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Complicity and contestation in the gentrifying urban primary school

Abstract:

The transformation of primary schools in gentrifying localities has sometimes been referred to as a form of 'class colonisation'. This article draws on ethnographic research with teachers, teaching assistants, and parents in two inner-London primary schools to explore the largely unexamined role of school leaders (headteachers) in mediating gentrification processes within urban schools. It argues that institutional history, contexts of headship and leadership style all play an important role in negotiating and recontextualising middle-class mobilisation and power to re-shape primary schools. Headteachers' relationship to gentrification is therefore not simply one of complicity, but often of contestation and conflict. This article therefore challenges understandings of gentrification as a hegemonic process, and contributes to a more nuanced picture of the educational consequences of gentrification, particularly the institutional realities and experiences of urban social change.

Keywords – Gentrification; Urban Education; School Leadership; Bourdieu; London

Introduction

There is a growing interest in urban schooling among sociologists of education and urban geographers. These interests have focused on changing class relations given the increasing presence of middle-class families in previously working-class urban localities. This is often framed in terms of 'gentrification' – understood as a process of displacement and substitution of poorer groups by those from more advantaged socio-economic groups (Butler et al., 2013). In education, Reay and colleagues (2011) have documented the practices and anxieties of (white) middle-class parents in their ambivalent engagement with urban schools and how this can constrain educational opportunities for working-class children. Urban geographers have looked at urban schools as arenas of *spatial* contestation and struggle as middle-class groups forge new forms of belonging and identification for themselves within the urban order (Butler and Robson, 2003a), whilst at the same time securing class advantage for their children over others. Others have emphasised that the transformation of urban schools is part of a wider neo-liberal project of urban restructuring which results in the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups (Lipman, 2008; Grant et al., 2014; Gulson, 2006; Thiem, 2009). While these studies have advanced our understanding of the class relations in gentrifying or gentrified urban spaces, there has been less empirical and explanatory focus on the *institutional* and *lived perspectives* of teachers and other staff within urban schools, in particular the ways that school leaders negotiate and recontextualise neighbourhood social class changes within their work. This article presents an *institutionally* focused account of 'class colonisation' within two urban primary schools. It draws from wider ethnographic research, fieldwork observation and interviews in two London schools in adjacent localities that are constructed as different

neighbourhoods vis-à-vis gentrification. I argue that changing neighbourhood social class relations, through gentrification, are *institutionally* mediated. Specifically, school leaders, as institutional actors, are presented with opportunities to re-negotiate the classed relations of schooling relayed through gentrification. Moreover, understanding the institutional contexts of headship itself helps to illuminate how gentrification is constituted with educational fields. Thus, the analysis presented foregrounds educators' agency and perspectives on urban social change and their educational mission. It demonstrates that middle-class dominance within urban schools is neither assured nor predictable, but rather something which has been continually negotiated on the ground within local institutional cultures, interactional contexts and constraints.

'Class colonisation' of urban schooling in the field of gentrification

Robson and Butler (2001) in their study of gentrification in London in the 2000s, suggested that one way that (white) middle-class power is enacted within urban localities, is through the 'class colonisation' of schools. This reshaping of urban schools, they argue, is a strategy of explicit social and cultural control of urban primary schools which is increasingly popular amongst some fractions of the urban middle-classes. Butler and Robson define class colonisation as the wholesale transformation of the 'performance and ambience of a primary school in the locality ... through the successful deployment of cultural and social capital' (2003a: 72). Most often this is a transformation of a school with predominantly multi-ethnic working-class pupils into one with a largely white middle-class intake. They posit a process whereby social capital is realised in networks which enhance and 'collectivise' the individual cultural capital of households. Such class action, and the associated habitus, is dependent on class consciousness or, in their phrase, 'collective awareness' as well as an ideological narrative of 'equality of opportunity and meritocracy' (Butler and Robson, 2003a: 73). As the process unfolds, middle-class presence and action signal and activate further involvement, increasing the visibility and desirability of the school to the wider field of gentrification, which reinforces existing circulations of cultural capital and activation of social capital (Maguire et al., 2006). This strategy is likely to be pursued by those middle-class fractions *relatively* low in economic capital, but high in cultural capital, often coupled with a strong ideological commitment to state education and valuing of multi-ethnic and social class 'diversity' (James et al., 2010; Hollingworth and Williams, 2010). Class action is directed at the personnel and institutional practices of urban schools. It involves middle-class parents asserting their social power over teachers – as evidenced by greater confidence in interactions, greater willingness to criticise teachers, and a propensity to demand customised and/or additional provision for their children (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau and Horvat, 1999). This process is facilitated by the symbolic power of their intensive participation being viewed simply as 'good parenting' in contrast to working-class forms of engagement which are often seen as inappropriate and inattentive. As a strategy it is dependent on

