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Diane Reay & Stephen J. Ball

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'Spoilt for Choice': the working classes and educational markets

DIANE REAY & STEPHEN J. BALL

ABSTRACT *Drawing on data from an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study of market forces in secondary education, this paper explores the ambivalence displayed by many working-class parents in the research to the idea of choice of school. School is frequently associated with powerful memories and images of personal failure. The authors argue: that for working-class parents choice can sometimes involve complex and powerful accommodations to the idea of 'school' and is very different in kind from middle-class choice making; that social class remains a potent differentiating category in the analysis of home-school relations; and that choice is a new social device through which social class differences are rendered into educational inequality. Extracts from interview data are quoted to support and illustrate these arguments.*

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we attempt to develop an analysis of working-class school choice which recognises the complex and sometimes painful accommodations working-class parents have to make. We suggest that working-class decision-making in education is infused by ambivalence, fear and a reluctance to invest too much in an area where failure is still a common working-class experience [1]. When understandings of working-class choice are expanded beyond simple comparisons of lists of criteria, to include psycho-sociological processes and the conditions of experience, then contradictions that they have to deal with, and the compromises inherent in their decision-making in relation to schooling, become apparent. While we employ working class in a fairly crude and all-embracing way here we do not wish to deny either the complex and shifting nature of social class in 1990s Britain or the many different factions which comprise the working classes. It is clear from our data that a small number of working-class parents do engage with the educational market in similar ways to middle-class choosers (Ball *et al.*, 1996). However, as we point out later, in doing so they are involved in a very different process to middle-class parents. Furthermore, the working-class category remains useful in so far that the economic and social context within which educational choices take place is one of increasing social inequalities and social polarisation (Hutton, 1995). In the new consumer age, class analysis which addresses and exposes social inequality, rather than rehearsing social pathology, offers an important oppositional discourse to set over and against the tide of neo-liberal individualism. The 'new' consumption class divisions generated by the establishment of social markets (in education, health, housing,

community services, etc.) seem on closer inspection to be a re-invention or ramification of old social divisions.

The separation between working and living is at best a superficial estrangement, an apparent tearing asunder of what can never be kept apart. And it is at this deeper level too that we can more clearly see the underlying unity between work-based and community-based conflicts. (Harvey, 1978, p. 35)

Social class continues to provide some of the most powerful imagery for describing and analysing social injustice in the UK [2].

DEVIATING FROM THE NORM

The wider context within which working-class parents make their school choices is strongly influenced by prevailing political and educational discourses. These discourses have become part of an array of ideological constraints that working-class parents face. Concurrently, in academic discourses the processes impacting on working-class life have been reduced to either declarations about the disappearance of 'the working-class' (Pakulski & Waters, 1995) or, within other research on 'choice', have been reworked into new social pathologies based upon implicit criticism of 'bad choosers' or 'bad parenting' (Martin, 1995; Murphy, 1989). Both of these positions are premised on a denial of working-class experience, either by conflating it with middle-class experience or by conjuring up deficit models of the working classes. Furthermore, despite current academic querying as to whether the working classes still exist, they are very evident in both middle-class parents and teachers' accounts as potent and threatening 'others'. Increasingly, in the context of choice of school they have become what is to be avoided. School management teams talk openly about not getting swamped with too many working-class pupils, while many middle-class parents refer euphemistically to avoiding schools with 'rougher elements' (Ball *et al.*, 1996).

In the popular and academic media, educational choice is typically theorised in terms of an implicit middle-class norm. The possibility of other experiences of or orientations to choice is ignored. There is a tendency 'to forget that actors, because of their very unequal access to the economic, political and cultural means of production, contribute just as unequally to the construction of social reality' (Mouzelis, 1995, p. 16). The working classes are objectified within normative constructions of parental choice which are based on middle-class, not working-class, choice making (Ball *et al.*, 1995). Issues that are significant for many working-class parents are marginalised in choice debates. None the less, there are other versions of choice which lie outside the discursive *status quo*. Here, we want to begin to explore and theorise the relationship of working-class parents and children to 'school'. In particular, we want to uncover understandings that are not easy to represent within the prevailing discourses but which working-class parents may communicate 'a sense of'. As well as working with and within what is clearly articulated by parents in interview, we have attempted to work with the traces, hints and suggestions that convey a sense of 'something different going on'. Different that is from explanations sustained through hegemonic discourses [3].

