Raising the 'Meritocracy': Parenting and the Individualization of Social Class

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ABSTRACT

Theories of 'individualization' and 'risk' have shifted attention away from the material and structural roots of inequality and sanctioned a psychologized view of class distinctions in terms of personal qualities. This article will demonstrate how the association of disadvantage with a particular form of subjectivity is operationalized and institutionalized through a contemporary focus on childrearing practices. Discourses of 'social exclusion' construct working-class families as lacking in personal skills and moral responsibility, destined to transfer disadvantage to their children in a 'cycle of deprivation'. This view underpins the current UK policy focus on parenting, characterized by state efforts to regulate and control the way children are brought up. Drawing on qualitative research with parents across a wide range of social backgrounds, this article will show how such an approach fails to recognize the socially and materially grounded nature of childrearing.

KEY WORDS

class / exclusion / individualization / parenting

Introduction

The last few decades have seen social class distinctions become increasingly codified, displaced and individualized (Lawler, 2000; Reay, 1998; Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Although this has led some to declare the contemporary irrelevance of class as a topic, such claims ring hollow given the steadily mounting gap between rich and poor in a context where social mobility rates are almost static (Aldridge, 2004; Paxton and

Dixon, 2004). While systems of distinction and discrimination have evolved they continue to underpin and reproduce inequality, dramatically shaping the lives and opportunities of those they position. This article outlines a dominant cultural reconstruction of class, from a structural category to a form of subjectivity, and will show how this has precipitated a new scrutiny of the practice of childrearing. A critical analysis of recent social policy highlights a particular concern with socially excluded parents, demonstrating how initiatives seek to indoctrinate middle-class values as a method of tackling disadvantage. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with parents, this article will challenge the notion that parenting can be separated from its socio-economic context and will show how the experience of living class is integral to the day-to-day process of raising children. It will also illustrate how discursive constructions of the deserving self become a resource for middle-class parents to consolidate their advantages and ensure the reproduction of privilege through the generations.

From Social Class to Social Inclusion

Contemporary understandings of inequality have been heavily influenced by a sociological preoccupation with post-industrialization and its social impacts. Theorists describe a de-traditionalization and individualization of social life, claiming a new significance for personal agency in negotiating and managing life events (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991, 1992). More specifically it is argued that industrial capitalism has been superseded by an individualized, globalized economy that has shrunk the UK manufacturing base and decimated traditional working-class communities (Gorz, 1982). This is seen as precipitating a new age of modernity, replacing the old predictabilities and certainties of industrial society, and bringing with it new risks and opportunities (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). According to the prominent sociological theorists Anthony Giddens and Ulrick Beck, the demise of class and other group identities are characteristic of the new individualized lifestyles of late modern social actors (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998). Such theories acknowledge the enduring nature of inequality, but suggest that this is more effectively explained at the level of the individual rather than in terms of a particular group or class (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Savage, 2000).

The ascendancy of theories describing a new age of 'reflexive modernity' in which individuals produce their own biographies, was highly instrumental in levering class off the academic agenda. Consequently, a period marked by record levels of inequality coincided with virtual silence from sociologists on the subject of class (Savage, 2000). This vacuum has, of late, been redressed by an emerging body of literature exploring the contemporary relevance of systems of classification and drawing out the real lived experience of class. In contrast to early, male-centred, sociological preoccupations with employment and the economic relations of class, much of this work focuses on women's experiences to

demonstrate how value distinctions place, categorize and mediate access to material resources.

Many feminist sociologists have drawn on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990) to demonstrate how class positionings are generated, maintained and reproduced through structured social relationships. This more nuanced approach highlights the status of social class as dynamic, symbolic and culturally produced, and demonstrates how sociological theories are themselves actively implicated in cultural processes of classification and distinction. For example, Skeggs (1997, 2004) notes how the historical generation of class as a categorization has resulted in the production of discursive frameworks, which both warrant and project onto structural inequality. Walkerdine (1996) has also shown how traditional sociological understandings of class in terms of occupational or economic status, are caught within this framework, reinforcing dominant discourses around mobility and merit.

In a similar vein, Savage (2000) focuses on the individualism underscoring the work of Beck and Giddens, highlighting the way middle-class experience is made normative. Theories of the reflexive, late modern agent have permeated the social landscape they purport to describe, generating a new language to explain personal experience and social relationships. More specifically, their influence has been substantial in shaping current governing politics, with a stated aim of redistributing possibilities as opposed to wealth (Giddens, 1998). According to Giddens (1998), achieving a more meritocratic society requires people to embrace their individualized citizenship and become 'responsible risk takers'. From this perspective, prosperity derives from being the right kind of (middle-class) self, while poverty and disadvantage is associated with poor self-management.

