good enough. I didn't have any worries and it's been that way through the rest of my kids' education at Pincrest. (Diane)

Hal's experiences are similar. When asked whether ESOL disrupts the classroom at all, he responded:

No, no, it doesn't. It doesn't because, as far as my kids – like, in [daughter's] class, there were very few that needed the ESL. Very few. And the teacher just went on. You know, it's amazing. She just went on and would go to them

individually at times and then – and she even had, like, the kids, help them. Which is great. So, it wasn't really a problem. No." (Hal)

Parents like Rhonda and Barb expressed specific concerns that Pinecrest was inattentive to their children's superior academic needs. Yet when Heidi sent all three of her children to private schools, she discovered that Pinecrest had prepared them adequately for the presumably greater demands and that "none of them suffered at all." Used as a barometer for the quality of education at Pinecrest, Heidi demonstrated to herself that her fear about Pinecrest was unfounded. Ruth provided evidence that the quality of education at Pinecrest was more than adequate: after completing grade 6, her son successfully passed an international entrance exam for an elite private school in the city.

For some of these parents, the anxiety of ensuring that their children get ahead may dissipate only after their children move on to the next level of schooling and prove that their education at Pinecrest was adequate. Through their school choice and the maintenance of their children's positioning in the school marketplace, they realized that educational quality at Pinecrest was not jeopardized after all. Whether this lesson translated to a defeat of related fears is uncertain. The Baywoods parents may be wondering about the risk of reproducing their class position and their whiteness. How can they be sure that their children will seize a future through whatever educational resources are available? There is no certainty, hence the anxiety of playing the school market. A parent must do whatever she or he can to shape favourable conditions for winning. The themes of distance and of maintenance of boundaries – psychic and ideational – persist here. They are expressed in words consistent with middle-class parenting: there is equal opportunity to compete for school qualifications in a non-discriminatory marketplace patronized by individualistic consumers.

THE MAINTENANCE OF CLASS AND WHITENESS: SCHOOL CHOICE AND COMPETITION

Middle-classness and whiteness are maintained to effect advantage or security in otherwise insecure conditions. The public school, an effective site in which to observe such activity, is sensitive to the state's growing

accommodation to markets and the shifting of responsibility for public goods to individuals and families. White, middle-class parents' preoccupation with securing their children's future through the right education converges with the commodification of education in the form of a proliferation of private school options, private tutoring businesses, charter schools, standardized testing, tax credits for private school attendance, and the state's campaign to position schools as the place to form young citizens prepared to compete (and win) in the global marketplace. These sentiments – and the anxiety they precipitate – are expressed well here by Miriam whose observations are remarkably self-reflective and anxious.

And it's not good enough to just get a mediocre education today. It's just not good enough. It's such a competitive world and you want to give your kids the best shot. And that's why we're – we as young parents today, we're struggling because – to the point where I think we overdo it, because we don't know what to do. It's not enough! You know, we don't know [how] to do enough for our kids. We want to expose them to everything and we're afraid that if we don't expose them to everything, they're just not gonna survive. . . . It's almost a competition – you know, who can, who can give their kids the most; who can put them in the most activities; who can put them in the best schools. The more you pay, the better the school. It's a big friggin rat race. And these kids are all becoming part of it. . . . (Miriam)

As positions of educational advantage are squeezed and the bond between educational credentials and good jobs erodes, these parents struggled to maintain their children's security. The outcome of the parents' anxious deliberations is a reproduction of whiteness and middle-classness. Accomplished through the practice of race and class, the parents' remarks made no mention of either factor. Naturalization, distancing, evasiveness, and neutrality are all instantiated here. Through insisting on the difference of the Kerrydale children and the entitlement of the Baywoods' children, rewards for the latter are rendered.