In research on school choice working-class choices are typically evacuated of any meaning in their own terms, and are routinely represented through the values of others. One consequence of this is the identification of middle-class parents with rational, carefully considered choice-making and working-class parents with inadequate, ill considered choices or 'leaving it up to the child'. Assumptions which take middle-class

experience to be normative thus discursively construct working-class parents as ill informed and less or inappropriately involved in their children's education. Concomitantly, headteachers of urban, predominantly working-class comprehensives, as well as headteachers of popular, high reputation schools, are increasingly talking of 'the need to attract more middle-class parents'. There is a danger that the working-class parent is being discursively constructed as a liability; 'not the sort of parent we want in our school'. Certain types of secondary schooling, such as grammar and direct grant, have always been predominantly middle-class. In the new educational era, growing numbers of comprehensives, particularly those that are successful in the educational marketplace, are becoming increasingly inaccessible to working-class pupils. New forms of selection may exaggerate this exclusivity further.

Wells and Crain assert, in their discussion of desegregation and black parents' educational choice in America, that what is frequently overlooked in the American choice debate is that black parents have to negotiate more difficult choices than their white counterparts: 'Choices that are mired in the reality of discrimination and domination' (Wells & Crain, 1992, p. 80). In a similar way, many working-class parents have to deal with the conflicts inherent in viewing popular, academically oriented schools as 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 110). Unsurprisingly, there is a reluctance on the part of many working-class families to choose popular, high reputation schools (Woods, 1993, p. 8). Far from being ill considered, this reluctance represents a powerful common-sense logic in which to refuse to choose what is not permitted offers a preferable option to choices which contain the risk of humiliation and rejection.

An earlier article (drawing on the same data-base) argued that 'how far and in what ways people are "captured" by the discourse (of consumption) is thus a matter for any investigation of parental choice' (Bowe *et al.*, 1994b, p. 66). Embedded in consumerist discourses there are contentious propositions around the intrinsic value of individuals. In a contemporary climate where everything, from water to education, has a price, it is becoming increasingly acceptable to voice questions involving the measurement and evaluation of people's relative social worth (such as in the health sphere where old people with dementia are deemed not worth wasting flu jabs on!). As suggested already, within a prevailing educational culture in which school governing bodies talk openly about potential A grade pupils being more valuable than potential Ds, girls more valuable than boys (Ball *et al.*, 1996), it is only a small step to begin to identify being working class with having low social value.

ISSUES OF RELATIVE SOCIAL WORTH

Working-class parents are far less likely than middle-class parents to see themselves as the sort of 'consumers' of education represented in official texts, like *The Parents Charter* (Ball *et al.*, 1996). None the less, they are captured by and within other dominant discourses and frequently judge themselves by middle-class standards. For every parent the individuality of their child is primary. Distinctions are made between 'our' child and others. One aspect of this in our interviews is that working-class parents repeatedly differentiated between their own child or children like their own, and more academically inclined pupils. Working-class parents also tended to regard differences and individual qualities as fixed within the child and not susceptible to school effects. Mrs Rassumen, for example:

Well, I did think of Gorse because obviously the results, 83% of GCSEs at A to C and there were two girls got ten As but then there was my nephew. He

went to Gorse and I don't know maybe he got into the wrong company or whatever, and he started skipping school and things like that, he didn't turn out to be very good and he didn't even do his GCSE ... so it's not necessarily about whether the school is good or the result is very good because it depends on the children [4].

and:

The second one is doing better than the oldest one, she's quite bright, the second one ... but it's not the school, it's the child. it's not down to ... you can't blame the school. (Mrs Stockwell)

These are examples of a paradoxical theme in a number of working-class accounts. There is a perverse sense in which such ideas feed back into the social Darwinism of Conservative welfare ideologies which seek to 'blame the victim'.