The New Labour government have been keen to ensure that subjects adapt to the changing post-industrial landscape described by prominent sociological theorists. This concern to 'empower' individuals by ensuring they take responsibility for their decisions has driven a welfare agenda which focuses on generating opportunities as opposed to direct financial or material aid (Dwyer, 2002). The formation of new categories of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' have been prominent in this shift, with the term social exclusion replacing a more general concept of working-class disadvantage. As Levitas (1998) and Fairclough (2000) point out, this approach marginalizes notions of fairness and justice through the construction of a culturally distinct 'excluded' minority as the major, legitimate focus of concern for governments. Inequalities among the 'included' majority are then normalized, with both the privileges of the rich and the struggles of the poor rationalized through reference to an inclusive, meritocratic society.

As Rose (1999) notes, the discourse of social exclusion not only obscures structurally grounded inequity, it also reinforces a distinct view of subjecthood. The socially excluded are seen not as victims but as failures in self-governance, unable or unwilling to appropriately capitalize on their lives. Thus, poverty and privilege, once discussed in terms of wealth distribution and

attached to the concept of class, have been reframed by inclusion/exclusion debates, which sideline issues of inequality and foreground individual life choices and conduct.

While the wealthy middle classes have a long history of questioning the moral fibre of the poor, contemporary individualized understandings of social exclusion are tied to a specific notion of social justice. From this perspective the poor must, for their own sakes, be helped or coerced to become included citizens. Efforts to mould individual subjectivity are most clearly seen in the current New Labour Government's preoccupation with childhood development and more specifically in the nurturing of young selves by their parents.

Parenting the Right Kind of Selves

Gewirtz (2001) describes how the New Labour government are pursuing a determined aim to tackle the social problems of disadvantage by inculcating middle-class values at the level of the family. In line with a pledge to place families at the heart of the policy agenda, recent years have seen a stream of initiatives designed to regulate childrearing as part of an almost evangelical drive to equip working-class parents with the skills to raise middle-class children. According to the government, inadequate parenting is the source of serious social ills, driving a cycle of deprivation and generating crime and anti-social behaviour. As Lawler (2000) notes, this approach represents the latest manifestation of a long running pathologization of working-class parenting. Characterized by a new policy focus on the role of personal responsibility and parenting in upholding public order, this stance is also grounded in a more ambitious social justice agenda. More specifically, intervention in the traditionally private sphere of the family is warranted on the basis that children who are parented well will have a better chance of upward social mobility. Parenting is thus viewed in terms of preference and rationality, with little recognition of its classed underpinnings (Duncan, 2005).

According to the recently published government Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*, a range of factors are key to enabling children to break the 'cycle of deprivation' and overcome the effects of disadvantage, including strong relationships with parents, parental involvement with education, appropriate role models, feeling valued, and individual characteristics such as intelligence. Conspicuously absent from this list is any acknowledgement of material or financial capital as significant resources in evening out life chances. The clear implication is that a quality upbringing is all that is needed to ensure equal opportunity. The government's Strategy Unit pursues a similar re-conceptualization of disadvantage in their discussion paper 'Life Chances and Social Mobility' (Aldridge, 2004). They identify particular characteristics associated with children's achievement, including psychological traits such as high self esteem, cultural factors associated with the ability to use and understand 'educated' language, and access to a diverse variety of social networks. These features are detached

from conventional, material definitions of social class and used to explain upward mobility (or the lack of it), the inference being that class mobility is a matter of being the right kind of self.

Margaret Hodge, the former minister for children sums up this conviction in a recent speech, claiming that 'good parenting in the home is more important than anything else to a child's future' (speech given at the Parent-Child 2004 conference). In reviewing research highlighting early developmental differences in low-income children (Feinstein and Symons, 1999), Hodge draws the conclusion that poor parents are failing to impart the necessary skills and traits that are needed to sustain a meritocratic society. Consequently, she reasons, childrearing must be repositioned as a public rather than a private concern and the state must take responsibility for inculcating the practice of good parenting. According to Hodge, only the political Right argues for childrearing to remain the private concern of families, while a more enlightened New Labour Government recognizes its moral duty to uphold social justice (speech to the Social Market Foundation 1st May 2004). For the sake of their children's future, and for the stability and security of society as a whole, working-class parents must be taught how to raise middle-class subjects.

