
Class, culture and control: the transformation of educational work in a gentrifying primary school

Research indicates that white middle-class families’ engagement with urban schools in gentrifying localities is often characterised by strategies of dominance and control, which support claims of belonging and identity, as well as securing educational advantage for their children. This is referred as ‘class colonisation’ or ‘school gentrification’. However, there has been a neglect of educators’ perspectives and responses to urban social change and middle-class parental practices. In this paper, I offer an institutionally-focused analysis of class colonisation as a feature of educators’ working lives. I argue that class colonisation produces organisational ‘turmoil’ through parental practices and interactions which unsettle staff’s social and cultural control over key aspects of their work situation and institutional boundary maintenance. This turmoil is experienced as disruptive of the social order, generating staff cynicism, conflict, ambivalence, and alienation.

I draw on ethnographic data with teachers and teaching assistants from a gentrifying inner-London primary school to empirically specify these arguments. Theoretically, this paper integrates elements of Bourdieu and micro-sociology, to foreground how agents use their unequal resources to negotiate their interpersonal institutional realities, and in the process, re-produce classed and racialised boundaries and relations within the changing contexts of urban education.

Keywords: School gentrification, class colonisation, urban education, white middle-class parents, educational staff, urban sociology, Bourdieu

Word count: 11,400

Introduction

What institutional form does urban gentrification take, specifically in education, and how is it experienced by educators? Sociological accounts have drawn attention to the
shaping power of white middle-class parental practices, voice and expectations in relation to urban schools (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Posey-Maddox 2014; Cucchiara and Horvat 2013; Billingham and Kimelberg 2013; Frank and Weck 2018). They reflect concerns that processes of gentrification may contribute to spatialised educational segregation in urban localities, and marginalise working-class and minority ethnic children and families within schools (Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2013). Yet, despite the obvious and important institutional dimensions of school gentrification, the experiences of educators, and specificities of schools as workplaces, remain underexplored. This paper highlights, through ethnographic data, how educators interpret and frame gentrification processes as a feature of their work situation, and in turn how their responses shape the cultural and symbolic form that gentrification takes institutionally.

**School gentrification and the transformation of urban schools**

According to Posey-Maddox and colleagues (2014, 454) ‘school gentrification’ is characterised by increasing numbers of (mainly white) middle-class families attending predominantly low-income and/or minority ethnic urban schools, where their practices and forms of engagement result in enhanced educational resources and opportunities, a physical upgrade to the school’s infrastructure, domination of catchment structures, and a change in culture. Whilst it is feasible that changes arising from school gentrification might benefit all children, much of the evidence suggests otherwise (Hernández 2019; Keels, Burdick-Will, and Keene 2013).

Research indicates that white middle-class engagement with urban schools is ambivalent and contradictory, oscillating between a commitment to the social good, and
the individualism of middle-class advantage, which results in practices that constrain educational opportunities for working-class children, and marginalise their families (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). The literature highlights that middle-class strategies ‘are predominantly geared towards the reconfiguration of the school ethos, shaping them as a safe space and facilitating the enrolment of other white middle-class families’ (Hernández 2019, 280). These actions are driven by status anxiety regarding intergenerational social reproduction in an uncertain and congested social landscape (Ball 2003), and reflect the significance of place-based identity and lifestyles in middle-class formation more generally (Butler and Robson 2003). Posey-Maddox’s (2014) ethnography illustrates how middle-class parents mobilised to seek a ‘critical mass’ of ‘like-minded’ parents in a broader locality, to change the wider perception of a working-class, predominantly African-American school, into one attractive to other middle-class parents.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Butler and Robson (2003) explicate ‘school gentrification’ in London as a process of ‘class colonisation’; a strategy of explicit social and cultural control of urban primary schools amongst highly-educated fractions of the middle-classes (i.e. with high volumes of cultural and social capital). This is often coupled with an ideological commitment to socially and ethnically diverse state education, infused with a narrative of ‘equality of opportunity and meritocracy’ (2003, 73). For Butler and Robson, class colonisation is reflective of the ways in which different middle-class groups settle and form identifications with specific neighbourhoods, giving rise to localised cultures of gentrification, in terms of their particular class habitus, social trajectories, and differential capitals. The orientation towards primary schools is not accidental; they are viewed as less socially ‘risky’ than secondary schools, and more open to interpersonal influence and
reshaping due to their relative small size and organisational simplicity (Billingham and Kimelberg 2013). Middle-class families’ strategic engagement in these primary schools is extensive, ranging across activities and forums which penetrate the physical infrastructure, curriculum, personnel and other organisational matters. This ‘in the aggregate … fundamentally works to shape the nature of these urban institutions and, by extension, the neighbourhoods in which they sit’ (Billingham and Kimelberg 2013, 101). Institutional action is often underpinned by parents’ assertive interactional styles, grounded in their dispositional class habitus – as evidenced by greater confidence in communications, and a propensity to challenge teachers’ expertise and demand customised or additional provision (Vincent and Martin 2002; Calarco 2018). Studies show that white middle-class parents often monopolise mechanisms of parental voice such as parent-teacher organisations (PTOs) introducing more formalised decision-making structures that increase their effectiveness, whilst marginalising families without the time and resources to participate (Syeed 2019; Posey-Maddox 2013; Lareau and Muñoz 2012; Winton 2018). School gentrification is framed by reflexive moral claims of ownership over place that middle-class residents make through their ability to choose, what Savage and colleagues refer to as ‘elective belonging’ (2005) – a sense that they could have done otherwise, either by ‘exiting’ to the suburbs or sending their children to private schools. This orientation infuses parents’ practices with value and informs a commitment to ‘voice’ and investments in specific urban schools alongside similarly resourced and disposed families (Billingham and Kimelberg 2013; Butler and Robson 2003; Crozier, Reay, and James 2011). The centrality of ‘choice’ in the constitution of class identity and practice, connects to contemporary marketised notions of political subjectivity in urban and educational policy that ‘emphasize partnerships between
governments and private entities ... to provide public services and solve social problems’ (Quarles and Butler 2018, 453) by encouraging the ‘return’ of middle-class families to the inner-city in support of ‘mixed communities’ and ‘renewal’ (Gulson 2005; Lipman 2008; Galès 2012). From this perspective, the middle-class presence is viewed as transformative, bringing additional economic, cultural and social resources, enhanced political voice, and role models for the poor, whilst at the same time deconcentrating poverty (Lees 2008; Freeman 2005). Urban middle-class families view themselves, and are seen by policy makers, as investors in an urban educational ‘marketplace’, who add value ‘to the school in the expectation that they would get value from it, putting their social and cultural capital to work for the school to benefit their children’ (Freidus 2016, 22). These dominant narratives of urban renewal posit middle-class families as agents of school improvement (Billingham 2015).

