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Abstract

A dominant discursive formation claims deficient parenting amongst the poor predisposes their children to educational underachievement. A small number of children in poverty succeeding within early education challenges this construction of ‘parent blame’ and requires an explanation which does not undermine the dominant discourse about deficiencies amongst parents in poverty. This article argues the theory of active cultivation has gained traction because it offers this explanation by claiming ‘good parenting’ is context-neutral and is achievable once parents in poverty change their ways. But, drawing on data from parents in poverty whose children ‘beat the odds’ in early education, it is argued active cultivation has limitations as an explanation. It downplays the importance of economic marginality connected to parenting in poverty and is part of a wider trope justifying political direction.

Key Words

Child poverty, Active Cultivation, ‘Beating the Odds’, Pre-school, Early years

Introduction

Social class differences in parenting approaches have been recognised by many scholars. They ‘pinpoint the family as one of the most important loci of class differences’ and see parenting ‘as a mechanism for the reinforcement and reproduction of class variation’ (Sherman and Harris, 2012: 60), including a ‘social class gap’ (aka the ‘attainment gap’) which is evident initially in the early years (Perry and Francis, 2010; Andrews et al, 2017). Their work suggests complex interactions between social class determined by parents’ occupation and/or income, parenting and children’s attainment (Feinstein et al 2004). For instance, some highlight the continuing significance of economic aspects such as household income in the framing of parenting practices and support for children’s development and learning. They claim early educational outcomes of children remain dependent upon parents having enough financial resources to invest in their children’s education. Being poor creates problems and the level of financial

resource parents can utilise shapes stark differences in parental approaches and strongly correlates with outcomes for children (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018: 3). A 'cultural turn' in class theory has also produced claims it works through culture and socialisation processes to influence family life and parenting and this links to children's attainment (Skeggs, 2005). Indeed, rather than viewing economic and cultural resources as dichotomous there has been recognition of how they are intertwined and mutually reinforcing factors which shape 'class-related parenting' which differentially advantages children in early years education (Sherman and Harris, 2012: 60). The work of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu on 'capital' and reproduction of class inequalities has been influential in this respect.

Bourdieu (1986) pointed to an interplay between different forms of capital – economic (income from salary, savings, assets or other things that have economic value), cultural (in varied forms but including level of education/qualification and knowledge), and social capital (social assets derived from membership of networks and trusting, reciprocal relations) – in reproducing classed behaviours including those connected to parenting. Although Bourdieu did not empirically show how his theoretical notions apply to parenting his ideas suggest parents develop 'habitus' – i.e. socially acquired, embodied schemes that give meaning to practices. This 'habitus' is derived from one's social class position and is shaped by differing access to resources (i.e. the different forms of capital) which influences differing parenting values and actions in, for instance, the 'home-school field' (Mayall, 2015: 17). The differential habitus and transmission of resources through family suggests middle-class children receive a greater 'pay off' (e.g. in terms of language use compared to children in poorer families) and this has a superior value in an education field over which the middle class have power and control (e.g. over what is valued). In this way early educational inequalities – of process and outcomes - are claimed to be reproduced.

The seminal work of Lareau (2003; 2011) drew on Bourdieu's ideas to research parenting across social classes in the United States of America – applying them empirically (Lareau, 2011: 361) to reveal how individual parents draw on class-based cultural resources. She used data from her original ethnographic study of 88 parents (Lareau, 2003) and her follow up with 12 of these families (Lareau, 2011) – including in her sample 'middle class', 'working class' and 'impoverished parents'. She argued 'that key elements of family life cohere to form a cultural logic of child rearing'. Class position and access to different levels of resources 'cluster together to form meaningful patterns' of parenting – i.e. a middle-class parenting strategy called 'concerted cultivation' and a parenting strategy dominant amongst working class and poor parents called 'the accomplishment of natural growth'. These are 'cultural repertoires' which are discussed further below. As Lareau noted 'it was the interweaving of life experiences and resources, including parents' economic resources, occupational conditions and educational backgrounds [i.e. cultural capital], that seemed to be most important in leading middle-class parents to engage in concerted cultivation and working class and poor parents to engage in the accomplishment of natural growth' (Lareau, 2011: 250). Lareau claimed these different philosophies and approaches to rearing children via parenting lead to transmission of differential outcomes to children via the accumulation

of capitals that have unequal exchange value across institutions and fields such as early education.

