From School Exclusion to Provisional Access: Possibilities and Limitations of a Critical Class-Conscious Parent Engagement Program in Rural Upstate New York

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Abstract

Parent engagement is typically understood as parent attendance at school functions or volunteering; however, these spaces are often defined by the behavioral norms of White middle-class parents. Using social class, moral capital, and Critical Whiteness Studies as theoretical frameworks, this article qualitatively examines the implementation of a class-conscious parent engagement strategy—the Parent Mentor Program—in a rural, predominantly White school district. Based on 42 focus groups with six low-income White parents who participated as Parent Mentors, we argue that, through the process of engaging with the program, these parents began to form community and access some parts of the institution. Although these parents demonstrated their commitment to being active contributors to the school community as classroom volunteers, authentic acceptance remained provisional. We argue that the continued disparaging treatment of these parents is connected to the fact that they do not perform whiteness in an acceptable (i.e., middle-class) manner. Because they lack a discourse of systemic oppression, we analyze the parents' discourse with a theoretical lens that explains how moral capital, individual access, and meritocracy is applied to their tenuous access to privilege. These individualistic discourses—hallmarks of whiteness mostly devoid of class critique—prevent the program from developing into a larger activist strategy to transform the school culture.

Key Words: moral capital, social capital, critical whiteness studies, classism, parent engagement, rural schools, classroom mentors, low-income families

Introduction

Research in education has confirmed what parents and educators have always known—that the active engagement of parents in the schools their children attend is beneficial to their children's educational success (Auerbach, 2009; Noguera, 2001). However, what educators and policymakers often define as parent engagement is typically based on White, middle-class norms of participation that exclude low-income parents, both White parents and parents of color, who are already marginalized by class (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2009). Norms of engagement are often determined by the agenda of those in power—White middle- and upper-class parents who align with school administration. These alliances between White middle- and upper-class parents and the school system work together to set the agenda for parent engagement efforts that leave nondominant parents out of decision-making, requiring them to be deferential to the school's agenda and to "serve as cooperative volunteers rather than participate as equal power-holders" (Cooper, 2009, p. 380). Low-income parents are often faced with hostility from school staff when they enter school buildings, a hostility that originates from classist assumptions about them—assumptions that position these parents as "lazy, ignorant, and morally deficient" (Sullivan, 2014, p. 35). These classist assumptions about low-income parents reverberate in their children's experience of school, exacerbating disparities in educational outcomes between low-income and middle-class students.

Based on three years of qualitative action research in a predominately White, rural, geographically dispersed school district—which we call "Pleasant Grove"—in upstate New York, and responding to the call made by Tieken (2014) and others for more educational research on rural schools, we examine the experiences of low-income White parents as they attempt to engage the school system. The student population in Pleasant Grove is 96.1% White, with 62% of its students identified by New York State as "economically disadvantaged." The study takes place in the context of the Parent Mentor Program, an innovative, class-conscious parent engagement program that we initiated in Pleasant Grove in 2015, adapted from a similar program we started in the urban setting of Rivertown in 2013 (Yull et al., 2018). The program places low-income parents who typically do not show up to traditional school-initiated events into classrooms in their rural community to assist teachers in understanding the children from nondominant backgrounds—in the case of

Pleasant Grove, those students categorized by the state as "economically disadvantaged" and who have faced challenges with school discipline, academic performance, and/or attendance. We call these parent volunteers "Parent Mentors" to reflect the aspiration of the program in placing nondominant parents in classrooms to mentor middle-class teachers in better relating to the nondominant children they teach.

During program implementation, we collected data for this study from 42 focus groups conducted with six low-income White parents who participated in our Parent Mentor Program (described below). Focus groups took place weekly over the course of three 10-week program implementation periods and an additional three four-day training sessions that also included focus groups. These weekly focus groups and training sessions for the Parent Mentor Program form the corpus of our data and took place in March–June of 2015, 2016, and 2017, respectively. These focus group conversations centered on these six low-income White parents' experiences with school prior to and during the implementation of the program. The six parents who participated in the focus groups were the same parents who volunteered as Parent Mentors in elementary school classrooms.

In this article, we report on the findings from these focus group interviews across the three years of the Pleasant Grove program implementation. We interpret the experiences of these parents using a theoretical lens foregrounding social class and classism (Lott, 2002), Critical Whiteness Studies (Castagno, 2014; Lensmire, 2017; Sullivan, 2014), and moral capital (Jaye et al., 2018; Sherman, 2006), focusing on the intersections of these frameworks in a rural school setting. We examine the social processes and outcomes associated with implementing a social class-conscious parent engagement strategy in a rural school district where low-income White families experience social and cultural exclusion both in and outside the school. The Parent Mentor Program is an effort to counter what Tieken (2014) refers to as "the habits of inclusion and exclusion a rural school can perpetuate in a rural community" (p. 3), and here we analyze both the promises and limitations of this program in achieving its goal.

From Traditional Parent Involvement to Family Engagement to Equitable Collaboration

Traditionally, educators have expected parents to meet White middle-class expectations of parent involvement—to participate cooperatively and deferentially in their children's education by communicating with the schools and helping children at home in the ways schools prescribe. Such norms for participation maintain deeply entrenched notions of parents, particularly nondominant parents, as deficient and needing to be remediated in order to

conform to White middle-class norms of parenting, rather than viewing them as a rich source of cultural knowledge and leadership potential to build toward just schools (Ishimaru, 2020). Parent involvement, in its most traditional form, is usually understood as parent attendance at school functions such as parent–teacher conferences and/or volunteering in school-organized programs (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Cooper, 2009; Lewis & Forman, 2002). Because models of parent involvement originated in federal government attempts to "fix problem parents" in the context of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, most of these programs to this day are dictated by "a vision of partnership centered on the school's agenda" (Baquedano-López et al., 2013, p. 150) that does not value the forms of knowledge that parents, particularly parents of color from all class backgrounds and low-income White parents, bring to their children's education. These programs are based on a Eurocentric, middle-class model involving behavioral norms of White middle-class parents, who lead most of the programs and establish the standard for successful parent involvement (Lewis & Forman, 2002).

Ferlazzo and Hammond (2009) argue that parent engagement, in contrast to parent involvement, requires schools to develop a relationship-building process, where ideas are elicited from parents in the context of trusting relationships. This form of engagement goes beyond calls for parents to be more interested in their children's education and more supportive of teachers; it requires *schools* to be more supportive and responsive to the children and families they serve by consciously developing partnerships based on mutual accountability and responsibility (Noguera, 2001) —a tall order given the inherently inequitable relationship between schools and nondominant parents (Cooper, 2009; Ishimaru, 2020). Because the relationship between schools and nondominant parents always already exists on unequal relational ground, efforts to move from parent involvement to family engagement in schools have typically reified the very power structures they attempt to transform, as "many of the practices and implicit assumptions of parent involvement *still persist* in approaches reframed as 'family engagement'" (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 30). These practices and assumptions do not fundamentally question the stance that parents need to be brought on board with agendas and reform efforts that the school and other stakeholders such as the PTA have created without the input of nondominant families themselves (Ishimaru, 2020). As Cooper (2009) argues, the normative discourse of "partnership" between schools and parents does not consider

> the extent to which shared responsibility should entail sharing power…. Power sharing is left to school community members to negotiate, yet the history of public schooling indicates that educators typically urge

> parents to serve as cooperative volunteers rather than participate as equal power-holders. (p. 380)

Furthermore, the discourse of partnership "still constructs a lack of parent involvement as endemic and as something that schools must address to get parents on board with their agenda, particularly on reform efforts" (Baquedano-López et al., 2013, p. 154).

