British Journal of Sociology of Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbse20

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To cite this article: Suzanne Wilson & Kim McGuire (2022): 'You feel a bit lost': a case study interpreting white, working-class mothers' engagement through habitus, British Journal of Sociology of Education, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2022.2026762

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2026762

Published online: 25 Jan 2022.

BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2026762

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'You feel a bit lost': a case study interpreting white, working-class mothers' engagement through habitus

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ABSTRACT

Bourdieu argued that class-based inequalities influenced educational outcomes and this paper illustrates the relevance of Bourdieu's concepts in understanding one specific community. A wider study by the authors used the concept of habitus to identify factors which impacted on the participants—predominantly white working-class mothers'—perceptions of their engagement with schools. This paper provides two selected case study examples from the wider study which describes the ways these mothers interpret different habitus in relation to education and discusses how habitus can inform understandings of different parental perceptions towards education and how this affects engagement. Schools can use this insight to ensure that parents from such backgrounds feel better able to engage with their children's education. Schools use this insight to inform to ensure that parents from such backgrounds feel able to engage with their children's education, both at home and in school.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 April 2021
Accepted 4 January 2022

KEYWORDS
Parental engagement; habitus; class inequalities; educational stratification

Education is internationally understood as being a means to provide opportunities for social mobility (Fenning and May 2013). However, children from more affluent backgrounds generally achieve higher academic results than their less advantaged peers, often referred to as 'disadvantaged'[1] (Carter-Wall and Whitfield 2012). The British educational attainment gap between disadvantaged 16-year-old pupils and their peers at the end of secondary school is currently 18 months, despite considerable policy and practice focus (Education Policy Institute 2020). International literature demonstrates the existence of educational class stratification in exam performance (Grodsky, Warren, and Felts 2008), vocational secondary education (Shavit and Müller 2000) and access to higher education (Marginson 2016).

The importance of parental engagement in education is well documented (Goodall and Montgomery 2014; Epstein et al. 2002; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995) and continues to be a focus of research and policy surrounding closing the attainment gap, both in the UK and internationally (Sammons, Toth, and Sylva 2016). In their analysis of parents' accounts from eight EU countries, Ule, Živoder, and Du Bois-Reymond (2015) found that parents from 'disadvantaged' city areas recognised their own roles and responsibilities towards their children's education in providing economic, social and emotional support.

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This, however, was compounded by a perceived lack of support from school and distant parent-teacher communication. Some working-class parents interpret their dealings with schoolteachers as strained, with a parent in one study summarising this relationship as 'we know when we're not wanted' (Crozier 1999, 537), resulting in a lack of agency (Vincent and Martin 2002; Vincent 2001). Communications have been described as eliciting nervousness and anxiety in some mothers, reinforced by their own negative educational experiences (Reay 1999).

Bourdieu's social reproduction theory

Bourdieu's social reproduction theory has been widely used to explain class inequalities (Bourdieu 1974) and includes the concepts of habitus, capital and the field. Bourdieu offered numerous definitions of habitus, the simplest being one's 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 128), and 'a system of implicit and deeply interiorized values which, among other things, helps to define attitudes towards the cultural capital and educational institutions' (Bourdieu 1974, 43). Habitus, as a system of 'durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990, 53) describes how one's social class is embodied within our unconsciousness from an early age. Bourdieu proposed that habitus is shaped by the wealth of social, economic and cultural capital a family possesses and that these dispositions are developed from a young age, influencing aspirations and what is deemed achievable (Bourdieu 1990, 53). Within the realm of working-class habitus, Bourdieu argued that low expectations of achievement, cultivated through parental interactions, result in a disengagement within the educational system.

Bourdieu asserted that working-class children do not possess the socially prescribed assets and attributes associated with success, and thus are likely to feel unconformable and ill equipped to effectively navigate a school environment and succeed academically (Bourdieu 1977). This, as will be argued, can be said to be the same for parents, which impacts on practice (i.e. engagement). This habitus plays a larger role in social mobility than exam performance, suggesting that, despite inherent intelligence, working-class children will be at a disadvantage within the educational world (Bourdieu 1994). Attitudes, values and social competencies are frequently referred to across a range of Bourdieu's definitions of habitus, summarised in the table below. These will form the conceptualisation of habitus presented in this paper.

We acknowledge that habitus encompasses so much more than these three concepts (including beliefs, conduct, speech, dress and manners), within a field of power struggles where one habitus is favoured by the dominant class over others. However, we argue that the three concepts provide a framework to unpack and interpret behaviour through certain facets of habitus, within the restricted limits of an article.