This representation of parenting as a fundamental determinant of children's future life chances has underpinned a raft of policy initiatives designed to 'support' parents in the essential practice of raising children. While in policy contexts the term support has traditionally implied direct help in the form of material benefits (as in child support, income support etc.), New Labour's use of the word refers primarily to guidance and education and has become a common shorthand description for parenting classes (Gillies, 2005). Reflecting what Furedi (2001) has identified as the creeping 'professionalization' of childrearing, the government has introduced a range of measures to ensure that parents are 'supported' to fulfil their responsibilities. These have included setting up the National Family and Parenting Institute to act as a 'centre of expertise', providing information and 'authoritative' advice on parenting 'good practice', and the creation of the Parenting Fund, which will distribute £25 million to organizations promoting parent support services.

Parenting 'support' initiatives are promoted as being relevant to all parents regardless of their circumstances, but this concern to regulate childrearing practices is for the most part directed at those families defined as socially excluded. For example, Sure Start, the government's flagship parenting support programme, is concentrated in areas of high deprivation and is described as a cornerstone of the government's drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. Consisting of locally organized programmes offering parents of young children a range of services, Sure Start focuses prominently on providing information and advice, with its publicly stated intention being:

> ... to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children – particularly those who are disadvantaged – so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school, and thereby break the cycle of

disadvantage for the current generation of young children. (http://www.surestart.
gov.uk/aboutsurestart/)

While Sure Start is based on voluntary participation, other parenting 'support'
initiatives targeted at socially excluded families have an explicitly coercive remit.

For example, legislation introduced through the Crime and Disorder Act com-
pels parents of young offenders to attend weekly classes to learn 'parenting skills'.

As Young (1999) notes, the discourse of social exclusion invokes an imper-
ative of inclusion. Exclusion is a unconscionable position and consequently the
excluded must be helped or compelled back into the fold of the included. This
moral mission structuring government family policy is characterized by a puni-
tive approach towards parents described by the Home Office as 'unwilling or
unable to respond to support when offered' (Home Office 2003a: 9). This
includes the fining of parents whose children commit crimes or miss school, and
the imprisonment parents of persistent truants. The White Paper *Respect &
Responsibility –Taking a Stand Against Anti-Social Behaviour* contained even
more severe proposals, including benefit cuts for errant families, the removal of
persistent young offenders from their families for placement in foster homes,
and the committal of parents to residential homes for 're-training' (Home
Office, 2003b).

The notion that parenting practice can be separated out from socio-economic
status and then used to explain the inequality it is necessarily grounded in, high-
lights a very particular understanding of class in terms of gradients of personal
development. Structural and other constraints on action are dismissed in this
model of the agentic, reflexive self, with appropriately raised citizens assumed to
be able to negotiate and transcend obstacles in their path by exploiting opportu-
nities, developing skills and managing risk. Articulated through the language of
inclusion and exclusion, this approach promotes a highly moralistic and ulti-
mately authoritarian stance, isolating parenting practices from their situated,
interpersonal context and presenting them as methods which must be taught for
the public good. Class is thus obscured by its re-framing in terms of an included
majority of reasonable, rational, moral citizens who seek the best for their chil-
dren, and an excluded minority who are disconnected from mainstream values
and aspirations. Consequently, class remains implicit but is made invisible,
thereby denying validity to central issues of social justice. The 'included' worthy
citizen subscribes to middle-class values and ambitions and can therefore be
trusted to raise the next generation. The excluded, however, are destined, through
their own personal failings as parents, to reproduce their poverty (Gillies, 2005).
While this model drives current approaches to family policy, a situated analysis
of parenting reveals a very different social reality.

Researching Parenting: Resources and Practices

As part of the ESRC funded research project 'Resources in Parenting: Access to
Capitals',[1] an extensive survey was conducted among parents of children aged

8 to 12, followed up by in-depth qualitative interviews with 25 mothers and 11 fathers from a wide range of 27 households across England and Scotland (see Edwards and Gillies [2004] for further details of the research design). The latter qualitative phase explored the micro processes of everyday family life by examining the resources that are available to parents and was the major focus of this article. Drawing on a framework informed by the work of Bourdieu (1990), the project conceptualizes parenting resources in terms of economic, social, cultural and emotional capital. 'Economic capital', refers to financial assets in the form of access to money, income, investments etc. 'Cultural capital', is more complex in that it relates to values and knowledge which are both personally embodied as dispositions and institutionalized (in the case of education). 'Social capital' describes the value that can be generated from social connections through relationships or group membership. The concept of 'emotional capital' is drawn on to explore levels or types of emotional investment in children. These capitals are accessed and utilized through an interrelation of social positions and are as a result highly gendered and racialized as well as classed (Skeggs, 1997).