Ishimaru (2020) proposes the framework of *equitable collaborations* as an alternative to both parent involvement and family engagement; such a framework, while messy in its implementation and still far from its ideal goal, involves (1) beginning with the strengths and wealth of knowledge of nondominant families; (2) fundamentally transforming the relationship of power between schools and communities; (3) building reciprocity in which there is "two-way communication and presumption of expertise and capacity on the part of all parties" (p. 53); and (4) approaching change as "collective inquiry" that seeks to learn from rather than smooth over tensions in the power-sharing process (Ishimaru, 2020). While our project attempts to engage low-income White parents as equal power-holders in the school system through the framework of equitable collaborations, our research and program are necessarily situated within an institutional context that expects low-income White parents to conform to White middle-class norms of conduct—to be docile, cooperative, and not fundamentally question the relations of power already at work. Our ability to create a truly equitable collaboration remains an unrealized ideal, but one to strive toward nonetheless. Throughout the remainder of this article, we use the term "parent engagement" to describe our program and efforts, as it is most closely aligned with what we were able to accomplish given the structural constraints we faced.

Poverty and Parent Engagement in Rural Schools

Rural education remains an area of concern for policymakers and the people who populate rural areas. With more than 9.3 million children attending rural schools and nearly one in six of those children living under the poverty line (Showalter et al., 2019), the need to find effective strategies to support student success through parent engagement and community building is critical (Bailey, 2014). Some researchers have argued that although rural and urban schools often have much in common in terms of poverty levels and lack of resources, the bulk of the current educational literature is directed at an understanding of urban school districts (e.g., Barrett et al., 2015; Beeson & Strange, 2000; Tieken, 2014). While the federal government defines rurality in terms of what is left over—"what 'urban' and 'metropolitan' are not" (Tieken, 2014, p. 5)—the literature on rural education asserts that there are qualities unique to rural sites

that demand increased attention in educational research (Arnold et al., 2005; Beeson & Strange, 2000; Gallo & Beckman, 2016). Tieken's (2014) research suggests that rural communities tend to provide a "geography-dependent sense of belonging" (p. 5) and the potential for close relationships between school staff and parents that prove more difficult in larger, urban areas. Our research evaluates whether "the same race and class lines that slice urban America" (Tieken, 2014, p. 7) are upheld in Pleasant Grove as well, reinforcing old patterns of social exclusion.

Researchers have examined the significance of poverty in relation to social exclusion and social capital based on class status among parents and its influence on school–parent relationships (Cooper et al., 2010; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Milbourne, 2010). Research suggests that children's experience with poverty in rural areas makes them more likely to have negative outcomes in education and more susceptible to insecure parental employment, substance use, and poor health status compared to their counterparts in urban areas (Buck & Deutsch, 2014). A growing number of rural communities are faced with a shrinking job market relative to the depletion of the rural extractive industries, such as farming, mining, and timber work (Bailey, 2014). In rural settings, health care services, recreational programs, and public transportation are sparse, and the affordability of owning and maintaining a personal vehicle is difficult for poor families, especially in single-parent homes.

In a congruent manner, rural school settings can also create spaces for parents with limited resources to form a community of mutual support. However, Howley and Howley (2010) explored in their study how stigmas associated with the intersections of rurality and class create conditions for poor rural communities that promote the social exclusion of an already marginalized group. Combined with negative stereotypes of rural identity and cultural messages that reinforce the associations between rurality, backwardness, and deficiency, scholars argue that the "othering" of the "rural poor" obscures their resiliency and remarkable productivity in their capacity to identify resources and manage their existence (Howley & Howley, 2010, p. 5). Because rural places are often areas of high poverty, research in rural education must foreground social class as an analytic lens.

Educational paths and opportunities in school for students are greatly influenced by social class (Lott, 2002). Schools are social institutions that act as "agencies of moral regulation" aimed at the production of individual ethical subjectivity (Valverde, 1994, p. 218). Historically, educational systems have been positioned as contributors to the reproduction of the structure of power relationships through the inequitable distribution of symbolic goods referred to as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973). The concept of cultural capital used in

this study asserts that the position of White middle class is exclusive and represents a standard whereby "all other forms of expressions of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm'" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). This standard reflects an accumulation of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society to facilitate social advancement and social mobility (Yosso, 2005). Rural poverty has a significant influence on the type of cultural capital parents wield in rural schools and constitutes a discursive space in which rural identities are produced and reproduced based on power relations (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). Lareau and Weininger (2003) found that social class affected the likelihood of parent's compliance or lack of compliance with the standards of a dominant institution, such as schools. A lack of compliance with standards places low-income parents on the social margins. Lareau (2002) argues that social class creates distinctive parenting styles influencing parents' role in their children's lives. For example, findings from Lareau's (2002) study indicated working class and low-income parents viewed educators as social superiors whose decisions were to be unquestioningly accepted, whereas middle-class parents possessed more confidence in childrearing, thereby giving their children a sense of entitlement in social institutions such as school (Lareau, 2002).

While cultural capital refers to the effects of proper educational "skills," "ability," and "achievement" differentiated by class (Lareau, 2002, p. 22), moral capital, also derived from Bourdieu (1973), provides a nuanced way of understanding class distinctions among low-income families in rural settings. Among the poor, moral capital is a form of symbolic capital that serves in the absence of economic capital by creating distinctions within this class as a result of the cultural homogeneity (Jaye et al., 2018; Sherman, 2006). This can be perceived as equivalent to measuring a person's moral worth based on their coping behaviors in managing the stress of living in poverty. Sherman (2006) argues that moral capital is important because it is a source of self-respect and can be traded for social and economic capital in the form of job opportunities and assistance from family and friends in the community when residents face especially difficult times. Maintaining high moral capital is often considered more important than attempting to build economic capital, especially when the only means to building economic capital available to families are illegal or dependent on state assistance, such as welfare, both of which impart low moral capital (Sherman, 2006). This alternative ideal of moral capital implies that one should only help those who are willing to help themselves as an effort to build good character or independence (Valverde, 1994). Moral capital has the potential to enhance or erode relational ties between low-income parents and schools based on perceptions of class identity. In this study we analyze how moral capital divides parents on the basis of class because of the assumption

that any marginalization that parents experience is due to individual moral choices rather than structural constraints.