Capital is considered to be a 'set of actually usable resources and powers' (Bourdieu 1984, 114), having a 'market value in the struggle for privilege' (Kingston 2001, 89). Different kinds of knowledge are socially constructed and ascribed a value; if deemed culturally appropriate, knowledge is considered an asset, in the same sense that economic theory ascribes value to capital. Despite the similarities to economic value, capitals are more complex than simply a set of resources to be presented or exchanged. What is important is not what forms of capital are possessed, it is how they are used to assert power or dominance of others, as Serre and Wagner stated, '[c]apital is above all a social relationship that

introduces relations of domination between those who have it and those who do not' (Serre and Wagner 2015, 446). Within 'Forms of Capital' (1986), Bourdieu conceptualised cultural capital as an attempt to 'explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success' (Bourdieu 1986, 47).

Bourdieu argued that middle-class parents instill in their children a culture rich in intellectual content complementary to the requirements of educational institutions and formal examinations. De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp (2000) provided examples of promotion of cultural capital, including engaging with their children over the dinner table in conversation about art, taking children to visit the opera and filling their homes with literature. Here it is important to stress these activities are not intrinsically 'better' than others, but they have simply been socially constructed and accepted as such. Parents included in this paper would be classed as lacking cultural capital when applying the taken-for-granted socially constructed notion of the term.

Bourdieu argued that the ease in which one operates within the field (i.e. the classroom) was dictated to by one's habitus and capital. Those with more assets (i.e. capital to trade) gain qualifications, and thus social reproduction is maintained (Bourdieu 1990, 49). As Bourdieu remarked middle-class children 'move in their world as a fish in water' (Bourdieu 1990, 108). Within an educational context, this can be viewed as school systems imposing rules, expectations and norms that are naturally more difficult for those with lower levels of cultural capital to navigate. As working-class parental habitus and the field do not mutually reinforce one another, parents do not experience an appropriate 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 128) at school and view secondary school education as being 'not for us' (Bourdieu 2000, 185).

Class in educational research

The concept of habitus offers a perspective of class analysis that has been used to explain persistent inequalities in educational stratification. For example, habitus has been shown to impact on university choice (Bathmaker 2015) and academic attainment in immigrants (Gokpinar and Reiss 2016). According to Bourdieu, class is bound up in power struggles, and is established and maintained by the dominant class (through exercising what are considered 'advantaged attributes', Bourdieu 1984, 484). This framework of class analysis remains relevant and has been used by contemporary sociologists to develop thinking about working-class experiences of negotiating different fields of power, such as schools.

Contemporary scholars applying habitus in class analysis acknowledge how issues of intersectionality, like gender, age, disability and race, can influence working class families' experience of education (Devine et al. 2005; Reay 1998; Savage 2000). Reay (2004) argued that class is deployed both as a resource and as a form of property through categorisations of race, gender, nationality and sexuality, and is 'everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted' (Reay 2006, 290) and called for a conceptualisation of 'habitus [that] include[s] race and gender differences' (Reay 2004, 437). Savage argued that class distinctions and inequalities are as real and powerful than ever, fueled by a transmission of advantage powered by cultural capital (Savage 2000). It is from this conceptual standpoint that class will be interpreted in this paper. Furthermore, self-doubt and self-scrutiny has been argued to characterise some white working-class women's everyday actions and decisions, fearful of scrutiny and the negative judgements of others (Skeggs 1997). In response,

women's caring practices became the focus of their social identity in attempt to claim moral superiority over middle-class women. This paper will argue that such self-protective attitudes and behaviours can be applied to the education system, which, as Bourdieu argues, is inherently middle-class (Bourdieu 1974).

Research context

The accounts presented in this paper are selected case study examples, as noted above, due to saturation being reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967) from a wider research project that sought to better understand the perceived barriers faced by families in supporting their children's education, particularly those from areas experiencing significant poverty. The research was conducted in post-industrial coastal communities in the north-west of England, often referred to in policy as 'left-behind' (Sensier and Devine 2017). These towns and communities are so labelled because they are 'left behind by poor standards in existing provision, limited access to educational institutions and a lack of employment opportunities, resulting in low levels of aspirations' (House of Lords 2019, 3). The term 'left-behind' is not used by the authors of this paper to ignore the significance of race, nor to perpetuate stereotypes of the white working class as backward, nor that whiteness is the default. This paper illustrates the complexities of assuming a unified 'white' privilege exists. The areas included in this study were predominately white, working-class ex-mining communities.[2] All participants in the wider study, and thus the case studies, were white, working class mothers.

Results of the wider research found that families experienced discomfort and difficulty in accessing secondary education, but not primary school. Families attributed this experience to a physical and symbolic distance from secondary school, where they felt they lacked the cultural capital to successfully navigate the secondary school system. Accounts from mothers described feelings of being stigmatised by teachers (Wilson and McGuire 2021) and parenting styles being to odds with the education system (Wilson and Worsley 2021).

The two accounts presented in this paper were felt to be representative of many mothers interviewed and illustrated the salient themes clearly. The case studies cited in this paper sought to further explore the role that cultural capital and habitus plays in mothers' confidence in engaging with their children's education and school.