Although interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers, and included a number of ethnic minority families, this article focuses predominantly on the impact of class on parenting practices.[2] However, it is important to note that discussions of 'parenting' often obscure the highly gendered practice of caring for children. It is still predominantly mothers who take responsibility for the day-to-day care of children, despite attempts by the government to encourage fathers to become more involved in family life (David, 1998). Consequently, it is primarily mothers who bear the brunt of initiatives and sanctions designed to promote 'good parenting'. As research conducted by Drakeford (1996) reveals, court orders designed to make parents accountable for their children's misdemeanours are invariably served on mothers, even on the occasions when the fathers are also present.

According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) the advent of individualization has transformed old sociological concepts like class into 'zombie categories', 'dead and still alive' (p. 203). They argue that while the vocabulary and framework of social class persists as a classificatory tool, the category can no longer relate meaningfully to everyday life. However, our research on parenting resources points to an opposite interpretation, demonstrating how the content and experience of class endures despite a paucity of language and theory to describe it. While approaching a concept like social class as if it existed in some kind of objective, independent realm is problematic, some form of abstract reification can work to bring particular phenomena into sight so they can be better understood. For this pragmatic reason the terms 'working class' and 'middle class' are used in this article to describe the material and social status of the families discussed. The parents interviewed for this study were approximately evenly divided between the two classes on the grounds of their access to economic/material, social and cultural capital. More specifically, a range of characteristics including occupation, education, family background, social networks,

household income, housing status and geographical location were taken into consideration in classing these parents. This simple categorization may overlay a greater complexity, but it allows analysis of the real effects of class as a set of systemized social relationships with powerful material consequences.

The enduring relevance of class for the parents in our sample was a central finding in our study. Detailed analysis of the interview data revealed the extent to which economic, cultural, social and personal resources are interdependent in families. Clear relationships were also evident between the resources held by particular parents and the childrearing practices they pursued. Parents with access to middle-class resources (such as money, high status social contacts and legitimated cultural knowledge) drew on these capitals to consolidate their power and advantage, and invested heavily in their children's education as a method of transferring this privilege. Previous research has produced similar findings, with Allatt (1993) demonstrating how the minutiae of middle-class parenting practice is founded on an active manipulation of social and financial resources to ensure advantage is passed down through the generations. Bates (2002) has also explored the dynamics of social and cultural capital transmission within families, highlighting the complex struggles of parents to ensure middle-class benefits are reproduced.

In contrast, parents in our sample with severely restricted access to resources struggled to preserve their limited stock of capital, and in the process actively inculcated their children with crucial survival skills. Working-class mothers and fathers in our sample were emotionally and practically engaged in helping their children negotiate disadvantages and challenges that were considerably less likely to trouble middle-class children or their parents. This often set their practices at odds with the normative values structuring 'inclusion' initiatives, particularly in terms of education and discipline. Poverty, low social status and high vulnerability to emotional and physical violence were rarely compatible with middle-class ideals of parental investment in education and democratic childrearing styles. Instead working-class parents were more concerned to ensure that their children have the skills and the strength to be able to cope with the instability, injustice and hardship that will most likely characterize their lives.

Meanwhile, for our middle-class sample, the perceived failures of particular parents and their children provided a clear marker from which to judge and warrant their own children's successful development. More specifically, our research highlights the way individualized understandings of class facilitate a middle-class 'discourse of entitlement', which itself becomes key resource for cementing family privilege.

The Right to be Bright: Developmental Discourses of Entitlement and Distinction

Individualism has long played a key role in defining the middle classes, distinguishing them as worthy selves against a working-class mass (Skeggs, 1997,

2004; Strathern, 1992). As Savage (2000) documents, the recent emphasis on individualization theories represent a further dimension in this process of middle-class cultural differentiation. Furthermore, as Lawler (2000) notes, it is through the nurturing of individuality that children become recognized as social beings and 'good citizens'. In our study, analysis of parents' accounts demonstrated the extent to which the middle-class interviewees were invested in constructing their children as 'unique' and distinct from others. This was commonly articulated in relation to education, with middle-class parents emphasizing the intellectual competence of their children. For example, Howard, a white, middle-class father was keen to establish the exceptional status of his son, Joel:

> The nine-year-old's extraordinarily bright, I wouldn't call him severely gifted or make out any special case for him, but he is very bright. To hear him explaining Einstein's theory of relativity to Miriam when we're both trying to keep a straight face. He's very computer-literate, he's engaged with science and the world around and education's a priority. (Howard – white, middle-class father)

While Howard suggests he is not 'making any special case' for Joel, the claim that he is 'extraordinarily bright' is levelled throughout his interview to underline the responsibility of the adult world to ensure his son's potential is reached. This theme of exceptionality is also pursued by Joel's mother who describes how her anxiety was aroused when her son started complaining about the behaviour of a boy at his school:

> I did check out very specifically with his tutor in fact, was it something particular to Joel, was Joel always being bullied? Or the impression I had, which the teacher confirmed, in fact, that this other child, Alan, is just not an easy child ... there is Joel and he's not the tallest in the class but he's one of the tallest, he's an extremely attractive-looking child, he's academic, I wanted to make sure that he wasn't being picked out and bullied by somebody who's physically very skilled, but academically backward. But once I talked to the teacher about it, it became quite clear that Alan was extremely even handed [laughing] and was in no way picking on Joel, but I did want to check that out with some care, and the teacher obviously caught on to *exactly* what I was asking [laughing].

Miriam's effort to insure that her exceptional son is not picked out by less able children derives from her strong sense that Joel's right to be bright must be protected. Both Howard and Miriam emphasize Joel's entitlement to continued academic success and attention from teachers on the grounds that his individual talents must be maximized. However, the basis of this exceptionality can only be maintained at the expense of the children distinguished from him. In order to be exceptional and deserving of the investments made in his development children like Alan must exist as markers of failure or ordinariness. This process of distinction lies at the heart of the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and exposes a major flaw in efforts to associate social inequality with parenting skills. Middle-class selves are necessarily defined in relation to working-class inferiority, with claims to privilege

founded on a notion of deserving individuality. But such middle-class selves are also grounded in a social and economic context which enables, supports and legitimizes their individuality.

In many ways, Howard and Miriam embody the values and practices advocated by the government in their efforts to promote good parenting. They place great importance on Joel's education, actively monitor his academic progress and have high aspirations for him. Joel is represented by his parents as exactly the kind of confident, reflexive, agentic self endorsed by the government as the worthy 'included' citizen. However, it is important to consider the specific material and social resources underpinning Howard and Miriam's approach to parenting. Both are very highly educated, hail from well-connected families, and have a friendship network containing a range of middle-class professionals. For instance, Miriam's brother is an academic historian and takes Joel on regular weekly museum visits. As Ball's (2003) work demonstrates, social and cultural capital are closely interlinked resources in the context of education. Howard and Miriam are not particularly wealthy but have enough financial capital for them both to be able to work part time. Howard is an osteopath while Miriam is an academic and both often work from home, freeing up time to spend with their son.

Furthermore, Joel's academic success is a source of pride and pleasure for them as a family, enabling Howard and Miriam's involvement in Joel's homework and educational development to be experienced as a form of intimacy. Their high stock of middle-class cultural capital ensures that they are familiar and comfortable with the educational values prioritized by Joel's school, and their own standing as highly educated professionals imbues them with a particular status licensing a constant surveillance of and negotiation with Joel's teachers. As Miriam's quote demonstrates, her interactions with the school often centre on ensuring Joel's high status is recognized and properly catered for. Her expressed reassurance comes partly from realizing Joel is not being bullied, but also from a complicit, shared understanding with the teacher based on the recognition of the other 'academically backward' child as a problem. Working-class parents are far more likely to occupy this 'other' space and consequently are positioned very differently in terms of power.

In our sample, almost all the middle-class parents used the adjective 'bright' to describe their sons and daughters. As Lucey and Reay (2002) demonstrate, the notion that middle-class children are bright, clever and possess potential is a common implicit assumption articulated by their parents, teachers and the children themselves. In their school-based research they show how middle-class children were most likely to be identified as 'gifted and talented', thereby qualifying for educational acceleration and enhancement schemes designed for bright but social disadvantaged inner-city children. As with Howard and Miriam's representation of their son as exceptional, this claim to brightness operates as part of a discourse of entitlement (Lucey and Reay, 2002; Skeggs, 2004). Being bright is constructed in relation to the alternatives of being average or 'dim', and is usually evidenced through academic accomplishment at