"Poor White Trash," Critical Whiteness Studies, and the Education System

This article examines the intersections of class, rurality, and whiteness as they play out in poor White parents' attempts to gain access to the institutional power of the school system. While Critical Race Theory (CRT) has traditionally (and rightly so) focused on the experiences of people of color in a White-dominant society (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998), the field of Critical Whiteness Studies extends this focus to those on the receiving end of the privileges and opportunities that have historically and are presently afforded to White people while systematically denied to people of color (Gillborn, 2005; Leonardo, 2009). Combined with the fact that most education research has been focused on urban centers (Tieken, 2014) which are typically more racially diverse than rural contexts, our focus on whiteness in the predominantly White rural setting examines two areas often overlooked by researchers in education. While a focus on race in rural schools in terms of interactions between Whites and people of color is beyond the scope of this article due to the racially homogeneous environment of Pleasant Grove, an examination of the ways in which whiteness informs these low-income White parents' perspectives on the education system and their role in it is one of the key contributions of this article.

One way in which whiteness operates in rural areas with high rates of poverty is through the projecting of middle-class White racism onto poor White people—what Sullivan (2014) terms "dumping on 'White trash'" (p. 8). Sullivan analyzes this move by showing how middle-class White people prove their moral goodness (of being nonracist) "through a process of abjection [whereby] White middle-class anxieties about the failures of poor Whites are managed by expelling White trash from the realm of proper whiteness" (p. 8). In other words, to understand the class hierarchies between low-income and middle-class Whites requires us to disrupt the notion of White people as a monolithic group. Low-income White people have been subjected to an array of socially sanctioned forms of prejudice from racial in-group members, such as referring to them as "White trash" or "trailer trash." While maintaining a focus on the racialized practices directed at non-Whites, we overlook the discriminatory practices that non-poor Whites direct toward low-income Whites. While these discriminatory practices are based on the surface on class difference, there is also a racializing component as the criteria for being included in the group of "proper" or "good" White people is always already constructed in

relation to blackness (Sullivan, 2017). As Lensmire (2017) recounts through his own story, growing up working-class and White created a deep sense of not belonging (to the middle class); he struggled "with the offer, made by school, to join the middle class. I was struggling with its demand that I remake (or at least hide) my working-class insides" (p. 17). The privilege afforded to Whites by their skin is threatened by the presence of low-income Whites who do not perform whiteness in an acceptable manner, as Lensmire's story indicates. At the heart of this perceived threat is an ideology of antiblackness; according to Sullivan (2014), "White trash do not speak, eat, dress, and otherwise behave as proper White people are supposed to do, and their breach of White social etiquette threatens the boundary between White and non-White (especially Black) people" (p. 35).

This disparagement of poor and low-income White people hinges upon two closely related ideologies at the heart of whiteness: individualism and meritocracy. Sullivan (2014) argues that "the middle class in the United States thus is less a precise economic category than a broad rhetorical designation for the vast majority of Americans who see themselves as the moral norm: hard workers who deserve their success and who have endless possibilities for improving their lives even further" (p. 8). While such avenues for meritocratic success are not made available to low-income White people, an investment in whiteness—an identity as White people rather than an identity as low-income people exploited by the same economic system that exploits people of color—leads low-income Whites to believe that the field is as wide open to them as it is to middle-class Whites. When it fails to turn out this way, low-income Whites are left only to blame themselves and each other as individual failures—more specifically, as we will see in the case of Pleasant Grove, as "bad parents."

The Pleasant Grove Community and School District

Pleasant Grove is a rural village located in a northeastern rustbelt region where economic growth has been on a steady decline for many decades, resulting in widening income gaps amongst the community's wealthy and impoverished families. The Pleasant Grove village, which sits about 30 miles outside of Rivertown, the nearest urban center, is a small rural community of fewer than 1,000 people, of whom 96.9% are White, 1.6% Hispanic/Latino, 0.2% Black/African American, 0.3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.8% multiracial. Some families in Pleasant Grove are middle class and highly influential in the town, while many others are extremely poor and marginalized in town and school functions; 13.2% of the population lives below the poverty line. The school district serves 1,370 students, whose racial demographics mirror

the local population: 96.1% are White, 1.7% Hispanic/Latino, 1.4% multiracial, and 0.4% Black/African American. This small district has three schools, with 62% of students identified by New York State as "economically disadvantaged." For the low-income families in this district, daily life in this rural community can be challenging. People often live isolated, miles from their nearest neighbor with no local public transportation, limited phone service, and minimal financial resources. These barriers result in families left isolated and immobile or dependent on rides from family or friends. Most of the teachers and administrators, unlike the families they serve, are middle-class and do not live in the local community; instead, they commute to the schools from surrounding urban and suburban areas. The school has struggled with disproportionate educational outcomes[1] among the economically disadvantaged students in this rural community.

Context of the Study: The Parent Mentor Program

The Parent Mentor Program at Pleasant Grove Elementary School began in May 2015 and concluded after three years, in June 2017. The program each year was limited to a 10-week period in the spring term of the school year, in addition to one week of orientation at the beginning of each program year, for a total of 33 weeks of program implementation and data collection. The Pleasant Grove parents who participated in the Parent Mentor program from 2015–17 included six low-income White parents (five mothers, one father), five of whom refer to themselves as "lifers," having grown up in the small community of Pleasant Grove and attended the same schools their children now attend. The remoteness of Pleasant Grove creates a situation where parents with minimal resources are isolated from one another and feel that they cannot participate in traditional routes to parent engagement because they do not "know the right people." Table 1 provides demographic information on the parent participants, and in the Data Collection and Analysis section that follows, we provide information on the recruitment and sampling.

The Parent Mentor Program in Pleasant Grove was initiated in 2015 when the school district approached Denise and Marguerite (Authors 1 & 3 of this article) to implement a parent engagement program modeled after a similar program we had started in 2014 in the nearby urban district of Rivertown (Yull et al., 2018) but adapted to the local predominantly White rural context. The goals of the program are to: (1) transform the school culture by increasing the school's investment in the parents' social and cultural capital; (2) work alongside parents and teachers to reduce detentions and suspensions, thereby keeping low-income children in the classroom; and (3) build a community of parents who support each other as they engage with the schools their children

attend. Parents who participate in the program receive a weekly gas card to facilitate transportation to and from the school.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Parent (Pseudonym)	Years Participated	Level of Education	Employment Status	Lifetime Resident	# of Children in District	Grade level(s) of child(ren)
Amanda	2016–17	Completed high school	Unemployed	Yes	1	PreK
Cassandra	2015–17	Completed high school	Unemployed	No	1	PreK
Nancy	2015	Some high school	Unemployed	Yes	1	9th
Alex	2016	Completed high school	Former contractor; unemployed on disability	Yes	1	3rd
Nina	2016	Completed high school	Unemployed	Yes	3	1st, 4th, & 7th
Ramona	2015–16	Completed high school	Childcare provider	Yes	2	PreK & 2nd

We recruited low-income parents using a convenience sampling method with referrals from community organizations and schools. Participants had to be parents or guardians of one or more children in the school district and have time to spend on-site during the school day. Teachers who volunteered to participate were identified by the school administrators and then contacted by the community schools coordinator with whom we, as a research team, worked closely. Parents completed an initial one week (20-hour) orientation, which was identical for all three years of the program, and then spent four hours in the school building each week—two hours in a classroom and two hours in weekly processing meetings co-facilitated by the researchers and the community schools coordinator. As part of the agreement with the school district we submitted a report each year summarizing the number of parents who participated in the program and our key findings.

