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Black Middle Class bodies: conflicts, contestations and challenges

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Background

Previous research on the white middle class has explored their access to and deployment of various forms of cultural capital in seeking specific education experiences and outcomes for their children (e.g. Ball, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2006). This is evident through the researching and collating of information to identify and access specific schools for their children and, through the prepping and maximising of their children's talents and skills. Such practices are also evident in our ESRC project examining the educational strategies of the Black middle classes. However, the data also reveals particular tensions and negotiations concerning embodied forms of cultural capital. For example, despite the relative advantages of their class position our parents report examples of awkwardness, exclusion, isolation and of being Othered by school staff and other parents as, we argue, they fail to fit a perceived stereotypical Black working class norm seen to be characterised by specific accents, lack of knowledge and resources and particular modes of comportment. Such findings corroborate existing research which reveals the Black body as a site of marginalization and surveillance (Mirza, 1997; Rollock, 2007; Kay, 2009).

Research Questions

This paper arises from an ESRC project: "The Educational Strategies of the Black middle classes" (ESRC RES-062-23-1880) in which 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

Our initial findings indicate that the Black middle class body occupies a specific "liminal space of alterity" (Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2005) due to the particular intersection of race and class. This interplay points both to a tension and awkwardness in recognising and accepting the possibility of the Black body as able to occupy a middle classness and also to the uncritical readiness to restrict the Black body to a site of working classness. This is evidenced through our parents' accounts of both belonging and not belonging to spaces which are mainly occupied and monitored almost exclusively by the white middle class or the (Black) working class. Successfully negotiating these raced and

classed spaces reveals something of the challenges experienced by the Black middle class but also demonstrates their resilience as they battle for the best education and life outcomes for their children.

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