Unequal childhoods: A case study application of Lareau's 'accomplishment of natural growth' in British working-class and poor families

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International authors have argued that social class inequalities can influence parental engagement in education. Lareau argued that middle-class families possess the resources to actively cultivate their children to succeed academically, whereas working-class and poor families feel they lack such resources and allow their children to develop limited and passive relations with school. This article applies a core element of Lareau's typology of child rearing to examine disadvantaged British mothers' experience of engaging with schools. A study involving 77 parents and caregivers of secondary school children, considered disadvantaged, sought to understand the experiences of parental engagement in primary and secondary education. Selective case studies have been chosen from this larger study, using a thematic analysis, to understand how these mothers interpreted their experiences of engaging with secondary education, their feelings of frustration, powerlessness and distance from secondary school. The stories presented illustrate that the 'accomplishment of natural growth' provides a contemporary class analysis framework to interpret the experiences of some disadvantaged British parents. Recommendations are made advising how Lareau's typology of child rearing can inform policy and practice in the British education system and recommendations for future research are made with the purpose of promoting equal access to educational engagement and opportunities.

Keywords: inclusion and exclusion; inequity and social justice; parental engagement; socioeconomic circumstances

Introduction

Education is often lauded for its ability to offer opportunities for social mobility (Fenning & May, 2013). However, it operates within a context where children from middle-class families generally perform better academically than those from working-class and poor families (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012). In Britain, the educational attainment gap between 'disadvantaged' 16-year-old pupils and their middle-class peers at the end of secondary school is currently 18 months, despite considerable policy and practice efforts (Education Policy Institute, 2020). Schools receive additional funding for supporting disadvantaged pupils to close the attainment gap, yet families are not supported in a similar way. Moreover, parents may have experienced a

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lifetime of inequality in accessing and managing the education system, which leaves them feeling at odds with their wealthier counterparts. This article reviews the literature surrounding constructions of class-based differences in parental engagement and involvement in education, considering the wider policy context. It will describe Lareau's parental engagement framework which argues that middle-class parents adopt a highly organised and interventionist approach to child rearing and education, whereas working-class and poor parents adopt an approach which differs significantly, allowing children to explore and preferring unstructured learning. It is argued that the latter form of parenting and child rearing is at odds with the education system, placing working-class and poor children at a systematic disadvantage. Two case study examples will be outlined using Lareau's framework to illustrate how parents feel marginalised and disconnected from the education system, before reflecting on the subsequent impact this can have on their engagement in their children's education. We will discuss the implications of the results on policy and practice, arguing for policy makers and practitioners to consider the wider contexts and lived experiences of families before considering the wider systematic barriers that exist within policy that perpetuate social exclusion and marginalisation.

International literature demonstrates the existence of educational class stratification in settings such as exam performance (Grodsky *et al.*, 2008), vocational secondary education (Shavit & Müller, 2000) and access to higher education (Marginson, 2016). Furthermore, the importance of parental engagement in education is well documented and continues to be a focus of research and policy surrounding efforts to close the attainment gap, both in the UK and internationally (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). In their analysis of parents' accounts from eight European Union countries, Ule *et al.* (2015) found that whilst parents from poor city areas recognised their own roles and responsibilities towards their children's education, this was compounded by a perceived lack of support from school and distant parent–teacher communication. Some working-class parents interpret their dealings with schoolteachers as strained, with a parent in one study summarising this relationship as 'we know when we're not wanted' (Crozier, 1999, p. 537), resulting in a lack of agency (Vincent, 2001).

This article is published in a UK context where considerable attention is given to parents, who are scrutinised and encouraged to modify their behaviour to fit the education system. The construction and circulation of a putative 'crisis in parenting' across social policy and popular discourse has created an environment where individual parents can be demonised for purported moral failings, while widening socioeconomic inequalities are overlooked. This 'political economy of parenting' (Jensen, 2018, p. xiii) appears to promote 'good' and 'bad' parental constructs to legitimise both the surveillance of families and the retrenchment of welfare. Such policies and practices can be seen through policy interventions; for example, the Troubled Families programme. Introduced under the auspices of support, these programmes blame parents for any social ills experienced by the families—and neglect to acknowledge wider social, economic or political factors that may have contributed to the situations families are facing (Jensen, 2018).