Author Positionality

Our positionality is a critical component in this study as we conducted this work through the lens of three women scholars; Marguerite identifies as a

White woman, and Ada and Denise identify as African American women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Marguerite grew up in an affluent, predominantly White suburb of the San Francisco Bay Area where she attended the local public school; there, most families could afford to have one stay-at-home parent and therefore were highly involved in the school system both in terms of donating their time as well as their financial resources. Even with middle-class standing, Marguerite's parents, as overworked assistant professors at two different local university campuses, did not have the time or financial means available to participate in the ways desired by the school and often faced criticism from other parents and school personnel for their lack of involvement. Even though Marguerite's class standing is different from the parents in this study and is a stark example of the intraclass hierarchies among White people, and she does not have school-aged children of her own, her experiences with parents facing judgment from the school is a motivating factor for conducting this study.

Ada is a middle-aged African American woman who grew up in a single-parent family household. She lived with her family in a diverse working-class community within a semirural school district. Her mother's work as a manual laborer in manufacturing resulted in long hours outside of the home, which hindered her ability to be actively involved in her children's education; however, the value of education was highly regarded and prioritized. Ada attended schools that had a racially diverse student population but significantly lacked faculty diversity; therefore, the curriculum and student supports were often not inclusive or equitable. Ada is a first-generation doctoral graduate with children. With active involvement in her children's education, Ada recognized how privilege of class and race is used to push low income and parents of color to the margins of their child's school system.

Denise is a middle-aged Black woman who has navigated through school systems in different parts of the United States, both as a student navigating her own journey through public schools and observing the differential impacts of the education system on her siblings, as well as through her experiences as a parent and as an educator. While her middle-class economic status, her educational level, and her racialized experience situate her in a category distinct from the participants, Denise's own personal experiences of marginalization in the education system afford an avenue for relating to those who are different from her in terms of both class and race. As a parent, Denise has navigated the dismissiveness and hostility of the school system as she has advocated on behalf of her own children in the school system. The experiences of low-income White parents, also marginalized by the school system, fall along similar lines.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study is a critical qualitative research study incorporating critical ethnographic methods (Thomas, 1993). Our central research questions were: (1) What are the perceptions and experiences of low-income rural White parents participating in a parent engagement program with respect to their relationship with the school system? (2) To what extent were these low-income rural White parents' relationships with each other and with the school system transformed by participating in the Parent Mentor Program? The main source of data for this study is 42 audiorecorded focus groups involving the Parent Mentors and co-facilitated by the two principal investigators (Marguerite and Denise), the co-principal investigator (Ada), and the community schools coordinator over the course of the three-year study. Each year the program was implemented, we began the program with a week-long, 20-hour orientation with the Parent Mentors to critically discuss the institutional norms of the school system and ask focus group questions around the Parent Mentors' prior experiences in school (see below). Following the orientation, weekly focus group meetings were conducted by the researchers and community schools coordinator to understand the Parent Mentors' current experiences in the classroom, discuss and build parent engagement, and work collectively to solve any problems arising in their classroom work.

A critical ethnographic approach was utilized to explore parents' perceptions of the school, location of power, and the way power is distributed and managed in the schools and among parents historically marginalized by the school system (Grbich, 2013). This methodology works to re-center the voices of parents who have been silenced, and as such, operates from a critical approach whose goal is to redistribute power in more equitable ways (Thomas, 1993). We relied on the community schools coordinator to make connections with these six parents and recruit them into the program and research; this was a convenience sampling method, relying on relationships and word of mouth in the community, given the high amount of distrust among low-income parents with regard to the school district and each other (none of them knew each other prior to the program). Therefore, an impersonal call for recruitment conducted through school district channels would not have engendered the kind of trust necessary for low-income parents to be willing to enter the school building, volunteer in classrooms, and participate in a research study associated with the school district. Participants who volunteered through this process of convenience sampling in the community were accepted into the program as long as they met the minimum criteria stated above. The parents were required to commit to the program for one 10-week session only; they were invited back

each year, but there was no requirement for them to be able to participate for all three years. In fact, only one parent participated for all three years. This was due to the fact that some of the parents were able to find employment from one year to the next, and therefore were no longer able to visit the school during the school day. Some parents joined in the second and third years, so it was a rotating group of Parent Mentors rather than a group of six parents who participated the entire time.

To collect data and to facilitate opportunities for parents to connect with one another during their course of involvement with the Parent Mentor Program, we employed focus groups. Focus groups create safe(r) spaces for individuals from marginalized communities by allowing them to share personal experiences in a collective manner to unify their voices and decenter authority (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Beginning from the critique that low-income parents typically have never been asked the basic questions of what their experiences in school were and what their goals for their children's education are (Swadener, 2005), we began the orientation with eight *grand tour* questions (Brenner, 2006) that we revisited in various forms throughout the study: (1) When you were growing up, what were your experiences like in school? (2) In what ways are your child(ren)'s experiences in school similar or different than yours? (3) What are your goals for your child(ren)'s future? (4) What is it like to be raising (a) child(ren) in this community? (5) Share a positive experience you've had with the school. (6) Share a negative experience you've had with the school. (7) How do issues of poverty impact your relationship with the school system? (8) If you could say anything to the superintendent and know they wouldn't judge you, what would you say? These questions helped us to understand the parents' experiences with the school system prior to entering the Parent Mentor Program and established a baseline for determining if and how their relationship with the school changed over time.

Data analysis involved transcribing the 42 audiorecorded focus group sessions and coding each transcript according to the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The analysis unfolded in three phases. In the first phase, the three researchers separately used open coding to generate initial codes, focusing on the overarching analytic question of how the parents' discourse about themselves and their access to participating in the schools changed—or not—as a result of participating in the program. We also paid particular attention to discourses about race, class, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in our first pass of the data. We then compiled our combined list of 26 codes and used our research questions to focus our inquiry and collapse these codes into 10 larger categories: exclusion, inclusion, access/popularity, provisional acceptance, class and classism, individualism, meritocracy, good

parent/bad parent, building parent community, and mistrust/social distancing. (Note: We define social distancing as creating hierarchical social distinctions which define one's implicit or explicit access to moral capital). In the third phase, we used this refined list of categories to identify relevant themes. In what follows, we discuss the three primary themes that emerged from this data analysis process.