Methodology

Case study approaches are informed by paradigm, study design, and selection of methods, with two main approaches within qualitative research. A social constructivist paradigm is proposed by Stake (1995) and Merriam (2009), whereas a post-positivist perspective is argued by Yin (2014), Flyvbjerg (2011), and Eisenhardt (1989). Stake's case study research design (1995, 2000, 2005) aims to investigate how people's reality is constructed, based on socially and historically related interchanges. This paper seeks to understand the experience of white, working-class mothers, so adopts a case study approach presented by Stake (1995), where thick descriptions are interpreted to understand the phenomenon and relationships, which leads to aggregation (clustering) of themes. We argue that Stake's case study design is suited to Bourdieu's theoretical constructs both sitting within a social constructivist paradigm.

Case selection

Our limitation of studies, and those selected as representative, is based upon Glaser and Strauss 1967, where:

> *Saturation* means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated. He goes out of his way to look for groups that stretch diversity of data as far as possible, just to make certain that saturation is based on the widest possible range of data on the category.

Stake (1995) proposed three types of cases and study design frameworks. These include the intrinsic case (particular of a single case), the instrumental case (insight into the phenomena being studied with the aim to advance understanding), and the collective instrumental case (an instrumental case with multiple cases). When using a collective instrumental case, each case study is analysed individually, on its own merit, but can then triangulated with others to identify relationships and compare similarities and differences among cases (Stake1995, 1998). A collective instrumental case study design using purposive sample has been used to understand the experiences of white, working-class mothers in relation to their engagement with their children's education. Two cases have been used to increase understanding and support theorising by comparison of case. By better understanding the phenomenon concepts can be aggregated, in this case, through the habitus framework which includes values, attitudes, and social competencies.

Cases were selected from a wider research project which sought to examine factors impacting on families' engagement at primary and secondary schools (for a detailed account of the methodologies undertaken in this study see Wilson 2020). In this study, 77 disadvantaged parents and caregivers of secondary school children participated in focus groups or interviews to identify perceived barriers. This is similar to Coltart and Henwood (2012), who selected two cases from a sample of 46 fathers in their study of first-time fathers and parenting. Two mothers were selected for inclusion in this case study, both of whom reported as not actively engaging with their children's secondary educational institutions and were classified as being 'disadvantaged' (i.e. in receipt of welfare benefits). These cases were selected on account of both their diversity and connectivity to salient overarching themes (habitus and cultural capital). We are not arguing that these accounts are representative of all experiences of working-class mothers, but that they are illustrative of the wider research sample, setting 'the bar of what is standard or "typical"' (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016, 3).

Analysis and theory building

Within the larger research piece, written transcripts underwent data driven thematic analysis using the software NVivo to identify key generative themes emerging from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). An initial familiarising of the data revealed patterns, which was followed by the generation of initial codes in an attempt to understand the experiences of parents and caregivers' in engaging with their children's education. These themes were then reviewed, defined and named, in order to provide a narrative framework of the parents' experience. Supplementary analysis of the research data on parental engagement revealed the relevance

of Bourdieu's conceptual framework in light of habitus and cultural capital, and this framework was then applied to the findings. Within this specific analysis the data were reanalysed using a theory-driven thematic analysis, again developing specific codes and themes.

Cases were then selected on their consistency with the framework and these two cases were then reanalysed and aggregated to provide the interpretation presented in the results. As a social constructivist paradigm was used in this study, the results were aggregated to identify concepts, build and develop theory around the use of habitus to interpret the experience of white, working-class mother's engagement in their children's education, which is the framework presented in this paper. Key direct quotations were then extrapolated from the data and used to frame the structure of the results section. Stake's case study methodology stresses the importance of giving context, such as historical background, physical setting, and other institutional and political contextual factors (Stake 1998). As such, each case study starts with a brief background into the life of the mother.

Results: mothers' experience of parental engagement in education

These case study examples are used to illustrate the ways in which parents experience their engagement with primary and secondary schools. Each case will be introduced, providing some background, following by an analysis of their experience of education, embedded in Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory (1977). Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus are complicated and inter-related, and one cannot be described without the other. They operate within a complex field of power struggles, influenced by many other factors. However, we argue that setting out and illustrating specific examples of the facets of habitus and cultural capital is useful in interpreting and understanding different processes that are underway in parents' interaction with the school system and the explicit and implicit power differentials that are in play.

Jasmine

Jasmine (aged 42) grew up in a strict Jehovah Witness household with two brothers and sister, for whom she acted as a carer following her mother's departure from the family home when Jasmine was at primary school. Growing up with her father and siblings, Jasmine undertook the caregiving role as her father was often absent, saying 'I felt my role was to look after them … I merged into the mother role. I'm more comfortable looking after somebody, cleaning for somebody … because my mum did a runner and my Dad saw me as a helper rather than a daughter'. Jasmine has two children from two former relationships, both of whom had substance misuse issues and were physically violent towards Jasmine. At the time of the interview, Jasmine lived with her son (aged 17) and daughter (aged 15) in her own home. She had a long-term partner, who although was not the biological father of her children, had a close relationship with her children. Jasmine was working as a carer and was in receipt of working tax credits.