parental – or more accurately, as feminist analyses highlight, maternal – engagement with schooling (Reay, 1998). Posey-Maddox's (2014) US school ethnography shows how middle-class parents mobilised to seek a 'critical mass' of 'like-minded' parents in the broader locality, activating forms of social capital, to change the wider perception and appeal of a working-class, predominantly African-American, school. Underlying class colonisation as a process is its congruence with other aspects of gentrification which generate social taxonomies, that enable the middle-classes to *recognise* one another and *organise* as a cultural, social and symbolic class within the neighbourhood. Class colonisation may also be facilitated by the actions and strategies of urban governments keen to 'revitalise' a neighbourhood through 're-branding' of schools (Cucchiara, 2013). Cucchiara's (2013) study of urban reforms in Philadelphia highlights the explicit efforts made by public officials to galvanise middle-class support for public schools by positioning them as 'valued customers' within a 'rebranded' urban educational quasi-market. Once gentrifiers recast a primary school 'in their own image as a core social institution', it becomes a site through which others are socialised into the 'gentrified habitus', as well as being emblematic of community life and belonging (Robson and Butler, 2001: 82). Urban schools then become important symbolic resources, and competitive stakes in the educational field, which confer a statement of place in the urban order for middle-class groups. As Billingham and Kimelberg (2013) argue, this localisation of identity through engagement with schooling, reflects how, through the life-course, some childless gentrifiers move from being *consumers* to *producers* of urban space. They add that recognising the importance of schools in gentrification processes enables us to see how the 'urban bourgeoisie [is] actively working to produce an institutional landscape that reflects their habitus and allays their concerns about remaining in the city when so many of their peers have relocated to suburban locales' (2013: 86).

Whilst existing explications of class colonisation are illuminating, relatively little attention is paid to the experiences and perspectives of school staff in relation to urban middle-class parents' cultural and social power, as they attempt to transform the educational arena (Butler and Robson, 2003b). Middle-class practices within schools are often depicted as hegemonic relays of neighbourhood social class relations rather than sites of struggles which carry their own class relations. Moreover, the ideological positioning of educators, in particular school leaders, within urban school itself is not problematised. Class colonisation presents an interesting process and context in which to study educational work and identities, whilst attending to wider neighbourhood processes.

Methods and approach

This paper draws from a wider ethnographic study conducted by the author. The empirical aspects of the research consisted of participant observation of classrooms, staffrooms, playgrounds and other settings, including the immediate neighbourhoods, of two primary schools in inner-city London over fourteen months between 2003-2005 (consisting of approximately 135 days of fieldwork). In-

depth individual interviews were conducted with 12 teachers (constituting 43% of teachers at Greenvale) and 11 teachers at Plumtree, (constituting 85% of teachers at Plumtree); 14 teaching assistants (TAs) (comprising 35% of TAs at Greenvale) and 16 TAs (constituting 94% assistants at Plumtree). Twenty interviews were carried with parents (15 at Plumtree and 5 at Greenvale). In addition, there was a focus group of parents at Greenvale, and analysis of policy documents and published secondary material about the areas. It is a substantial qualitative interview dataset particularly in relation to staff perspectives and experiences across the schools. Parental interview data was less balanced. In Greenvale, all the five parent interviewees were white middle-class, and the focus group was comprised of working-class Turkish speaking parents. The parent interviewees in Plumtree were more mixed, although the majority were white middle-class, there were some working-class white and minority ethnic parents interviewed. The data were analysed in a thematic manner using Nvivo qualitative data software. This paper draws mainly from interview data, and is informed analyses of fieldnotes. All data extracts are from interview transcripts.

Theoretically the analysis is informed by the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1990) – namely his concepts of habitus, field, and capital – and the micro-sociological approach of Goffman (1983) and Collins (2004). Bourdieu’s work on capital, habitus and field illuminates how different social groups maintain or advance their position through struggle within particular structured contexts (i.e. fields) and how these contexts articulate with each other. Positions within fields are dependent on accumulation of assets or resources: capitals. These can be economic (financial resources), social (networks and relationships and the resources and opportunities within them) and cultural (knowledge, credentials and training, tastes and dispositions). Capitals are valued in relation to specific field dynamics and struggles (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus is the unconscious framework and schema that guide individual action and practice, in a relatively consistent manner. The consistency emerges from the structuring impacts of fields. The habitus mediates between individual agency, identity and dispositions and the structural elements of society (i.e. fields). Symbolic capital is the legitimization that accompanies the use of other forms of capital. It is the capacity to represent (and thereby potentially conceal) the exercise of power, and its basis in unequal social relations, as natural and legitimate. This is wielded by those who occupy dominant positions within fields. *Class power*, for Bourdieu, stems in part from the ability of social groups to dominate the classification systems (e.g. symbols and representation) within a field of struggle as well as monopolising material resources.

