



# The Racial Politics of Cultural Capital: Perspectives from Black Middle-Class Pupils and Parents in a London Comprehensive

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## Abstract

Drawing on 13 in-depth interviews and three focus-group interviews with Black middle-class pupils, along with 14 in-depth interviews with their parents, this article highlights Black parents' and pupils' strategic use of Black cultural capital to contest White hegemony in the curricula at a large state comprehensive school in South London. The findings of this study underscore the racial politics of cultural capital as experienced by the Black middle classes. The results also spotlight the quiet alliances between Black middle-class pupils and parents to challenge the racial blindspots of state school curricula and negotiate changes throughout the school community. This article adds to scholarship in cultural sociology by highlighting the calculated intergenerational work among the Black middle classes – perspectives that are often missing in traditional class analyses.

## Keywords

Black middle class, Bourdieu, comprehensive schools, cultural capital, education, England, parents, race, young people

## Introduction

Cultural capital, as traditionally articulated in cultural sociology, too often comes with an underlying racial prescription.<sup>1</sup> Though cultural capital is largely understood as a race-neutral 'transubstantiated form of economic capital' of an embodied, objectified and institutionalised nature that informs status formations and social relations (Moore, 2008: 102), contemporary interpretations suggest that cultural capital is always already a racialised construct across social fields, with whiteness regularly appended to it as an

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unnamed, unmarked force (Archer, 2010; Wallace, 2018a). In the lived experiences of Britain's Black middle classes, the active racialisation of cultural capital is understood as more than a mere thought experiment that influences the cultural character of social life, but as a consequential political project that often informs the cultural and curricular conditions of schooling. And yet, there is hardly any public recognition of how the racial politics of cultural capital inform schooling experiences. This article therefore focuses on the ways in which Black middle-class parents and pupils negotiate the racial politics of cultural capital to advocate for cultural and curricular change in a London state school.

The social and political stakes of this work matter because they raise questions about the active function of racial bias in school curricula discernible to Black pupils and their parents, the limits of class advantage in contexts given to racial domination, and more specifically, the potential precarity of middle-class standing for Blacks in Britain. Additionally, this article showcases not only the agentic powers of Black middle-class parents, but also of Black middle-class young people to counter White dominance in the school curriculum and culture. In a nation-state long preoccupied with the material and discursive realities of class inequalities, the experiences of the Black middle classes reiterate the enduring significance of racism and ethno-racial domination as key, compounding determinants of social life in British society (Alexander, 1996; Gilroy, 1992, 2012; Hall, 1996; Solomos, 2003; Troyna, 1984).

Attempts made throughout this work to take seriously the racialisation of class relations – or more precisely to consider how cultural capital is racially classed – from the perspectives of Black Caribbeans in Britain should not be read as an investment in reifying a black-white binary. The particularities this work articulates draw on blackness as a pliable political prism through which racial dominance hidden in (dominant) cultural capital is unveiled from its guise of neutrality. Such understandings reject interpretations of race as a fixed somatic register with a biological essence, but instead conceptualises blackness as a discursive category with multiple contingent and consequential meanings that are context-specific (Bressey, 2009; Thomas, 2007). When understood as part of a larger project decrying racial hegemony, discussions of blackness and cultural capital in this work are not exclusively about these constructs themselves, but a set of logics that make room for a range of racialised capitals subjugated in cultural sociology.

Before providing empirical evidence of how Black cultural capital is used to challenge White dominance in school curricula, I first review scholarship on the Black middle classes in Britain, offering close attention to the limited empirical research focused on the linked agency of, and strategic partnerships between, Black middle-class parents *and* pupils. I then provide a genealogy of Black cultural capital and its relationship to schooling, illustrating its formation in the USA and its generative extensions in the UK. Next, I briefly discuss the research design before exploring empirical evidence on how the Black middle classes draw on Black cultural capital to promote curricular change. Through their references to the objectified properties of Black cultural capital (books, artefacts and cultural sites) in classrooms, Black Caribbean pupils and parents in this study challenge the forced and seemingly singular union between whiteness and middle-class belonging.