Theorising about parenting, though, has also been influenced by a wider trend in social theory. Emerging theoretical perspectives on selfhood in 'new times' began to challenge theory around social class and placed far greater emphasis on identity and notions of individuality, fluidity, negotiation and choice (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). With this came a questioning of the utility of social class as a concept which can help make sense of society and social practices such as parenting in late modernity (Pakulski and Waters 1996). There was an argument social class had lost its relevance and primacy in explaining how people make sense of their identities (e.g. as parent) or adopt practices – although there remains plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise (see Dorling, 2014). Rather, the claim was practices including parenting are increasingly influenced by differences in personal resources, lifestyles and choice. This has raised debates about 'individualization' and 'risk' which for some shifted attention away from the economic, material and structural roots of inequality and sanctioned a psychologised approach to understanding parenting (Gillies, 2005: 835). As will be noted, 'active cultivation' is a psychologised approach emphasising personal qualities and choice in parenting, although it draws selectively from Lareau's classed analysis of parenting.

'Active cultivation' and 'success against the odds'

Although social class (based on income and occupation) and living in poverty, is a strong predictor of negative outcomes in early education and beyond, it is easy to forget that some parents living in poverty do raise children to succeed 'against the odds' according to the measures used in early education. An explanation for these small successes has gained traction. The theory of 'active cultivation' as a parenting strategy is advocated as a means for parents in poverty to help their children succeed 'against the odds' in education (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2013). This theory was constructed by child psychologists via the EPPSE (Effective Provision of Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education) Project (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2013). As such, it has a psychological ethic and orientation and a central focus upon what child development theorists call 'the proximal' rather than 'the distal'. Those completing the EPPSE research note how they set their focus upon 'investigating proximal processes that are related to children's expected or unexpected academic achievements' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2013; Siraj & Mayo, 2014). These proximal processes include interactions which children experience directly – particularly factors closest to the point of development such as attachments – rather than 'the role of society'. The rationale for this is proximal processes are the most malleable and open to change. The distal is downplayed but includes characteristics such as socio-economic status and low income:

'While the study found that parents' socio-economic status... and levels of education were significantly related to child outcomes, it also found that the quality of the HLE [home learning environment] (especially in the very early years) was important: it was what parents did that was more important in terms of children's outcomes than who they were' (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2013: 5)

The EPPSE research draws selectively on the theoretical framework of social class differences in parenting mentioned earlier which was developed in the USA by Lareau (2003; 2011). As noted, Lareau found middle class parenting styles are characterised by a cultural logic she called 'concerted cultivation'. A key aspect of this is parents deliberate and concerted engagement in their children's education and schooling and their use of economic and cultural resources to support their children's progress. Middle-class parents enrolled their children in a range of organised enrichment activities. In explaining why a small number of children from families with low socio-economic status (SES) succeeded in the English early educational context, the EPPSE project concluded that a parenting strategy called 'active cultivation' was a key contributing factor. Active cultivation was rooted in and 'resembled concerted cultivation' but it was 'by no means a mirror image of 'concerted cultivation'' because parents in low SES circumstances 'did not have similar financial means' as their middle class counterparts or 'equivalence in cultural and social capital' (Siraj & Mayo, 2014: 248). Rather, these parents with low SES adopting a strategy of active cultivation were said to overcome limitations in access to resources by 'the strength of their determination to help their children move ahead' and by 'helping their child to aspire to something more than they managed for themselves' (Siraj and Mayo, 2014: 248):