From Exclusion to Provisional Access: Classism and Moral Capital in Pleasant Grove

In the analysis of findings that follows, we argue that the dynamics of classism and moral capital created isolation and mistrust among parents in the Pleasant Grove community; in the schools, classism created a hostile environment that inhibited engagement. Through participating in the Parent Mentor program, however, parents began to access some aspects of the institution. Nevertheless, while parents' institutional access increased in some contexts and spaces, the program did not change the structural conditions that led to parents being marginalized based on class. Parents discussed the fact that acceptance from the school was always provisional and tenuous, and, because the parents did not have a discourse of class, classism, or systemic oppression to explain their situation, they relied on explanations of individual access, achievement, and meritocracy to explain this tenuous access. These individualistic, meritocratic explanatory frames are imbued with ideologies of whiteness; ironically, the parents' discourse, therefore, reflects an allegiance to whiteness, even as these parents are unable to perform whiteness in an acceptable (i.e., middle-class) manner. In what follows, we consider each of these points in turn, considering how race and class factor into the shaping of these individualistic perspectives.

Wanting to Be Accepted, But Acceptance Is Provisional

In Pleasant Grove, the low-income White parents who participated in the Parent Mentor Program experience the school system as unwelcoming and dismissive of their presence in school spaces. These parents' experiences reflect a school climate that makes it difficult for them to engage the schools, leaving them feeling powerless and marginalized. Schools, as institutions of the dominant society, facilitate low-income White people learning an internalized sense of inferiority relative to middle-class and wealthy White people. For the low-income White parents in Pleasant Grove, this sense of inferiority is a daily lived experience when they enter the school. According to one Pleasant Grove parent, walking into the school felt intimidating, both in terms of navigating the physical space as well as interacting with school staff who were unwelcoming:

> It's just little things like that make you feel, like, uninformed or stupid or uncomfortable. Or even like coming to the building and being like, okay, I got to push the button and open the door and grab it at the right moment and make sure that I don't miss it so I don't have to! It gives me anxiety to even just come into the building.

Because of this internalized feeling of inferiority and intimidation, these parents saw the schools as a place from which they *as individuals* needed acceptance. One parent shared, "I just don't feel comfortable coming to school functions. What will I wear; how will I sound?", reflecting a hyperawareness of how habits of dress and speech may betray class standing. Another parent echoed this concern with a discussion of language,

> Well a lot of people with multiple children, I know 'cause I've had experience with this, when you're home, when you're stay-at-home mom, you don't know how to connect with people, you completely lose that, and so you come into a situation where there's a bunch of, you know, real people, and you just kind of hunker down; "I'm so scared," you know? You don't know how to talk to people, and we do have a lot of stay-at-home mommies down here, and may not even have a vehicle, you know? And that's why they don't come here, so it's finding people with enough, you know, I don't know, just a kind of slowly to work their way in, you can't just walk up to somebody and be like, "oh, join this" because that's scary. I mean I'd be scared of that, so you know, that's I think a problem, too.

Here, this parent framed the exclusion they face from the school system as one of being a "stay-at-home mom" who does not know how to connect with "real people." While they made a brief connection to the isolation parents face because of structural barriers (i.e., not owning a vehicle) exacerbated by living in a rural setting, they stopped short ("so it's finding people with enough, you know, I don't know") of naming the specific form of *social capital* valued by the school that parents need in order to be accepted.

In one discussion during the initial week-long orientation in which we prompted the parents to think about how poverty impacted their relationship with the school system, one parent more explicitly linked social status with income: "If you make money, you're okay, but you're low class when you're not." More frequently during this initial discussion, though, parents indirectly indexed class status by referring to coming from the "right family," stating, "My last name isn't of importance in this town." In individualizing their problems, they often fell back on explanations that emphasized individual personalities, stay-at-home parenting, money, and consumption practices to understand their difficulty in accessing social capital in the school system. Like

the working-class girls in Bettie's (2014) ethnography, Pleasant Grove parents rarely used a discourse of class oppression to frame their struggles. One parent talked about themselves as "low maintenance" in contrast to the middle-class school personnel (and us, the researchers), whom they considered "high maintenance." While this in some ways is a discourse of class, they defined these labels in terms of individual consumption practices (the cars people drive, the clothes people wear, where people live), rather than in terms of how the school interacts with the *entire group* of "low maintenance" families.

Despite these concerns, parents participating in the Parent Mentor Program expressed a shift in their willingness to participate in school-sponsored programs. One parent attended a school camping activity, sharing with the group,

> I came to the campout last night, and some of the kids from the classroom recognized me and came over and gave me a hug, and I was like, aww. "Mommy, this is [name] from my class," so it was really cool. I was in the classroom yesterday so that probably helped them remember me because I have the same outfit on. I would have never come to something like this before.

However, even after participating in the program, parents reported that their acceptance in the school was provisional and that they sometimes still faced the same hostility from school staff as they did when they came in as parents. One parent made a suggestion for improving the program the following year, and in doing so revealed this continuing sense of alienation:

> It would be helpful even if there's like, we have to fill out a form in the beginning of the school year that we're going to come in once a week and maybe make it a flex time, so if we're a little early, we're allowed in. Like even if that becomes a policy that you have to sign a form in the beginning of the year and still sign in and out and still get your badge, but you're not questioned week after week on why you're here, does the teacher know you're coming, is it your time yet? Because it's hard to be here as the program and be welcomed and then as a parent you feel that same thing you were feeling before the program.

In making this suggestion for a clearer communication process with school staff, this parent related that, even though they volunteered at the same time on the same day every week, they continued to be questioned by school personnel, particularly when they entered the space as a parent on behalf of their child rather than in their official capacity as a Parent Mentor. Although schools routinely question non-staff members as to their identity and purpose for being in the school as a matter of ensuring student safety, particularly in an era of heightened concerns around school shootings, the parents experienced this

repeated questioning from the same staff members, week after week, as an exclusionary and hostile practice. Another parent shared this same feeling of continued hostility, pointing out that different parents received differential treatment from staff members:

> Well, I'm no different than she is, and I'm no different than you are, and I'm no different than you are, or you [pointing to other parents sitting at the table]. So, when you walk into the office, I should get the same treatment as you guys all do, not like "oh, what are you here to do?" You should be greeted all the same, or because it is such a small local school district, a lot of the parents were raised here, did go to the school. So, your outlook should be that we want to change their attitude. I was a good kid in school. I didn't get in trouble. I didn't have school problems at all whatsoever. I didn't have problems with teachers….I wasn't a troubled child.

This parent's experience demonstrates the ongoing questioning parents faced as to why they were entering the school building, reinforcing the "habits of inclusion and exclusion" (Tieken, 2014, p. 3) in rural communities. The parent expressed a discourse of powerblind sameness (Castagno 2014), naively interpreting all parents as being "no different" from one another, ignoring the power dynamics at play even within the group of Parent Mentors sitting around the table. It is unclear what makes all of these parents "the same"—whether it is the fact that they are all White, that they all have children in the school district, or that they all come from low-income backgrounds. Yet it is clear that they are not treated "the same" by the school personnel, especially when compared to middle-class parents. This parent went on, however, to draw on discourses of moral capital—of their own academic achievement and spotless behavioral record—as an argument for being treated better in the school. According to this discourse of exceptionalism, it is not enough for all parents to be treated humanely from the outset; instead, they must prove their worth and belonging by conforming to middle-class behavioral standards—to the prevailing standard of whiteness—to be accepted at school.