The current dominant political discourse espouses early parenting interventions as a means to rescue children from 'sub-optimal parenting', whilst neglecting the

structural barriers and political agendas which target the most disadvantaged and marginalised who find it difficult to thrive in a neo-liberalist environment (Gillies *et al.*, 2017, p. 115). Such discourses around early years parenting appear to create and perpetuate social inequalities. This is because they pathologise parenting preferences that do not fit within a socially constructed middle-class, concerted cultivated model of parenting (Gillies *et al.*, 2017). Government interventions that focus on 're-modeling' (Hartas, 2014, p. 71) parents to be more involved in their children's education, promote an approach to help families transcend material and social deprivation which, in turn, blames individual parents for children's reduced life chances, obscuring the role of structural factors in shaping inequality (Hartas, 2014). By continuing to provide a model of parenting and socially acceptable parental engagement in education, the punitive myth that 'educational inequality and social immobility can be tackled through effective parenting' (Hartas, 2015, p. 32) is perpetuated, leaving systemic barriers such as inequality and social immobility unquestioned.

The experiences of working-class parents' involvement with their children's education have been explored in the light of class distinctions, with Crozier arguing that there is a 'separation between home and school', a process she refers to as 'marginalization' (Crozier, 1999, p. 320). This marginalisation, it is argued, excludes working-class parents from obtaining the knowledge, skills and social networks to navigate the education system. Contemporary authors applying class analysis acknowledge that issues surrounding intersectionality, such as gender and race, can also influence working-class families' experience of education (Reay, 1998; Ball, 2003). Savage argued that class distinctions and inequalities are both real and powerful, fuelled by a transmission of advantage powered by cultural capital (Savage, 2000). Yet within these broader structural concerns, how do we really understand the lived experiences of those subject to these forces? Lareau has worked extensively in this area and her work will be used to theorise and contextualise our research, which examines women's stories on this theme. Skeggs, in her ethnographic study with white working-class women from North-West England, found that relentless self-doubt and self-scrutiny characterise some working-class women's everyday actions and decisions, where they are fearful of scrutiny and the negative judgement of others (Skeggs, 1997). This article will seek to present and interpret the experience of working-class mothers through the lens of Lareau, who used ethnographic methods to produce a class-based typology of how parents from different backgrounds interpret and respond to the education system.

Unequal childhoods: class, race and family life

Applying ethnographic methods to identify patterns in parental engagement towards child rearing, Lareau proposed that middle-class parents (who she described as those employed in management positions) present a 'concerted cultivation', whereas working-class (those employed in unskilled positions) and poor parents (those without regular employment) seek to facilitate the 'accomplishment of natural growth' (Lareau, 2011, p. 1). Concerted cultivation entails a conscious effort to equip children with the necessary experiences and resources to effectively navigate middle-class society and the school system. This is attempted through 'the development of the child

through organised activities, the development of vocabulary through reasoning and reading', where parents are 'actively involved in school and other institutions outside the home' (Lareau, 2003, p. 24). Working-class children, she argues, tend to be free to organise their own leisure activities; parents see their 'children's development as unfolding spontaneously, as long as they [are] provided with comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support' (Lareau, 2011, p. 408).

Through the accomplishment of natural growth, parents focus on keeping their children safe, enforcing discipline and regulating behaviour, which, it is proposed, 'does not involve being actively involved in schools or other institutions outside the home' (Lareau, 2003, p. 66). Middle-class parents tend to reason with their children through discussion, whereas working-class families communicate mainly using directives which, Lareau argues, is in opposition to the education system. Consequently, middle-class children whose parents adopt strategies of concerted cultivation appear to gain a 'sense of entitlement', while working-class children develop 'an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint in their institutional experiences' (Lareau, 2011, p. 3). This behaviour was also observed in parents, who were more likely to accept the actions of persons in authority and presented much more distance from the school than did middle-class parents. Furthermore, some working-class and poor parents appeared 'baffled, intimidated and subdued in parent–teacher conferences' (Lareau, 2011, p. 409) and some were less aware of their children's school situation or dismissed the school rules as unreasonable. Parents also expressed frustration over communications, leading to feelings of powerlessness (Lareau, 2011).