'The parents of low SES children 'succeeding against the odds' set and reinforced high standards of behaviour and academic aspiration for the child. They explicitly expressed their high esteem and aspirations, expectations for education. Although these parents acknowledged limits to their social, cultural and economic resources, this did not stop them from helping their child to succeed in school' (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2013: 5)

In contrast, the EPPSE project found parents of low SES children not succeeding 'expressed and displayed helplessness in their parenting' - although why was not considered by the authors of the EPPSE project via their focus on the proximal. So there was no explicit consideration of whether financial poverty might be to blame for helplessness. Rather, they implied it was not, because a small number of low SES parents do raise their children to succeed in early education. Moreover, they went on to indicate how the dominant parenting characteristic of working class and poor parents whose children did not succeed was a focus upon what Lareau in the USA had named 'the accomplishment of natural growth'. So, although Lareau (2003; 2011) found parents in poverty value educational success, their main pre-occupation is ensuring their children are fed, housed, appropriately clothed, clean and attending school. Lareau noted these are a serious challenge for the poorest families in the US context.

Drawing on Lareau's work the EPPSE researchers suggest it is this dominant focus upon the accomplishment of natural growth rather than a focus upon active cultivation by parents in poverty which prevents their children succeeding. Indeed, it is claimed 'both the 'sustaining natural growth' and the 'active cultivation' approach provide advantages and disadvantages and for many parents they increasingly present 'clear alternative choices' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010: 473). Active cultivation is conceptualized, therefore, as an acculturation process where a small number of parents in poverty choose to move beyond what are perceived as negative working-class cultural logics

which predispose children to failure to embrace and ape characteristics associated with middle class concerted cultivation. Lack of access to material and other resources is downplayed in this process. Active cultivation suggests parenting is a site for choice and it promotes key characteristics of a certain form of middle-class parenting ('concerted cultivation') as 'good parenting'. Such ideas have been fused with the wider discourse of parent blame by politicians championing neoliberal ideological shifts as part of a move to individualize structural problems. Indeed the EPPSE research and the language of active cultivation (e.g. Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2013: 5) has been used by the current Conservative government in the UK to justify its approach to improving social mobility - 'it is what parents and carers do that is more important than who they are' (DfE, 2017: 12).

Economic marginality and its ongoing corrosive effect on parenting

Active cultivation claims social class position and access to economic capital has largely diminished as an influence on parenting. Rather, the theory individualises parenting and in doing so it implies 'bad parenting' resulting in low educational attainment is avoidable if parents change their ways of thinking and practices. There is an implication parents are to blame for not changing. The theory has gained traction because it aligns with dominant political ideas held by successive UK governments about 'parent blame' and parenting deficiencies being a prominent causal factor of low educational attainment, poverty and other social ills (Jensen, 2018; Gillies et al, 2017). This 'new politics of parenting' asserts that even when 'parents have a strong desire to do the best for their children... many, especially in low-income groups, are ill-informed or poorly motivated on how to achieve this' (Allen, 2011: 57). The solution is to address supposed deficiencies via parent pedagogy (DWP & DfE, 2011: 20). Alleged widespread negative values and behaviours amongst parents in poverty, though, are hard to find and this view is challenged by research evidence (e.g. see Gordon, 2011: 5; Dermott and Pomati, 2015:125; Main and Mahony, 2018: 7).