Whilst the existing literature has advanced our understanding of class relations in gentrifying urban schools, with a few notable exceptions (e.g Posey-Maddox 2014; Mansaray 2018), this is focused on parents’ perspectives and interactions. Our knowledge of the impact of class colonisation is often derived from parental accounts, through interview-based studies. There has been less empirical focus on the institutional perspectives and the agency of educators within urban schools. It is therefore unsurprising that school gentrification appears as a hegemonic process, in which schools can do little but acquiesce in the face of a mobilised middle-class. An ethnographic sensitivity to the ways in which people negotiate their institutional encounters is likely to reveal a more complex and fluid process. Urban schools are workplaces for teachers and other adults, whose actions are guided by specific institutional histories, professional and pedagogic concerns and values (Woods 1983). Parents and educators have different
stakes in the educational game, which is not fully reflected in the literature. An institutional focus enables a reconceptualization of colonisation as a distinctive organisational change which confronts workers ‘with a range of unknown or unexpected events, which challenge established frames of reference and evoke uncertainty, ambiguity and fear’ (Reissner 2011, 595). As Hernández (2019, 13) contends, ‘research has failed to provide a deeper analysis around the way in which parental practices are welcomed and strengthened by school leaders and teachers’ practices or, in opposition, are mitigated and resisted by them’. It is this deeper analysis which is attempted here via an institutionally-focused ethnographic examination of staff responses to, and experiences of, attempted social, cultural and symbolic control (i.e. class colonisation) in a gentrifying primary school.

**Methods and theoretical approach**

This paper draws from a wider substantive ethnographic study of social change and educational work conducted by the author (2012). The empirical aspects of that research consisted of participant observation of classrooms, staffrooms, playgrounds and other settings, including the immediate neighbourhoods, of two primary schools in inner-city London between 2003-2005 (approximately 135 days of fieldwork). This article re-interprets and recodes some of that original material, focusing on one school, Plumtree¹, to specify its arguments. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with 11 of the 13 teachers employed at Plumtree and 16 of the 17 teaching assistants. In terms of ethnicity only two of the 13 employed teachers were from non-white backgrounds: amongst

¹ Northwick and Plumtree are pseudonyms.
assistants, the figure was significantly higher, with 8 out of the 17 from such backgrounds. Most assistants could be characterised as working-class; the few that were from middle-class backgrounds are significant for the analysis and described in detail in the main text. Fifteen parents were interviewed, the majority of whom were white middle-class, although not all. A short socio-demographic survey was administered to all interviewees to facilitate basic socio-economic class designation (informed by Bourdieusian notions of class – see theoretical framework below), including basic questions about household composition and tenure, and income. In addition, there was analysis of policy documents and published secondary material about the neighbourhood of Northwick in which Plumtree was located. The data were analysed in a thematic manner using Nvivo qualitative data software. This paper draws from interview data and observational fieldnotes. The interview sample is comprehensive, thus inferences regarding the typicality and representativeness of experiences and views across the main analytical themes are robust. All quoted data extracts are from interview transcripts, except where indicated.

**Theoretical approach**

The arguments of this paper are framed by a Bourdieusian (1990) understanding that social class groups compete to maintain or advance their position through struggle within particular structured contexts (fields), using their accumulated, social, cultural and financial resources (capitals). Social agents make sense of their worlds in a relatively consistent manner through their structured practices (habitus), which is the unconscious framework that guides action. Capitals are valued in relation to specific field dynamics, trajectories, and struggles (Bourdieu 1990). Power, for Bourdieu, stems not only from
unequal access to resources, but the ability of social groups to dominate symbolic representation; and how resources are valued within a field of struggle. The use of Bourdieusian concepts to explicate gentrification in general, and the strategies and practices of white middle-class groups in urban schools in particular, is long established in the literature (Butler and Robson 2003; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). However, the use of micro-sociological approaches, with a focus on how gentrification is experienced and shaped by situational definition and processes of mutual influence in the organisation of interpersonal encounters, is less developed in the literature (exceptions include Anderson 1990). Here the study draws on Goffman (1967/2005) and Collins’ (2004) understanding of social interaction or ‘interaction rituals’ as the recurrent emotionally-motivated intersubjective reality achieved through the mutual calibration of talk and bodily responses when individuals are co-present. Participating in social interaction requires the acceptance, largely implicit, of a negotiated set of contextualised expectations. These enabling conditions provide predictability and legibility to participants. It is within interaction that individuals communicate and realise an identity or situated self. This self ‘crystallizes how someone performs obligations, behaviours, duties, and feelings associated with a particular named status in society’ (Shulman 2017, 45). From this perspective, interaction mediates between Bourdieusian structural fields of power and individuals’ dispositional habitus and its activation (Santoro 2011). This understanding highlights how social relations structure unequal distributions of resources and opportunities, and the kinds of identities individuals can express, whilst remaining sensitive to the fact that it is within interactions that social structures are
experienced as meaningful, and this is the basis on which individuals act\(^2\). Social and cultural control is not exacted from above, or even necessarily through the habitus, but emerges from individuals’ more localised need for social acceptance, and their negotiation of cultural assumptions through interaction.

**Introduction to Plumtree and its fields of gentrification**

This section introduces Plumtree in relation to neighbourhood gentrification, synthesising existing published research and ethnographic observations. Plumtree occupies an unassuming 1960s building in Northwick. This is a neighbourhood in the north of Hackney, a densely-populated, ethnically-diverse inner-city London borough with areas of immense deprivation (Wessendorf 2014). The neighbourhood was, at the time of fieldwork in the mid-2000s, experiencing an intense period of gentrification, bolstered by a housing boom which started in the late 1990s. For several decades, the gradual gentrification of Northwick \(^3\) had drawn white middle-class fractions – Ley’s (1994) ‘new cultural class’ of university-educated professionals, such as teachers, social workers, journalists, artists, academics, with high levels of cultural and social capital, and relatively low levels of economic capital (Butler and Robson 2003)\(^4\). This was a politically

\(^2\) This framework is discussed more fully elsewhere (Author, 2018).

\(^3\) Northwick and Plumtree are pseudonyms.

\(^4\) This resonates with the socio-demographics of the middle-class parent sample which included: four journalists working for national newspapers, four solicitors, a press photographer, a music promoter, a writer, a medical research scientist, a painter, and four education professionals. The majority were educated to degree level and above with origins in the south-east of England.
liberal fraction\textsuperscript{5} of the middle-class, attracted among other aspects, to Northwick’s large, relatively-affordable Victorian properties and ‘vibrant’ mix of ethnicities (Ball and Vincent 2007). The middle-class self-image was couched in terms of a tolerant urban ‘cosmopolitanism’ that entails ‘an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences’ (Hannerz 1996, 103), set apart from other middle-class fractions.