Scholars have criticised habitus for being too reproductive of the social structures in which it is embedded, and for lacking a clear account of ‘situated agency’ – how individuals act and interact. Goffman (1967/2005) and Collins’ (2004) work is useful here. The interaction ritual describes the

recurrent emotionally-motivated intersubjective reality achieved through the mutual coordination and calibration of talk and bodily responses when people are co-present. It highlights that participating in social interaction requires the acceptance, largely implicit, of a negotiated set of contextualised expectations. These contextualised expectations frame local actions, local behaviour and roles, and the local social identities expressed, which in turn structure the unfolding social interactions, presenting opportunities and constraints. It is within interaction rituals that individuals communicate and realise an identity or situated self. These insights, can be integrated with Bourdieu's work, to produce a nuanced account of identity construction through the concept of *cultural style*. Cultural style represents the interpersonal resources and repertoires which agents make use of in and through interaction rituals, to maintain particular definitions of the situation and identity. This concept tracks agents' capacities by virtue of their embodied cultural capital to remake their social worlds 'not on the global level of a "society" in the large sense but as memberships that are local, sometimes ephemeral, stratified, and conflictual' (2004: xi). A focus on the situational context highlights the different opportunities and constraints through which individuals can negotiate their position within an institution. Moreover, whereas for Bourdieu social control is effected through the internalised cultural control and self-regulation of the habitus, in Goffman's work, social control is more localised and exerted through individuals' need for social acceptance. Social control is not exacted from above, or even necessarily through the habitus, 'it is a deep, complex, moral arrangement in our everyday encounters, to help each other stage our personal realities' (Williams, 1986: 352). From this perspective, the social order is relatively open, more contestable than in Bourdieu's work, and revealed through ethnographic research. This framework allows us to understand the agency of individuals within institutions such as schools, given the structural positionings generated by wider social changes in the urban fabric in relation to gentrification.

[Introduction to the schools and their fields of gentrification](#)

This section presents sketches of the two schools and their neighbourhoods, synthesising existing published research and ethnographic observations. Plumtree occupies an unassuming 1960s building in Northwick. This is a neighbourhood in the north-west of Hackney, a densely-populated, ethnically-diverse inner-city London borough with areas of immense deprivation. 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 (Ball and Vincent, 2007). Many of its residential roads had been thoroughly reworked, creating an aesthetic uniformity that lent them a genteel

ambience. For several decades, the gentrification of Northwick¹ had drawn white middle-class fractions, attracted to its large, relatively-affordable Victorian properties; its proximity to the cultural and consumption spaces of central London; the ‘vibrancy arising from the mix of ethnic cultures’ (Ball et al., 2004: 483); the architectural style of its civic buildings; the abundance of open green spaces; its rich historical heritage; and, more recently, its own localised consumption field and the density of parents with young children. Northwick, was constructed by many of its inhabitants as a middle-class haven, in which the middle-classes have asserted their *right* to leadership and ‘community’ over others. For them, Northwick was experienced as a symbolic, cultural and social enclave, maintained through vigorous sociable interaction rituals centred in the field of consumption. This yielded an emotionally-energising context for the development and expression of cultural styles and identities which communicated interpersonal solidarities and trust in the locality and its symbolisation as a ‘community’ of ‘people like us’ as the habitus of classed dispositions acquired spatial characteristics. As Watt adds, ‘social distinctions therefore take an implicit or explicit spatial form as people attempt to sort themselves into a geographical as well as social habitus, i.e. *where* they feel comfortable with others “like themselves”’ (2006: 779). The result was an *occlusion* – of process of obscuring from view, socially and culturally – the working-class presence and claim to Northwick. Northwick’s working-class presence was variegated, with large numbers of Turkish-speaking, black Caribbean and white residents, typical of ‘the post-industrial working-class’, a disparate, unevenly organised grouping, united by ‘considerable exposure to poverty, either of the in-work or out-of-work varieties, alongside various forms of deprivation’ (Watt, 2008: 209). There were commonalities of social location, in the fields of employment, housing and education, as well as differences of ethnicity and race. The desirability of Plumtree as a site of class colonisation to gentrifiers (particularly newer parents) rested on its assimilation into the dominant narrative of place and community. It was a successful school, rated Good by Ofsted², popular amongst parents and with good academic results, and an intake of 222. The school offered an extensive array of extra-curricular activities, with an emphasis on sports and creativity. The proportion of pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM), a proxy for disadvantage, was 22%, and nearly 16% spoke English as an additional language (EAL) which is below average for the Borough. White British children were the largest ethnic group with 57% of the pupil population. These figures pointed to the declining ethno-racial and class diversity of the school. Plumtree appeared to offer the middle-class opportunities to more completely secure their place in the urban social order. However, the

¹ Northwick and Earlsdale are pseudonyms.