Working-class parents bring different concerns and perspectives on schooling to their choice making which are, in part, a consequence of their lower social status. For instance, it was only working-class parents who mentioned fairness as an important quality in secondary schooling:

RB: So you've been quite pleased with Mountview?

Mrs P: Yes, I've found them very fair.

There was also a particular focus on the accessibility and friendliness of teachers. Mrs Harvey, explaining the influences on her choice of secondary school, commented:

Then we went to have a look around the school and that's where it started ... the positive attitude from the tutors, they made you feel welcome, they were very friendly, they explained everything.

Concern with the accessibility and friendliness of teachers is understandable when it is juxtaposed with stories like the one Mrs Robertson recounted:

There was something said to my son in the school ... cos your mother is a cleaner and my son came home and told me that and I didn't think it was a nice thing. It was a teacher that said it to him ... like is he not ashamed ... because I'm a cleaner in the school, like the lowest of the low that was the way they looked at it.

An awareness of status differences is more significant and problematic for working-class than middle-class parents although they can be of importance to the latter (Ball *et al.*, 1996). Mrs Robertson feels her relationship to school is affected and constrained by her status position relative to teachers. Consequently, a number of working-class parents seem to be reassured when the social distance between parents and teachers and pupils and teachers is less, rather than more, apparent. Such working-class concerns suggest a need to take into consideration the general structural relationship of the working classes to education; a relationship 'fraught with dilemmas and contradictions' (Lynch & O'Neill, 1994, p. 318). They stress the specificity of the working-class relationship to education:

This structural isolation of the working class does not occur to the same degree for any other group because no other group's culture is structurally defined in its totality as being structurally inferior and inadmissible in education. (Lynch & O'Neill, 1994, p. 319)

Inherently, schooling is about working-class failure, middle-class success. This should inform any theorisation about class differences in relation to choice. Massey's

reworking of the concept of 'home' is also useful here in the analysis of the relationships between social class and schooling. The sense of 'being at home' and 'feeling at home' varies between schools. It appears from our data that working-class parents feel most at home in their local comprehensive. The specificity of place is thus important, but on another level it can be argued that wherever the working classes are located they have never been 'at home' in schooling. Home is also about 'what you feel at home with'; for working-class parents this is unlikely to be state packaged education. There is a long history of academic writing which, through the development of theories of alienation or resistance (Aggleton, 1987; Brown, 1987; Giroux, 1983; McFadden, 1995; Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977), positions schooling as a space where the working classes feel 'out of place' (or imprisoned; three of the working-class transcripts use the metaphor of a 'prison' to describe secondary schools visited). In contrast, middle-classness tends to be about feeling 'at home' in education. Clearly such a contrast sits awkwardly and antagonistically against the prevailing political discourse of classlessness in which class is no longer a significant category. Rather it reminds us that in England we are coping with 'the most class differentiated system in the world' (Green, 1990).

We argue here that educational choices are informed by an interior world of class and, within that, a whole system of defensive mechanisms that incorporate all subjects regardless of class position (Pheterson, 1993; Walkerdine, 1995). Walkerdine describes working-class negotiation of the social world as a complex socio-psychological process governed by expediency and survival in 'dangerous places'. And indeed, 'Patterns of defences produced in family practices which are about avoiding anxiety and living in a very dangerous world' (Walkerdine, 1995, p. 325) are very evident in the worlds of working-class parents in our data set. Working-class patterns of educational-choice are characterised by ambivalence, and appear to be as much about the avoidance of anxiety, failure and rejection as they are about 'choosing a good school for my child'. This raises the question of the degree to which an individual's sense of their own social worth influences or plays a part in the choice process. Working-class choice of secondary schooling often seems to incorporate a process of self-elimination similar to the one Bourdieu and Passeron describe in relation to working-class children and education more generally (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977):