There was however a tension between the safety of Northwick and the imagined social and cultural diversity, and the perceived threat, of Hackney ‘proper’ (May 1996). Whilst the multi-ethnic working-class presence in Northwick was still significant (comprised of Turkish-speaking and African-Caribbean groups), they had been relegated to ‘a kind of social wallpaper’ (Butler 2003, 484), and were absent in the social and cultural worlds of the white middle-classes. The desirability of Plumtree as a site of class colonisation to gentrifiers rested on its assimilation into the dominant narrative of place and community.

Although neighbourhood gentrification was extensive in the fields of housing and consumption, it was less formed within education, with few determinate choices for middle-class parents. Plumtree was a single-form-entry primary, rated Good by Ofsted\textsuperscript{6}, with consistently good academic results, and an intake of 222 at the time of fieldwork. Since opening in 1965, Plumtree has been a typical urban primary, educating the multi-ethnic and often disadvantaged population of Northwick. In common with most primary

\textsuperscript{5} Geo-demographic data for Northwick indicates that residents were over five times more likely than the national average to be readers of The Guardian – widely regarded as the voice of the liberal intelligentsia. The neighbourhood is also staunchly Labour voting.

\textsuperscript{6} The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) is the statutory education inspection body for the UK.
schools in Hackney at the time, it has had an ethnically diverse, predominantly working-class intake, in which white British pupils were a minority. However, the intake had changed dramatically in the five years prior to fieldwork in 2003-05. White British children were now the largest ethnic group, with 57% of the pupil population, compared to 31% for the borough. The two next largest ethnic groups were African-Caribbean and Turkish-speaking. The intake was also more advantaged than most Hackney schools; the proportion of pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM), a proxy for disadvantage, was 22%, where the borough average was 48%, and there were far fewer (16%) pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) than the borough average of 53%. Plumtree’s ethnic and social diversity was decreasing and children from middle-class backgrounds now constituted a majority amongst the white British pupils. It was attractive to parents from different backgrounds and classes, and some working-class pupils were the second and third generation in their families to attend. Living within the catchment area of Plumtree carried a significant housing premium, which reflected its visibility and value within the field of gentrification in Hackney.

**Institutional change and context at Plumtree**

This section briefly outlines key institutional changes at Plumtree, namely leadership succession and the employment of middle-class parent volunteers, which generated a context in which the school became more open to influence and transpositions in the social space between the parental and institutional fields, presenting opportunities for reconfiguring home-school relations and boundaries.

Leadership, in particular the role of the headteacher, is an important theme in understanding how schools confront school gentrification (Cucchiara 2013; Butler and Robson 2003), and has been explored elsewhere in greater depth (Mansaray, 2018). As
leaders, heads give sense and meaning to the work and actions of others, through their
capacity to define a school’s educational and institutional goals, and cultural parameters
(Ball 1987). Plumtree, in the four years prior to the fieldwork, had undergone significant
organisational changes that generated an unsettled context which framed the current
head, Tom’s, leadership. The previous long-standing head, Meredith, left in 2001. Both
staff and several prominent white middle-class parents commented on Meredith’s
formidable leadership style within interactions and acknowledged the boundaries that
she had established. Adam, chair-of-governors, and a powerfully positioned parent,
recalled: ‘[She] was very charismatic although not always approachable. ... I feel I’m
quite a confident person, but I was a bit intimidated [by her].’ Her departure was seen, in
retrospect, as symbolising a decisive break with the past. Subsequent to Meredith’s
departure, the school was led by two interim heads, including Peter, the current deputy,
until Tom’s appointment in 2002. It was during this period that several prominent white
middle-class parents transitioned from volunteers to educational support staff,
generating new levels of participation and integration into school life. This transposition
from the parental field into the institutional landscape was an important moment in the
redefinition of boundaries between the school and middle-class parents.

These volunteers (Ellie, Kirsten, Chloe, Anthea), all had similar motivations rooted
in their identities as parents, mothers and gentrifiers. They were all white, had high levels
of education (particularly in relation to the existing working-class assistants) and had
lived in dual-income professional households until motherhood. Having children had
precipitated a gradual withdrawal from paid employment, and financial dependence on
their higher-earning partners. Mothering provided a rich vein of agency and expressive
identity, which led to a localising of the habitus, as Ellie remarked: ‘I mean, before I had
children I didn’t even know my next door neighbours in Northwick’. They had been high-profile, involved parent volunteers, with deeply socialising experiences within the parental field, as active members of the PTO, before they made the transition into paid employment at Plumtree. These affinities of cultural style, trajectories and positions within the urban social space, were interpolated into the parental field, and ultimately the institutional space of Plumtree, as highlighted below:

I was the right kind of person before they knew, because I was out in the playground, I was coming in doing voluntary reading; I was involved with the [PTO] … I was known around the school. (Ellie)

These women’s transitions into Plumtree illustrate their determinate strategic feel for the game within the parental field, a dialectical relationship between habitus and field, a sense of being and becoming ‘the right kind of person’, and the importance of institutional recognition in enabling interpolations across positions. Bourdieu and Wacquant refer to this as a ‘practical sense’ indicative of a ‘social sensitivity which guides us … [and] constitutes the world as meaningful by spontaneously anticipating its immanent tendencies’ (1992, 21). From the school perspective, these white middle-class women’s visibility, and the resources they embodied, were increasingly seen as attractive, and supportive of school improvement in line with dominant narratives amongst urban policy makers (Cucchiara 2013). Peter had employed nearly all of these women during his time as interim head. He viewed their transitions as a pivotal moment in the school’s ideological orientation towards the locality’s middle-class, generating new forms of participation and value.

Let me put it to you like this: if your child is in a school, you will redouble your efforts to improve that school, to make it better. … I thought the best way of ensuring that high-quality people would take part in the improvement of the school, was to seek
parents from the local community, who were well educated, and were up to the
tasks that we were giving them.
In Peter’s formulation, offering employment to middle-class parents consolidated and
extended their involvement in the school. Exchange relationships between these parents
and the school (i.e. intensive participation in return for access and recognition) led to a
shift in the forms of capital and dispositions that were valued. He was confident that
middle-class parents’ self-interested investments in the education of their own children
could be harnessed for the social good, and school improvement. It also suggests a
reframing of what constituted the ‘community’, a turn towards the white middle-classes
as mobilised participants in school improvement, and an occlusion of multi-ethnic
working-class parents who were no longer viewed as potential partners. Parents’
transitions into work roles at Plumtree signalled new classed (and racialised) relations
between the school and the locality. As Reay and colleagues (2007, 1042) observe: ‘In a
class-ridden, racist society, to embody both whiteness and middle-classness is to be a
person of value. It is also to be a person who makes value judgments that carry symbolic
power; a valuer of others’. The symbolic value of Peter’s actions was to relay a greater
recognition of the white middle-class as the pre-eminent social group within the parental
field and to confirm these parents’ perceptions of themselves as agents of institutional
change. The middle-class assistants formed a discernible group institutionally, and were
recognised in their duality, as both gentrifier parents, and all that this came to symbolise,
and as colleagues. Their incorporation demonstrated a willingness to render permeable
Plumtree’s institutional backstages (Goffman 1969/1990) – those areas of educational
work and activity usually hidden or obscured from parents’ view.