Moreover, several reviews of international research identify the continuing significance of economic marginality in shaping parenting practices and identities – e.g. with low income identified by international research as 'a significant factor influencing parenting behaviours' (SMC, 2017: 18). A 'extensive, integrative review of the empirical literature on the effects and antecedents of parent–child attachment' also found 'our understanding of socio-emotional processes will remain incomplete without further consideration of how socioeconomic conditions affect parents' capacity to form secure attachments with their children' (Moullin et al, 2018: 278). A recent meta-analysis of random control trials found 'poorer children have worse cognitive, social-behavioural and health outcomes in part because they are poorer, and not just because poverty is correlated with other household and parental characteristics'. In explaining why (low) income matters, the authors 'found evidence in support of two central theories, one relating to the stress and anxiety caused by low income (the Family Stress Model), and the other relating to parents' ability to invest in goods and services that further child development (the Investment Model)' (Copper & Stewart, 2013: 5). Traces of these models were found below in the accounts of those parents of higher achieving boys living in Middlesbrough - the local authority area in England with the highest proportion of neighbourhoods in the most deprived 10 per cent of such neighbourhoods nationally

in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015. The data reveal the fundamental ongoing challenges faced by parents in poverty experiencing economic marginality.

Methodology

Although completed by the author independently, the research reported in this article utilized the methodology and research tools developed for, and used, in the Higher Achieving White Working Class (HAWWC) Boys Project in three other parts of England by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (2016). This article reports the findings of the research undertaken by the author using HAWWC's research tools in Middlesbrough. The HAWWC Boys research aimed to: 1) generate new knowledge about the parenting experienced by young, boys in poverty who succeed in early education despite the known negative predictive factors and; 2) identify from parents/carers key features of the early lives of these high achieving boys. The Middlesbrough research focused upon the parenting of 11 white working class boys in poverty who were 'succeeding against the odds' when they reached 5 years of age. Consequently, ten parents of HAWWC boys (9 mothers and 1 father) in Middlesbrough completed a Life Story interview. One parent had twins who were both HAWWC boys. Boys of the parents were in the top percentile in England for their attainment in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) aged 5. They therefore 'beat the odds' as underachievement in EYFSP of children entitled to free school meals (FSM) is a significant concern and that of White British FSM boys has been highlighted as particularly worrying (OfSTED, 2014; Strand, 2015).

As only 10 parents were interviewed no claim is made about the sample being representative of the wider population of parents in poverty who have raised their children to 'succeed against the odds' in the early years. The ability to generalize the findings is therefore restricted. Although modest, though, the research has wider relevance as there has been very little qualitative evidence in the literature which addresses the issues it explores (Feinstein et al 2004), especially in the context of continuing austerity (Gilles et al, 2017). So, the research addresses a gap in the literature and in doing so a cautious approach is adopted using 'moderatum generalization' (Payne and Williams 2005). Small-scale qualitative projects can support a coherent chain of reasoning to test, challenge and even refute current propositions (Gorard, 2002) and they can also produce testable propositions that themselves might be confirmed or refuted by further evidence (Payne and Williams 2005, 296).

Meta-theoretically the research adopted critical realist ideas which assume societal structures (such as economic structures) and agency of parents are 'distinct strata of reality as the bearers of quite different properties and powers' (Archer, 2003, 2). So ontologically there is no conflation of these strata and no denying of 'the life of the mind' in the mediatory process that links structural factors, individual agency and reflexivity (Sayer, 2005: 29). Below dualism is assumed with reflexivity (i.e. 'internal conversations') being key to a dynamic mediatory process between agency and wider structural conditions of choice. As such, theoretically in explaining the parenting mentioned below wider contextual circumstances (including access to different forms of capital) enabled and constrained parents, their parenting practices and parenting

resilience. But they did this when parents engaged in reflexive internal conversations about (rather than with) these contexts and about the limited resources to which they have access. This 'determines [their] being-in-the-world, although not in the times and the circumstances of [their] choosing' (Archer, 2001). The data reveal how parents were involved in a continual process of prioritizing, mulling over and planning connected to their parenting. Their reflexive self-talk gives meaning to and activates the constraints and enablers of the social contexts in which they find themselves with regard to their parenting. Indeed, findings below show how in reflecting on parenting and the circumstances and resources in which it took place parents 'could find themselves pulled in different directions' (Sayer, 2005: 25). Full ethical clearance was granted from the author's University for the research and all names used are pseudonyms. At least one extract from all 10 interviews has been used below.