Lareau's typology of class-based child-rearing practices is embedded in Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1974). Bourdieu believed that middle-class parents instil in their children a culture rich in intellectual content, which is complementary to the requirements of educational institutions and formal examinations. Bourdieu (1997) argued that the ease with which one operates within the social world is dictated by one's capital and those *with* more assets (i.e. capital to trade) *gain* more assets such as qualifications. Thus, social reproduction is maintained and middle-class children 'move in their world as a fish in water' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 108). Within an educational context, this can be viewed as school imposing systems that are naturally more difficult for those with lower levels of cultural capital to navigate. Working-class parents do not experience an appropriate 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 128) at secondary school, and thus are reluctant to engage with secondary school education as it is viewed as being 'not for us' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 185). Through her work, Lareau developed these concepts and presented a typology of the differences in child rearing in a concise and clear way, illustrating the lived experience of working-class and poor parents.

Some of Lareau's limitations must be noted, in that there is arguably a lack of appreciation of intersectionality, particularly race, in discussing how complex social identities can impact on people's lives. For example, Lareau argues that social class is more influential than race, despite an overwhelming majority of black parents in her research recalling experiences of racism in their daily lives (Pearce, 2004). Moreover, the views of the children were not included in the analysis and they are arguably

viewed as being passive objects rather than showing their own agency (Stuber, 2005). Acknowledging these critiques, the concept of concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth continues to be relevant in educational sociology, understanding that power struggles influence relationships between school and both middle-class (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012) and working-class and poor families (Lareau, 2009, 2014; Lareau & Calarco, 2012). This article offers a contemporary contribution, applying these concepts to a specific sample of the British working-class population. We will focus on how working-class and poor families intervene with institutions which, as will be seen, is indeed characterised by a 'sense of powerlessness and frustration', along with a 'conflict between child-rearing practices at home and school' (Lareau, 2003, p. 31).

Methodology

The accounts presented in this article are selected case study examples from a larger research project conducted before the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent home schooling in the UK. It sought to better understand the perceived barriers faced by families in supporting their children's education, particularly those from areas experiencing significant poverty. The research was conducted in post-industrial, coastal communities in the North-West of England, with levels of child poverty above the national average. These areas are often referred to in policy as 'left behind' (Sensier & Devine, 2017), characterised by high levels of deprivation, poor health outcomes (Depledge et al., 2017), and where children are vulnerable to educational isolation (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019).

Within this larger study, 77 parents and caregivers of secondary school children, who were considered to be 'disadvantaged' (eligible for free school meals), participated in community-based focus groups or interviews to share their experiences of educational engagement in primary and secondary education. For a detailed account of the methodologies undertaken in this study, see Wilson (2019). The results of the larger study found that families experienced discomfort and difficulty in accessing secondary education, but not primary education, and were interpreted as families experiencing a physical and symbolic distance from secondary school, where they felt they lacked the cultural capital to successfully navigate the secondary school system (Bourdieu, 1977). Families expressed that they felt their values of supporting and nurturing their children were aligned with primary schools, but the values of secondary school, based on targets and rigid systems, was at odds with their own approach to their children's learning. The consequence of these perceptions was a withdrawal from their children's education at secondary school, where family members limited communication with teachers where possible. These accounts, from 77 parents, provided a broad understanding of the experiences of families and the subsequent impacts on educational engagement. The case studies detailed in this article attempt to provide a more thorough understanding of the lived experiences of families by applying the accomplishment of a natural growth approach to child rearing, examining how these experiences manifest themselves in a withdrawal from their children's education.

Sample, methods of data collection and analysis

A selective case study approach was chosen above a single case study in order to high-light how overarching themes of mothers' engagement can be present in seemingly different situations and contexts (Yin, 2011). Typical case sampling was used to select two cases which provided accounts that shared a number of characteristics typi-cal of the sample (such as being a mother and experiencing barriers when engaging with school), but with different stories to tell within this context. The case studies pre-sented here were selected on account of both their diversity and connectivity to over-arching themes. Two mothers were selected for inclusion in this case study, both of whom reported as not actively engaging with their children's secondary educational institutions and were classified as being 'disadvantaged' (i.e. in receipt of welfare ben-efits). Here we are not arguing that these accounts are representative of all experi-ences of working-class mothers, but they are illustrative of the wider research sample, setting 'the bar of what is standard or "typical"' (Etikan *et al.*, 2016, p. 3).