I think they [assistants] contribute enormously, I mean, a lot of them are parents,
and they do provide a link between school and other parents, you know, if there are
things going on, you hear about it from them rather than the teachers. (Amy, white middle-class parent)

Despite the recognition conferred by Peter’s action, their presence was a dislocating one, particularly for some working-class assistants, suggesting that appreciation by senior leaders was not universal and uncontested.

It’s like in this school you’ve got the bottom group [of parents] and then you’ve got these high-flying ones, doctors, barristers, who think they are above everyone else ... The ones that have just come, don’t know how to put it, they’re different from me, Lucia, Esma, Estella, Yvette, Sue in the office, who’ve all been here a long time. [pauses] Basically they think that they are better than us, I would put it that way.

(Ruth)

For Ruth, institutional solidarities were constructed on the basis of longevity, and shared working histories and interactions. In her account, institutional membership included long-serving teachers, assistants and administrative staff (and cut across ethno-racial, institutional position and class boundaries) which was contrasted with the relatively recent presence of white middle-class assistants, whom she identified in relation to their position amongst the dominant fractions within the parental field, the ‘high-flying ones’. Ruth’s comments highlight some of the social, cultural and symbolic tensions which their presence generated institutionally.

Finally, many staff connected the articulation of white middle-class voice and influence within the school with the new head.

Since Tom has been in here, [parents] are in and out all the time. I mean … if they’re not in and out talking to him, they’re on the phone to him or they’re e-mailing him.

(Esma-assistant)

Thus, again, neighbourhood change combined with organisational change had altered the nature of field boundary relations between the school and parents. It is within these organisational contexts that class colonisation emerged as a significant feature of
Plumtree’s institutional reality, and as framing the leadership of the new head Tom.

**Staff perspectives on neighbourhood social change**

In this section, I outline staff’s perceptions of the socio-demographic changes in the neighbourhood as they were manifested institutionally, particularly through talk about the changing social and ethnic mix of the children. Whilst much has been written on middle-class parental perspectives on pupil mix within gentrifying urban contexts (Byrne and De Tona 2019; Goossens et al. 2018), less is known about staff perspectives.

Teachers’ and assistants’ understandings of neighbourhood changes and the way they were inflected in the school varied. Institutional perspectives were shaped by factors such as the length of time that individuals had worked at Plumtree; their familiarity with schools in Hackney and Northwick; the cohort of children they worked with (there was a greater ethnic and social class mix amongst the older children than the younger ones, and assistants more than teachers tended to interact frequently, and in small groups, with minority ethnic children, who were more often assigned additional classroom support); whether they lived in Northwick or Hackney themselves or had prior knowledge of the neighbourhood; their focus; and whether they had personal connections with Plumtree (e.g. their children attended the school or they were former pupils themselves). Most staff were able to characterise the decreasing social and ethnic mix of the intake as reflective of *neighbourhood changes*, notably growing numbers of white middle-class families in the immediate locality. Several staff used the term ‘gentrification’, communicating a highly *reflexive* understanding. They appeared to view the changing social mix at the school as problematic and increasing the social class ‘gap’ between children:
Well, most of them actually come from professional families, that come here. The majority, yeah. And they all live that end, over that way [points towards Victorian houses]. ... I would think more than half, yeah. Yeah, most got au pairs, and all this stuff... It’s the complete opposite, it can be. There’s not like a middle – you know – there’s a few in my class now, and they have a very hard life. Hardly any money...

Yeah, it’s two extremes. (Ruth-assistant)

The changing ethno-racial and social mix symbolised an uncomfortable position at the ‘frontier’ of neighbourhood gentrification:

It’s very interesting, because – we are literally – we are marooned in the middle here, and then around us, all our neighbouring schools have got black – mainly black population. (Yvette-teacher)

For many, the changes represented a decline – from a recent past in which the school had a mix that they valued. This view was most clearly articulated amongst those with the longest social and professional ties to school: for example, Estella, an African-Caribbean teacher, at the school for over two decades, and Esma, a Turkish heritage assistant at the school, and former pupil whose own children had all attended Plumtree. For them, the school held deep psycho-social resonances in the habitus, woven into individual biographies, wider intergenerational ties to the locality, and part of their identification with wider imagined urban working-class communities in Hackney. This racialised and classed affinity with the children they taught, and where they taught, infused staff orientations and practice (Maguire 2001). Working at Plumtree was a statement of place and claim of belonging:

I stand here as my own example, and to be a model for children in my school. I’m born and bred in Hackney. ... And it should mean something, it means something to me to stand in front of children in a Hackney school, and it should mean something for the children who come into my class. (Estella-teacher)

For these staff, their understanding of the past framed their relation to the present:
I think you had a great mix, and it was really a mix... in terms of ethnicity there was a greater mix. (Estella-teacher)

The area and the school are a lot more middle-class than it used to be. I mean when I was here there was ... the non-ethnic minority children were the minority. (Esma-assistant)

Within these accounts, the changing social mix was clearly linked to the ascendency of the white middle-classes within the neighbourhood, and the concomitant marginalisation and displacement of the working-classes. For Esma and Estella, institutional change mirrored a personal and symbolic sense of displacement in the urban order. Others expressed concerns that working-class families in the future would be unable to access the school because of the contracting catchment area and housing affordability. Several white teachers expressed concerns that the social and ethnic mix was changing in ways that troubled their professional commitments to working in a more diverse context.

I have worked in other schools sort of more in the [other Hackney neighbourhood] ... and there is a, sort of, very different feel. And I think you get a more rich mix of children. But I think sometimes it’s a bit hard [here]. You know, when you do black history month and you’ve got just the one child in your class. (Caragh)

The accounts of white middle-class assistants were more deeply conflicted. As individuals who could be described as ‘early’ gentrifiers in relation to the neighbourhood and the school, and whose very presence might be read by others as supportive of middle-class colonisation, their positions were more ambivalent. Anthea, as a parent, had chosen Plumtree for her children when it was a more multi-ethnic school. When asked what she thought of the change, she responded:

Well, I don’t know you see. It depends how you look at it, really. I mean – I don’t think it’s a bad thing, but I would rather it was a good mixture than – people, you know, start to become one sort of, type of group.

These assistants were more likely to frame the issue of ‘mix’ in relation to their valuing of
Plumtree as a means to ‘create a specific progressive middle-class subject’ through the acquisition of multicultural capital and competences for themselves and their children (Goossens et al. 2018, 51). For them, as gentrifiers within Northwick, Plumtree was the main context for interaction with Northwick’s working-class and minority others. Thus, whilst Plumtree’s ethnic and social class diversity might be decreasing, it could still be viewed positively in comparison to their own culturally white upbringings and socially and ethno-racially exclusive networks and interactions within Northwick.