² The statutory inspection body for schools in England.

colonising vision was not uncontested, and there were parents who were committed to the vision of Plumtree as an urban school, with a significant multi-ethnic working-class presence.

Greenvale Primary School opened in 1894 and is still mainly housed in the original imposing Victorian buildings. It is located at the centre of Earlsdale, a neighbourhood in the south-east of Hackney. It sits impressively on the corner of Earlsdale Park, towering over the 'artisan cottages' and elegant Georgian and Victorian terraces which have proved popular with gentrifiers. It is a large school with an intake of 620. It is flanked on several sides by low and high-rise social housing blocks, a newly 'regenerated' Carlton estate – a once notorious and stigmatised place which previously housed a significant proportion of working-class inhabitants. The Carlton estate had provided the dominant place-image for the neighbourhood and its legacy still resonates among existing residents. There was feverish building activity in the neighbourhood during the fieldwork period, as private developers competed to erect new residential property, encouraged by state-led 'regeneration'. Unlike in Northwick, the geography of gentrification was not particularly visible. Although there had been previous waves of small-scale gentrification in Earlsdale, in the 1980s and 1990s – forging a continuous middle-class presence within the neighbourhood – it had not been concentrated or consolidated. It was an ethnically-diverse area with a majority working-class population and an increasing middle-class one. In contrast to Northwick, there was no clear process of class formation into a gentrified habitus in Earlsdale (Butler and Robson, 2003b). This was partly due to the absence of a consumption infrastructure in which middle-class interaction rituals could be established, partly to a more diverse middle class. Consequently, there were constraints on the development of strong interpersonal emotional investments and solidarities based on affinities of cultural style. Of most significance was the visible presence of racially-marked and impoverished working-class groups housed in the regenerated Carlton estate and other social housing. There appeared to be a reluctance, and inability, among gentrifiers to exert dominance over the locality and its working-class groups. This was due partly to an attachment to the notion of 'authenticity', which was attributed to an idealised notion of Earlsdale's working-class heritage, and its imperfect embodiment in its current inhabitants. The prominence of 'authenticity' as an ethical value seemed to support a sense of middle-class marginality as virtuous. As Saracino-Brown argues, gentrifiers such as these, 'write themselves out of community' because they associate authentic community with particular groups within the neighbourhood (2004: 461). However, the confrontational and volatile clash of opposing cultural styles and expressive identities in public interactions between middle-class and working-class groups disrupted such simplistic symbolic constructions of 'authenticity'. The result was often sharpened cultural and social divides of class and race (Butler and Robson, 2003b).

It was within this context that Greenvale was beginning to emerge as a highly desirable school for the middle classes within the field of gentrification, as an ‘authentic’, and ‘counterintuitive’ choice (James et al., 2010). Much like Plumtree, Greenvale was rated Good in its most recent Ofsted inspection and popular, with an intake of 620. It was successful in terms of academic attainment and in the progress made by pupils who entered with below average English language and academic skills. There was a wide range of extra-curricular activities organised by the school. Around a third of the pupils claimed FSM and nearly 40% had EAL which is average for the Borough and significantly higher than Plumtree. White British pupils were the largest ethnic group (37%), in a majority-minority population. These figures highlighted the extent to which Greenvale was at the time anchored to the diverse and disadvantaged segments of Earlsdale. Colonisation appeared to be neither desired nor actively sought at the time of the fieldwork, and was institutionally *resisted*. The virtue of marginality within the wider social space was transposed into the educational arena. It was unclear precisely what Greenvale meant to the middle classes, since they had yet to develop prominent symbols of attachment to the locality. This was partly because many did not stay; as Butler and Robson suggest: ‘there were many cases of people fleeing east to Earlsdale searching either for more space or more authenticity but who could not “hack” the latter and moved on’ (Butler and Robson, 2003a: 191). In the next section, I outline the different contexts of headship in each school, and how they established the opportunities for educational leadership and engagement with middle-class parents.

Contexts of leadership in Plumtree

Heads must maintain control ‘in an organisational ... [and] educational sense’ (Ball, 1987: 83). As leaders, heads give sense and meaning to the work and actions of others, through their capacity to redefine a school’s educational and institutional goals (Thayer, 1988). Following Ball, the possibilities of headship ‘are realised within the specific constraints of a particular setting, history and context’ (1987: 81). Tom’s headship was highly important in understanding class colonisation at Plumtree. Plumtree in the four years prior to the fieldwork had undergone significant institutional changes that had generated an *unsettled* context which framed Tom’s headship. The previous long-standing head Meredith left in 2001. One parent, Shona, described her as: ‘exceptional ... one of the really old-fashioned heads, she looked like a head’. Other informants’ accounts suggest that Meredith exemplified strong leadership and had established firm boundaries, particularly in relation to middle-class parents. The chair of governors, Adam, himself a powerful figure at the school, said:

[Meredith] was very charismatic although not always approachable. When I met her again, a couple of weeks ago, I realised how – I feel I’m quite a confident person, but I was a bit intimidated, and I remembered how it used to be with Meredith.