Findings

Economic marginality and threats to parenting resilience

The parents in Middlesbrough were united by a common experience of economic marginality and lacked access to economic capital. Despite this the Middlesbrough parents raised boys to 'succeed against the odds' in early education while resisting and minimising the impact of risky contextual conditions to allow warm and positive parenting behaviours to predominate in their relationship with their boys. They created positive home learning environments while investing in their boys' social and emotional well-being. But this did not mean economic marginality was unimportant and their data highlights the significant challenge material restrictions continually presented to their parenting and to their parenting resilience. Their resilience was more than an individual personality trait which helped them cope with adversity attached to economic poverty (Clark, 2012). Rather it resulted from a continual process of negotiation - including reflexivity, defence mechanisms, guarding against stress and shame. Resilience was about daily strategizing connecting their personal resources such as resourcefulness and adaptability with limited access to economic and other resources shaping very difficult conditions of choice. Stressful economic and social challenges continued to make this much more difficult.

The Middlesbrough data makes visible how economic marginality gives rise to real effects which cannot be ignored if one is wanting to fully understand parenting in poverty. This was most obviously evident in the Middlesbrough parents' ability to invest in goods and services to support their boy's development. A lack of access to economic capital impinged upon such investment. The majority of the Middlesbrough parents had experienced persistent poverty as they raised their boys meaning their access to economic capital (income from salary, savings, assets or other things that have financial value) was severely restricted. Especially in an English context where since 2010 (the year the majority of the HAWWC boys were born) austerity policies and welfare reforms have resulted in those on low incomes being affected most negatively with their situation described as 'bleak' (EHCR, 2018: 8). There was clear evidence of financial pressure amongst the sample members which stymied investment in items and activities which might support their boys' interests and learning:

Natalie - It's been tough on my own... Like sometimes struggling with money, sometimes trying to get him what he wants.... Then like sometimes his behaviour can be a bit offish, his attitude... You only get so much to live on... I'm on ESA [Employment and Support Allowance], I get child tax credit and child benefit, but it doesn't help with other things like paying bills and stuff as well because you have to pay your bills and then food shopping.

Rachel – they know when mum's a bit down. Like, you can't help it, if you get upset... Like they know when payday is... They go on about, well, so-and-so, they're going on holiday this year. We've never really been on holiday... they're going on about, 'oh, so-and-so's rich, so-and-so's rich; are we rich, mam?' 'No, no, we're not rich, but we're okay, we've got a roof over our head.

Importantly, the comments above reveal how the 'accomplishment of natural growth' through ensuring heating and eating, along with 'a roof over' their boys' heads, was an on-going priority and challenge for the Middlesbrough parents. It was not simply a choice between supporting their boys' natural growth or their active cultivation as others discussed earlier suggest. Moreover, this continual focus upon natural growth by the 10 parents in Middlesbrough was not detrimental to their boys' early educational outcomes. Indeed, it appeared essential to their children's success. Given its importance, to secure more economic capital and ease their precariousness some parents in the sample and their partners undertook paid work to ensure increased household income. But when they did, balancing parental employment and parenting investment as part of family life could be a serious challenge. Katie highlighted this challenge and the strain it can place on family relations and remaining resilient:

Katie – there's been arguments and things... Just things like bills what need paying... Money worries... I feel sometimes like I'm left on my own with three kids a lot. He works currently at a tyre garage, and he works Monday to Saturday, leaves here at about quarter past eight in a morning, and doesn't get in until about half past five, and the kids go to bed at seven. So, I do a lot of it on my own, and then it's like weekend and he works.