A consequence of these dynamics is the manufacture of social distance between the Baywoods and Kerrydale groups. The Baywoods parents' personal experiences with children from Kerrydale were limited to casual interactions with some of their children's friends. There was

almost no personal knowledge, friendships, nor cooperation between Baywoods parents and Kerrydale parents. The Baywoods parents we interviewed had little empirical basis for their claims. Their inconsistencies are revealing. How can ESOL be an enormous problem for teachers *and* of no consequence? How can parents talk about the low calibre of students and of high test scores for the school? How can they characterize the families in Kerrydale as refugees alien to Western culture and as underemployed professionals qualified to work but dependent on welfare? The conceptualizations about the large and diverse groups they live alongside were based on presumption and little else.

Another form of this distance is the detachment from the consequences of social inequalities reproduced through the school choices of the Baywoods parents. The advantages of an elite private school education were self-evident for many of the parents. Here, two parents describe their observations of these well-resourced schools:

When [son] went to Linwood Heights, he had a whole computer lab and he loved computers . . . just the facilities are so much greater in the private schools. That's another thing that influenced us. Like, I went to Laurelgates' open house last week. They have a science lab with a laptop for every other child. I mean, I'm paying for this but it's just the advantage of, you know, of having such great facilities. (Heidi)

[W]hen you walk around, they have these amazing facilities. He would like to go there. Like, I would like to go there. It's amazing. The science labs have snakes and lizards and they have like such a rich learning environment that you could – like, in their English class they have little tables with all lamps. Like the teacher doesn't put on the fluorescent lights . . . the art room has a skylight. It's all natural light coming in. You walk around, you think, oh man, just go here, it would just make learning so much more of an experience. (Ruth)

With their abundant and valuable equipment, the attractions of the elite private school are obvious. They are a clear passage to admission to choice universities and jobs, and parents can rest assured that the student body is homogeneous in the ways that count for their children's success. Such schools market themselves in their brochures and tours for prospective students, and these Baywoods parents were predictably responsive to their appeal. It is difficult to imagine a parent who would

not be enthusiastic about such schools. It is tempting to assume that such campaigns are delivered without any question of who gets to attend them. However, privilege cannot always take its seamless reproduction for granted. Miriam, a Pinecrest critic, provided an instructive contradiction. Well aware of her peers' preference for private schools, Miriam herself chose a Jewish day school for one of her children. Yet, she anticipated the outcome of such decisions to abandon public schools for private ones. In the excerpt below, she departed from the self-evident choice for private schooling where children, like hers, would socialize only with others like themselves. Although she had accepted this option as a way of maintaining desirable social outcomes (whiteness and middle-classness), she also considered its negative implications.

[P]arents from here on in, will – private schools will be the only way of educating your children. . . . Which means that the only people attending those public schools (pause) are people that are coming from lower income families. Which is very sad. . . . [I]f our Board of Education or our government continues to not support our educational system, then those lower income children will not have the same calibre of education than – of the children that are going to private schools. (Miriam)

Miriam knew the arrangement was relational; indeed, she spoke of it as a zero-sum game. One side's gain was the other's loss. She anticipated the reproduction of social inequalities across groups and she was troubled by it although she assumed universality among parents like herself who preferred private schools. She assumed consensus about the deteriorating quality of public schools and the ultimate bifurcation of the system into private schools for the privileged classes and public schools for everyone else. But she was not speaking for all parents. She realized that low-income families were excluded from making the same choices for "the best education" and pronounces this forecast as "sad."

How may educators explain such holes in the picture of the reproduction of middle-class whiteness among the Baywoods' parents? Describing the "moral balancing act" performed by parents involved in school choice, Ball (2003, p. 66) argues that middle-class parents neither defend class segregation in schools nor ignore the impact their decisions have on reproducing social inequalities. He prefers to regard the parents

as acting “within unclear and contradictory values systems which are complexly and unevenly related to our social practices” (p. 114). In practice, middle-class parents support the principle of inclusion *and* desire their child’s success in a competitive environment. As a result, parents end up working against the principle of equality to ensure their class interests. Some research shows this very explicitly. Wells and Oakes (1998) show how middle-class parents may work in jobs related to the promotion of equity but still expect their children to get special treatment at school. Their actions can involve the thwarting of detracking programs that benefit racialized students. Middle-class parents’ values and actions conflict: one serves the conservation of distance and difference; the other serves integration and equity. Hence there is a “mass of contradictions which set pragmatism and love against principles and the impersonal standpoint” (Ball, 2003, p. 146).