The academic side of things wasn't the be all and end all. I think a lot of it stems from our background really. I mean we are not particularly academically brilliant. (Mrs Pallister)

Processes of self-elimination were especially evident in relation to private schooling. Among the white working-class parents interviewed even those parents who knew about the Assisted Places Scheme and had considered private schools frequently expressed serious reservations about their child's ability to 'fit in':

They can go through the school for nothing, but then we thought ... well I felt ... Richard would be ... the children there are paying children ... they would be not Richard's sort ... maybe he might feel out of it. (Mrs Chaning)

Along with repeated self-deprecation, there is often a ready assumption of the mantle of stupidity. In a similar vein Greed writes of the difficulties of juxtaposing 'clever' with 'working-class' and the resultant 'intellectual carnage' among young working-class people (Greed, 1991, p. 106). For the majority of working-class parents we interviewed

entering your child for a selective, secondary school examination is to dare too far; a denial of what working-class parents 'know':

I thought mine wouldn't get in anyway, because my cousin's little girl, no, my sister-in-law's little girl is very clever and she didn't get in, so I thought, well there's no hope for mine. (Mrs Nevin)

Even when the working classes are clever, there is no guarantee of academic reward. Mrs Harper, talking about her partner, commented:

I mean he's a very clever man and he came away with nothing, nothing as far as qualifications. He didn't get anything.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CHOICES

Throughout the interview transcripts there were important cross-class themes. Travel, uniforms, discipline, and judging by the impression of children at the school gate were frequently mentioned in the perception and evaluation of schools by both middle and working-class parents. Across all these shared themes what is at issue is the degree of emphasis between class groupings rather than class differences. However, drawing on Bourdieu again the similarities can be viewed as a consequence of the working-classes taking over a system of evaluation which works against them (Bourdieu, 1992). In the example of children's behaviour at the school gate, parents have very different relationships to what they see depending on their class position. The middle-classes see 'rough elements', working-class kids who may get in the way of their own child's learning. Working-class parents confront the spectre of what their own child may become.

Intuition and feel also play a part in parents' decisions across class (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1993). Intuitive feelings for both middle- and working-class parents seem to act as a screen for what is unacceptable within choice making. When middle-class parents talk in terms of 'the sort of school I like' and 'the right social mix' they are often employing euphemisms for middle-classness. Intuition and feel in working-class transcripts is a much more tentative searching; an attempt to articulate something that is even harder to say:

I think also the more we thought about it ... we decided that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to send him there after all. He'd be out of his depth ... and also with Blenheim the kind of kids that he's going to be mixing with there is not exactly a particularly good cross section of society ... certainly not really the sort of kids that he mixes with at the moment ... it would be a total change for him. (Mr Reid)

The prospect of negotiating difference and class boundaries often kindles a sense of alarm and uncertainty in working-class parents; feelings that lead to self-exclusion and social closure. The uncertainty which results from difficulties in seeing across class boundaries produces an open-endedness; an ambivalence about the future which is evident in many of the working-class accounts:

No, I've always believed ... you sort of let them go where their life takes them ... where they end up wanting to go ... never had any sort of preconceived ideas of what they were going to end up doing. (Mrs Donald)

Two possible interpretations of this can be offered. Mrs Donald's words can be construed as indicating a lack of interest in her children's prospects. Alternatively, they

can be viewed as a rational mixture of pragmatism and defensiveness in the face of endemic, working-class academic failure. Both she and her husband left school without any qualifications. For parents whose own educational experiences have been characterised by failure, explicitly articulated aspirations for children involve negotiating the dangers of setting them up to fail. There are the hazards both of disappointment and of making costly emotional and psychological investments which are unlikely to generate a return. They also do not have the appropriate repertoire of imaginary futures in which to place their child as 'academic success' or any real sense of what that might mean socially or positionally.