Creating a Supportive Parent Community: Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion

After the initial week-long training, the weekly processing meetings became a space in which Parent Mentors gathered together with us, the researcher–facilitators, to get to know each other, share their experiences in the classroom, and bring concerns to the group to discuss collectively—as a counterspace to the alienation parents experienced in the rest of the school building. It was a space created intentionally to build community among the parents, which is

needed in rural districts such as Pleasant Grove, where the sheer geographic size and remoteness of residences produces parental isolation. Because parents in the district are car-dependent, automotive troubles can prevent them from attending school events. These factors result in isolation and mistrust of other parents, particularly those whose middle-class privilege (or middle-class passing) runs the risk of inflicting class injury (Bettie, 2014) upon low-income parents. This mistrust and feeling of exclusion was expressed by one parent when they discussed what it is like to attend sports events organized by the school:

> Well it's not just that, but I noticed from like other parents, but parents who have kids in sports, like that's where parents tend to meet up, at sporting events, and they group off, and some won't talk to others. It's very weird, and you bring parents in a place like this [referring to the Parent Mentor meetings], this is just about the kids, and it's different, you know? It's just strange.

This parent expresses an innocent-sounding wonder at the exclusionary practices of "other" parents—presumably those who are middle-class and accepted within the school environment. They express that the meeting space of the Parent Mentors is "different" than those exclusionary spaces—and yet lack a discourse of class or classism to articulate *why* the spaces feel different.

In our observations of the group and our analysis of focus group discourse, we found that the weekly school visits and meetings provided a significant space for parents to connect with one another and reduce this isolation. In the second year, we witnessed two parents—who both participated in the program in the first year—forming a friendship with one another and helping each other beyond the space of the school. When one parent was left without a car, the other parent made sure to give them rides to the school for volunteer hours and our weekly meetings. Second, the creation of a parent community is evidenced by the fact that the parents, unprompted by facilitators, created a private group on social media where they could independently connect with one another, circulate ideas, and coordinate rides. Third, while we as facilitators shared our knowledge of the working structure of the school, the parents also taught each other a great deal in the space of the meetings. For example, during one meeting a parent explained both how to get in touch with the school to confirm whether school has been cancelled due to weather, as well as specific information on special education with which the other parents were not familiar. One parent shared what they had learned from other parents in group meetings:

> I like being able to socialize with everyone, 'cause as much as we are a wealth of information for our teachers, and they are for us, we are for each other, and it really helps me to have confidence to speak up within

> the school after like bouncing ideas off you guys, or like I get numbers from [parent] because she knows the world.… Then she brought me into the community more. With the [local] library, I'm gonna volunteer this summer there while my daughter's away, rather than, you know, chasing my dog all day.

Here, this parent recognized the wealth of information that each parent brought to the table and provided evidence that they were able to create an authentic community focused on supporting each other, providing advice and feedback, and helping each other connect in the larger community in ways that had been inaccessible prior to the program.

However, parents in this group still mistrusted other parents *outside* of the group. One parent expressed the ongoing anxiety they experienced coming into a space with other parents they did not know:

> I got anxiety about how many people were going to be here. Am I not going to like someone here? I know a teacher in the school that I, she used to be a substitute, but I didn't ask about it. I can't be in the same area as her 'cause we don't get along. There are just a bunch of different factors, especially because it is a small town. We are separated a lot, but like I know you. I didn't sit across from you; we didn't have lunch together; girl, I feel like that's a lot of the withdrawal some people have.

This ongoing mistrust and fear of judgment inhibits the larger goal of the Parent Mentor program—to have Parent Mentors connect with other marginalized parents and recruit them into the program. As a result, the program remained limited to the six parents who were recruited by the community schools coordinator.

Leveraging Social Distancing to Access Moral Capital

The limitations of the program in creating a broader sense of community also speaks to a final theme from the data, in which parents in the program repeatedly used discourses of moral capital to distance themselves from "other" parents who, in their judgment, were "bad parents." Herein lies an important irony—these parents were judged by the school for being "bad parents," yet they used the *same discourse* to talk negatively about "those parents" using the frame of moral capital. This indexes social class positioning—creating small distinctions in performing class to obtain individual access to social and moral capital. If these parents can perform "good parenting" (i.e., perform middle-class) in a way that makes them look and feel superior to "those parents," then they hope to gain access to power and belonging in the school building.

This leveraging of moral capital in order to perform middle-classness and "good parenting" occurred both within the dynamics of the Parent Mentor group as well as in the ways that parents in the group spoke about parents outside the group. One parent in the second year of the program spent much of their time attempting to "prove" their middle-class standing to the rest of the parents in the group, even though it was a small community of "lifers" who knew each other's backgrounds and knew that this parent was not, in fact, middle-class. The secrets of this parent's past were not secrets at all to everyone in the room—except to us, the researchers. Still, the need to create a distinction between themselves and the other parents in the group to gain individual access in the school was persistent. In one instance, at the end of a group processing meeting, one parent who had been volunteering with the local community-supported agriculture program shared a flyer that advertised reduced-price farm share produce boxes for low-income families. The middle-class performing parent dismissed the flyer, saying, "oh, we already eat healthy at home." Here, the performance of middle-class "good parenting," which includes providing healthy food for children, was something this parent claimed to already do and thus claimed to not need the assistance offered by the farm share. Accepting such "handouts" would reduce their moral capital in the eyes of the community. This same parent entered the group claiming to have no issues with engaging with the school, presenting themselves as a "pushy parent" in alignment with middle-class values:

> My son has, is here [in the elementary school], and I'm here three times a week to intervene, so like I have an advantage. I'm very pushy. I'm kind of at school now, so I come in and have lunch with my daughter, and I, first it was like they looked at me like, "Really? you want to have lunch with your daughter?" but now I just walk in and just go to lunch, you know? So, so I have a pretty good experience here, for the most part.

While this parent positioned themselves as a middle-class "pushy parent" with "advantage" over other parents who try to come in to the school and have lunch with their child, they also hinted at more negative experiences—"at first it was like they looked at me" and "for the most part"—on which they did not elaborate. Emphasizing their individual inclusion in the school community seemed to be more important than aligning themselves with other parents in the room who had recounted experiences of exclusion from the school.