Subsequent to her 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 a number of the middle-class parents transitioned from parent volunteers to educational support staff, generating new levels of participation and integration into the school. Peter's account of this period reveals it as pivotal in the school's ideological orientation towards the locality's middle class. In the following extract he explains why he decided to recruit assistants from the middle-class parent volunteers:

I thought it was one way of involving the community ... which would engage their interests. 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, TA work was part of the on-going social and cultural exchange between the school and various groups within the parental field. Offering employment opportunities to middle-class parents consolidated and extended their involvement in the school. The assumption was that their self-interested actions and investments in the education of their own children could be harnessed for an institutionalised collective good. It also suggests a reframing of what constituted the 'community', a reorientation towards the white middle classes and an occlusion of working-class parents who were no longer viewed as potential partners in school improvement. It was middle-class parents who were evoked as sharing the same values and having the 'right' dispositions to participate in school improvement. The incorporation of middle-class parents (i.e. mothers) was perceived both as a reward for their existing contributions and an inducement to develop their relationship with Plumtree, with the prospect of greater access and 'insider status'. Peter's actions therefore had symbolic value in relaying a new level of recognition of the white middle class as the pre-eminent social group within the parental field. As Lareau has argued, 'the social profitability of middle-class arrangements is tied to the schools' definition of the proper family-school relationship' (1987: 713). Peter's actions established a context, and precedent, which increasingly made middle-class mobilisation profitable.

[Middle-class parents and Tom's leadership](#)

The legacy of Meredith, the previous substantive head, and Peter's own brief spell as interim head framed the challenges that Tom encountered, the options available to him, and how he was perceived. Tom, from a white middle-class background, had been a deputy in an urban London school with a predominantly working-class Pakistani Muslim population and this was his first

headship. His professional formation had occurred within a different configuration of parental expectations and demands, as he explained:

Their attitude as a group of parents, at my last school, was much more respectful of teachers as a profession. And in some ways you were trying to break that down a little bit, because there was – the esteem that they held teachers and head ... sometimes they wouldn't question ... [what] happened. They ... let you ... do your job sometimes, without questioning about the minutiae of things.

The assertiveness and cultural style of Plumtree's middle-class parents therefore represented a serious challenge, and contrast, to his professional practice and leadership style:

We're working with a highly-intelligent group of parents, so it's not – you don't want to patronise them ... They are quite demanding as parents. And, I think they're – there are a very small minority who seem to think people will drop things straight-away for them.

Whilst Tom described his leadership as one in which there was 'shared ownership', he told me he had initially been quite forceful in making changes: 'at the start there were certain things, bottom line, I want things done in a certain way'. My observations and informants' accounts suggest that Tom had yet to establish his credibility for many parents, a large number of whom remembered Meredith's impressive leadership and self-presentation. Some parents commented negatively on his leadership style and expressivity within interactions. Adam, the chair of governors, described Tom as:

A quieter leader, and that's tougher for some of the parents to accept ... I would say that he doesn't come across brilliantly in the playground or assemblies.

Other powerful parents reported that they found him approachable and receptive to their demands, in particular to *their* constructions of schooling, as a neo-liberal consumer good. One, Amy, speaking about an incident around which she and other middle-class parents mobilised against Tom, explained:

I find him very approachable, which is a big bonus, open to ideas, very aware that schooling *is supply and demand*. ... What I am trying to say is that there are some groups of people who'll say 'that's okay, that's what the school has organised' and there are other parents, 'nope, we don't like this, and we want to change this,' and that is what we have around here ... It's still a learning curve for Tom, I think, in some respects. One of the things he hadn't realised until that point maybe was how strong parent power is around here [laughs].

Incidents such as those described above highlight how parental mobilisation, and Tom's response, shaped and defined this headship. His leadership style, and openness, appeared attractive to some within the parental field. It provided opportunities for some parents to exert interpersonal dominance through their realisation of a more confident cultural style. Cynthia, the Parent-Teacher Organisation (PTO) Chair, said:

I've now built up a rapport with Tom ... I understand that he is receptive ... which has made me bold. ... He's been very cooperative and helpful with the [PTO]. He's completely un confrontational which I don't know how that works in terms of certain situations, in terms of leadership, there is a slight lack of power in that area. In terms of the way I operate, he's perfect.

For these very reasons, some, like Parent-Governor Kelly, voiced concerns about Tom's ability to personally confront or challenge the formidable power of Plumtree's middle-class parents:

I think Plumtree parents are quite scary ... A lot of them earn more than [Tom] does ... and come from a position where the parent is the customer and the consumer-rights-based approach to school as a service, and what it's going to do for them.