Parents' current choices are frequently powerfully influenced and informed by their own experiences of schooling. Recent work on educational choice has started to engage with the impact of parents' educational histories on their decisions (David *et al.*, 1994). On the simplest level, almost by definition, the working classes in general have a more negative experience of education than middle-class people. There is a lot of negativity and negative self-evaluation in working-class transcripts:

Obviously he doesn't take after mum cos he's a bright boy. (Mrs Botham)

I didn't see eye to eye with school so I didn't go much. I don't want that for mine, I want them to try and have a go at things. (Mrs Everley)

I just took my CSEs then I was glad to get out of there. I mean people say your school days are the best days of your life but ... (Mrs West)

I didn't take any exams because I just hated school. (Mrs Gatsby)

There is a need to open up what is encoded in working-class choice within this larger landscape of working-class, academic failure. How difficult is it to put your child over hurdles you have failed to clear yourself or to subject them to experiences which were so painful and damaging for you? There are several traces of this theme of reservation, mingled with ambivalence, in the transcripts:

SB: Do you have any ideas what you want the boys to do?

Ms Talbot: Me? It's not up to me. You see, it's not really ... it's not up to me ... whatever they decide what they wanna do, I'll back them up. All I can do is help them along the way ... that's all I can do.

and:

I looked at the league tables but I can't say I was interested at all by them. We were looking for something to bring Karen and Matthew on. 'Cos one thing with Matthew when he was at primary school ... he was very frightened as such about maths. (Mrs Casey)

Previous articles have discussed a middle-class process of matching child with school (Ball *et al.*, 1996). However, there is evidence that 'child matching' is important for working-class parents but involves identifying different aspects of schooling from those on middle-class agendas. Often working-class parents were impressed when schools gave positive attention to less academically inclined pupils rather than focusing primarily on able students:

I was quite impressed because they were interested in individual children ... not just the bright ones ... they were interested in all children and their idea is no child is a failure and every child stands a chance ... and to my mind it's a much better approach ... than saying we expect them to leave school with so many exams ... you know cos this is the idea when they're selling their schools all you get is exam results. (Mrs French)

and:

It was good really, they displayed lots of children's work ... it wasn't just the good ones ... that you saw the names of the same person on things, it was a whole cross-section of pupils that had put work in ... they displayed the lot, and it was the same with all the subjects, history and geography ... it wasn't just the good one. (Mr Casey)

Mrs Wood, talking about covert selection procedures, said:

Well, it is unfair, it depends whose side you're on. I mean if you have a child and you really think she's bright and you don't want people to hold her back then you can say it's good, but if you have an average or maybe low ability then you'll say no ... they can select you in a way you really don't know there's a selection going on. But I think there is selection because they ask you all these questions ... and they are going to judge you by the answer you put ... I prefer to go for the older school which remains the same ... I mean ... if ... the new technical school is good, but I know what I think Melissa's capable of, so I go for the school that I think will suit her, maybe the new technical school, I don't know ... is a more of a selection, for the most able children.

Importantly, these three pieces of text make far more sense if they are understood in terms of working-class defensive strategies in unfamiliar contexts than if they are judged against middle-class criteria for choice making. They also suggest a common-sense awareness of the value emphases currently in play in the education marketplace.

PLAYING TO LOSE: WORKING-CLASS PARENTS IN A MIDDLE-CLASS GAME

'Rational' working-class choice differs in significant ways from 'rational' middle-class choice. The middle classes are playing a game they expect to win:

I know how to play the game. I mean I expect her to get into the CTC [City Technology College]. I work there and I'm on the working party ... and they know I'll be very angry if she doesn't get in but I can play the game. (Mrs Demsey)

And this is a game in which winning for some presupposes and ensures that others lose. Children of low status parents 'suffer adversely as a consequence of the actions of high status parents' (Hatton, 1985, p. 270). The new market economy in education exacerbates the consequences of unequal social power rather than alleviating them. As a result the working classes are caught up in a game in which they are required or expected to participate with commitment and enthusiasm but are invariably the losers. Within such an analysis what appears initially to be working-class apathy and fatalism can be redefined as a refusal to engage in a game where the stakes are often too high for working-class players. In Mrs Lilly's account she attempts to reconcile having a son with special educational needs with an educational climate in which such children are being increasingly marginalised. In reference to school league tables and examination results she comments:

It doesn't really mean much to me, because I think with all my kids, as long as they try I'm not really bothered what they come out with because the way things are at school now, if you haven't got what it takes, it seems no teachers want to bother with you ... that's my impression anyway ...