## *Black Middle Classes in British Schools: The Case of Parent–Pupil Partnerships*

In the expanding literature on the Black middle classes in Britain, the strategic partnerships between pupils and parents have not received much attention. This is due to at least two distinct reasons. First, only a small body of scholarship in Britain explores the social and scholastic experiences of the Black middle classes in schools (Vincent et al., 2013; Wallace, 2018a). In the long tradition of research on Black education in Britain, social class differences among Black African and Caribbean pupils have not been consistently addressed. And to the extent that class distinctions have been acknowledged, disproportionate attention has been devoted to the Black working classes (Gillborn, 2008; Rollock et al., 2015; Solomos, 2003; Troyna, 1984). Second, research on the Black middle classes in and out of schools focuses on the perspectives of *either* Black middle-class adults *or* children, parents *or* pupils (Meghji, 2019; Rollock et al., 2013; Vincent et al., 2013) – not the associated agency or the strategic collaborations of both constituencies. Of course, scores of ethnographies and survey studies have included Black middle-class pupils in their samples, but they have not necessarily offered deliberate analytical attention to the school-based experiences of Black middle-class pupils *and* parents (Archer, 2012; Strand, 2012). Instead, the literature on the Black middle classes in Britain emphasises resistance to whiteness and misrecognition (Meghji, 2019; Wallace, 2017b, 2018b); the relationship between the Black middle classes and the Black working classes (Wallace, 2017a, 2018a); pre- and post-migration economic strivings (Bressey, 2009; Dabydeen et al., 2008; Fryer, 1984); and the expression and reproduction of Black middle-class tastes (Campbell, 2019; Meghji, 2016; Rollock, 2014). How Black middle-class pupils and parents partner strategically to call White hegemony into question in school curricula and advocate a shift in the cultural conditions of schooling have yet to surface substantively in British cultural sociology or cultural sociology of education.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most foundational scholarship focused on the Black Caribbean middle classes in British cultural sociology is Rollock et al.'s (2015), *The Colour of Class*. Based on 77 in-depth interviews with 62 Black Caribbean parents, the study examined the educational strategies Black middle-class parents use when interacting with schools to enhance the educational experiences of their children. Findings from Rollock et al.'s research indicate that 'to be Black and middle class does not mean to have transcended racism' (2015: 3). Rollock and colleagues maintain that despite measures of class privilege, Black Caribbean middle-class pupils' educational experiences are still shaped by low educational expectations, racial stereotypes and cultural marginalisation. Strategies deployed by Black middle-class parents to counter these discriminatory practices and mitigate racial disadvantage include, but are not limited to, searching for 'the right mix' (defined as schools with a predominantly middle-class intake and increasing ethno-racial diversity); intentionally moving to catchment areas with elite state schools or exceptional private schools; scrutinizing their children's work; monitoring signs of teachers' engagement (or the lack thereof); confronting teachers failing to adequately or optimally support their children's academic progress; making scheduled and impromptu visits to build relationships with school officials; and prioritising their children's psycho-social well-being and healthy racial identity development in predominantly White environments

(Ball et al., 2013; Vincent et al., 2012). In the *Colour of Class* and related works, Rollock and her colleagues offer considerable insights into the class-based protective practices of Black middle-class parents, but little substantive exploration of the accompanying agency of Black middle-class young people in schools.

Careful analysis of how Black middle-class pupils and parents organise to address racial disparities in schools is also limited in US-based research. In fact, the most prominent sociological studies on the educational experiences of the Black middle classes in the USA note: Black parents' investments in the concerted cultivation of their children (Allen, 2013; Banks, 2010, 2012; Lareau, 2011; Lareau and Horvat, 1999), the psycho-social labour involved in raising Black middle-class children in predominantly White contexts (Ascher and Branch-Smith, 2005; Hemmings, 1996; Tyson, 2002), and the power of institutional racism to negate the modest class advantages of the Black middle classes in schools (Banks, 2012; Horvat and Antonio, 1999; Lacy, 2007). Despite the analytical and theoretical contributions of such US-based research, the aforementioned studies are primarily about the African American middle classes – not Black Caribbeans and Black Africans (Clerge, 2012; Waters, 1999).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, these works often prioritise the perspectives of Black middle-class parents and adults. Consider, for instance, Banks' (2010) ethnographic study of the strategies mobilised by upper middle-class Blacks to socialise their children according to their parents' class-based tastes and ethno-racial affinities. Banks' (2010) research draws on 68 in-depth interviews to illustrate how Black parents teach their children to explore 'high brow' visual art from across the African diaspora that honours their racial heritage. Because Banks' (2010) research, and other studies like it, primarily explores the perspectives of Black parents, new complementary research is needed on how Black Caribbean parents *and* pupils work in partnership to decode whiteness in state schools and assert their racial and class identities in educational institutions through the use of objectified forms of dominant Black cultural capital (Carter, 2005; Hall, 1993).

### *Cultural Capital and the Politics of Race*

Cultural capital ranks among the most popular concepts in cultural sociology around the world. The career of the concept spans traditional exegeses on class-structured taste profiles to less conventional propositions on ethno-racial and gender distinctions (Reay, 2004; Shah et al., 2010). Bourdieu formulated cultural capital as a conceptual tool for understanding the cultural conditions of inequality in 1960s post-war France as reproduced through elite schools (Bennett and Silva, 2011; Prieur and Savage, 2011). Bourdieu characterised cultural capital as 'instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed' (1977: 488). Whether of an embodied, objectified or institutionalised nature, Bourdieu contends that cultural capital retains its market premium as one of the primary mechanisms through which power, prestige and privilege are transferred across generations (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This claim has been corroborated by several sociological studies within and beyond the UK (Bennett et al., 2009; Bowles and Gintis, 2011; Lamont, 2012; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lareau, 2011;

Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Prieur and Savage, 2011). However, research published over the last decade or so has highlighted and interrogated the racial politics of cultural capital, formulating new subtypes of cultural capital that more precisely reflect the influence of race and racialisation on the composition of cultural capital. One increasingly popular amendment to Bourdieu's formulation is the concept of Black cultural capital (Banks, 2017; Carter, 2005; Fleming and Roses, 2007).