Negotiating the demands and pressures from middle-class parents therefore consumed a significant proportion of Tom's time and energy, as he explained: 'it seems to be the attitude often with some people, that things are always open for debate ... Consultation doesn't always mean you get your way'. Whilst alive to the pressures and demands placed on him by some middle-class parents, Tom's focus and orientation towards this fraction of the parental body reinforced the general occlusion of working-class and minority-ethnic parents who no longer had any influence in the main spaces of engagement and influence in the school. This observation was confirmed by Adam, parent and Chair of governors:

We have a certain number of very articulate parents who make their views forcefully felt, and [they] are the white middle-class parents. We have Bengali and Turkish parents who are much more reticent about coming forward, we know less about them.

Tom's negotiation of middle-class mobilisation, fostered an impression of him by staff as acquiescent and a 'weak' leader. In contrast to Meredith's powerful demeanour and leadership, Tom was seen as timid, lacking in confidence, and diffident. He was judged inept at handling interpersonal conflict. Teacher Isaac felt, he had: 'a lack of vision, a lack of conviction, and therefore a lack of self-confidence as well'. TA Lucia felt: 'Meredith was a stronger character ... I think sometimes Tom tries to please too many people instead of making his own decisions'. He was seen as ceding 'too much' control and influence to middle-class parents on educational and organisational matters, and this

was experienced as a challenge to staff autonomy. His inability to establish a stable context for their work – less permeable to middle-class intrusion came to symbolise for many an indifference to their daily classroom struggles. He appeared unable to *define* and *control* what many of the staff perceived as acceptable boundaries between the school and ‘outside’ agents and pressures.

[His focus is] directed at needing to please parents more than it’s needing to please us. ... There are a number of situations where he’s come down on the side of parents. And, yes, in some cases it’s probably perfectly justifiable but we still need to know that he’s there for us as well and he’s, you know, he’s our manager, he’s our leader. (Niamh, Teacher)

Overall, Tom was seen as failing performatively to realise the power invested in his position as head. This called into question his credibility and the symbolic legitimisation of his leadership with staff. His performance of headship seemed devoid of the ‘social magic’ that occurs when symbolic power is ceded (Bourdieu, 1991), as a teacher Avril said: ‘I think also, the other thing that lacks with the leadership is the real power I remember from school that my headteacher ... had’. Tom’s deferential attitude was also grounded in the school’s increasing dependence on the symbolic and material support given by middle-class parents, in terms of their time, cultural knowledge and social networks and fund raising efforts. The next section examines Bev’s headship at Greenvale and the contrasting enactments of leadership style and negotiation of middle-class influence.

[Negotiating colonisation at Greenvale: the contexts of Bev’s headship](#)

In many ways Bev’s headship demonstrates the notion of heads as ‘cultural founders’, ‘owners’ of their schools and ‘exemplars’ (Nias, 1989). In contrast to Plumtree, Greenvale had experienced a long period of leadership continuity. Bev had been head for 15 years and during that period had lived locally, becoming a recognisable figure on Earlsdale’s streets. She spoke of the ingrained low expectations that she found when she took up what was then her second headship, in the early 1990s:

There weren’t just low expectations on behalf of the staff, the children didn’t expect much, and the parents didn’t expect much ... So it took a long, long while ... actually getting people’s trust, particularly in an area like this, where it’s so disparate, I think is a long term thing.

Her professional formation and leadership style seemed to have been deeply influenced by her class mobility from a working-class background in northern England, and involvement in union politics. She recalled during our interview, what Sennett and Cobb (1993) refer to as the ‘hidden injuries’ of class that her family experienced during her grammar school days, for example, not being able to

afford the uniform. Her orientation towards headship was therefore personal and explicitly political. In the extract below, she grapples with the contradictions of urban schooling:

I think many people made the issues that inner-city children face ... if not excuses then they would give them as reasons, and it's not good enough, is it? That's not enough. Now, I can't eradicate poverty from a headteacher's office. It doesn't happen like that ... But I am suggesting that there is a huge amount that can be done to change the way that people look at their own expectations of how their lives will unfold. And it's up to us to equip them to be able to make choices.

Bev's interview account reveals the contradictions at the heart of urban primary schools as they were currently realised in Greenvale. Whilst she located the problem of the inner-city as societal, she did not want the disadvantages suffered by pupils used as an excuse for their failure, justifying the abdication of educators' responsibilities. There was therefore a strong belief in the educational mission and the importance of leadership. For some heads, 'their work is simultaneously a matter of self-definition and self-expression. A head is literally and inextricably caught up in his/her work because the work is his/her *self*' (Southworth, 1995: 218). For Bev, this seemed very much the case. Bev's orientation towards the locality and working-class population were evident in the recruitment of TAs. For her, such work was part of a wider politics of empowerment and orientation towards the neighbourhood's working-class communities. She saw urban leadership as furthering community development. Recruiting working-class TAs was part of the school's role as a *redistributive* neighbourhood institution. She explained:

[It's about] ... women coming back into employment. I spent time at home with my child when he was very young. And it was incredibly difficult, on an individual, personal level, to make the transition back into work ... I think that if you're coming back ... you might never have been in a workplace, or ... you've got no qualifications, everything's moved along, if you don't have a reasonable source of income, you can very easily get stuck to the point where you're not going to go back outside the home again. ... So people come and volunteer for a while ... and then that grows ... and that improves things for people's families.