Economic pressure and parental stress

Access to limited economic capital also resulted in financial stress and anxiety amongst the parents and this could compromise their resilience and parenting practices. Large scale research across several countries has identified that 'to survive on a low income in very challenging conditions requires considerable skill, inventiveness and fortitude', but this can be very stressful and it can make parenting very difficult (Walker et al, 2013: 230). This is especially the case for those experiencing persistent poverty, with family relations often being strained. Living in poverty and the associated stress levels can undermine parenting resilience by fraying family relations – although some interesting solutions can emerge via family arrangements:

Karen - I don't regret none of my kids, but... if I'd have obviously gone into studying, university and stuff, and then obviously started a family, but it all panned out different... Obviously, I wouldn't have no, like, money issues or nothing like that... He [her partner] lives in a separate house. We just get on better... He lives with his mam, just down the road... We're still together, we just obviously just get on better living apart.

Living in poverty can be visceral – it can result in deep inward feelings of shame and 'hidden injuries' which complicate and can undermine decision making when parenting. This is because as well as its material effects, people living in poverty have to live with the shaming attitudes of others towards them. Psychological discomfort can occur when poverty threatens the prestige which comes from being recognised as a 'good parent' within kinship and social networks. Walker et al (2013) revealed how parents often feel ashamed because of the poverty they experience and subjective feelings of shame reduce parents' self-confidence and are especially strongly associated with parenting in Britain:

Natalie - I suffer with panic attacks and depression. It just gets me down sometimes... because like you're panicking and you're thinking I'm not going to get everything in what I can get him... So long as I've got my gas and electric and I've got my food in for me and [her son], then I'm not bothered about anything else, as long as like we've got food and a roof over our head and gas and electric.

Natalie exposes again how the 'accomplishment of natural growth' continued to be a constant focus of these parents. Additionally, and importantly, though, it is easy to see from Natalie's comments why the feeling of 'helplessness' in parenting found by Siraj et al amongst those with limited access to economic capital might become prevalent and how it can impact negatively on family life and parenting. Women and single mothers have been particularly hard hit economically by recent austerity measures (EHCR, 2018: 8). The single mothers in the Middlesbrough sample reported particular challenges:

Tina - Well, it is hard. Of course it's hard. I mean, there's no way around that – it is hard. It is stressful... But, it's something that's just the norm now, and we get on with it... We go out a lot; we do have a lot of family time so that we don't have to be stressed out. We go out so they can run round; we love going for walks and stuff like that.

Space, place and challenging home learning environments

Economic capital is invested in housing and all the Middlesbrough parents lived in social housing or private rented accommodation. As mentioned above, their narratives reveal how providing a 'roof over the head' for their children was a top priority but the type of accommodation that was affordable on low incomes shaped highly localized housing histories. The Middlesbrough families lived in limited spaces which resulted in family stress and arguments which, again, threatened the active cultivation of their boys by

undermining positive home learning environments. Parents in this study were constantly guarding against the negative effects of stress and the limited housing they could afford featured as an intersecting factor:

Martin – When our [boy] was born we ran a paper shop, newsagents and bakery... We lived above, we actually lived in a one bedroom flat, four of us, then [the son] was born. There was plenty of stress.

Lisa – It is quite stressful. Like, there are money problems, and just with the four children, all just ... like, the house is quite small [3 bedrooms for 4 children and mum and dad], so it does get a bit stressful... He's [her partner's] on the sick at the minute, for depression and stuff.

Parents also implied the places in which they could afford to live made actively cultivating their boys a significant challenge. Parenting resilience to achieve active cultivation is about protecting children from risky contextual conditions and several of the sample talked about negative aspects of the places (neighbourhoods) in which they lived and having to ensure these did not threaten their boy's development. For instance, when interviewed Carol-Ann had recently moved from social housing within the neighbourhood in which her son had attended pre-school education. She expressed very negative views on that neighbourhood which in 2015 was one of the 1% most multiply deprived wards in England. She highlighted how trying to protect her son from the negative aspects in that local community had caused tensions with her son undermining positive relations important to resilience and active cultivation:

Carol-Ann - with all of the criminals and stuff round there, and [her son] couldn't really go on the front of our road, so I thought it'd be best to move... he used to say to me, 'Mum, you won't let me go and make friends', and I'm like, 'Well, I would, but you can't go out where there's naughty people', and then he'd kick off... like, start screaming and crying, 'but I want to play out', I'm like, 'You can't'.