school, which (as Howard and Miriam demonstrate), is underpinned by middle-class economic, cultural and social capital. The majority of the middle-class parents in our sample had children who scored well in classroom tests and consequently they were able to evoke their child's right to continued success by emphasizing their natural brightness. In contrast, a substantial number of working-class parents in our sample had children who were struggling at school, while none had children who excelled academically. For these parents, hope was invested in their children managing to secure a basic level of education. Bright was not a word used by any of the working-class parents when discussing their children. Instead, the attributes most likely to be proudly described were children's ability to stay out of trouble, get on with others, and work hard. As has been noted by Skeggs (1997) the ontological security of the working classes is more likely to lie in 'fitting in' rather than standing out. This is further underlined by Reay and Lucey's (2000) research into secondary school transition highlighting working-class children's desire to avoid standing out as different in school.

Working-class parents in our sample were distinctly more likely to attach negative connotations to the notion of children being different or 'special', and to fear that any marking out would derive from accusations of misbehaviour or failure. For many of these parents, hopes that their child would shine at school had been revised by an early reality of poor marks and conflict with teachers. As a result more fundamental aspirations for their children to gain a basic education, stay out of trouble and survive the psychological injuries of school failure took precedence. This is reflected in the kinds of emotional investments made by working-class parents, in comparison with a more middle-class concern with academic performance. For example, Denise and Ted's son, Liam, is struggling at school and needs special sessions to bring his literacy level up, but they drew on a value system emphasizing personality, good behaviour and helpfulness:

> I mean I'm not blowing me own trumpet but I get complimented on how he is with people so that's a good thing for your self it boosts you. But there's never been, like I say there's never been anything negative. He's no angel and he can kick off like other kids can but he is a good kid. I've been lucky that I've had a gooden. Yeah, yeah I think we've done alright. (Denise – white, working-class mother)

> Since he's started [school] up to now, he's always enthusiastic and willing to learn. Never back chat's them and he tries to be helpful and he wants to be helpful with nothing in return … Yeah always tries to help other people and he particularly likes helping the younger ones. You know the ones that have only just started 'cos he does playground pal and that basically entails that all the younger kids if they're lost or they've got a problem they go to the older ones and if need be they go get a teacher then. (Ted – white, working-class father)

From the Government's point of view, Denise, Ted and other working-class parents holding less than high expectations of their children's academic attainment are failing to generate the aspirational values needed to facilitate self development.

This interpretation gives little consideration to the everyday material and social context shaping the lives of these families. Denise and Ted have few of the resources available to Miriam and Howard. Their low household income is sustained by the long hours worked by Ted as a cleaner. While they derive substantial social capital from family, friends and neighbours who occupy a similar social status, they have no highly educated or influential contacts to draw on. Having both grown up in working-class families and left school without qualifications, they lack grounded knowledge of the cultural and academic framework structuring their son's school, and are aware that the cultural capital they do possess positions them as problematic and inferior. Consequently involvement in their son's education generates little of the cosy intimacy experienced by Howard, Miriam and Joel. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that parents like Denise generate crucial emotional capital enabling their children to survive school without being psychologically crushed. Existing literature tends to equate the concept of emotional capital with educational success, viewing it as a resource passed on through parental involvement. However, our analysis demonstrates that for many working-class parents emotional investments were necessarily directed towards day-to-day survival.

As numerous studies have established, class plays a formative role in shaping the nature and experience of parental involvement in education (Ball et al., 1996; Crozier, 1996; Reay, 1998; Vincent, 1996). For Denise and Ted education was associated with disappointment and failure, both in terms of their own personal histories and their experiences of being parents. Involvement with teachers was characterized by humiliation and/or conflict, as was the case for many of the working-class parents in our sample. For example, one father described acute feelings of embarrassment and anger when his attempts to help with his daughter's homework were met with derision and a red marker pen from a teacher. Like most of the working-class interviewees, Denise and Ted had limited contact with their son's school, visiting only if they were summoned to account for a problem, or if they felt compelled to challenge a perceived injustice. These visits commonly fostered antagonisms, with working-class mothers and fathers feeling misunderstood and de-valued by teachers. Such feelings could also lead parents to adopt confrontational or provocative measures in an attempt to alter the balance of power. For example, Denise explained how she risked a prison sentence by supporting her son in truanting when her repeated complaints about bullying incidents were not acted on by the school.