Jasmine initially had a positive relationship with primary school and began volunteering at her daughters' primary school to develop her career prospects. However, negative experiences, mainly in communications with teaching staff, created a distance and distrust with the school (which will be discussed further). Jasmine struggled with confidence to help her

children with their secondary school work, questioning her ability. The only time that Jasmine would contact the secondary school was to discuss the emotional welfare of her daughter. Jasmine also struggled with working unsociable hours and worried about her boundaries, wanting to provide care for her children rather than push her children academically.

Cultural Capital

Jasmine explained that she felt she lacked the skills to support her children, which stemmed from her own lack of educational achievement. Reflecting on her childhood Jasmine said:

> I was more interested in doing the housework. That was easier in my head. I can understand why I went the way I did, if something needs cleaning, I can do it. If it's something I've got to read, take it in and write about it, I didn't really know what essays were.

Jasmine focused much of her childhood on acting as the main caregiver for her family, and felt she received little support and encouragement from her father to achieve academically. Interpreted through the lens of cultural capital, we suggest that Jasmine feels she lacks the ascribed cultural capital to support her children with their schoolwork (in writing essays) but describes a field where she did feel comfortable (doing housework at home).

Jasmine described her involvement in her children's education as being minimal and reflected upon this in relation to her father's engagements in her own education:

> There was a parallel between how I was with my Dad, he had nothing to do with my education … When it came to doing exams he asked how many O levels are you doing? 9? I went 'Dad, I'm not in for any' I thought if you'd had any interest in how school life's been for us, you'd know that. But it's easy to be like that. You're in your own world.

Here, Jasmine almost justifies her father's lack of engagement by saying 'it's easy to be like that. You're in your own world'. This world, when viewed through the lens of habitus, does not include a school system that is familiar to them. This separation/disconnect between home and school is summarised when Jasmine says 'I dread if they come and ask me anything … they don't tend to, they got on with it. But then am I being like my Dad?'. By considering if she is a 'as bad as her Dad' Jasmine implies that this is something that she believes is wrong and that she should be engaging better between with her children's education. When reflecting on her perceived lack of ability and discomfort in supporting her children's education Jasmine says, 'me being the way I am hasn't had a negative effect in that sense'. Here, we can see Jasmine consciously accepting a position of inferiority in the field of education, where, interpreted through the lens of cultural capital, she draws on her experiences of a child in forming her current strengthens and limitations, the latter of which are felt most significantly in relation to her children's education, that is, her cultural capital.

Despite her perceived lack of ability and familiarity with the education system (which we interpret as cultural capital), Jasmine reports a number of attempts to improve her qualifications. For example, Jasmine enrolled on an ACCESS course, but had to withdraw, 'I did six months and did really well, but I was overworked, working to try and achieve … then I had to give it up because I nearly had a breakdown. It was too much with kids and everything'. Here, Jasmine illustrates how she was motivated and tried to develop her skills and knowledge

but struggled to balance the other demands in her life. Another example Jasmine's attempts to develop her skills and experience were evidenced through volunteering at her daughters' primary school.

> I used to help in reception class because I wanted to be a teaching assistant. When I was in the class I enjoyed the classroom work, but I was scared of getting things wrong. I learnt things like alliteration, I'd never heard of it. When it came to maths I was like 'how am I going to do this? Fractions I haven't a clue'. And it was just because in my head it didn't click.

On the surface, Jasmine navigates the classroom well, being able to physically go into the classroom and reporting to enjoy the work. However, from a cultural capital perspective we can again see how Jasmine struggles to navigate the classroom, where she lacks the cultural capital (in this case, knowledge of fractions) to feel comfortable and able to contribute. Again, we can see an assumed subjugation, highlighting the powerful, unconscious and insidious role of capitals in the power battles within social fields.

Further reflecting on her time working at the primary school, Jasmine could see how her abilities to support children differed from the teacher:

> Seeing a child that needed help, I saw things the teacher didn't, because I didn't have all the paperwork to do. If a child looked disturbed or found something hard I maybe saw it and pointed it out to the teacher. So I was a help there. That gave me confidence.

Here we can see how Jasmine was able to find a way where she could exercise the skills, she did possess which centered around being able to observe when a child was experiencing difficulties in their learning. This relates to Jasmine's values (to be discussed shortly), which centre around nurturing and protecting children's wellbeing. She tells us that in using these skills she feels more confident within the school field. Interpreted through the lens of cultural capital, this experience suggests again Jasmine's experience of lacking certain educational skills, certain cultural capital, but possessing other skills, such as observing how children and responding to schoolwork. Jasmine is aware of the capitals she possesses, and assumes a position of inferiority, based on these capitals. What is particularly interesting about this passage is that Jasmine is actively trying to better her circumstances, but the feelings of domination are too great to bear.