For instance, in his analysis of 23 Black middle-class professionals, Meghji (2019) identifies Black cultural capital as a strategic class expression attuned to the tastes, expressive traditions and cultural mores of the African diaspora. Meghji argues that:

the black middle classes learn to decipher that some forms of cultural capital have been encoded as pertaining to white or black middle-class consumers; this decoding is facilitated not only through analysing the content of the cultural capital, but also the people, institutions and practices which produce, uphold, and recognise it. (2019: 4)

This article offers complementary yet distinctive perspectives on Black cultural capital by focusing squarely on the mobilisation and transmission of objectified forms of cultural capital among the Black middle classes in schools, which are consequential cultural sites of power. I give credence to Black cultural capital in the latter part of this work to illuminate the cultural order as Black Caribbean middle-class pupils and parents experience and re-imagine it in a predominantly White school.

There are two salient formulations of Black cultural capital in relation to schooling. The first is a non-dominant variant of Black cultural capital developed by Prudence Carter to challenge ethnocentrism often embedded in legitimated expressions of cultural capital and to show that '[c]ultural capital is context-specific and its currency varies across different social spaces where struggles for legitimation and power exist' (Carter, 2003: 137). In Yonkers, on the outskirts of New York City, Carter (2003) found that low-income African American youth draw on wide-ranging cultural repertoires to garner respect, develop social networks and secure opportunities in and outside of school. Carter (2003) points out that classic, 'high-brow' cultural codes may have limited traction in specific social fields, and that power (of positive social and economic consequences) might in fact be garnered from non-dominant modes of expression (ways of speaking, dressing, etc.) *depending on the social field* and the habitus that governs institutions within it. Furthermore, Carter (2005) points out that like many of her participants, urban young people are often culturally savvy enough to navigate multiple expressions of cultural capital – the dominant and the non-dominant.

The second version is dominant Black cultural capital, as informed by Rollock et al.'s study of the Black middle classes in Britain. This iteration of Black cultural capital focuses on how blackness informs the expression and experiences of cultural capital within the field of education. This formulation of Black cultural capital calls into question traditional interpretations of dominant cultural capital that presume it to be a generatively race-neutral resource. Such colourblind exegeses undermine the significance of race and reinforce whiteness as *the* normative, universal force that underlies class logics in Europe and North America. At the conceptual and theoretical level, dominant Black cultural capital identifies race as a fundamental organising principle shaping the distribution of power among

the middle classes and challenges the influence of whiteness in shaping which aesthetic properties are considered 'high status'. Failure to identify the consistent racialisation of cultural capital reinvigorates ethno-racial dominance and preserves whiteness as an invisible ideological regime. Based on the work of Rollock et al. (2015), Black cultural capital can therefore be situated squarely among the articulations of the expressive cultures, political resistance, and class-consciousness of the Black middle classes in Britain and across the African diaspora (Foner, 2018; Lacy, 2007).

Despite the analytical gains of both dominant and non-dominant variants of Black cultural capital, understandings of their influence in the lives of Black Caribbean middle-class pupils and parents, as partners in negotiating the educational system, remain limited in cultural sociology. Whereas Carter's (2005) analyses examine the perspectives of young people, and Rollock et al.'s (2015) rendition focuses on the experiences of parents, there is an urgent need to make more central the partnerships between Black parents and pupils to incrementally challenge the curricular and cultural conditions of schools. Such analyses can extend the understandings of the cross-generational deployment and transmission of Black cultural capital. To address the aforementioned gaps in the literature, the latter part of this article focuses on how Black Caribbean middle-class parents and pupils deploy the dominant variant of Black cultural capital to challenge the dominance of whiteness in secondary school curricula.

### *Methods and Data Sources*

Perspectives on the mobilisation of Black cultural capital in school presented in this article are drawn from interviews conducted as part of a cross-national ethnographic study of the educational experiences of second-generation Black Caribbean young people in London and New York City.<sup>4</sup> The larger study explores the national, cultural and political factors that inform the educational experiences and outcomes of Black Caribbean working-class and middle-class pupils in two of the largest state secondary schools in their respective cities. Ethnographic work in London was conducted between 2012 and 2013 at Newton Secondary School (a pseudonym), one of the largest state comprehensives in South London. In addition to having the largest intake of Black Caribbean students compared to neighbouring schools, Newton has maintained a long-standing tradition of supporting White working-class pupils since the mid-20th century – though there has been a steady increase in the number of Black middle-class students of Caribbean and African heritage enrolling at Newton in recent years. Newton is located in a White middle-class enclave at the edge of an urban borough, bordering a wealthy suburban neighbourhood. None of the Black middle-class participants in this study lived in close proximity to the school, but commuted for as much as 45 minutes between their home and school, traversing racialised class boundaries of safety and belonging.