Interestingly when interviewed Carol-Ann had recently moved to another neighbourhood which was also within the top 1% most multiply deprived wards in England in 2015 and has a reputation for significant social problems such as poverty, illegal drug use and prostitution. The difference lay in the proximity of Carol-Ann's trusted locally-embedded social networks being situated within the new neighbourhood to which she moved. Her extended family were living in this new locale and they became a source of resource and comfort. Her experience highlighted the importance of access to other sources of capital (e.g. social capital) when rearing their boys.

Other forms of capital

Economic marginality influenced parents' access to social capital and cultural capital which can also be 'spent' by parents to support their children's development.

Limited economic capital rooted the Middlesbrough parents in highly localised kinship networks which had implications for access to social capital – i.e. trusted relationships and social networks 'directly usable in the short or long-term' (Bourdieu, 1986). Of course, accessing social capital via kinship bonds to support their parenting was not

simply dependent on economic capital. Most of the Middlesbrough parents highlighted the importance of accessing social capital via family as a support:

Katie – [their nan] always had them, since being a baby in a pram, she's always came and picked them up at least once a week, if not more.

But in a context of insecurity and precariousness these parents were very dependent on kinship networks. Only 3 of the 11 parents had accessed 'free' education places for disadvantaged two-year olds which was piloted in Middlesbrough when their boys were growing up. But all the parents accessed 'free' education places for 3-4 year olds available in England for 12 hours a week at the time when their boys became eligible. The parents, though, could not pay for additional time in nursery for their boys or tutors. They relied on family members and trusted others for additional support and all had limited bridges to wider forms of social and cultural capital via extended relationships, and the advantages this might bring. Indeed, some in Middlesbrough and the wider HAWWC sample experienced social isolation. Some accessed community resources where they met with other parents. But wider economic pressures and austerity cuts has meant contraction and/or closure of community resources in England. Susan acknowledged such resources were a big help when raising her boy but when more recently she had another child she found this support had reduced in the context of austerity cuts:

Susan – I used to go to everything... Sure Starts. There was a hell of a lot more then – there's nothing, hardly anything now – and then I'd meet mums and then go round each other's houses, that sort of thing.

Being embedded in these kinship networks was also complicated when competing demands were present. For instance, Catherine – the oldest sample member in her 40s - was the main carer for her elderly mother. She would drop off her boy early at school and collect him after he'd attended after-school provision. This allowed her extra time to care for her mother. Her son, though, questioned the amount of time he spent at school:

Catherine – each term you've got to write down where he wants to go and which [after-school] activity, so ... it was before Christmas anyway, we had to do another form and he said to me, 'no, I don't want to go'. What did he say? 'Don't you think I spend enough time at school'? ...It's like three till four; I picked him up at four. He just didn't want to go when I was filling the forms in... He said 'no, mum, I don't want to go. I spend too much time at school.

Material poverty with limited social networks also had implications for accessing forms of cultural capital. As already indicated, the parents sometimes prioritized paying for heating rather than what is called 'objectified cultural capital' – i.e. cultural objects which might support learning activities. Another form of 'embodied cultural capital' includes the ideas and preferences shaping parenting – so what Lareau called their 'cultural repertoire' of parenting. These are learnt via the socialisation process, and for the parents in Middlesbrough this took place in their kinship networks with little evidence of extended relations facilitating learning of values and practices more usually found

embodied in the 'concerted cultivation' of the middle class. Indeed, a striking finding was clear evidence that the Middlesbrough parents (and the parents in the wider HAWWC Boys project) lacked awareness and knowledge of their son's academic progress/achievement and their own successful parenting in this regard. This raised doubts about any acculturation taking place. The Middlesbrough parents were far more relaxed about their children's learning than is suggested by the theory of active cultivation. They provided warm, nurturing parenting and engaged in sustained dialogues with their boys, but they allowed their boys to self-initiate and direct their activities with limited evidence of parents' organisational hand in their learning:

Interviewer: Did you know much about his performance?