These comments were typical of how Bev's leadership was constantly grounded in her own experiences and identity; in this case, as a mother. She recognises that mothers face disadvantages – in terms of qualification, skills, and confidence – in engaging with the world of work. Bev's construction of the urban school was as an institution which could facilitate access to dominant forms of cultural and social capital for working-class families. Rather than being agents of social reproduction, schools should and could be spaces of transformation. Grace has argued that urban

school leadership orientated towards working-class betterment has ideological appeal because *'it appears to offer a mode of working "within the system" while at the same time encouraging critical opposition to it'* (Grace, 1978: 82, original italics). This is in contrast to Peter's notion that Plumtree's middle-class parents should be encouraged to take on delegated leadership on behalf of the working-class. There was however a tension between the undemocratic character of leadership and the opportunities available for others to participate in social change.

In recruiting assistants from the working class, Bev endowed the parental field with a different sensibility and gave value to experiences and resources that were in opposition to the dominant symbolic order. However, the intensification of gentrification during the fieldwork period was beginning to impact on the parental field. Bev viewed the changes with apprehension:

I think there's an interesting phenomenon going on now, because I think increasingly people are coming to schools and ... in my experience recently, people are coming to *our* school, when there's TA work around. And they're different. They're not straight out of the community. They're not working-class people. And they're coming to take on some of those roles. And I think we have to monitor that incredibly carefully. ... There's something underpinning what we've been able to do here ... I think we need to be careful to make sure that it's still open to everybody.

Unlike Peter at Plumtree, who viewed TA work as a way to actively elicit middle-class involvement, Bev's comments suggest a different ideological position, of alignment with the locality's working-class fractions. For Bev the 'community' refers to Earlsdale's working-class groups; gentrifiers were not perceived as members of that community. They were *in* the community but not *of* the community. For the time being, Bev's refusal to offer *recognition* to the middle class was a powerful statement of opposition. Without symbolic recognition, middle-class parents would find it difficult to 'improve their position and to impose the principle of hierarchization most favourable to their own products' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 101). Bev's ideological orientation and construction of Greenvale as an urban school set a powerful context in which middle-class colonisation, or its potentialities, had to be negotiated. In the next section, I examine middle-class parents' perceptions and interactions with Bev and how this framed their engagement with the school.

Middle-class parents and Bev's leadership

Bev's leadership style and presentation of self were direct and forceful. Bev was a highly visible head. Her leadership style focused on cultivating relationships and talking to staff. Ball observed that this leadership style 'makes certain demands on the incumbent in terms of social skills. The emphasis on the "the personal" requires an authenticity and facility in social interaction. A great deal is done through "talk"' (Ball, 1987: 94). Bev displayed a remarkable level of expressive control and

subtlety in her self-presentation within situated interaction rituals. As one teacher, Adelaide, summarised: 'she knows when it needs to be formal and when it's got to be informal'. All the middle-class parents interviewed were aware of her political views, motivations and investments. Amongst these parents opinions were polarised. Abigail, a white middle-class mother, who had previously occupied a powerful position in the parental field as treasurer in the Parents' Committee, found her overt class politics and demeanour confrontational and alienating:

She's got a huge chip on her shoulder ... so that there are things that are personal to her that affect her work and her decisions. ... My ideas were just not welcomed really ... Sometimes you were quite derided ... She would be quite rude to particular middle-class parents in the group, so, you know, it became 'what am I doing this for'? [Laughs].

The centrality of the headship role to Bev's identity, in concert with her confrontational style, made her appear adversarial. She was recognised as an astute and highly-skilled operator. For school leaders 'in the adversarial mode the assertion of control rests upon the skills of the head as an active politician and strategist both in the conduct of leadership ... [and] the use of talk' (Ball, 1987: 106). Arabella, another similarly-positioned parent acknowledged Bev's antagonistic attitudes towards middle-class parents, but framed this in relation to what she saw as Bev's legitimate concerns about middle-class dominance:

We've had our antagonistic moments over that and lots of people like me are extremely bugging, and they ring up and ... they are just all about their precious poppets ... I suppose I try to put the good side to everybody of Bev, and there are people like me who will do lots of great things for the school, who are very committed and aren't too precious. ... I can see that it's a really valid concern [of hers].