Values

As with a majority of parents interviewed within the wider study, Jasmine perceived the values of primary to be aligned with hers, centered around nurturing. Jasmine expressed these values when saying, 'I want both of my children to do well but most of my energies have been focused on the more caring side of things rather than pushing them academically or with career aspirations'. Here, Jasmine expresses a clear sense of what her strengths are in supporting her children (her own set of capitals), along with what she struggled with. Jasmine saw her role as supporting her children, where she admits that disciple and boundaries sometimes were a 'grey area', feeling that 'we're not in this world to torment them. If they behave, I will give in because I want to be nice. I want them to be happy'. Here Jasmine illustrates her desire to gently nurture her children. These passages illustrate Jasmines' values being embedded in caring for her children, which builds on where Jasmine sees her strengths. These values and strengths, it will be seen, significantly impacted on Jasmine's

attitudes towards secondary school teachers' values. Whilst here Jasmine does not necessarily show values that are at odd with being 'pro-educational', as Bourdieu asserted, it does suggest where Jasmine's attention has focused, on supporting and caring for her children, a habitus, life world she feels more comfortable and confident navigating. Through the lens of habitus, this could be interpreted as the school system having a fixed set of cultural capitals, values, attitudes and social competencies that Jasmine felt were at odds with her own, leaving her feeling unable or uncomfortable in navigating the social field.

Attitudes

The perceived value misalignment experienced by Jasmine influenced her attitudes towards teachers, and also her perception of teachers attitudes towards herself. Jasmine demonstrated ambivalent attitudes towards teachers. Initially, Jasmine felt that the teachers were warm and approachable, so much so that she began volunteering in school. However, the relationship between Jasmine and school broke down:

> I couldn't do the placement time that she wanted me to coming up to Christmas because I was assistant supervisor in this restaurant. When I told her I couldn't do it because I needed to work she said I wasn't dedicated, and that finished me off. I said 'I'm a single person, no financial help, I'm struggling'. I can struggle, but my work has to come first.

Jasmine describes how the 'abrasive and abrupt' approach 'left a nasty taste in [her] mouth' which resulted in Jasmine choosing to leave the course and the voluntary position. The situation described by Jasmine suggests a lack of understanding of the barriers that Jasmine was facing during the time on the part of the school, where working in the services industry over the Christmas period is a very different experience to schools who have time off. This suggests a lack of understanding of the experiences of parents who must work unsociable hours, which may inform a negative attitude towards such parents from teachers. It certainly it suggests that they do not share the same habitus, that their lives are very different.

Relating to values discussed above, this also suggests that Jasmine's assumption of primary school teachers sharing Jasmine's values of being kind and nurturing are brought into question, leaving disdain for the teacher and a withdrawal from both a physical and symbolic involvement with the school. It must be noted that such accounts need to be met with caution, as people often retrospectively assign reason to events, to justify their decisions and protect their self-concept. However, in this context such a reflection is important, as it shows how this can impact on engagement. Although not explicitly discussed, Jasmine's story contains an undercurrent of perceived power inequalities, feeling undervalued and distant from the school system. Bourdieu argued that working-class parent's attitudes were not 'pro-educational'. Jasmines accounts suggest that these attitudes are not necessarily anti-education attitudes. Rather, it is influenced by her attitudes towards teachers and how Jasmine feels she is perceived by teachers. These are informed, in part, by a perceived value misalignment and also feelings of ill treatment by teachers in the past. Not all attitudes towards teachers were negative however, one secondary teacher, her daughters' head of year, was felt to mirror Jasmine's nurturing values, who 'really cares about his kids'. Jasmine provided an example of how he would spend one to one time with her daughter when she refused to get out of the family car to attend school and that 'he didn't need to do that'.

The passages above illustrate how a diverse range of experiences with teachers can create ambivalent attitudes. When teachers' values are perceived to be in alignment with her own, Jasmine holds a positive attitude towards teachers. When these values are perceived to be in conflict, a distance, both physical and symbolic, between home and school is created. Thus, parents who perceive inconsistent value-alignment with the school are unsure of their habitus in the education system. When looking at Jasmine's experiences of her involvement in her children's education through the lens of habitus, it could be argued that her values and attitudes are actually pro-educational, she certainly values her children's education and see it as being important. Rather, her difficulties arise through a history of challenges in navigating a system where Jasmine feels she doesn't fit.

Social competencies

Jasmine had limited contact with secondary school, which she felt resulted from being distracted with demands of work and also lacking confidence to talk to teachers. As highlighted, when reflecting on Jasmine's cultural capital, Jasmine sees her strengths in nurturing her children, rather than supporting them with their education, 'I can clean forever, but if it comes to things using your head I've no confidence with it'. Jasmine is self-critical and feels that this impacts on her ability of communicate with teachers, that is, her social competence, 'that's where I go wrong because I have no confidence … I didn't feel comfortable with them'.

Following both of her children's transition to secondary school, Jasmine reported a disconnect from secondary school:

> you feel a bit lost at first because you're not picking them up, you're not taking them and then nobody's giving you feedback. At least when you're at junior school gates, if they've done something they'll come out and tell you. Along there its guesswork, they don't even let you know when they're in detention.