CONCLUSION

When these parents were children, Pinecrest School was highly regarded. Several of them attested to that on the basis of personal experience. There would have been little doubt of their enrolment in an elementary school located only a few blocks from home and where they would meet all their friends. As adults, many of the parents were eager to send their own children there. However, by 2000, only 29 per cent of their children attended with their parents’ unequivocal approval; 41 per cent of them could very well have been elsewhere given their parents’ preferences.⁹ How did the parents respond to this transformation? This article has shown how social difference is constructed and how it is excluded especially as an obstruction to their children’s academic goals. In these activities, the Baywoods parents expressed their class position and worked their class positioning to redefine their place within the school. The practice, relationality, and maintenance of their class and their whiteness present the range of their positions.

A salient theme throughout the interview data is not denial or neutrality, nor is it straightforward expression of privilege or colour-blindness. What is most striking is the distance at which the Baywoods parents stand in relation to the families from Kerrydale. They regard themselves as significantly different in most respects. I have noted how

the construction of difference serves as a rationale for critical assessments of Pinecrest School. Yet when examining this claim of difference more closely, I find a paradox emerges when comparing Baywoods and Kerrydale families. Recent immigrants to Canada, 73 per cent of whom are visible minorities (McIsaac, 2003), have higher educational attainment than Canadian-born citizens. For year 2000, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2001, pp. 9, 27) shows that 49 per cent of principal applicants and dependants arrived in the city with Bachelors degrees or higher. The figure for Canada is 44 per cent. This advantage, however, does not translate into higher incomes nor occupational opportunities (Kazempur & Halli, 2000; Kunz, Milan, & Schetagne, 2000; Reitz, 2001).¹⁰ This statistic means that the families who settle in Kerrydale are very likely middle-class as measured through (original) professional occupation and education level, but they are underemployed with low incomes.

Middle-classness is not all that Kerrydale parents share with Baywoods parents. Research shows that immigrants value education highly and regard it as essential for the social mobility of their children (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Kao, 2002) Commonalities penetrate more deeply as well. Collective memories of immigration, residential segregation, underemployment, and discrimination are retained by Jews, too. Throughout their history, Jews have been cast as a group whose status as insider/outsider changed in relation to the meaning placed on factors like their religion, their occupations, their bodies, and even their politics, whether socialist or capitalist, because Jews are framed as symbols of both. Because of historical purges and current resentment against them, an unequivocal whiteness is difficult to attribute to the Jews. For Britzman (1998), "the idea of the Jew as 'white' in both North America and Europe is barely fifty years old" – since the Holocaust (p. 104).

Given the Jewish collective memory of oppression, something may impede some Jews' ability to extend social justice to other groups. For most Jews, whiteness facilitates their denial and distance from their own racialization. It suppresses a collective memory that could be valuable in joining with others such as those in Kerrydale in their struggles for equity. A selective withdrawal from such memories upholds commitments to individualism detached from history and biography (Simon, 2000). The consequence is that Jews hold themselves up as the image of

the self-made citizen who conquered barriers and made it. Hal identifies one consequence of this [outlook](#) in the following excerpt.