Within the larger research piece, written transcripts underwent data-driven the-matic analysis using NVivo software to identify key generative themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial familiarising of the data revealed patterns, followed by the generation of initial codes, in an attempt to understand the experi-ences of parents and caregivers in engaging with their children's education. These themes were then reviewed, defined and named, in order to provide a narrative frame-work of the parents' experience. Supplementary analysis of the research data on par-ental engagement revealed the relevance of Lareau's conceptual framework, and this framework was then applied to the findings. Within this specific analysis, the data were reanalysed using a theory-driven thematic analysis, again developing specific codes and themes. Key direct quotations were then extrapolated from the data and used to frame the structure of the results section.

Sample considerations

There are a number of contextual differences between the research presented in this article and that of Lareau's original research which are important to note. Firstly, social constructions and systems relating to class and education vary considerably between the UK and the USA, with the USA having a much more explicit and polarised class system, strongly evidenced in access to health care (Krieger *et al.*, 2005). Likewise, the welfare system is different, with parents earning below a certain threshold in the UK receiving working tax credit. Such a system does not exist in USA. This results in neighbourhood effects arguably having a lesser impact on fami-lies in poverty in the UK (Orum & Musterd, 2019). The education system differs in terms of funding allocation and social segregation, with American schools being more dependent on local funding, and subject to the socioeconomic profile of the local area, leaving schools in poorer neighbourhoods receiving less funding (Brill, 2011).

Along with the cross-cultural differences outlined above, there are also a number of methodological differences that must be noted. The current study does not include the views of middle-class families, nor those from different ethnic backgrounds (due to the demographic composition of the research geography). This article does not

comment on household conditions, as different methodologies were used. Whereas ethnographic methods utilise the observations and interpretations of the researcher, the interviews and analysis used in the current study relied on the mothers' interpretation of their encounters with schools.

There are also a number of similarities that warrant attention. Like our sample, many of the mothers from working-class and poor families experienced mental ill health and substance abuse in those close to them, including ex-partners and siblings. Also, like our sample, mothers always adopted the role of principal caregiver. This article presents two case study examples applying Lareau's accomplishment of natural growth, introducing Sarah (pseudonyms are used throughout), a mother who attempted to engage with her daughter's education but withdrew due to feeling undervalued by the school system, and Jenny, a mother who tried to work with school to overcome her sons' behavioural difficulties, but found the process humiliating and disempowering.

The authors drew on Kvale's metaphor for process, moving from the 'mining' of information, unearthed from the respondent. Rather, the research was more that of a 'traveller', where knowledge is created and constructed alongside the respondent, with the meaning of the 'stories' told being developed as the researcher interprets within a transformative experience for both researched and researcher (Kvale, 1996). The case studies illustrate how these experiences impact on the lives of families, showing their lived experience of feeling powerless, frustrated and disconnected. The two stories apply Lareau's accomplishment of natural growth to interpret mothers' engagement in their children's education, specifically relating to how parents interact with institutions. This includes the mothers' focus on keeping their children safe, and providing children with love and support to grow naturally. Sarah and Jenny are not actively involved in schools or other institutions outside the home, towards whom they feel powerless and disconnected, seeing the child-rearing approach of schools as being in conflict with their own (Lareau, 2003).

Findings

Sarah: a mother feeling disconnected

Sarah (aged 42) grew up in a strict Jehovah Witness household with two brothers and a sister, for whom she acted as a carer following her mother's departure from the family home when Sarah was still at primary school. Growing up with her father and siblings, Sarah undertook the caregiving role as her father was often absent, saying '*my role was to look after them… I merged into the mother role. I'm more comfortable looking after somebody, cleaning for somebody because my Mum did a runner and my Dad saw me as a helper rather than a daughter*'. Sarah has two children from two previous relationships, both of whom had substance misuse issues and were physically violent towards Sarah. At the time of the interview, Sarah lived with her son (aged 17) and daughter (aged 15) in her own home. Sarah was working as a carer and was in receipt of working tax credits.