This reflection shows how physically collecting children from the school gates provided valued opportunities to talk to teachers and can influence how parents feel involved in their children's education. Furthermore, Jasmine reported that the appointment system for parents evening was difficult to negotiate:

> I was working from 8 am till 10 pm and there was no way I could go to it, I tried to get part of it off and there was no chance. That was it, so I couldn't go to it. Once you've missed that parents evening there isn't an opportunity to meet all the teachers again. It's just one teacher and you don't know if you're getting the right outlook over other subjects.

Jasmine's account provides an example of how inaccessible teachers can be, with parents' evening being the only opportunity to meet. This system, it would appear, was felt to exclude families who work unsociable hours. Jasmine's accounts of communicating with teachers shows how confidence can play a significant role in parents' drive and perceived ability to make contact with school. These passages also illustrate frustrations felt when systems are felt to be inflexible and inaccessible. Furthermore, Jasmine's experiences of the education system go beyond competence, highlighting the differing expectations that schools and parents have of one another, and a lack of understanding on the part of the school of Jasmine's circumstances and consequent barriers. These issues still relate to habitus, a field in which Jasmine doesn't feel comfortable.

Lucy

Lucy (aged 39) grew up in the same area where she raised her own children, enjoying school and behaving well until the divorce of her parents when she was 12 years old. The new-found freedom gained from living with her father, who was largely absent, resulted in Lucy missing school and drinking with older teens, which subsequently impacted on her academic achievement. Lucy met her husband shortly after finishing school and soon started a family. Lucy lived with her husband and four children, three boys (aged 17, 15 and 13) and girl (aged 12) in social housing. At the time of interview, Lucy was not in paid employment, but did volunteer at the local community centre. Lucy's husband was unable to work due to a long-term health condition.

Lucy reported no problem communicating with primary school or teachers until two of her sons were in year 6 and began presenting with disruptive behaviour. These two sons had considerable challenges with secondary education, with Lucy initially believing that her children were misbehaving, but subsequently felt it was the teachers discriminating against her sons. This came about following meetings with teachers, where Lucy felt belittled, but did not feel confident to speak out. This caused Lucy to question herself and feel guilty for not believing her children, and created division and conflict between home and school, feeling that cliques existed between teachers. School would call home frequently regarding her sons' behaviour, causing Lucy considerable anxiety. Eventually these two sons were removed from mainstream education, and Lucy had limited contact with secondary school surrounding her daughters' education.

Cultural Capital

Lucy explained that she felt lacked the educational cultural capital to support her children, which particularly concerned her when one of her sons was being home schooled, 'I was worried because I'm not well educated myself and that's the only thing I was panicking for was because I thought "How can I teach him?"', Here, Lucy provides an example of how capital can be internalised as being inferior when compared to those who demonstrate the cultural capital accepted by the dominant class.

Rather than having the resources to support her children academically, Lucy felt that her strengths were embedded in caring for her children, and to try to financially provide them with what they needed to peruse their career aspirations. For example, Lucy described how she found the money to buy her son tattoo equipment, 'he's great at it, we got him everything, the whole kit, and he's doing really well. If we can see our children have an interest in something, we'll support them by getting them what need'. Here, Lucy shows that although she feels she lacks the cultural capital in terms of supporting her children's education she does have a strong desire to support her children to achieve their aspiration and will provide what capital she can.

Values

Lucy's values were centered on nurturing and caring for her family. This was expressed through not challenging her children, with their immediate happiness being her focus, 'I just support them, there's no point pushing them somewhere they don't want to go, whatever they're happy in. It's what they decide'. Here, Lucy saw her role as being indirective, gently

guiding her children. This value and role was perceived as being different to that of secondary school, where it was felt that teachers were under pressure to achieve certain attainment targets, with Lucy expressing, 'it's all about getting the ticks in the boxes and if their work's done they're happy'. Here, Lucy suggests an impersonal approach to teaching, where targets, rather than individual pupils' welfare, is the priority. These passages illustrate Lucy's values being embedded in caring for her children, with their happiness being central. This happiness was felt to be attainable through acting a gentle guide to her children, rather than applying pressure to achieve academically.

Attitudes

Lucy's attitudes towards secondary school teachers were overwhelmingly negative, reporting, 'I wouldn't give them the time of day now. I've had enough'. Lucy shared her experiences of their son's behaviour resulting being in trouble with school, and how they felt teachers tried to ensure they were 'pushed out of the school'. It was reported that children were immediately sent home to be 'forgot about'. It was felt that the presence of special education units provided teachers with the opportunity to dispel disruptive students, without attempting to support them, 'they don't give any kids a chance, they're just threw out or they're put somewhere else. There's PRU (pupil referral unit) … so they're just pushed aside'. Such institutions were also seen as used as a threat to children and parents:

> one certain teacher kept threatening to put him in the PRU. And I didn't think my son was a child that belonged in the PRU. But that was his threat because he knew, he got my back up every phone call I got was 'your son's going to the PRU'.