To underscore the heterogeneity of the Black middle classes, multidimensional measures of the middle classes were deployed as part of this ethnographic study. Consistent with Bourdieu's understandings of education, cultural capital and their influence on social mobility, the study marshals a complex understanding of middle-class standing, beyond annual earnings as the primary indicator. Participants were classified as 'Black middle class', not based on income, but on degree attainment (including BA

and advanced degrees), professional occupation, and self-identification.<sup>5</sup> In the British context, professional occupations were designated as middle class based on The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification 1 and 2, and in keeping with the UK's Standard Occupational Classification Manual.

In this article, I focus on interviews with Black Caribbean middle-class pupils and parents: 13 in-depth interviews and three focus group interviews with pupils, along with 14 in-depth interviews with parents.<sup>6</sup> The interviews explored a range of topics, including participants' understandings of class identities and histories, their efforts to reconcile their class advantage with their racial subordination, perceptions of teacher expectations, the politics of class and cultural authenticity, among other topics. All one-on-one and focus group interviews took place in school or participants' homes and lasted between 55 and 85 minutes, with most interviews lasting for just over an hour. These interviews were digitally recorded, professionally transcribed and carefully analysed using NVivo qualitative analysis software. The interview extracts showcased later in this article best typify the trends and experiences across the 30 interviews that inform this article.

To ensure anonymity, confidentiality and the protection of participants, pseudonyms are used for research sites, participants' names, and in some instances, even specific references to participants' hometowns (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). After reading through the transcripts for full contextual meanings, data were analysed through two rounds of coding as an exercise in inductive and deductive analysis to identify core themes in participants' experiences (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).<sup>7</sup> The coding scheme used throughout the analysis process was refined iteratively to strengthen understandings of the racialised class experiences of the Black Caribbean middle classes. In what follows, special attention is devoted to exploring how Black middle-class pupils and parents mobilise Black cultural capital to influence school curricula.

### *Parents Critiquing Curricula: Challenging Whiteness and the Status Quo*

Often drawing comparisons with their own schooling in the Caribbean, the parents in this study perceived whiteness as having disproportionate weight in British secondary school curricula. These parents noted the predominance of White authors of school texts in key classes, the relatively high frequency of excursions to cultural and historical sites that do not address Black and ethnic minority histories, and the limited ethno-racial diversity among the teaching force. The comparatively limited positive representations of Black and ethnic minorities in core curricular offerings cause a number of Black middle-class parents to come to terms again with the subjugation of blackness as a long-standing feature of the British educational system (Gerrard, 2013; Reay and Mirza, 1997). However, participants' class status and racial consciousness emboldened them to critique White normativity in school. Consider, for instance, Jennifer – a mental health professional and mother of two who lived in Jamaica until her early teens – who asserts:

... When I see what my children are learning in Maths and English at Newton, I get quite upset about it. It's all about White history and knowledge, really ... taught mainly by White teachers. I'm glad they are learning the important concepts they need to know for their A-levels and GCSEs, but they are learning a one-sided history. It's good for them to know Steinbeck and

Shakespeare, yeah, but I teach them to know Toni Morrison, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Derek Walcott too ... to help my children get ahead, I make sure I buy top books by Black authors and encourage them [the children] to walk with them [the books] to school and show their teachers. I ask the teachers why these books are not in the curriculum, and encourage my children to ... ask the teacher to use examples from these books to teach things like alliteration and double entendre ... Now apparently, they do that every year at the school ... So, basically, yeah, my children and I tag team the White teachers ... but why should we have to do that in this so-called multicultural country?

Recognising the limited access her children have to dominant Black cultural capital at school, Jennifer marshalled her social class resources to question teachers' curricular choices, provide a range of literary figures of African descent for her children to display and explore in school, and with the support of her children, offer an intervention into how figures of speech are taught. Such efforts expand the range of intellectual authority figures worth speaking about. Like a number of Black Caribbean middle-class parents in this study, Jennifer recognises that the cultural and organisational conditions of Newton, and the wider political economy that inform them, are disproportionately controlled by the White middle classes. And yet, for Jennifer, there are ways to stage interventions that do not force a false choice between racial affinity and class standing. Using Black cultural capital is one such means.

While Jennifer's comments clarify the racial politics of cultural capital and the strategies deployed to subdue the prevailing powers of whiteness in schools, Jennifer is but one in a range of Black middle-class parents in this study asserting the power of Black cultural capital (as a set of 'high-brow' objectified properties racialised as Black) to challenge the 'invisible' hand of whiteness in school curricula. Harvey, a Guyana-born Letting Agency Manager, offers commentary in a similar vein. He argues:

... I used to think that my son would have a better education than what is offered in Guyana because there are more resources, more books, better school buildings in England and whatnot ... but when I look at the books they [school teachers] give him to read, the kinds of museums the school carries him to ... it doesn't reflect Black people or Black middle-class people. It's like it's all about White people ... and when you ask the teacher why that's the case, they tell you that's how it's always been and that the GCSE curriculum is out of their hands ... That's why I give him expensive books about African and Caribbean history and tell him to carry them to school and talk to his teachers about this ... You have to try to puncture the White bubble somehow ...