Sarah initially had a positive relationship with her children's primary school and began volunteering at her daughter's school to develop her career prospects.

However, negative experiences, mainly in communications with teaching staff, created a distance and distrust with the school. Sarah lacked the confidence to help her children with their secondary school work, questioning her ability. Sarah also said she struggled with working unsociable hours and maintaining discipline in the home, wanting to provide care for her children rather than push them academically.

Sense of powerlessness and frustration

Lareau posited that working-class and poor parents experienced a sense of powerlessness and frustration, caused by a perceived disconnection with school. In *Unequal childhoods*, it was proposed that:

> This gap in the connections between working-class and poor families and schools is important. It undermines their feelings of trust or comfort at school, a feeling other researchers have argued is pivotal in the formation of effective and productive family–school relationships. (Lareau, 2003, p. 231)

Indeed, a lack of trust and comfort was mentioned by Sarah, who described how she felt that her trust had been undermined when she volunteered at her daughter's primary school. Sarah did initially demonstrate some commitment to developing herself and being able to better support her children. She began volunteering at her daughter's primary school and enrolled on a training programme to become a teaching assistant. Initially, Sarah felt that the teachers were warm and approachable, and she felt confident in supporting children in the classroom. However, the relationship between Sarah and school broke down:

> I couldn't do the [school] placement because I was assistant supervisor in this restaurant, and they'd been lovely to let me do the course. When I told her I couldn't do it because I needed to work, she said she thought I was not dedicated, and that finished me off. I said, 'I'm a single person, no financial help from anybody, I'm struggling'.

Sarah describes how the '*abrasive and abrupt*' approach '*left a nasty taste in* [her] *mouth*' which resulted in her choosing to leave the course and the voluntary position. This account suggests frustration with a system that, despite Sarah's efforts, placed demands on her that she believed she was unable to meet, leaving her feeling powerless.

Sarah's accounts of communicating with teachers suggests that confidence can play a significant role in parents' drive and perceived ability to make contact with school. These passages also illustrate frustrations that can be felt when systems are perceived to be inflexible and inaccessible, which, as suggested by Sarah's account, can create a sense of disconnect and distrust towards school. This resonates with the experiences of working-class and poor parents who adopt an 'accomplishment of natural growth' approach to child rearing, as described by Lareau in *Unequal childhoods* (Lareau, 2003).

Conflict between child-rearing practices at home and school

In conceptualising concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth, Laurau described how schools promote a concerted cultivation approach to education.

This approach, it is argued, is at odds with the accomplishment of the natural growth approach to child rearing. When reflecting on her own child-rearing practice, Sarah summarises: '*I want both of my children to do well but most of my energies have been focused on the more caring side of things rather than pushing them academically*'. Here, Sarah expresses a clear sense of what her strengths are in supporting her children, along with where she feels her skills are lacking. Sarah says she saw her role as supporting her children, where she admits that discipline and boundaries sometimes were a '*grey area*', feeling that '*we're not in this world to torment them. If they behave, I will give in because I want them to be happy*'. This is consistent with the accomplishment of the natural growth approach, which includes 'allowing children to be children and allowing them to make their own choices' (Lareau, 2003, p. 76).

Sarah is self-reflective and appears to perceive that her child-rearing practices are inherently different to those of schools, stemming, perhaps, from her childhood where she was the main caregiver for her family, receiving little support and encouragement from her father. Sarah reflected on her father's engagement in her education, and how this had influenced her own lack of engagement in her children's education, '*there was a parallel between how I was with my Dad, he had nothing to do with my education. But I must admit it's easy to be like that. You're just in your own world*'. The impact of this was highlighted, with Sarah stating '*I dread if they come and ask me anything, they don't tend to, they got on with it. But then am I being like my Dad?*' Sarah '*often fear* [s] *doing "the wrong thing" in school-related matters*' (Lareau, 2003, p. 198). Here, Sarah's story illustrates how she feels disempowered and disconnected from school, resulting in her withdrawing from engaging with the system. Jenny's story, which will be described below, tells of how she not only feels disempowered and disconnected, but also frustrated to the extent of withdrawing her own engagement with school, and also removing one of her sons from mainstream education.