By the teachers threatening to exclude her son which would result in him being forced to attend the PRU, a clear power inequality is experienced by Lucy, where she feels she has no choice or control over what happens to her son. Lucy talks about her frustration of feeling 'pushed aside' in these experiences, which influence her attitudes and also her behaviour towards secondary school and the teachers.

Lucy felt negatively judged by some teachers, which she interpreted as prejudice (a negative attitude) and discrimination (negative behaviour) towards her children. The pervasive impact that this perception can have upon a child's education is clearly evident, which resulted in Lucy removing her child from mainstream education:

> They've never had a start from day one, just because that referral went in from [primary] that as soon as my kids started [secondary] school, that was it, they never got a chance. It was awful, and I ended up taking one out and he's home educated.

Lucy felt that once her child had a reputation for being 'difficult', they 'gave up' on those students, not attempting to offer interventions for support, summarising 'he got branded and that was that, they just didn't want nowt to do with him'. Here, Lucy highlights how the perception of being judged and discriminated against not only indicated a perceived negative attitude of the teachers, but also explains Lucy's negative attitude towards the teachers, sometimes resulting in a combative and hostility relationship between home and school.

Social competencies

Lucy offers numerous accounts of where she has faced challenges in communicating with teachers. These mostly relate to situations where Lucy feels judged and intimidated, and that she lacks the social skills and confidence (the social competence), to defend herself and her children. Lucy recalled hostile communications with secondary school, to the point where she avoided any contact where possible. Lucy explained the difficulties she had communicating with a secondary school teacher after she had been called into school following the disruptive behaviour of her son:

> She was trying to put you down … She wasn't nice … I'm not a very confident … I wouldn't shout at a teacher; I was constantly blaming my kids thinking it must be them. … She was like 'You know what I mean darling?' I'm thinking, 'No you're really pushing his buttons now', because I knew the way she was speaking to him.

Furthermore, Lucy, recounted an incident where she complained, impacting on her son, 'because I'd opened my mouth, he had it in for him … Nothing got done. When I phoned the school, they are all one clique, they all stuck together. Well that's just the way I feel'. These experiences clearly reveal perceived power inequalities between Lucy and the school, where she felt judged and discriminated against.

Pastoral meetings were perceived as being intimidating by Lucy, describing her experience following repeatedly being called into school for meetings:

> every time I was going into a meeting, I was bursting out crying, and it's embarrassing. I'm sitting here with you lot round me, and I felt intimidated. Once when I went into a meeting there was six of them and me. I felt so intimidated. Why can't you have a one to one?

This had a significant impact on Lucy who explained, 'I've ended up with depression … I have panic attacks and stuff with the school phoning me'. Lucy explained that she contacted to school to explain that the perceived excessive phone calls were causing her great anxiety and to call her husband, but she continued to receive calls daily. To resolve the issue, 'my husband went up and told them to phone him, stop phoning his wife, she can't cope, she's had enough. Then I felt like a failure … to struggle on with four kids'. This example demonstrates how home-school relations can impact on the emotional well-being of the parent and subsequent involvement. Lucy's accounts show how a perceived lack of social competence, that is, the skills and confidence to communicate with school can contribute to strained communications between home and school, where perceived power inequalities can result in feeling judged. This can cause frustration, resulting in emotional, hostile reactions, that can destroy any relationships between parents and teachers.

Discussion

The two case studies presented in this paper resonate strongly with the experiences described previously, such as Crozier (1999) and Reay (1999), where working-class mothers are strongly aware of power differentials between themselves and teachers. For example, Reay's account of a mother 'plucking up the courage' to approach school (Reay 1999, 161) is similar to Lucy's experiences of anxiety in approaching teachers, both characterised by a fear of initiating and engaging in conversation with teachers. Also consistent with previous

literature mothers assumed a depicting attitude in relation to their children, a hesitancy in approaching teachers and feeling that they were not listened to (Reay 1999, 168).

This paper argues that habitus serves to provide a useful framework to explain parental engagement. Indeed, '[h]abitus helps to make visible the taken-for-granted inequalities of gender, 'race' and class embedded in such social processes' (Reay 1995, 370). That said, we recognise the complexity of habitus and cultural capital, which operate in complex social field of battling power dynamics and social forces and we do not wish to oversimply these concepts. We hope that this conceptualization of values, attitudes and social competencies provides a clear framework to interpret and understand the experiences of mothers, and that cultural capital describes the assets parents' feel they possess (or not) in supporting their children, informed by their own childhood.