SB: Unless you're?

Mrs Lilly: Unless you're really bright, they seem to ... they don't want to bother ... because like my son has a lot of difficulty at school, and he tries really hard, and he's doing well ... but they always want you to be at the top, so I've just said to all of mine, as long as they try at school, that's it ... if they come away with nothing then it doesn't really bother me.

However, the avoidance of failure is often in tension with difficult desires for children 'not to become like me'. Mr Botham said:

I've always had to work with my hands ... and I don't want him to have to do that, I don't want him to have to struggle ... that's why I instil 'it's no good being second, you've got to come top in your exams'.

Many working-class parents convey a sense of being caught up between two conflicting impulses and struggling to reconcile the two. Mrs Botham's account of her son opting for the less prestigious of two schools is emblematic of much working-class choice:

I think Danny is saying John Moore because he's frightened. If he says I want the CTC and he doesn't get it ... he's not gonna feel ... well it doesn't matter cos I want to go to John Moore anyway, and I really do think that in my heart that Danny is saying John Moore, I might be wrong ... I hope in a way I am wrong, 'cos if he doesn't get in he won't be upset. But I think Danny would hate to turn around and say oh, I wanted to go to CTC and I didn't get in. I think he'd rather say I wanted to go to John Moore school all along. (Mrs Botham)

Looking at the working-class transcripts as a whole there seems to be a general theme of 'playing safe', not taking too many risks. There is sometimes an articulation of choice itself as problematic:

I mean obviously with my parents they didn't have a choice for me. ... So in fact I feel we've got too much choice, there's too many schools to pick from, in a way I'd rather not have the choice. (Mrs Dankworth)

Instead of construing such views as confused and disengaged they can be conceptualised as 'a rational avoidance of high risk choices'. Such choices could set working-class children up to fail in individualised, publicly humiliating ways in predominantly middle-class, high-achieving schools as opposed to the more masked, shared processes through which they fail (or are relatively successful) in local, inner city comprehensives. When we view parental choice from a working-class rather than a middle-class perspective, working-class choice can be reconceptualised as a pragmatic appraisal of the actual choices available to a group which lacks the cultural, psychological and material resources of more privileged groups in society. The market system in particular, but capitalist education systems in general, valorise and value certain unevenly distributed resources.

'SPOILT FOR CHOICE'

Conceptualising middle-class experience as normative is simultaneously a failure to recognise the extent to which social processes are differentiated by class. In academic writing on educational choice the hidden, highly politicised process of deciding who and what to write about and in what ways is elided. This subtext is masked by the seeming impartiality of the text:

Talk of relations of power can sometimes obscure the grinding, relentless nature of oppression and the way it forces accounts and choices which may

not always be attractive to bourgeois academics. Instead of facing up to this task of description, researchers have often reached for fantasies of otherness which, in classic post-colonial terms, trap the colonised in the fantasies of the coloniser and which therefore play right into the hands of prevailing relations of power by silencing other actual or potential speaking positions. This effect is probably most clearly seen nowadays in the dumping overboard by many ambiguous academics of the 'white working class', a strategy which closes down the task of description and also avoids more difficult emotions. (Pile & Thrift, 1995, p. 371–372)