The above extract highlights the ambivalence with which Bev was viewed by middle-class parents, even amongst those who were generally supportive like Arabella. Bev did little to suppress her irritation with some middle-class parents and their 'poppets' and this bluntness did not endear her to this faction. Parental involvement appeared to be very much on Bev's terms. In contrast to the autonomy afforded to active middle-class parents within the parental field at Plumtree, Bev had made a concerted effort to limit the power of the PTO to mobilise, unlike the parents described by Posey-Maddox (2014). This was reflected in her regular attendance at their meetings and close monitoring of their activities. Bev also attempted to influence the composition of the committee and encourage more ethnic-minority and working-class parents to participate, although she admitted

this had been largely unsuccessful: 'The PTO is still almost exclusively white. And that's a bit unshiftable. I can't – we can't seem to make that difference'.

Bev's leadership style and dealings with middle-class parents communicated a clear sense of boundaries. Further, middle-class parental involvement itself was not valued in the same way as at Plumtree; doing 'lots of great things for the school' did not result in greater acceptance. Bev appeared to disrupt the dominant implicit understandings that middle-class parental involvement should be welcomed and encouraged. This refusal to symbolically recognise and valorise middle-class parents' contributions had been a source of frustration for Abigail during her time as treasurer: 'I really don't think they know how to get people involved and how to welcome somebody who is, after all offering them a service, into the school'. There is an expectation, implicit in Abigail's comments, that parental involvement was part of a marketised exchange that should lead to greater responsiveness to parental perspectives in return for 'service'. Bev's account suggests that her uncompromising attitude towards the white middle class must be viewed within the context of her own accrued symbolic capital, due to her tenure as head of a *successful* well managed school.

Just because I'm very old and I've been around forever and actually there's not much people can do to me. ... It means that I have the luxury of being able to be very direct in a way that 10 years ago I didn't have, because I wasn't in that position yet.

As Bev points out, the 'luxury' of being 'direct' was simply was not available to her previously, when the school was struggling. She now had a public reputation as a 'good' head, that extended across the Borough. Bev's successful *transformation* of the school was therefore an implicit rebuke to the *necessity* of middle-class parental involvement. Bev's directness meant that even powerfully-positioned white middle-class parents were highly conscious of the limits on their capacity to act and shape Greenvale's agenda, and for the time being, they seemed willing to uphold the status quo:

She's got very firm ideas about how the school should be run, I don't think there is a lot of flexibility for any suggestions to be taken on board really, because it runs very well as it is, you know, and if it's not broken, why do you need to fix it. (Imogen, Parent)

In meeting the challenges presented by middle-class parents in relation to her headship, Bev had managed 'to achieve and maintain particular definitions of the school over and against alternative, assertive definition' (Ball, 1987: 278). This provided symbolic capital, which she could utilise in negotiating relations with internal audiences of TAs and teachers.

Conclusions

This article responds to Watt's (2008) plea for more 'bottom up' accounts of gentrification, which incorporate diverse actors' perspectives. I have demonstrated the 'peril' and 'promise' (Cucchiara

and Horvat, 2009) of middle-class engagement in urban schools, as not just a question of mobilisation but of the texture of the institutional leadership which it encounters. The heads of Greenvale and Plumtree were significant actors, able to shape and mediate the parental field as well as institutional realities through their actions and enactments of leadership. These findings from both schools contrast with Butler and Robson's (2001: 82) discussion of a London primary school, where the head played a supportive role in middle-class colonisation. Unlike other staff, heads' position at the apex of schools' authority structure mean that their presentation of self is constantly exposed to scrutiny. Heads are 'caught between audiences, and the demands those audiences make may be very different and are often contradictory and irreconcilable' (Ball, 1987: 86). In Plumtree, I showed how the contexts of headship, coupled with the head's relative inexperience and distinct leadership style, contributed to a problematic realisation of his authority. This in turned empowered middle-class action within the school, impinging on educators' autonomy and institutional life, further eroding his legitimacy. In contrast at Greenvale, the authority of the head was realised through an effective leadership style which enabled a defence of the ideologically-driven possibilities of headship, which curtailed middle-class action and provided a settled context for educators' work. Equally, middle-class colonisation was less assertive at Greenvale, reflecting the ambivalent orientations of the middle class towards Earlsdale. The empirical research on which this paper is based was undertaken some time ago in the mid-2000s, and it is likely that the processes chronicled here have developed, as gentrification has intensified across London in general and in those neighbourhoods in particular (Butler et al., 2013). Whilst an update on the two schools is beyond the scope of this paper, the analysis presented clearly suggests middle-class colonisation of urban schools is a complex, open-ended and variegated *process* which has to be negotiated through the available opportunities to enact social and cultural power in localised contexts. As such it documents a more *ambivalent* role for heads under conditions of class mobilisation as an aspect of gentrification.

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