Mothers' values, bound up in protecting and caring for their children, were viewed to be at odds with the school, which was viewed to be focused on academic attainment and behavioural control. They described their children's happiness as being their priority (centered on having the freedom to make their choices at their own pace) which was felt to be undermined by schools' seemingly unrelenting drive for children to gain top grades and (unfairly) punishing their children for not adhering to the school rules. This perceived misalignment between the values of mothers and the school created negative attitudes towards teachers and school. The mothers described feeling that they lacked the social competencies to be able to communicate with teachers on an equal platform, worried about their lack of educational attainment and being negatively judged. This cumulates in a perceived habitus misalignment between home and school, where parents experience a discomfort in dealing with the education system. This discomfort can be interpreted as what Bourdieu described as doxa, the feeling that engaging with education is 'not for us' (Bourdieu 2000, 185).

Accounts in this study suggest that mothers from white, working-class 'left behind' communities see their role very much bound up on traditional caregiving roles. These findings contribute to the literature surrounding parental gender stereotypes in education (Archer and Leathwood 2003; David et al. 2003; Bodovski 2010; Reay 1997), particularly caregiving (Johnston and Swanson 2006; Mattis et al. 2008). The accounts provide confirmatory evidence to Savage's proposal that class-based power inequalities remain a feature in modern society, embedded in class distinction and a transmission of advantage (or lack of) (Savage 2000). Both mothers provide accounts of perceiving a deficit of cultural capital relating to education, leaving them feeling unable to competently access and navigate the school system, despite wanting the best for their children. These findings, which are indicative of the many others in wider study, provide contemporary contribution to Savage's arguments surround class-based distinctions in the 21st century.

This study listened to women from a similar background to those in Skeggs seminal book, Formations of class & gender: Becoming Respectable (Skeggs 1997), and indeed, the accounts provided demonstrate that Skeggs' arguments are still relevant some twenty years after her study was published. Our results show that some mothers perceive their role and strengths in caring capacity, which was formed very early in life following. Both mothers show how their identity is bound up in caring through protecting their children (from the school) and caring for their families. The results discussed in this paper expand on Skeggs' work, arguing that the emphasis on being a 'respectable and caring women' to claim superiority over middle-class women, can also be applied to the education system, which is inherently a middle-class system (Bourdieu 1974). As with the women in Skeggs' study, the

mother's in this paper were consumed by self-doubt, in this case about how they could adequately support their children's education, and they expressed fear regarding how they were perceived by teachers.

As with all case studies, the results cannot be generalised or used to explain the behaviour of all working-class mothers. More research is needed to further understand the experiences of white working-class mothers, for example, particularly those from 'left behind' communities such as such post-industrial British coastal towns. Likewise, more research is needed in other nations, exploring how working-class mothers across Europe and the world interpret their engagement with their children's education. Mothers included in this case study showed little appetite to learn 'the game' of a middle-class educational habitus, and caution must be exercised to avoid making assumptions towards working-class mothers on the whole. A critical evaluation of Bourdieu's habitus in interpreting the experiences of working-class mothers who have successfully navigated the educational system would contribute to this understanding.

Moreover, this paper focused exclusively on the experience of mothers, and thus has excluded the voices of fathers and other male caregivers. The application of the analytical framework adopted in this paper, this time applied to fathers, would contribute to the limited literature surrounding working-class father's attitudes and behaviours relating to their children's education. The views of the mothers were the only concern in this research, and further research would benefit from allowing the voice of the child and the school to be heard, alongside the mothers, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of class inequalities in education.

The two case studies confirm earlier works like Reay (1999) which apply cultural capital to communication with school. However, results from this study describe secondary school, whereas Reay's focused on primary school. Comparative research into perceived power differentials across the school systems (nursery, primary school, secondary school) would be useful in better informing school engagement strategies across a child's educational journey. Furthermore, Reay interviewed a diverse range of black, white and mixed-race mothers. Whilst this paper purposefully focuses on the experiences of white working-class mothers, more research on the experiences of mothers from different ethnic backgrounds would help schools to better understand issues surrounding intersectionality and specific challenges faced by different ethnic groups.

Conclusion

Education, sometimes described as the great equaliser, is failing our more disadvantaged children who are leaving school further and further behind their wealthier peers (Education Policy Institute, 200). Equality of access and engagement is crucial in promoting a just and fair education system, not just for children but also for parents. The results presented in this paper illustrate some case study examples of parental experience of class-based inequalities in the education. Using Bourdieu's habitus and cultural capital to interpret these experiences provides a contemporary application of his concepts, demonstrating the relevance of Social Reproduction Theory some fifty years after its initial inception. Further work needs to be done to better understand the experiences of marginalised parents in education in order to inform education policy and practice to ensure that all children, despite their background, has an equal chance to thrive.

Notes

1. In the UK disadvantage is principally defined by being eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) within the last 6 years, being a child in care. There is debate surrounding the efficacy of using the pupil premium as a measure for disadvantage (see Ilie, Sutherland & Vignoles 2017) however, for this paper the pupil premium serves as a useful method for operationalising class in an educational context and is the predominant measure within educational and social science research.
2. See note 1.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

Disclosure statement

Both authors declare that declares that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Central Lancashire BAHSS Ethics Committee. For example, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study and all data were anonymised.

Funding

The research was funded by the Samuel Lindow Foundation.

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