Perhaps with equally provocative perspectives, Tiffany, a trained community worker from Antigua, complement's Jennifer and Harvey's critique of curricular whiteness. Tiffany maintains:

Some days I think my daughter would be better off with an education in Antigua ... she's here in England and can't see herself reflected in the textbooks they give her. I think that's just wrong ... that's why Black parents can't just leave their children up to these schools in England ... You have to coach your children on how to recognise hidden racism ... the fact that they have all of these so-called classic books by White authors and none by Black and minority ethnic authors, that is racism plain and simple ... I get my daughter museum passes, documentaries, music and

especially books by Black authors, and I make sure she shows her teachers ... My daughter gets her friends interested in the books I share with her so that they all pressure the teacher to at least talk about them in class ... that's power, that's influence ... We might be middle class or whatever, but we are still Black ... and the fact that we can't see ourselves in the curriculum is a loss for every student, not just my daughter.

Offering a comparable critique of 'hidden racism' in school curricula and the utility of Black cultural capital to counteract it, Paul, a hospital administrator from Martinique, asserts:

... You know racism is real, but when you see it hidden in what your children learn and don't learn ... I realise that I just have to be intentional about sending them to [supplementary] school, and getting them to use Black books in English class, jazz in music class, carry them to the Tate to see exhibits about African history and using that knowledge in classes.

These extracts are emblematic of numerous such comments from Black middle-class parents in this study who not only *possess* Black cultural capital, but *deploy* such capital strategically to strengthen their children's class position and racial consciousness. Additionally, the targeted lessons from parents such as Paul and Jennifer to their children about what *kinds* of books, music and cultural sites to reference underscores the perceived cultural value and political import of Black cultural capital in a White middle-class institution like Newton Secondary. The cultural capital sets referenced – the Tate art galleries, jazz and poetry by the late Derek Walcott – are typically ones in keeping middle-class tastes. Parents' responses illuminate the legibility of objectified Black cultural capital at Newton as an instructional resource for teachers and pupils and its legitimacy as a political intervention into public and psychic imaginaries that presume a fixed relationship between whiteness and middle-class standing or whiteness and national belonging.

Through the aforementioned comments, Black middle-class parents signal in clear terms a bold refusal to internalise whiteness as a prerequisite for middle-class belonging. Additionally, Jennifer, Harvey, Paul and Tiffany gesture towards an unwillingness to attribute the limits of their children's secondary school curricula to personal or moral failures. Instead, they see the predominance of whiteness as a manifestation of wider institutional commitments and arguably the outcome of racial inequity in Britain's political economy. Participants like Tiffany are acutely aware of racism fostered through curricular choices that accentuate whiteness and undermine the significance of Black and ethnic minority intellectual contributions. For them, racism is manifested in the curriculum through misrepresentation, misrecognition, evasion and elision. In this regard, school curricula generally – and as participants discussed, GCSE English curriculum specifically – become sources of social suffering that inform the erasure or evasion of Black and ethnic minority scholarship (Dumas, 2014). For Black Caribbean participants in this study, middle-class standing grants no freedom from the far-reaching arm of White domination, even amidst nominal racial progress in British society.

Jennifer, Harvey and Tiffany's complaints about the English Literature GCSE curriculum are not only relevant to Newton, but the entire British educational system today. Core readings for the 2017–2018 GCSE exams include *A Christmas Carol*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *An Inspector Calls*, *Animal Farm*, among others – all of which are written by White males. The criticism rendered by parents like Harvey about the English GCSE

curriculum is not about the presence of White male authors but their predominance and power in the formation of young people's literary and political imaginations. Furthermore, Black and ethnic minority people are hardly narrativised as key characters in these prized works, if they figure in them at all. Perhaps this is why Tiffany explains that her daughter 'can't see herself reflected in the textbooks', with the opposite being an experience the White middle classes often take for granted. In a school context with a predominantly White teaching force, where teachers are nominally open to parents' and students' interests, Black cultural capital becomes a key means to interrupt White domination in curricular offerings.

Like participants in Rollock et al.'s (2015) study, parents in this study are not only 'watchful' but partner with their children to recommend to teachers alternative cultural capital sets beyond whiteness that can enrich all students' learning. The strategic alliances between Black middle-class parents and pupils to 'puncture the White bubble' and in Jennifer's case to shape teaching and learning for all students with Black sites, texts and authors as the means of instruction are but initial steps toward a more representative and equitable curriculum that reflects the changing demography of the British polity. As will be demonstrated in the section that follows, the dispositions and actions of Black middle-class parents like Jennifer, Harvey, Tiffany and Paul inform degrees of confidence among Black middle-class pupils based on their class standing tempered by ambivalence about their racial ranking in a predominantly White school (Archer, 2012; Vincent et al., 2012).