Jenny: a frustrated mother

Jenny (aged 39), a married mother of four children, grew up in the same area where she raised her own children. Jenny enjoyed school until the divorce of her parents when she was 12 years old. The newfound freedom gained from living with her father, who was largely absent, resulted in Jenny missing school and drinking with older teens, which subsequently impacted on her academic achievement. Jenny aspired to become a chef, but her parents were financially unable to provide the equipment. She met her husband shortly after finishing school and soon started a family. Living with her husband and four children, three boys (aged 17, 15 and 13) and a girl (aged 12) in social housing, Jenny was not in paid employment, but did volunteer at the local community centre, and her husband was unable to work due to a long-term health condition.

Jenny reported no problems in communicating with primary school until two of her sons presented with behavioural problems in Year 6, which triggered a referral to secondary school during the transition phase. These two sons had considerable problems with secondary education, with Jenny initially believing that her children were misbehaving, but subsequently feeling that the teachers were discriminating against them. This viewpoint emerged following meetings with teachers, where Jenny felt belittled,

but did not feel sufficiently confident to speak out against them. This caused Jenny to question herself—she said she felt guilty for not believing her children—and created feelings of disconnection from school, with cliques existing amongst teachers. School would call home frequently regarding her sons' behaviour, causing Jenny considerable anxiety. Eventually, Jenny removed these two sons from mainstream education; they were then educated at home and in a local community centre, and had limited contact with secondary school surrounding her daughter's education.

Sense of powerlessness and frustration

When dealing with school, Lareau proposed that 'working-class and poor parents... mistrust the judgements of classroom teachers and school staff, but do not openly challenge them [due to a power] imbalance, that, reasonably, they both deeply resent and greatly fear' (Lareau, 2003, p. 217). Jenny's experiences of dealing with school regarding her sons' behavioural problems support this notion, where she says she felt pushed out, intimidated and humiliated. Jenny's accounts echo those reported by some of the mothers described in *Unequal childhoods*, saying '*I wouldn't give them the time of day now*'. Jenny shared her experiences of her sons' behaviour resulting in trouble with school, and how she felt teachers tried to ensure they were '*pushed out of the school*' to be '*forgot about*'. These accounts suggest a 'sense of distance and distrust, of exclusion and risk, with school' (Lareau, 2003, p. 227), where she '*felt school to be a threatening force... [feeling] worried, powerless and scared*' (Lareau, 2003, p. 230).

Jenny recalled hostile communications with secondary school, avoiding any contact where possible, and explained the difficulties she had communicating with a secondary school teacher after she had been called into school following the disruptive behaviour of one son:

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

Here, Jenny suggests a 'strong distrust in school and other authority figures' (Lareau, 2003, p. 218). Furthermore, Jenny recounted an incident where she complained, impacting on her son, '*because I'd opened my mouth, he had it in for [my son]. When I phoned the school, they are all one clique, they all stuck together*'. This echoes the experience of a mother in *Unequal childhoods* who, when trying to resolve an issue with school, reported that teachers 'had an answer for everything' (Lareau, 2003, p. 226). These experiences suggest perceived power inequalities between Jenny and the school, where she felt judged and discriminated against:

> every time I went to a meeting, I was bursting out crying, and it's embarrassing. I'm sitting here with you lot round me, and I felt intimidated. Once, when I went into a meeting there was six of them and me.

Jenny goes on to further explain how these meetings made her feel humiliated. Like the mothers in Lareau's sample, Jenny said she felt confident to challenge authority in other situations, but that the teachers '*wore [her] down*' over a period. Like Lareau's

mothers, it seems that Jenny was 'intimidated by the professional experts and authority of school personnel, [and] did not make similar demands with educators' (Lareau, 2003, p. 220).

The experience of intimidation and humiliation appears to have significantly impacted on Jenny, who explained '*I've ended up with depression... I ended up having panic attacks and stuff with the school phoning me*'. Jenny explained that she contacted the school to explain that perceived excessive phone calls were causing her great anxiety and to call her husband, but she continued to receive calls daily. To resolve the issue, '*my husband went up and told them to phone him. Then I felt like a failure... to struggle on with four kids*'. This example illustrates how home–school relations can impact on the emotional well-being of the parent and subsequent involvement. Jenny's accounts suggest how strained communications can become between home and school, where perceived power inequalities can result in feeling judged. This can cause frustration, resulting in emotional, hostile reactions that can destroy any relationships between parents and teachers.