I think, probably, it’s increasingly middle-class, white middle-class. But, I mean, what is really fantastic for me compared with the school I went to in the north-east of England where there was only one black kid – is that you certainly have a broader mixture. … I’m so glad that my children have that experience. And I really like it and I learn things, and I like the fact that we’ve got Turkish speaking kids in, and they teach you little bits of Turkish. (Ellie)

In line with his support of middle-class parental engagement in the school, Peter, the deputy, viewed the changing intake as a more dynamic and improved mix that would benefit working-class pupils. However, he acknowledged that this simultaneously reduced the ethnic diversity of the school.

In a school where it is just working-class, you do not have that mixture of children who’ve had advantages in life which lead them to be more confident in class, so you have a greater ability range in this school than you would at [nearby school with a predominantly black and working-class intake], but that helps because you use the more able children, who are generally the middle-class children, although not exclusively so, you use those children to provide role models, to drag other children along with them. … so we are lucky to have a mixture, although the disadvantage is that culturally we are becoming more of a white school, rather than a genuinely culturally mixed school.

Peter’s discourse reflects the special status accorded to white middle-class families and their children as instigators of school improvement. It resonates with dominant narratives of urban policy makers who posit the middle-classes as role models for the
poor; the value embodied in white middle-class families’ practices is (mis)recognised and read as natural, rather than socially produced (Freeman 2005; Lees 2008; James 2015). In such narratives, the learning gains of mixing ‘are all seen to flow in one direction from the middle to the working-classes, from white to minority ethnic children. Furthermore, the gains from social mix are only seen to work if there is a majority of white and/or middle-class students’ (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011, 95). There is also ambivalence in Peter’s acknowledgement that something of value is being lost, namely ethnic diversity, which serves to illustrate the range of responses found at Plumtree.

In speaking about Plumtree’s changing pupil mix, staff revealed their own, at times ambivalent, positions, investments and feelings towards the locality and their working lives. As Ball (1987, 28) notes, ‘change or the possibility of change brings to the surface those subterranean conflicts and differences which are otherwise glossed over or obscured in the daily routines of school life’. These differences are grounded in race, class, professional practice and values, as well as institutional position and status.

**Staff control of their work situation and educational agenda**

A key feature of institutional turmoil is that it disturbs the social order of the school, upsetting ‘the control that participants exercise over their environment through established patterns of thought and action’ (Hallett 2003, 94). Research suggests that the culturally-endowed middle-classes are particularly orientated towards what Bernstein (1975) calls the ‘expressive order’ of a school, to the quality of interpersonal relationships and cultural formation of pupils, and often prioritise this aspect of schooling over academic concerns (Butler and Robson 2003; Raveaud and van Zanten 2007). In this section, I show how parental practices impacted on teachers’ and assistants’ work situation and control of the educational agenda, generating strong negative emotions
and a sense of professional vulnerability. In turn, this negativity was refracted institutionally and directed towards the head, who was perceived as failing to offer sufficient leadership and protection from such parental action and assertion.

One important manifestation of middle-class parents’ influence at Plumtree was their advocacy for child-centred pedagogies, characterised by an emphasis on play, creativity and self-expression, as well as non-hierarchical relations between adults and children and ‘invisible’ forms of control enacted through talk (Bernstein 1971). This was most evident in the enhanced curricular provision at Plumtree, centred on ‘organised’ leisure activities and sports. Pupils regularly engaged in a host of pastimes – sailing, guitar, art, Spanish, swimming, cricket, Rugby, flamenco, tennis, athletics, choir, cycling, walking trips – and there were further activities for those identified as ‘gifted and talented’ (which was almost exclusively white middle-class pupils). The promotion of these kinds of activities is congruent with Lareau’s observation that middle-class parenting logic tends to favour what she described as ‘concerted cultivation’, where they are viewed ‘as an opportunity for play, but also as a chance to develop talents and skills that could be valuable in the self-actualisation processes that take place in adulthood’ (2011, 249). For Plumtree parents, much like those in Vincent and Ball’s London-based study, the focus is on the development of embodied cultural capital, ‘the establishment of the foundations of a cultural breadth – the beginnings [and development] of a ‘renaissance child’” (2007, 1068).

I observed that most if not all of the enhanced provision competed with the prescribed curriculum for time and, on occasion, space. Timetabling these activities

7 Most of these activities were funded or subsidised by fund-raising by the PTO.
resulted in a highly fragmented school day, particularly in the upper school (years 3-6). Children were frequently withdrawn from classrooms to undertake activities with peripatetic staff, causing disruption to teaching and learning. Organising so many activities was complex, and miscommunication was frequent. Time is a resource and teachers generally expected the school timetable to anchor their daily routines and teaching activities. Most teachers saw the timetabling of these activities as an illegitimate imposition on their work situation. The constant disruption of schedules and fragmentation of the school day generated strong emotions of anger, powerlessness and vulnerability, and tensions between educators and school leadership. It thus tended to have a destabilising impact on staff’s classroom experiences. In the following extract, Isaac, a teacher, recounts a confrontation over additional choir practice during lesson time:

I was furious when I was told that...one third of my class was going to choir, I was just livid... There’s nothing I can do about it. But, finally I had enough, so two weeks ago, I brought it up in a meeting [with Tom]. I said, ‘look I can’t take this anymore you’ve just destroyed my class. Tuesday afternoon was the only afternoon I had the whole class.’ ... Tom came back and said he spoke to the choir person, she said that she needs an hour absolutely... so I just got furious [stamps hand on table]. ... I think what we teachers want is more important than what she thinks, and we got it. It just meant putting up that fight.

As Isaac’s comments suggest, many teachers felt that the timetabling of extra-curricular activities in the school day reflected a prioritisation of parental wishes over the needs of staff. It appeared to many as the elevation of leisure over the academic curriculum.

Whilst Isaac’s resistance was dramatically realised, it was relatively unusual. Most staff complained in backstage arenas to each other (and me) rather than risk a direct confrontation with the head, or powerful parents. Moreover, as an experienced, white,
male teacher with a confident middle-class cultural style, Isaac was able to express his anger more directly in ways that there were perhaps not available to other staff and defend his professional practice. He said of himself: ‘There are a lot of head teachers who don’t like me [because] I am frank’.

I observed another classroom where Katherine, a differently positioned teacher (female, younger and newer to teaching), experienced similar regular disruptions.

It is really hard with all the distractions in this school ... I do feel that some of the children that aren’t so academic are missing a lot because of these things ... I only have one uninterrupted afternoon a week ... I feel like it’s my time that’s been taken away [laughs] ... I’ve got so much to do, and so much of the curriculum to teach, and some of these things aren't in the curriculum. Katherine’s daily struggles to establish control over her educational work resonated across the school. In a teaching environment already laden with constraints, in terms of government-led curriculum, initiatives and targets, the organisation of extra activities was experienced as an unwelcome additional pressure on classroom teaching and learning. In Katherine’s case, it contributed to high levels of stress and exhaustion.

