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## **Monitoring race at school: Assiduous Parenting by the Black middle class**

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### **Background**

Previous research on the white middle class (e.g. Reay, 1998; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Vincent & Ball 2006; Ball 2003) has painted a vivid picture of the effort, industry and attention that such parents devote to surveilling and monitoring the education experiences of their children. This monitoring is devoted to ensuring the child and the school are continually working towards a maximisation of talents, opportunities and advantages. It involves attempts to minimise the risks of failure and under-achievement by being constantly alert, for example, to any shortcomings on the part of the school, particularly in not 'stretching' the child, and on the part of the child in terms of completing tasks, preparing for examinations, doing homework. Being middle class is however no guarantee of constant success and if failings are identified, on either part, then 'interventions' may ensue. These can take the form of visits to school to speak to and/or write to teachers or Headteachers, or the mobilisation of support for the child (e.g. buying in tutors). In some circumstances if remedies are not forthcoming the child may be removed. By contrast, little is known about the use of monitoring by Black middle class families. This paper examines the role of monitoring as deployed by the Black middle class parents in our ESRC study "The Educational Strategies of the Black middle class" as they seek to obtain the best educational experiences and outcomes for their children.

### **Research Questions**

This paper is one of four from the same project "The Educational Strategies of the Black middle classes" (ESRC RES-062-23-1880) presented as part of the proposed Symposium. In this study, we examine the interaction of social class and ethnicity as potential factors influencing how these parents experience the education system, navigate its demands and their aspirations for their children's education. Drawing on the findings of previous studies about White middle class parents, we explore the kinds of capitals upon which Black middle class parents are able to draw to support their children and in particular to help identify ways in which parents seek to overcome racism.

### **Methods**

We have carried out over 60 qualitative interviews with parents from Black Caribbean backgrounds identified, using Standard Occupational Classification codes, as being in professional or managerial employment. Parents have at least one child between 8 and 18 years, encompassing key transition points in the school calendar. Sensitive to debates about the role of Black men as fathers at least 10 of the interviews are with fathers.

### **Frame**

We employ a broad range of conceptual tools, including the work of Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory to make sense of and analyse the data.

### **Research findings**

Virtually all of the parents in our project reported the same sorts of concerns and the same attention and effort as has been reported in the White middle class research. However, there is one very significant difference with respect to our Black middle class sample that is the role of race in the monitoring of schools and of the child's experience. That is to say, in addition to the concerns outlined above the BMC were constantly alert to forms of racism, racial discrimination or racial stereotyping to which their child might be subject - both interpersonal and institutional. In particular the parents

attended carefully to 'incidents' in which their children were involved, with other students and with teachers. They were also very aware of the possibility of low expectations of their children derived from racist stereotypes. However, a number of the parents were careful in the interviews to distinguish between issues related to bad practice at school and racist practice. Both may need to be responded to but in different ways. Shortcomings or problems needed to be assessed and responses were measured and careful. This paper will examine some of the specifics of the parental 'work' in this respect done by the BMC parents.

It is noted that the fact that these parents are middle class does not make them immune to the experience or effects of racism. However, they were usually able to draw on a formidable range of resources and capitals in mounting their interventions in response to race-related concerns; although there were also issues of race that sometimes attended the interventions themselves, particularly for the mothers (who were normally responsible in the family for both monitoring and responding). Issues of voice, demeanour and presentation of self were important here. In particular, the mothers in our sample were able to draw upon forms of 'insider knowledge' and related social capital both to monitor and respond. Again the paper will outline some of the parental work involved here. We will examine the range of monitoring behaviours and the nature and style of problems and responses in relation to the dynamics of race and class.

## **References**

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