Conflict between child-rearing practices at home and school

Jenny's values were centred on nurturing and caring for her family. This was expressed through not challenging her children academically, with their immediate happiness being her focus: '*I just support them, there's no point pushing them somewhere they don't want to go, whatever they're happy in*'. Here, Jenny saw her role as being indirective, gently guiding her children, which strongly resonates with Lareau's argument that 'child-rearing is balanced by allowing children to be children and allowing them to make their own choices' (Lareau, 2003, p. 76).

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

Discussion

Results from the wider study revealed that working-class parents experienced frustration, powerlessness and disconnection with secondary school, and many said that conflict between school and home practices was a factor that contributed to them having minimal contact with school and teachers. This clearly resonates with Lareau's work, where mothers expressed 'an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint in their institutional experiences' (Lareau, 2011, p. 3). Lareau's findings that mothers were 'baffled, intimidated and subdued' (Lareau, 2011, p. 409) was also reflected in these results, providing a contemporary contribution to Lareau's conceptualisation of the accomplishment of natural growth. Moreover, the way parents

mostly perceived a role in their children's education resonated with Lareau's concept of accomplishment of natural growth (Lareau, 2011), expressing a desire to allow their children to make their own decisions, with mothers being passive in their direction.

The two mothers' accounts presented in this article serve as detailed, illustrative case study examples that typify the experiences of many of the disadvantaged parents and caregivers who were voiced during a wider research project. The experience of powerlessness and frustration was a strong feature in both accounts in this article. Conflict, accompanied by feelings of frustration, intimidation and humiliation, were some of the consequences of engagement with school, eroding trust and connections with the education system. As Lareau summarised regarding one mother she observed, 'she distrusted school personnel. She felt bullied and powerless' (Lareau, 2003, p. 243). These case studies support Lareau's assertion that parenting practices are 'accorded different social values by important social institutions' (Lareau, 2003, p. 241) and, for some disadvantaged parents, may be at odds with the schools. Many of these differences are 'down to social class position, both in terms of how class shapes world-views and how class affected economic and educational resources' (Lareau, 2003, p. 214).

Looking more broadly, traumatic childhood experiences and lack of educational capital appear to have led these mothers to focus on protection and comfort. Economic resources, although not explicitly referred to in these case studies, did play a part in their lives. Reasons included having to work unsociable hours (thus limiting the ability to help with homework or attend parents' evening), or lack of finance due to long-term unemployment. These experiences undoubtedly impacted on how they supported their children. Both mothers in this article spoke about lacking the necessary educational resources to support their children and engage with school. Both described how they did not perform well at school themselves and did not feel comfortable or confident to support their children. Also, unlike middle-class parents who adopt a concerted cultivation approach to child rearing, they lacked the social networks to gain extra support to help their children. It must be noted that, in spite of these perceived challenges, both mothers, like many of the parents included in the wider study, exhibited significant drive and agency to support their children in the (alternative) ways they felt best. In the cases described in this article, this includes volunteering within school and withdrawing children from mainstream education. These findings also contribute to a developing understanding of issues around intersectionality, where being a mother and being working class can result in feeling torn between wanting children to succeed and protecting them from a system that is felt to be against them (Skeggs, 1997).

The results discussed in this article have significant implications for educational practice. In the UK, Ofsted, a statutory body, monitors schools' efforts to engage parents and assesses the use of the Pupil Premium (Ofsted, 2019). The experiences of mothers voiced in this article provide schools with evidence to reflect on not only how they engage with parents, but also how they can effectively spend their Pupil Premium funding. The concepts of concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth provide a framework for teachers and educational practitioners to understand class-based differences in parental engagement in education. By understanding that

parents classified as 'disadvantaged' may feel disempowered, distrustful and disconnected–targeted, sympathetic interventions can be applied to promote parental engagement in education.