As the comments above show, some teachers were ambivalent about the value of the activities and considered them a ‘distraction’ that shifted focus away from the curriculum. This was seen having a negative impact on learning and pupil motivation, particularly for children from less advantaged backgrounds.

You can be cynical about the whole exercise, the fun learning thing... [The children] feel that they don’t have to do it [their academic work] if they don’t like it. ... we have forgotten what school is about. (Estella-teacher)

Others, however, were more positive, highlighting the potential benefit to working-class children of the enhanced provision. Yvette a long-serving African-Caribbean teacher, explained:
It means that when parents fight for tennis, everybody enjoys tennis. When parents ask for sailing, the whole class goes sailing. So it means everyone benefits from it. And the children of working-class families, they wouldn't know that this is not what happens – normally. They just say, ‘thank you very much’. And benefit from it.

Nonetheless, Yvette also expressed frustration at the disruption to her teaching caused by the timetabling of leisure activities, and several days of ‘lost learning’ that occurred as a result.

Although most white middle-class parents I spoke to appeared to support the dominant pedagogic priorities, a few were critical of the agenda because it rested on ‘disguised’ white middle-class self-interest and resources, presented as progressive:

I do think that there’s a group of Plumtree parents, who basically have had quite privileged lifestyles themselves, who are therefore into the whole let’s all have a wonderful, kind of terribly unfettered, heavily child-centred, run-free type thing. And the assumption is that the kids will collect the sort of boring basic skills later. Well those kids will; because their parents will either pay for it, through a tutor, or they’ll be able to provide it anyway. But some kids who could have benefited won’t, because they won’t have parents that can provide that level of input. (Emily-parent)

Emily’s comments illustrate how dominant gentrifier parents’ ideological commitments and identities, underpinned by household capitals, guided school transformation efforts and the development of an educational agenda that detracted from the prescribed curriculum (Cucchiara and Horvat 2013; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). This was made possible because of parents’ willingness to deploy household cultural resources to manage and compensate for any potential educational ‘limitations’ they might encounter at Plumtree, through the use, for example of private tutoring. As noted by Emily, this was common amongst middle-class families and, whilst not openly discussed, was widely acknowledged by staff through interactions with children around homework.
Eight or nine children in my class have after school tutors, so they are paying for their education [laughs]... I am aware of which children have tutors after school... I feel like I am only a small part of their education. (Katherine-teacher)

Parental practices at Plumtree generated a strong impression of educational independence amongst staff – a sense they did not view the educational dimension of schooling at Plumtree as vital to their children’s educational success, as indicated in the extract. This sentiment is echoed by a white middle-class parent in Raveaud and van Zanten’s (2007, 118) London-based study:

> It’s quite easy to see school as almost filling in around the edges, but not even as their main academic provider. Certainly at primary school, and even quite a lot at the beginning of secondary school.

At its most extreme, parents’ educational independence was underscored by the threat of ‘exit’. During the fieldwork, a few white middle-class children from a specific class left, and whilst it was unclear what the reasons were for their removal, it nonetheless reverberated in staff talk. It disturbed collective staff confidence and contributed to the perception of parental unpredictability.

Independence, underpinned by household stocks of capitals, had two further consequences for staff. First, it tended to embolden parents’ actions, particularly in the curricular domain, where those with more resource constraints and thus dependence on schools might have been more accommodating. This contributed to parents’ perceived indifference to the perspectives of staff. Secondly, it supported a general orientation towards the symbolic, that is, changes that evoked the valued (and often idealised) symbols of parents’ identities and habitus; what Gouldner (1979, 823) refers to as ‘theoricity’ and the valuing of ideas and talk as superior to educational practice based on the confident realisation of cultural capital. This can be contrasted with staff’s
professional concerns and orientation towards educational content and the needs of all children.

It’s when they interfere in educational matters which they don’t necessarily understand, and even if they understand, it’s in a theoretical way, they don’t see it on the ground, and they don’t seem to have enough faith in teachers just to get on with it. (Isaac-teacher)

Several staff reported frequently being questioned about their classroom practices or presented with demands for customised provision. As one assistant remarked: ‘parents are always involved in the school. They’ve got too much to say, they either don’t like this, or they want it this way’ (Keisha). Gentrifier parents’ interventionist disposition, and general vigilance, generated wariness and mistrust amongst staff, and communicated a devaluing of teachers’ professional capital. I observed some teachers trying to protect their work situation from parental intrusion pre-emptively, often by spending time and emotional energy anticipating possible requests and demands: ‘we have parents who go through things with a fine-tooth comb’ (Yvette, fieldnotes). Another teacher explained how she was careful to manage requests from parents to assist in the classroom, reflecting her suspicion of their motivations for doing so: ‘I’m not always terribly keen on that because I don’t think parents’ reasons always for doing it are the right reasons’ (Erlina). Gentrifier parents’ authoritative expectations and the underlying sense of entitlement and marketised sensibilities they expressed, weighed heavily on all staff. For some staff, this was an emotionally exhausting and highly destabilising experience:

I sometimes wonder who we, you know, we’re not a service industry. ... We cater for individuals as best we can but at the end of the day you’re in a school. And I think maybe sometimes it’s part of where we are. You know, we’re in a very middle-class, white area and I think there are huge expectations. And we try as hard as we can to fulfil this but sometimes they’re not always possible, it’s not always humanly possible to do them all and deal with everything else in a day. (Erlina)
There was therefore an ironic aspect to class colonisation as it unfolded in Plumtree: middle-class parents advocated, in public, a ‘progressive’ educational agenda centred on their practices of ‘concerted cultivation’, which competed for time and resources, and thus constrained teachers’ delivery of the prescribed national curriculum and negatively impacted their efforts to meet the learning needs of all children. In private backstage arenas, many of these same families relied on their household capitals, for example utilising private tuition, to ensure that their children’s ‘education is on a par with (or better than) that of their similarly situated peers’ (Posey-Maddox 2014, 47), and that they were not disadvantaged by the institutional consequences of their actions. For many staff (and some parents like Emily above), the contradictions of gentrifier parents’ practices, pointing to their desire to ‘sustain a liberal image and to disguise self-interested educational choices’, appeared hypocritical (Brantlinger 2003, 49). This fed into a cynical outlook that reinforced distrust and division amongst staff (as well as between staff and gentrifier parents), eroding professional purpose and unsettling educators’ ability to derive a firm sense of reality from their institutional encounters (Goffman 1967/2005).