Social Class and the 'Special' Child

The class specific meaning and experience of being singled out as 'special' was particularly evident in the accounts given by the minority of middle-class parents whose children were receiving poor marks at school. It was in this context that differences between middle-class and working-class access to capitals

became particularly apparent. Middle-class parents with children struggling at school were able to mobilize significant resources in an attempt to reverse this pattern. These parents placed a great deal of importance on their children's academic success and remained emotionally invested in presenting their children as 'bright'. Cultural capital was utilized to cultivate relationships with teachers and to assess children's strengths and weaknesses. Time was spent monitoring and helping with homework. Private tutors were organized, and personal contacts with specific educational knowledge were drawn on for advice or practical help. Even though the desired level of achievement was not always reached, these parents were invariably successful in re-constructing their children's difficulties, representing them as having special needs, as opposed to below average ability.

For example, Katherine, a white, middle-class mother has a nine year old daughter (Zoe) who has started to struggle at school. Zoe has developed particular problems with literacy and has become disruptive in the classroom. As the following quote demonstrates, Katherine's response is grounded in her particular economic and social standing.

> There was a poster in the Child Development Unit saying 'Is this your child's writing?' and it was Zoe's handwriting, really badly formed letters, back to front letters and I just thought I've got to pursue this because it – I mean we used to joke about it being, you know, she's dyslexic in a sort of, not in sort of a serious way really, but when I saw this I thought I've got to get it sorted so we went actually privately we took her to a specialist near Oxford who gave her an assessment and he did say that he felt that she was mildly or moderately dyslexic, so erm we just made sure that the school in which she was, you know, the school they knew of the situation, the issue and she's got a very very high IQ but she was falling well behind in her reading and her writing.

Katherine places emphasis on Zoe's 'very, very' high IQ in order to contextualize the problem with literacy, thereby establishing that her daughter is 'bright', able and deserving. Throughout the interview, Katherine also stresses how Zoe's 'uniqueness' and 'maturity' can be challenging to teachers and other children, causing difficulties in the classroom. While working-class parents with misbehaving children tended to stress commonalities with other children, Katherine invokes her daughter's individuality to claim a special exception and entitlement. The implication is that the classroom must adjust in order to accommodate her daughter's specific developmental needs. To secure this entitlement Katherine draws on economic capital to pay for a private assessment to confirm that a medical condition is detracting from her daughter's potential. This diagnosis acts as an important bargaining chip, providing an objective validation to back up demands for extenuation and extra help. Katherine's personal relationships with Zoe's teachers developed through her position as a PTA committee member further facilitates this process. It is also likely that her skills and status as a practicing lawyer assist her in negotiating her daughter's case.

Katherine was not the only middle-class parent to seek a private diagnosis to account for a child's underperformance at school. One couple obtained two separate specialist reports, the first confirming their daughter was dyslexic and the second establishing that she is simultaneously 'gifted and talented'. The contrast here with working-class parents could not be sharper. The 'special' status associated with a specific clinical diagnosis was far less desirable to working-class parents who were likely to feel this would merely write their child off. Like Katherine, Kelly, a white working-class mother also has a nine-year-old child (Craig) with literacy problems and disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Kelly's son also has been diagnosed with a clinical disorder, but this was obtained through the family's involvement with social services and relates to a more generic definition of 'educational behavioural difficulty'. Despite the similarities, Kelly and Craig occupy a very different position in comparison to Katherine and Zoe. A claim that Craig's needs are unique and must to be accommodated in the classroom would gain little ground against a more dominant construction of him as exhibiting problematic behaviour that requires modification. Kelly's often fraught interactions with Craig's school centre on persuading them not to expel him. Having recently discovered that his reading age is extremely low she is now resigned to the idea that his best chance of learning may be at home and has agreed that he will only attend school in the mornings.

> It's very, very low [his reading age]. It's about year 2, the work that he can do. I, I've started teaching at home as well to try and build that up but he still can't do two letter words. He still has trouble with the two letter words so he's very, very behind … 'Cos they said he needs to learn the basics and that as well and I'm aware that they haven't got the facilities there to do it. They've got all them kids there that they've got to teach, they can't devote the time to one. So I've said that I'm quite happy to have him at home and when he's at home we've got books that we do and we've got the learning one for the computer that he does as well and so, it's picking him up a little bit. He's getting a bit more confidence now, he does try and read. Although he can't do it he will sit and try and do it.