In 1990s Britain, working-classness is once again being discursively constituted as 'a spoilt identity'. Goffman, writing 30 years ago, describes how working-class people were:

likely on occasion to find themselves functioning as stigmatised individuals, unsure of the reception awaiting them in face-to-face interaction and deeply involved in the various responses to this plight. This will be so if for no other reason than that almost all adults have to have some dealings with service organisations, both commercial and civil, where courteous, uniform treatment is supposed to prevail based on nothing more restrictive than citizenship, but where opportunity will arise for concern about invidious expressive valuations based on a virtual middle class ideal. (Goffman, 1968, p. 173)

The new market economy in education has exacerbated social distinctions of class. Not only in middle-class interviews but also in some working-class parents' own accounts they are presented as a stigmatised group. While a number of middle-class parents commend the integration of special needs pupils into mainstream schools, apart from the middle-class association with dyslexia, they do not identify their own children as having anything in common with such groups. Conversely, some working-class parents talked in terms of identification and shared qualities with disabled groups in society:

What I particularly liked was the fact that they actually have children there with hearing problems. And it struck me then that if the school can take in pupils with these problems and teach them then it's good enough for my children ... it's the general tolerance and patience required to teach children especially if they are on the slow side or if they need sort of a slow push, you know, to get to achieve. (Mrs Pallister)

Mrs Harper enthused:

I mean that must be one of the finest schools that I have seen in my life, truthfully ... what I thought was very good was the disabled having the normal ... able bodied children ... they wouldn't have so much what's the word ... they wouldn't be so nasty to them so much because they've been brought up with them. ... There's not so much prejudice, that's what I'm saying ... there wouldn't be so much prejudice ... they'd grown up with them, I thought that was very good.

However, working-class parents are having to contend with prejudice in an educational market that constructs the working-class child and her parents as less valuable assets to schools than their middle-class counterparts. It is this stigmatising process that underlies and makes a mockery of the bland, homogenising discourse of official and governmental rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

There is much more to be done with the sort of analysis begun here. One way of approaching the issue of the working-class's relationship to education is to turn it metaphorically on its head. Instead of accepting middle-class norms which implicitly problematise the working classes there is a need to problematise conceptions of meritocracy and social mobility, to deconstruct notions of educational failure and success and, concomitantly, middle-class practices (Reay, 1997). Chisholm (1995) has referred to some interesting German research on the damage social mobility does to working-class girls (Borkowski *et al.*, 1992) which confounds the taken-for-granted, implicit assumptions that it is an ideal all the working classes should be striving for (see also Jackson & Marsden, 1962). Furthermore, the consumerism celebrated in key government texts (DFE, 1992) fits uneasily with the necessities of working-class cultures, where many members lack the resources to compete in the marketplace. Finally, not only do the working classes have a tacit understanding of middle-class preferences which implicitly informs and constrains their own choices, but their own established rationale for choosing secondary schools, traditionally rooted in conceptions of community and locality, is being increasingly undermined and disrupted by the operation of the free market (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995).

NOTES

- [1] This paper builds upon a series of attempts at conceptualising and theorising choice making and competition in education (ESRC project No. 232858); (Ball, 1993, 1995; Ball *et al.*, 1996; Bowe *et al.*, 1994a, b; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1993, 1995).
- [2] This paper draws upon an analysis of a working-class sub-sample from 137 ethnographic interviews conducted with parents involved in the processes of 'choosing' a secondary school for their child. The research was set in three urban, south of England LEAs. For a full account of the research and the parent sample see (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995).
- [3] Much of what follows explores the traces and 'light marks' of things evident but not explicit in our data. The indications of difficult, awkward, half-grasped and almost inexpressible aspects of perception and experience. An emotive and emotional sub-text which can be glimpsed and inferred from asides, unfinished sentences and after-thoughts.
- [4] This also illustrates a definite tendency among working-class respondents to view intellect as immutable and thus achievement as determined, and therefore relatively unlikely to be effected by the kind or quality of schooling experienced.

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Correspondence: Professor Stephen J. Ball, Centre for Educational Studies, School of Education, King's College, Cornwall House Annex, Waterloo Road, London SE1 8WA, UK.