Classroom discipline

As documented within micro-sociological studies of classrooms, the establishment and maintenance of discipline and classroom control is a paramount concern, and intimately bound with teachers’ own sense of professional expertise and identity. Quiet orderly environments in which educators do not frequently raise their voices are aspects of classroom control that are valued institutionally. Yet, as Denscombe argues, whilst ‘classroom control is an essential feature of teaching... it is not something which can be taken for granted’, because teachers ‘still have to win that control’ from the pupils in the
course of their daily interactions (1985, 10). Equally, discipline is shaped by external influences, such as other teachers’ attitudes, the head, parental expectations, and wider societal discourses (Slee 1994).

During observations and interviews at the school, I noted that discipline and classroom control was a prominent theme. I perceived classrooms as very noisy, and children seemed indifferent to the authority of teachers and other adults. In turn, educators appeared reluctant to assert their authority over children. Staff across the school struggled to either establish or maintain order in the classroom environment and in public spaces and gatherings (e.g. assemblies), and most felt inadequately supported in their efforts to deal with what they perceived as ‘difficult’ or disruptive children. The school’s disciplinary procedures and practices relied almost exclusively on positive encouragement, with few sanctions.

As outlined in the previous sections, middle-class parents favoured pedagogic modalities that were child-centred and grounded in the discursive nature of their habitus. As Bernstein observed, in middle-class families, patterns of socio-linguistic interaction tend to ‘place greater emphasis upon the use of language in socializing the child into the moral order, in disciplining the child, in the communication and recognition of feeling’ (1971, 151). Lareau’s ethnography notes the dispositional focus in middle-class families on using talk, and on giving reasons and explanation to children, in contrast to more direct ways of speaking and commanding authority (2011, 116). Observations suggest that parents’ support of this form of discipline, with what was still a diverse intake, was fraught with tensions, which contributed significantly to the wider sense of turmoil experienced by staff.
For staff, ill-discipline and the problems they faced with classroom control were intimately connected to Tom’s leadership and cultural style. Several staff appeared to connect a decline in discipline and control with the departure of the previous head, Meredith, who was generally perceived as exemplifying strong leadership, which established boundaries and supported adult authority over children.

There used to be [strong discipline] but it’s gone downhill … [since] we changed heads. It’s more like sit down and talk. (Keisha-assistant)

I suppose it’s the last couple of years, it’s slowly gone down. But you talk to a couple of teachers been here a long time, they’ll tell you [laughs] they don’t like it either. … It’s all to do with the way discipline is handled. It’s … not enough, basically. They let the kids get way with more than they should. The leeway is too much. (Ruth-assistant)

Tom’s more discursive style of discipline and quiet demeanour, which was aligned with gentrifier parents’ expectations, was seen as ineffective and generated dissatisfaction. Tom (and occasionally Peter) were seen as failing to set a disciplinary ethos supportive of educators’ classroom control. However, a few staff also acknowledged the interactional constraints imposed by gentrifier parents’ attitudes. Most staff assumed they could not rely on parental support if they took a more assertive disciplinary approach, and were fearful of provoking disapproval and unwanted scrutiny, as one teacher explained:

Parents in other areas I worked in before … if it’s your word against theirs [the children’s] they would always support the teacher, whereas I think here, they support the children a lot more, the parents support the children a lot more (laughs). I think that’s just the nature of the area. It’s a white middle-class area isn’t it.

(Katherine)

Observations in classrooms with older children suggested that educators were also concerned about surveillance from pupils, which might provoke parental action. Research shows that middle-class children develop a sense of entitlement and power through their
parents’ authoritative practices and this significantly mediates their interactions with school staff (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011). From a staff perspective then asserting oneself in relation to children and discipline appeared risky, since neither internal (notably the head) nor external audiences (powerful parents) would support it, and since staff generally wanted to avoid confrontations with middle-class parents, most adopted therefore a cautious approach; outward deference to discursive discipline, whilst expressing private anger at these cultural constraints. Consequently, for many teachers, their classroom struggles to establish authority symbolised their lack of control of other fundamental aspects of their work situation, their sense of vulnerability, the illegitimacy of parental power and influence and their dissatisfaction with the leadership: ‘I wish he [the head] was a lot firmer with the parents and the children’ (Fiona-teacher).

The position of middle-class assistants, who had dual identities as parents and workers, is revealing in this respect. As parents, and in line with the middle-class habitus, they had supported positive and discursive forms of discipline. However, as workers, their position had changed:

[Discipline’s] too subtle. ... I think there is a place for strictness and discipline rather than just reinforcement and encouragement. ... I do think, generally in the school, a lot of it is carrot and there's no stick, and I think children have been getting away with murder. (Chloe)

If you'd asked me a couple of years ago I'd have said, ‘Listen, these are young children, this is a small school, we should all be able to just talk and express ourselves. And the fact they don't know how to line up is because they're five years old.' I'd have been much more liberal about it. And now I'm beginning to see that actually a quiet environment makes it much easier and much less stressful. .... So I'm becoming in favour of more authoritarian stance on that, basically. (Ellie)

Working at Plumtree challenged these assistants’ assumptions about white middle-class
children being inherently ‘peaceful and rational subjects’ who do not require discipline imposed on them, and the desirability of self-expression in education (Goossens et al. 2018, 48). It also led to recognition of teachers’ capital in establishing classroom control and its importance for teaching and learning in general. Ellie’s account highlights how as parents they assumed the superiority of their cultural values, and parenting styles, based on their social status and habitus, viewing them as normative, what is ‘good’ and appropriate for all (Sullivan 2014), despite none of them having any professional teacher education. It is an example of what scholars describe as ‘epistemic ignorance’ that results not simply from a lack of access to knowledge (e.g. about pedagogy) but a more active form embedded in their ‘identities and social locations and modes of belief formation’ as white middle-class women (Alcoff 2007, 40). Ellie’s previous powerful social location in the parental field neglected not only other parents’ views on discipline, but also staff’s experiences, professional expertise and perspectives. However, a new awareness and perspective was emerging from her immersion within the institutional field: ‘There is a divide between staff and parents, but when you’re both, you, kind of, you can see it’.

In viewing urban schools as places in which their values could be realised, many gentrifier parents elided, and were ignorant of, the prosaic realities of schools as complex educational workplaces, and viewed staff instrumentally in relation to their own broader ‘educational project [and]… commitment to particular notions of society and to particular kinds of socialisation’ (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011, 71).

Discussion
As Grace long ago remarked, urban schools are ‘inextricably associated with conflict – of class and culture, of ideologies and social processes’ (1978, 29). In this paper, I have begun to detail how, in one urban school, gentrification emerged as a distinctive feature
of institutional experience, and the complex ways in which staff responded to the practices and mobilisation of a ‘liberal’ fraction of the white middle-class. Rather than an ‘external’ context, I have argued for a reconceptualization of gentrification as an emergent aspect of on-going negotiated interactions and meanings framed by unequal exchange relations between white middle-class parents and school staff, and wider institutional arrangements. Moreover, the focus on educators’ experiences and perspectives shows strikingly the institutional costs and complexities of gentrification processes.