Many of the parents in the Parent Mentor group had internalized, to various degrees, these negative judgments of their own parenting, putting pressure on themselves to prove themselves as "good parents" based on a middle-class, settled-living standard. One parent used the trope of "good parent" to discuss the pressures they put on themselves to know about upcoming school-based events:

> I mean like, even if I am a good parent and check her backpack every day at five, which I'm not, [checking her backpack] but you know, like [I would put a reminder, like] a sticker to put up on your calendar, you know? [Getting a notice from school]…two weeks even ahead of time would be good, because then you can plan for [school events]…if you don't know something until [the last minute]…you have plans, [even] if you're planning you know, and that's hard too, because there are times when I come home, and she's like really [let's go, but] I really want to go to sleep…this nightly…thing that they do, and I really want to take her but I can't, [and] I just found out about it, and we have to do this.

Without a discourse of class oppression on a structural level, parents fell back on individual explanations of their parenting struggles, unable to articulate how the lack of resources in their lives and community contributed to this inability to fully perform middle-class parenting. These individual, meritocratic explanations of success or failure are a key hallmark of whiteness as an ideology that governs how schools operate (Castagno, 2014). While this parent discussed the improvements in communication that the school needed to make in order for them to plan to take their daughter to school events (in large part because, as single parents, they had to work around a shared custody schedule), the use of the "good parent" discourse reveals the pressure they put on themselves to check all of the boxes and find out about all of the opportunities for their daughter to engage. This parent internalized the dominant societal narrative that if they can just be a "good parent," then whatever structural barriers are in place because of poverty will fall away and their child will be able to enjoy a middle-class childhood with access to enriching activities and school-based functions.

Regardless of where they started from, through the process of engaging with the program, the parents began to see that their parenting struggles were not unique and were, instead, normal. In one conversation, one parent shared that in the classroom they were volunteering in, the onset of warmer weather meant that students were acting out more. They shared that it was a challenge but that it normalized their own son's behavior from a developmental perspective: "It made me feel better. He's four, it's that time of year, and it's nice out." However, at the same time, while letting go of judgments of their own parenting, in a paradoxical move these parents then turned around to judge *other* parents who were not part of the Parent Mentor group for being "bad parents" or not trustworthy. In a conversation among parents discussing attendance at school meetings (e.g., Open House, Common Core Support), one parent critiqued the parents who do not show up to these events:

> I have first, fourth and seventh graders. I always try to go to all of them because it changes from year to year. When they do have an Open House, instead of it being, "where is his work on the wall," it was the parents yelling at the teacher, like there was no niceness, like "I can't understand this math, how am I supposed to teach my child!"

Another parent chimed in:

> Yet *those* parents did not show up at the beginning school meeting, and *those* parents did not show up to the math meeting, and *those* parents did not show up until they actually struggled and kids are crying at home.

In this case the display of moral capital is evident as the parents vehemently refer to those parents as a way to separate oneself from the "other." This parent appears to judge the other parents that do not attend Open House or other scheduled school functions, forgetting that prior to their involvement in the Parent Mentor program, they also had reservations about participating in these same events due to feeling judged or fear of being rejected by their child's school. Possessing a higher moral capital represents a form of currency that creates a sense of entitlement and belonging. This form of capital shames parents that do not rise to the occasion of being the "good" parent, thereby reconstructing a hierarchy and perpetuating a cycle of social isolation and division based on middle-class standards of whiteness that, by definition, are impossible for low-income White parents to meet.

Discussion and Implications

In this study, we have applied the frameworks of classism, moral capital, and whiteness to understand the class dynamics among this group of six parents as well as their tenuous relationship to the school system. Moral capital (Jaye et al., 2018; Sherman, 2006) involves the creation of moral distinctions in communities with few economic resources. The conceptual application of moral capital in this study examines schools as institutional agencies of moral regulation that perpetuate middle-class ideologies which become equated with moral prestige (Valverde, 1994). One way the logic of moral capital operated within and beyond the group of Parent Mentors in Pleasant Grove, as we have noted, is through the binary discourse of "good parenting"/"bad parenting." Constructions of "bad parenting" are imbued with classist meanings and are part of the larger societal "family values" discourse that vilifies low-income families for their parenting practices, which are perceived by the dominant society as neglectful, uncaring, and not valuing education for their children (Swadener, 2005). While certainly there are harmful ways to parent children, this notion

of "bad parenting" also operates as a mechanism of social control and is applied particularly to what Bettie (2014) refers to as "hard-living" families—those who "are supported by low-paying, less stable occupations that lack health care benefits and make home ownership impossible—self-employed work, non-union labor, service work—and have lifestyles that are chaotic and unpredictable" (p. 13). What the dominant society typically does not understand about hard-living families, Bettie argues, is that "hard-living is not desired or intentional, but is a consequence of the difficulties of trying to establish a settled life" (p. 13).

In conjunction with moral capital, whiteness, with its constituting discourses of individualism and meritocracy, shows up in how the parents make sense of their treatment in the school. Rather than understanding the differential treatment between themselves and middle-class parents as being due to class, they fall back on individualistic explanations of popularity and (not) having an "important name" as reasons for their exclusion, insisting that all parents are the same, so why should they be treated differently by the school? This discourse of equality reveals the powerblind (Castagno, 2014) ideologies of whiteness, assuming that if all parents are viewed and treated as the same, differences can simply be ignored and will therefore disappear. The idea of difference in and of itself is regarded by the parents as negative—as a basis for hierarchical differentiation—rather than as a strength. These parents believe that if they can only manage to be treated the same as middle-class parents, they will essentially be able to perform as middle-class and access the privileges of whiteness more fully. Their discourse implies (but does not state directly) that they believe they are the same as the middle-class parents because they are White like them. Without a discourse of class (or race), it is unclear to these parents why they are, in fact, treated differently. The treatment of low-income White people is just as much about their class standing as it is about the fact that they do not perform whiteness in the same way that middle-class White people do (Sullivan, 2014).

This article adds to the scant literature on parent engagement from a critical perspective, examining the systemic oppression of low-income White parents in predominantly White rural communities. This program does not focus on "fixing the parents" so that they better fit the school paradigm of parent involvement, or even parent engagement; instead, we assume that the parents will bring into the school skills and experiences that can help change the way teachers engage low-income White families. Having low-income parents present in the school building is key to creating equitable education for low-income children, because if these parents are not brought into the school building even in the limited way in which they participated in the Parent Mentor Program, their concerns will never be heard in the school. Foregrounding social class and

classism requires stakeholders to privilege and respect the knowledge and experience low-income parents bring into the school as well as recognizing the oppression that these families face. This program offers a way—albeit small and contained—to bring parents into the building in a way that is less harmful to them because it does not demand that they be anything other than who they are. Teachers and administrators must be willing to embrace the presence of low-income parents in the school exactly as they are, without requiring them to conform to middle-class standards of speech, dress, and behavior.