### *Pupils Challenging Curricula: Black Cultural Capital as an Instructional Resource*

Out of the 13 Black middle-class pupils in this study, 12 confirm the efficacy of what could be regarded as parent–pupil partnerships to impact teaching and learning by capitalising on objectified stocks of Black cultural capital. The extended interview extract that follows best illustrates the political possibilities middle-class Black Caribbean youth find in Black cultural capital for contesting White normativity in Newton's school curricula. For these young people, 'high-brow' texts racialised as Black are instructional resources that are often recognised and/or legitimated by White middle-class teachers – ultimately informing teaching, learning and the implementation of school curricula (Carter, 2005, 2006). In a focus group interview with Black middle-class pupils, participants highlight how they complement their parents' efforts to infuse Black cultural capital in classrooms:

**Derron:** How do your parents help you to alter the curriculum in school to better affirm your racial identity?

**Michelle:** ... My mother showed me how to build relationships with my teachers and how to get them to add what my friends and I are interested in. I have books by Zadie Smith. I read them during my break period and I got lots of my friends to read them too ... When my English teacher saw how passionate we were about it, pages from *On Beauty* were given to us in class to compare and contrast themes from that

book with *Romeo and Juliet*. I didn't like the assignment, but it allowed me to challenge my White classmates about who is smart and who is not ... Now, it's like they're not smart if they can't handle Zadie Smith.

**Joseph:** I hear that ... I learn from my mother. When my mum tells me what she does to try and make sure my teachers know who I am and that they teach things that speak to my background, I feel confident in class ... I use the books and the knowledge my mum gives me ... my teachers notice ... now my music, RE [Religious Education] and English teachers encourage us to bring these kinds of books to school for debate and reading ... it comes up a lot in class, and the teachers [al]low it.

**Kayla:** Fam, they don't just [al]low it. It's good for them too ... I saw how my mother helped my English teacher to be a better teacher and add books by Black authors in class for discussion ... of course I back her up and bring in more material to show the teacher – not in a rude way to make her [the teacher] defensive, but just to show her all the good things I'm learning and that we should all learn.

**Derron:** Is that true for you too [referring to Luke]?

**Luke:** Yeah, but kind of in a different sort of way ... Last week, I got a few of my mates to go with me to ask our maths teacher to tell us more about mathematics in Africa ... you know, in ancient Egypt and whatnot ... Guess, what, Mr Lewis did all this research and taught us about maths ideas that started in Egypt while teaching us. That was such a fun class and we learned a lot ... I don't think that would have happened if my parents didn't talk me through how to win over my teacher and change what we were learning.

Participants like Luke, Kayla, Joseph and Michelle heed their parents' advice and collaborate with them to introduce texts by authors of African descent to displace the universality of whiteness in school curricula and reshape specific class sessions. In many respects, these middle-class pupils intentionally centre Black cultural capital as an instructional resource in an attempt to change teaching and learning. Pupils like Luke, Kayla, Joseph and Michelle testify to the utility of at least three approaches: (1) carrying first-rate books and other desirable materials to school that are widely recognised as Black, (2) discussing these works with their teachers and peers to garner wider interest and political power, and (3) where possible, negotiating with teachers to include classic works by Black authors. In this context, Black cultural capital functions as a racialised class signifier for recognition (among middle-class teachers and Black peers), rewards (as evidenced by more culturally relevant lessons) and the redistribution of power in classrooms (between teachers and students, majority groups and minority groups) – if only momentarily.

What is especially striking about pupils like Michelle and Luke is that they have acquired considerable confidence to advocate for a more inclusive curriculum and they possess the political savvy to develop interest among their Black and ethnic minority peers to ultimately influence teachers' curricular choices. By deploying Black cultural

capital as an instructional resource, Black pupils in this study collaborate with their parents to change the boundaries of cultural inclusion and exclusion in their school. What is more, members of the Black Caribbean middle classes recognise *and* resist White dominance, drawing on Black cultural capital in schools as a strategic expression of their racial heritage and middle-class status to alter the curriculum on offer. Like their parents, Black middle-class pupils in this study generally resist symbolic violence typically noted through the internalisation of dominant beliefs about Black educational failure and the terms of their subjugation (Rollock, 2007). This confirms Bourdieu's claim that:

Not only do most privileged students derive from their background of origin habits, skills and attitudes which serve them directly in their scholastic tasks ... they also inherit from it knowledge and know-how, tastes, and a 'good taste' whose scholastic profitability is no less certain for being indirect. (Bourdieu, 1993: 74)