We strongly urge schools to utilise the typology of concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth to develop parental engagement strategies that stress the schools' values surrounding ensuring the happiness and well-being of children. This can still include the school's requirement to reach certain attainment targets (in concordance with concerted cultivation), but schools must be clear in communicating with parents how this can promote the outcomes valued by parents. Our results complement previous literature adopting Lareau's typology, which suggests that some parents may feel uneasy when communicating with schools and may be resistant to organised activities (Von Otter, 2014). In order to build trust and accommodate any real or perceived barriers to engaging with the seemingly rigid systems, a revised structure could be implemented for events such as parents' evenings, providing parents with more time to talk to teachers, in a more relaxing environment.

The approach preferred by middle-class parents, that of concerted cultivation, is being promoted in policy, as can be seen to be reinforced in the new Ofsted framework (Ofsted, 2019). There has been particular emphasis on enrichment activities, but a failure to adequately consider the barriers some families may face in accessing these. Despite the considerable evidence supporting the educational and interpersonal benefits of extracurricular activities (Seow & Pan, 2014), consideration should be given to students and families whose preferences are not aligned with this approach to education and child rearing. By continuing to promote an educational framework based on concerted cultivation, working-class and poor parents who favour the natural accomplishment of growth approach will feel further marginalised and distant from the education system and unable to participate (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016).

This article highlights the lived experience of inequalities of some working-class and poor families and provides a case study illustration of how the system is orientated towards middle-class parents. These authentic accounts, interpreted through Laureau's conceptual framework, illustrate how policy orientation and practice can further marginalise parents already facing significant barriers in their lives due to wider, class-based social inequalities. Whilst the findings from this study are clearly of value in improving teachers' understanding of the barriers perceived by families, educational policy and practice should also undergo some critical review and revision to promote inclusivity to all families. These results add to the building evidence that policy should prioritise the reduction of socioeconomic differences in children's academic performance and well-being, which can be done through building parents' capabilities, thereby improving access to education, secure employment and public services (Hartas, 2014). We need to shift from the individualist deficit construction—where the gap in achievement between children from different socioeconomic groups is based on differences in child-rearing preferences (Crozier *et al.*, 2011; Goodall, 2017)—to a model which respects and understands the social, economic and political contexts of families (Goodall, 2019).

As with all case studies, the analysis presented here focuses on the accounts of only two mothers and thus cannot be generalised or used to explain the behaviour of all disadvantaged mothers. More research is needed to further understand the

experiences of working-class and poor mothers, particularly those from 'left-behind' communities such as post-industrial British coastal towns (Sensier & Devine, 2017). This article has excluded the experience of fathers and other male caregivers, and the application of the analytical framework adopted in this article, this time applied to fathers, would contribute to the limited literature surrounding working-class and poor fathers' attitudes and behaviours relating to their children's education (David *et al.*, 2003). Likewise, further research with different groups and factions of the population would help to reveal the role that intersectionality plays in parental educational engagement.

Unlike Lareau in her in-depth ethnographic study, the views of the mothers were the only concern in this research. Further research would benefit from allowing the voice of the child and the school to be heard, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of class inequalities in education. Moreover, the cross-cultural differences between the USA and the UK cannot be ignored. The current study was conducted in an area of the UK that was predominantly white British, whereas Lareau's work was situated within a much more diverse context. Furthermore, the cultural and political differences in terms of class, welfare and education impact on the experiences of parents need to be noted.

Conclusion

The role of parents in education has been intensified like never before under the lockdown measures imposed during the Covid-19 outbreak, where children across the globe who had been previously schooled within a physical school were now being largely schooled at home. In the UK, schools provided educational materials principally online—which in itself poses many class assumptions about families' abilities to access resources—and parents were made far more responsible for the education of their children. Individualist policies, with the focus on changing parental behaviour, neglects to acknowledge the structural barriers faced by marginalised working-class and poor parents. With the educational attainment gap widening, Lareau's class analysis of educational inequalities is more relevant than ever: in a world where education is becoming increasingly divided, we need to critically reflect on the impact this is having on our most disadvantaged families.

Conflict of interest

Both authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Central Lancashire BAHSS Ethics Committee (application number BAHSS 179) and complied with all BERA Ethical Guidelines. For example, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study and all data were anonymised.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

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