Kelly does not have the legitimating power and resources that would allow her to claim the same entitlement for her child as Katherine. She is well aware of Craig's status within the school as just another child, whose challenging behaviour makes him less, as opposed to more, deserving. She is also aware that her energies may be better directed towards helping Craig lean to read, rather than bombarding the school with demands and protestations. In her interview, Kelly explained how she is often unable to understand the homework sent by the school and so has had to resort to buying basic textbooks that she and her son can follow. This investment of time, money and emotion reveals how Kelly's commitment to her son's welfare is necessarily shaped by a need to compensate for experiences of disadvantage, discrimination and marginalization. Reay (1998) highlights similar findings in her study of mothers' involvement in their children's primary schools. Walkerdine et al. (2001) also draw attention to the

way working-class parents are positioned within a professional discourse that devalues their knowledge against the powerful authority of teachers.

The experiences of Kelly and Craig perfectly illustrate the consequences of policy moves to individualize and thereby pathologize the injuries and injustices of class. Although Kelly has not been offered professional help in home educating her son, Craig attends a regular appointment with a psychologist, while Kelly has been sent to parenting classes. This focus on psychological as opposed to tangible, material help is particularly striking given the family's history of deprivation and struggle. In order to escape a violent, abusive relationship, Kelly and her two children moved to a women's refuge and then lived in temporary accommodation in various parts of the country before they settled. This period was characterized by severe hardship, during which time Kelly herself regularly went without food and often relied on the goodwill of other parents to feed her children. Kelly's involvement with social services gave her access to psychologists, social workers and parenting classes, but provided her with little of the practical and financial resources that she and her children were most in need of.

Personalizing Poverty and Privilege

As Skeggs (2004) argues, theories of individualization and de-traditionalization displace class, whereas its material effects are simultaneously institutionalized and reproduced. This is particularly evident in current approaches to family policy in which responsibility is projected on to working-class parents for failing to equip their children with the right skills for social improvement. While middle-class practices of shoring up and passing on their privilege are held to be the embodiment of 'good parenting', working-class parents resourceful actions in the context of material deprivation are identified as the cause of their disadvantage. In effect, the notion that the working classes are failing to raise appropriately individualized children has become a key mechanism in the reproduction of social advantage, allowing the privileged access to resources enjoyed by middle-class parents and their children to be legitimized in terms of moral choice and entitlement. The discourse of social exclusion underscores this process, re-framing poverty as a malady affecting the least able and willing and prompting policy remedies orientated towards re-attaching the afflicted through modification of their lifestyle and conduct (Gillies, 2005).

Although theories of individualization resonate with middle-class experience (Savage, 2000) and generate discourses that warrant and preserve advantage, this exacts its own price. Complex and often painful pressures face middle-class parents and their children as a result of this meritocratic ideal. Analysis of interview accounts revealed the high levels of worry associated with middle-class perceptions of choice and risk. While many conveyed a strong belief in their children as exceptional selves deserving of every opportunity to maximize their potential, this was tied to a burning sense of

personal responsibility as parents to facilitate this development and make the right decisions. Choices, particularly around academic issues such as schools or subjects, were fraught with anxiety and apprehension and imbued with intense significance.

Developmental progress was tightly monitored and frequently fretted over, with particular emphasis placed on school attainment. In their longitudinal study of young women born in the 1970s, Walkerdine et al. (2001) identify a powerful fear of failure among middle-class families, and show how this is characterized by pervasive feelings of inadequacy, insecurity and guilt experienced by middle-class girls. Lucey and Reay (2002) similarly highlight deep-seated fears among the middle classes in the context of secondary school transition, whereas Ball (2003) links such apprehensions and uncertainties to the perception of risk. With a greater sense of individualization looms an increased threat of downward mobility and this appears to incite an anxious but ruthless determination to ensure this is averted.

To conclude, this article has sought to highlight the very different worlds inhabited by families from contrasting class backgrounds. The individualized, agentic self theorized by Beck and Giddens, and valorized in New Labour policies requires access to middle-class economic, cultural, social and emotional capital, yet is projected as a standard developmental example for all parents to follow. Consequently, a tautology of middle-class success is sustained, with class specific parenting practices and values used to account for the inequality they reflect. This faulty logic drives an almost missionary zeal to shape the poor into ideal citizens, as is evident in the moralistic and often authoritarian subtext of current initiatives to 'support' socially excluded families (Gillies, 2005). As this study demonstrates, while contemporary explanations of poverty and disadvantage have been re-constructed and psychologized, parenting remains an embedded, situated process, amenable to change only through social and material circumstances.

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Notes

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2   The author hopes to explore issues of ethnicity and gender in more detail in a forthcoming book on parenting.

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