Gentrifier parents’ transformation of the educational game subjected staff to forms of control that were perceived by many as illegitimate and disrupted their shared understandings of what Becker refers to as ‘authority relations’ – ‘the amount and kind of control each kind of person involved in the institution is to have over others’ (Becker 1953, 128; Lareau and Muñoz 2012). For some staff, parental action appeared naïve, ill-conceived and a form of usurpation, even if it was well-intentioned. Staff also noted the conditional, and ambivalent, nature of middle-class support, as demonstrated by parents’ willingness to intervene and to use their substantial cultural, social and financial resources to mitigate and supplement what the school offered (Raveaud and van Zanten 2007). Parents’ advocacy for a ‘progressive’ pedagogy, rooted in the discursive nature of their class fraction’s habitus and a desire to defend their liberal self-image, was seen as insincere, given their ignorance of and indifference to its institutional consequences. This undermined parents’ outward commitment to the social good, and conflicted with staff’s more prosaic educational concerns and mission, fostering mistrust.

The findings highlight struggles over the definition and maintenance of boundaries between parental and institutionally-defined interaction contexts, and
document the significant mediations and transpositions across fields, of mothers who became assistants. Staff’s understandings of neighbourhood gentrification, as reflected in pupil mix, were informed by a complex array of emotions and investments. For some, neighbourhood changes heralded an improved social mix, with middle-class parents and children accorded a ‘special status’ in school transformation efforts (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009, 988), whilst for others, they symbolised a form of institutional decline, a departure from the school’s past and commitments to diversity, generating an emotional register of nostalgia. There was apprehension, echoed in Posey-Maddox’s study, that newer white middle-class families ‘rendered invisible the historic and current contributions of many (working-class) parents and teachers at the school’ (2014, 74).

The findings indicate also that whilst middle-class parents undeniably brought additional resources to the school, they also utilised institutional resources (in particular staff time and expertise) and redirected these to support their own agenda and focus in ways that challenged and undermined staff’s professional practice, and constrained educational opportunities for other children. Whilst the literature has extensively documented urban middle-class families’ ethical dilemmas and anxieties concerning ‘what is good for their children … and what is good for society’ (Frank and Weck 2018, 24; Crozier, Reay, and James 2011), the ethical challenges faced by educators in gentrifying schools like Plumtree is less documented.

Staff experiences at Plumtree question the positioning of middle-class parents as unmitigated agents of urban school improvement and the assumption that schools are able to calibrate middle-class parents’ priorities with wider social, ethical and institutional concerns (Posey-Maddox 2013). Such a task, as I have showed, is difficult for educators, because, ironically, the organisational turmoil produced by middle-class parents’
practices, in this case at least, constrained the school’s organisational capacity to act in the interests of disadvantaged children. Parents’ greater cultural power, realised through their authoritative demands and ‘persuasive’ speech, came to define the parameters of negotiability by altering staff’s opportunities to act and expectations, shaping their ‘epistemological concerns, their interpretive skills, as well as their self-esteem and ability to make well-founded judgements’ (Engelstad 2009, 211). Engaging with culturally-assertive white middle-class parents, in sometimes coercive and domineering interactions, was experienced by many staff as professionally and emotionally bruising. Emotions, as Scheff suggests, constrain action because of the capacity of others, in particular those in higher status positions, to induce the fear of ‘embarrassment, shame, or humiliation’ (Scheff 1994, 75; Collins 1990). However, parents’ powerful definitions of reality were not always accepted as legitimate by staff. Many developed a cynical outlook which served as a means of positioning oneself outside of gentrifier parents’ control; ‘a declaration of autonomy... a hint that the self behind the role is not coterminous with the role, despite the claims of others’ (Kunda 2006, 188). It was a stance of ‘capitulation’ that contained elements of symbolic resistance and collusion, realised interactionally through deference and distance (Casey 1995), a refusal to be ‘gentrified’ and have their ‘subjectivities and behaviours more congruent with... neoliberal principles’ (Paton 2014, 40). Although cynicism enabled staff to cope with the demands of parental assertion, providing a means for workers to symbolically re-appropriate control over their work situation, it was not without cost. Cynicism can be disempowering and alienating because it requires workers to ‘give up on the idea that... [schools] are a space amenable to moral commitments and to resign themselves to
accepting the conflicting requirements of the job without attempting to reconcile them’ (Zacka 2017, 236).

It is clear that the ‘whiteness’ of middle-class parents was a highly perspicuous aspect of who they were in relation to the staff at Plumtree, and framed how they were understood. Equally, who the staff were, in terms of their own racialised identities and their institutional positionalities, also mattered. Gentrification troubled both minority-ethnic and white staff’s understandings of the school, and the ways it was being changed by gentrifier parents. This was further complicated by parents’ ‘liberal’ politics. As several studies have shown, ‘liberal’, diversity-seeking fractions of the white middle-class have ideological investments in whiteness and a self-image of ‘moral goodness’, and the privileges it confers in educational contexts, that often go unexamined, and may work against any rhetorical commitment to more expansive notions of solidarity, racial justice, and the social good (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Sullivan 2014; Brantlinger 2003).

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper, there is a clear need to understand how school gentrification is influenced by the intersectionality of parents’ race and class and its interaction with staff’s ethno-racial diversity and the normative ‘whiteness’ of certain organisational practices within schools. Research suggests black middle-class parents are located differently within class relations, and their interactions with teachers are shaped by wider racial hierarchies and cultural assumptions (Rollock et al. 2015).

Overall, the findings suggest that the positionality of staff in relation to gentrification is multifaceted, and not simply one of ‘complicity’ in facilitating middle-class advantage, as it is often presented within the literature (Calarco 2018; James 2015; Mansaray 2018; Posey-Maddox 2014). The modalities of school gentrification are structured by educators’ relatively low status within racialised and classed hierarchies vis
à-vis gentrifier parents, and a wider context of unequal cultural, economic, symbolic and social investments in education by different groups in society. As Van Galen (2004, 136) argues, ‘efforts toward educational change cannot settle only for modifications of curriculum and pedagogy but must also address the multiple ways in which educational policy and practice limit the relative capital available to teachers as they negotiate the social terrain of educational decision making’. It is clear that there is a ‘mutual affinity’ between the self-interest of urban school leaders operating within highly marketized and performative environments and that of middle-class households – as James (2015, 106) notes: ‘To put it crudely, head teachers wanted middle-class kids and would go to great lengths to attract and keep them’. However, ordinary staff perspectives and actions are more reflexive and ambivalent, framed by institutional interactions and position and wider cultural identities. The danger is that in disrupting and subordinating their own professional practice and values to satisfy the demands of gentrifier parents, educators risk acting in ways which disregard, and sometimes undermine those values.


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