The program partially succeeded in producing a tightly knit community of parents who support each other in and out of the school setting—the kind of tightly knit community that many rural communities already have (Tieken, 2014) but that Pleasant Grove lacks. Still, much work remains. Through critical analysis of the parents' stories, we discovered that acceptance in the school is not a binary of either being accepted or not; rather, low-income parents always exist in a liminal space in which exclusion can occur at any moment. The parents shared that while they experienced some gains in being treated more warmly in the school, these gains did not move consistently in the direction of progress. The same parents who volunteered in elementary school classrooms and built relationships with teachers and school staff were then dismissed and treated with hostility when they entered the *same* school building on behalf of their own children. The threat of exclusion was always present, and from the individualistic frame of whiteness and without a critical understanding of classism, the parents made sense of this threat of exclusion based on individual notions of popularity and friendship. As Sullivan (2014) argues,

> no matter how hard one works, a poor White person is at risk of being viewed as lazy, ignorant, and morally deficient. Unlike the Black person who likely experiences racial discrimination in education and the labor market, a poor White person has no way to account for her poverty and related moral "failures." (p. 35)

Class (and race) remained largely invisible in these explanations, even though it was ever-present in the ways these parents and their children were treated. From the parents' narratives, we learn that the dynamics of whiteness and classism operate mostly below the conscious awareness of parents and teachers alike, reframing group-level exclusion as individual deficits in parenting and school engagement.

In sum, even as parents within the Parent Mentor group began to form bonds of friendship and community that reduced the isolation they had experienced previously, the dynamics of moral capital and classist judgments of "good parenting"/"bad parenting" persisted both *within* the group and also

as they collectively analyzed the conditions under which parents *outside* the group functioned. This contradiction is explained by the individualistic frame of whiteness within which these parents insisted on understanding their own and other parents' situations. Because these parents were intent on gaining *individual access* to participating in the school for their own children's success, they maintained a stance of social distancing, creating hierarchical social distinctions. While they attempted to overcome the marginalizing practices of the school, they used the same discourse to talk about "those parents" in the frame of moral capital, trying to distance themselves from other White parents who were unable to perform as middle-class. The potential for solidarity with other low-income White parents was, ironically, undermined by these explanatory frames of whiteness.

Limitations and Future Directions

The small rural school district of Pleasant Grove presented challenges to the initiation and sustainability of the project, particularly in terms of the participatory action research model we had hoped to implement. In Pleasant Grove, we faced significant institutional barriers: the school district and building administrators maintained a traditional parent engagement perspective and, as such, insisted on keeping the program contained by limiting our contact with teachers. In all three years, the program was limited to 10 weeks at the end of the school year, rather than extending over the course of the year or even one full term, disrupting the potential impact. Additionally, the use of a community schools coordinator to mediate communication between the researchers and the teachers and administrators limited the control we had in implementing the program with fidelity—it was disempowering to us as researcher–practitioners and compromised the scope of the model by limiting the communication that could take place. As a result, the program remained constrained; we were not able to set up an agreement with the teachers to allow parents to communicate with and recruit other low-income parents in their classrooms, expand the program beyond 10 weeks at the end of the school year, expand beyond the elementary school, or allow parents to work with different grade levels.

The barriers listed above limited the impact we had as researchers as well as our ability to work alongside parents to craft the program according to *their* needs. We remained limited to a traditional parent engagement program with elements of a more transformative approach wherever we were able to (somewhat subversively) insert them. The barriers we described above prevented this project from having the transformational impact we sought. The parents continued to be viewed through a deficit lens which stunted the communication between the administrators and the parents. While the parents had ideas and

suggestions to share regarding school policies, they were not given a platform or a voice in crafting school policies. These low-income parents continued to be managed by the school authorities, making it impossible to address the systemic problems grounded in classism faced by low-income parents in the school.

Because of these challenges, we could only report changes we observed in the parents and their relationship to the school system, while also remaining critical of the limitations of this transformation, both in terms of the structural constraints of poverty and the district's control of the program. Subsequently, only one parent participated in the program for all the three years, which also limits any general conclusions we could make about changes in the parents' relationship with their children's schools over time.

Although our intent was to implement the participatory framework of participatory action research (Swantz, 2008), we were thwarted in our goals, thereby being relegated to a more traditional action research model directed by the researchers and community schools coordinator. However, despite not being able to fully implement participatory action research, the action component of this research consisted of working with the parents through processing their experiences to encourage them to become more active in their advocacy for their children and those children in the classrooms in which they volunteered—providing them with the institutional channels that they had previously not had access to and/or did not know about for airing their grievances and seeking action.

In addition to the gap between the participatory action research ideal and the realities we met on the ground, we also recognize that data was only collected from one rural school district, therefore the findings are not generalizable to other rural schools and families. Although gender was not a focus of this study, we recognize that there was a lack of gender diversity among the parents. A follow-up study to examine the role of gender and class in rural parent engagement is recommended.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analyzed the outcomes of a critical qualitative research study whose aim is to increase parent engagement in a manner approaching the ideal of equitable collaborations (Ishimaru, 2020) between parents, teachers, students, and the school, while working toward reducing the systemic marginalization these low-income White parents experience in the rural schools their children attend. The low-income White parents in this parent engagement project represent the community of parents in rural settings that are often dismissed as uninterested in their children's educational progress. This article critically analyzes the possibilities and limitations of attempting to create an

equitable collaboration that approaches parent engagement from a class-conscious perspective that honors the experiences and expertise of low-income White parents while responding to the need to conduct further research on rural schools (Tieken, 2014). This article contributes to the literature on parent engagement and equitable collaborations by incorporating an understanding of how classism works to marginalize low-income White parents in a rural context that uses moral capital to regulate their behavior.

Although much work remains—in terms of raising critical consciousness among parents as to the dynamics of classism, transforming school staff members' conceptions of low-income parents, and moving toward a true equitable collaboration that fundamentally reshapes relations of power—the three years of the Parent Mentor Program in Pleasant Grove were a start toward helping schools embrace low-income parents even in a very limited way. Even though the model was limited in time and scope and the program is no longer in operation, the parents' enthusiasm for being in the school near their children as well as the relationships they built with one another were positive outcomes of the program. Effective class-conscious parent engagement, then, requires much more than simply bringing low-income parents into the school as tokens of their community; instead, it requires a fundamental change in the classist conceptions of school staff members, challenging the system of moral capital that denigrates and isolates low-income parents, and a nuanced understanding of class among all school community members that goes beyond superficial notions of popularity, consumption, and individual access. A class-inclusive school community would also benefit from recruiting, training, and retaining teachers who both come from and live in the same communities as low-income families. When a class-inclusive rather than class-exclusive school community exists, the academic, social, and emotional well-being of all families and students stands to improve.

Endnote

[1]One metric used to measure educational outcomes is graduation rates. In the Pleasant Grove school district: economically disadvantaged graduation rate is 77% vs 89% for those not economically disadvantaged; the dropout rate for the economically disadvantaged is 12% vs 2 % for those not economically disadvantaged. Even the type of diplomas received shows the disproportionality: most of the economically disadvantaged receive a general Regents diploma, with only 17% receiving a Regents diploma with advanced designation, compared to 54% for those not economically disadvantaged (2019 data, retrieved from the New York State Education Department).

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