*Parent–Pupil Partnerships: A Mechanism for the Transmission of Power.* As research by Rollock et al. (2015), Banks (2010), among others suggests, the exploration of Black middle-class parents' understandings and use of Black cultural capital sheds light on the complex parenting practices that inform students' experiences in schools. However, as this article illumines, there is considerable analytical and political value in examining Black middle-class parents' and pupils' views in tandem, if only because their perspectives provide insights into the transmission of culture and power across generational lines. The empirical evidence highlighted in the previous sections suggests that power is conferred from Black middle-class parents to their children in at least four distinct ways. First, through parent–pupil partnerships, Black middle-class pupils are 'coached for the classroom' by their parents on the strategies of influence (negotiating, lobbying, organising, etc.) that would appeal to teachers and leaders in middle-class institutions like schools (Calarco, 2014). Based on their parents' recommendations and teachers' reception to such suggestions, Black middle-class pupils learn the ways of speaking, strategies of self-advocacy and the skills of negotiation that are not only assistive but advantageous in middle-class institutions like Newton. Second, through parent–pupil partnerships, participants experience a form of 'culture coaching' – repeated formal and informal engagement on the nature of middle-class tastes, styles and expressions that honour their families' ethno-racial heritage and class standing. Such 'culture coaching' functions as a source of both resistance and resilience.

Third, parent–pupil partnerships are not casual arrangements for participants in this study, but a deliberate, targeted approach to identifying Eurocentricity and countering White hegemony in school curricula. Parent–pupil partnerships represent a cross-generational, strategic alliance in deliberate pursuit of cultural representation and racial equity in school curricula. Such collaborations underscore the view that for participants, irrespective of generational status, parenting, teaching and learning are often political, especially in institutions shaped by racial inequities. Fourth, Black middle-class pupils and parents in this study draw on objectified forms of Black cultural capital to challenge the predominance of whiteness in their school curricula. Participants in this study not only challenge the status quo of White dominance in teaching and learning, but also introduce viable alternatives to it. It is through parent–pupil partnerships that participants negotiate

the racial politics of cultural capital in school. Furthermore, the promotion of Black cultural capital in parent–pupil partnerships enables the transmission of power from Black middle-class parents to their children and supports the reproduction of power among the Black middle classes (Carter-Black, 2003; Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Vincent, et al., 2013).

### *Black Cultural Capital and Beyond*

The aforementioned exemplars highlight the agentic capacity of Black Caribbean pupils and parents in this study to draw on Black cultural capital as a means to strategically advocate for curricular change and carefully rebuff the unspoken claim that dominant cultural capital has an inherently and irreplaceably White character. Such efforts problematise the doxic racial unconscious of cultural capital analyses. The data illustrate the ways in which Black Caribbean youth and their parents collaborate based on a common commitment to questioning and challenging Newton's institutional investments in a racial imaginary that prioritises whiteness, perhaps manifested most clearly in the school's skewed curricular offerings and predominantly White teaching force. Extending the burgeoning body of research on the Black middle classes, this article emphasises the power of racial consciousness and class confidence among the Black middle classes to regularly assert the need for curricular change in historically White educational institutions, rather than passively accept the inequalities such institutions advance through the sub-standard schooling of minoritised groups (Rollock et al., 2015).

Despite the efforts of Black middle-class parents and pupils in this study to draw on Black cultural capital to counteract what they see as reductive forms of state-mandated teaching and learning, there are at least three core limitations to such efforts at the micro, meso and macro-levels of schooling – shortcomings that should be addressed if the use of Black cultural capital is to be even more effective. First, participants' educational strategies are fundamentally about increasing representation, rather than transforming the power structure of the school in order to sustain – rather than simply introduce – Black cultural capital as an instructional resource. Having select teachers as part of a predominantly White teaching force draw on 'high brow' books, museum installations and classical music by Black and ethnic minority cultural producers without the requisite training on critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies as part of their teacher preparation and on-going professional development can result in reductionist renditions of Black cultural capital that further recreates racialised class hierarchies as opposed to redressing racial injustices (Paris, 2012).

Second, the successes that middle-class Black Caribbean pupils and parents describe appear to be episodic wins rather than long-term gains in a fight to diversify curricular offerings. Participants are able to impact individual teachers but not necessarily Newton's teaching force writ large, a day's lesson rather than the development of a module for an entire term. The transformation of institutional culture is unlikely to occur by simply heeding the impulse to prioritise individualistic interventions, but by promoting long-term, coordinated efforts with the primary powerbrokers of the school (such as the senior leadership team, governors, student council, among others) to emphasise the urgent need to redistribute resources as a complementary addition to the demands for recognition and representation.

Third, individual advocacy from Black middle-class subjects, which participants appear to value, can perhaps yield more effective outcomes when accompanied by strategic, multi-institutional political organising to hold school and national educational officials to account. This is perhaps the case because in Britain's cultural political economy, of which schools are a part, whiteness retains its premium as the dominant authentic signifier of membership *and authority* among the middle classes (Archer, 2010). The dynamics explored at Newton are not exclusive to this school, but reflect trends throughout the British educational system – from early childhood education to higher education (Archer and Francis, 2007). Accordingly, the transformation of school curricula and the cultural character of state schools requires lobbying local educational authorities and the Department for Education, from the school and borough levels to the city and national levels. The aforementioned limitations do not negate the agentic advocacy of Black middle-class participants in this study. Their experiences are discussed in this article to suggest that coupling the use of Black cultural capital at Newton with coordinated political organising of Black parents and pupils – which students like Michelle have already begun to do by lobbying her peer group – can increase the returns on their micro-level advocacy.