Martin: No, not really.

Interviewer: Were you interested in it?

Martin: If they're happy, they're learning. They could be top, could be bottom. If they're happy and they are picking things up. If they're at the bottom then they need a bit of help to get them to the average. But they're trying their best.

The Middlesbrough parents certainly did not view their boys as projects whose learning they needed to work upon in an intensive way. Rather, they gave their children autonomy and freedom to pursue their own interests via extended leisure time etc. which are characteristics of parenting to achieve natural growth in poorer families (Lareau, 2011: 4). The parents did talk about supporting their boys' social, linguistic and cultural competencies as best they could. But their 'institutional cultural capital' (i.e. their level of education and qualification) could be a hindrance:

Katie – I didn't do very well in school and I'd just like to think that them, my three kids, did do a lot better than what I did... I'm not the most cleverest person – I don't know lots ... and sometimes he'll talk to me about things, and I'll just think, I don't understand... So, then I'll go off and I'll try and find out a little bit about it so I can talk to him about it.

Conclusions

Poverty and the impact of economic marginality upon parenting and children should not be understated. Data mentioned reveal how social class and parents' limited access to economic and other forms of capital was intimately related to the process of parenting resilience and the successful cultivation of their boys. With its focus upon the proximal those applying the concept of active cultivation have implied such economic and other resources are unimportant. Rather, they imply parents in poverty predispose their children to failure because they choose to focus upon the accomplishment of natural growth rather than actively cultivating their children's motivations and skills. The data from this research, though, suggest active cultivation misrecognises consequence for cause in explaining the parenting of those from poor backgrounds who

successfully rear their children to 'beat the odds'. While it is important to be cautious when considering wider relevance of data from small samples, the evidence from Middlesbrough imply a focus upon natural growth and its accomplishment is a consequence of parenting with limited economic resources in a profoundly unequal society, and not a cause of underachievement. This focus featured prominently in the parenting of the sample members in Middlesbrough with economic marginality positioning it as a continual preoccupation for parents when protecting their children from poverty. It was prioritized over paying for additional tuition, holidays, books and new technologies. A focus on it was not detrimental to their boys' success in the early years. Indeed, this focus on natural growth appeared necessary to underpin their boys' success. The parents in Middlesbrough were also relaxed about their boys' progress, lacking knowledge of it and not, therefore, showing an intensive determination to ensure their boys succeeded educationally. This is claimed to be a key characteristic of active cultivation and parenting which allows children in poverty to 'beat the odds', although the boys in Middlesbrough had done so without such an emphasis from parents.

Active cultivation has gained traction as an explanation for children in poverty 'beating the odds' against a backdrop of austerity in which programmes of welfare reform and continuing economic uncertainty have seen rising poverty levels among children and families. This is a context in which official political rhetoric has explained educational underachievement among the poor as resulting from deficiencies in their values and practices rather than structural inequalities. Active cultivation, with its emphasis on the proximal and 'good parenting' being resource-neutral and achievable if parents in poverty would just behave in a resourceful and resilient way, has been adopted as part of this wider political trope rich in 'anti-welfare commonsense'. Parents in poverty, though, do not parent in a bubble. The experiences of those successfully parenting in Middlesbrough cannot be explained fully by active cultivation. Indeed, their data suggest explanations must fully acknowledge class processes attached to economic marginality - and how they work biographically through individuals. Explanations which do not may be harmful if used to justify cuts to welfare payments and services in the community. This is also true if they are used to support stigmatizing parenting pedagogy which tries to change 'motivations' and practices simply assumed to be deviant.

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