If you're Jewish, or my age, it was like my grandparents and their grandparents that immigrated. My mother was born here, my father moved here when he was two. It'd be a very similar to some of the small kids there [in Kerrydale]. My father was born in [Europe], he moved here when he was two. They didn't have anything. Were they stupid or ignorant because they spoke [a European language] and [the others] didn't? No, they worked hard and achieved something. Just like these immigrant people. But I think that's what my friends lose track of. (Hal)

Hal perceptively turns to the loss of the Jewish immigrant memory with its experiences of poverty, foreignness, and struggle. Like most of the Jewish families in Baywoods, he can only count two generations since having "made it" in Canada. He is aware that attributing Jewish success to hard work, dedication to education, and high expectations implies a detachment from the kind of conditions Jews faced, as discussed by Steinberg (1981): when and where the Jews arrived here; the opening up of universities; the need for skilled labour; benevolent societies to assist needy Jewish families; Jews' experience in fighting discrimination and with living in exile. Forgetfulness about the material and cultural forces that enabled Jewish social mobility – and distance from the current conditions of underemployment and discrimination against new immigrants – supports the differentiation that Baywoods parents make of Kerrydale children. The inclusion of Kerrydale at Pinecrest School represents an opportunity for Baywoods parents to create positive relationships, but it is an opportunity they miss due to their success at social integration, in other words, due to their whiteness and middle-classness. As a result, they engage in difference-making (practice) and in evaluating their needs relative to that of others (relationality). Finally, they are invested in the active reproduction of their raced, classed, and ethnic selfhood in the arena of school choice (maintenance). The process is as uncertain as it is compelling.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the research assistance of Jessica Ringrose in obtaining these data, and to SSHRC for providing research funding. Queen's University funded the research assistance of Georgina Blanchard and Lauren Perry. Many thanks to librarian and documents unit head, Jeff Moon, for training and for assistance in the collection of data appearing in this article. Thanks also to Bonnie Stewart of the Office of Research Services.

NOTES

¹ My use of the category of middle class derives from current British sociology and is discussed in the literature review section of this article. This approach may diverge from the one prevalent in Canadian research on middle-class formation, especially in social history. See for example, Darroch (1999) or Holman (2002).

² In the interest of confidentiality, I have withheld this reference.

³ One document suggests (see endnote #2) that non-Jewish families preferred to send their children to private schools, presumably the elite institutions, and the Catholic schools located in the district.

⁴ Data were not collected on socio-economic status (SES) as conventionally measured by parents' occupation, income, and educational attainment. Therefore, no formal comparison is made. The identification of SES for Canadian immigrants like those in Kerrydale is complex and influenced by such factors including as "push" and "pull" as well as settlement issues such as fluctuations in the labour market, the correspondence between job availability and immigration policy, recognition of foreign credentials, and discrimination in applying for jobs. No further effort to elaborate on the inequalities between the two groups is made in this article. For analytic purposes, my focus is on the Baywoods parents.

⁵ Two couples participated and with one, the husband and wife were interviewed together. Most of the interviews were conducted by Jessica Ringrose, my research assistant at the time. I gratefully acknowledge Jessica's input into all phases of this project.

⁶ This is not to suggest that rubrics of class and whiteness exhaust the meaning of identity for my participants or the dimensions that inform their choices. As others have noted, there are class, race, and gender dimensions to choice (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Dehli, 2000; Griffith & Smith, 2005). This

issue raises intersectionality as a methodological approach to the analysis of inequalities as noted in the introduction to this article.

⁷ Some good yet diverse examples of books on white racialization are the social historical work of David Roediger (1991) and Matthew Frye Jacobson (1999), studies in English literature by Toni Morrison (1993) and Valerie Babb (1998), cultural studies by Mike Hill (2004) and Vron Ware and Les Back (2002), and George Yancy's (2004) collection of essays in philosophy.

⁸ All names of participants are pseudonyms.

⁹ Because the group interviewed for this project was small, I make no claims about generalizability to all the parents at Pinecrest or to other parent groups.

¹⁰ There is some debate in Canadian research on reasons for this. The research cited suggests discrimination. Others, however, argue that socio-economic status is the more meaningful factor to explain persistent inequalities rather than ethnicity alone (especially when reduced to a general category). Examples of such work include Isajiw, Sev'er, and Driedger (1993), McAll (1990), and Tepperman (1975). More recently, see Liodakis (2003), and Hum and Simpson (1999).

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