The fact that the aforementioned micro, meso and macro-level actions are useful complements for Black cultural capital across social fields reiterates the fact that racial politics are closely associated with the production and mobilisation of cultural capital across social fields. Power is not shared equitably among various racial groups within the middle classes. In the aftermath of state-endorsed conquest and colonialism of the British Empire and the prolonged propagation of White economic and aesthetic dominance in 'postcolonial' times, the architecture of Britain's cultural political economy does not require White middle-class and elite individuals to organise micro, meso and macro-level actions for the effective mobilisation of their capital sets. The power structure already rests in their favour due to a history of White domination (Gilroy, 2004). The precarity of the Black middle classes, then, is not fundamentally about identity recognition within and against the dominant cultural infrastructure but about the institutional arrangements in which the Black and ethnic minority middle classes are less powerful numerically and politically than the White middle classes – including in schools like Newton (Rollock et al., 2015).

While Black cultural capital and other ethno-racial iterations of cultural capital are increasingly recognised and desired even by the White middle classes – as indicated by Shah et al. (2010), Meghji (2019) and Wallace (2018a) among others – an acute awareness of the racial politics of cultural capital as negotiated through parent–pupil partnerships necessitates a capacious political imagination that goes beyond equitable representation to, and acknowledgement among, the White middle classes. A counter-cultural political imagination demands an interrogation of racial capitalism as a system that powers inequality and preserves the marginalisation of Black and ethno-racial minorities, even when they attempt to 'play the game' among the middle classes.

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## Notes

1. The arguments advanced in this article focus on classical Bourdieusian notions of cultural capital, or what Carter (2006) refers to as dominant cultural capital. As argued in previous works (Wallace, 2017a, 2018a), I recognise the diversity and wide-ranging utility of cultural capital sets – including the dominant and non-dominant variants. However, in this article, I prioritise dominant iterations of cultural capital racialised as Black in keeping with the perspectives of the participants noted in this article. Such articulations are not only empirically significant but also politically expedient, particularly for cultural sociology, given the overwhelming interpretations of (dominant) cultural capital as a code for whiteness. For more on this, see Archer (2010) and Wallace (2018a).
2. I wish to be very clear at this juncture that my focus on parent–pupil partnerships among the Black middle classes in school is not at all an attempt to acquiesce to the conditions of social respectability nor an investment in shoring up claims of nuclear normativity as a vital or virtuous arrangement. The central commitment of this work is to the not-yet-explored multitudinous possibilities for recognising and resisting racism in schools. Parent–pupil partnership is but one such alternative articulated by participants in this study. This article is therefore concerned with the political agency and cross-generational advocacy of Black middle-class pupils and parents within contexts of constraint and racial bias.
3. Mary Waters' *Black Identities* (1999) and Orly Clerge's forthcoming *The New Noir* are the only exceptions. There remains a dearth of scholarship in the USA that focuses intently on the schooling experiences of the Black Caribbean middle classes.
4. Shared heritage notwithstanding, Black Caribbeans in the USA and the UK differ in meaningful ways based on their social class histories and the order of their arrival in their respective contexts of reception. Foner (2018), for instance, points out that the Black Caribbeans who formed the initial wave of immigrants to Britain were more selective (and largely middle class) relative to subsequent cohorts to Great Britain *and* compared to the stream of Caribbean nationals that immigrated to the USA. However, Black Caribbean immigrants in Britain did not have access to large groups of Black proximal hosts, race-based policies and affirmative action programmes to aid their transition into British society. In fact, as Solomos (2003) suggests, Black Caribbean immigrants to England were met with considerable racial animus and discrimination upon arrival, despite being full-fledged members of the British Commonwealth. Black Caribbean immigrants to the USA, however, benefited from the cultural presence, political power and legislative wins of African Americans.
5. Pupils were identified as middle class if one or both of the parents with whom they lived self-identified as such, earned a BA or related advanced degrees, and/or held professional or managerial occupations based on the British government's *Standard of Occupational Classification Manual*.
6. Parents in this study were immigrants hailing from Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, Barbados, Montserrat, Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, Martinique and the Bahamas. All the pupils were born in Britain, but self-identified as Black Caribbean, maintaining some familial and cultural ties to the Anglophone Caribbean.
7. First, I labelled the data using broad coding categories such as 'cultural advantages and disadvantages', 'Black tastes and styles', and 'racial bias in the classroom'. I then developed focused codes that more precisely represented the nuanced particularities of participants' experiences. These codes included 'tensions between class privilege and racial identity' and 'questioning whiteness in the curriculum'.

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