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Perils and Promises: Middle-Class Parental Involvement in Urban Schools

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Given recent trends, middle-class families may become an increasing presence in urban districts. Such parents could help secure badly needed resources and raise expectations. This study of parental involvement in two urban schools suggests that middle-class parental involvement may be more complex than often assumed. The authors find that middle-class parents bring myriad resources to urban schools and can be catalysts for change. However, the relationship between parental involvement and widespread benefit was mediated by parents' own goals and perspectives as well as by the larger social context. Furthermore, compared to a more individualistic approach to parental involvement, a collective orientation is more sustainable and has greater potential for benefiting all children in the school, without regard to their social class.

KEYWORDS: parent involvement, social class, urban education

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ERIN McNAMARA HORVAT is an associate professor of urban education at Temple University; e-mail: horvat@temple.edu. Her research agenda has explored how race and class shape access throughout the educational pipeline, focusing especially on the role of social and cultural capital in shaping families' interactions with schools, often drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical framework. She has been motivated by a desire to understand how interactions between individual and structural forces shape educational outcomes and life chances, including explorations of how race and class affect school and college experiences, college access, and high school dropout and reentry.

For several decades, urban public schools in the United States have been associated with low-income populations and with chronic poor performance (e.g., Anyon, 1997; Kantor & Breznal, 1992; Rury, 2005). The latter is often attributed, at least in part, to the tendency of school districts to be unresponsive to the concerns of low-income constituencies (Anyon, 1997; Kantor & Breznal, 1992; Noguera, 2003). Yet some middle-class families also use urban public schools, and given the recent “back to the city” movement (Birch, 2005) and the economic crisis (Rogers, 2009), they may become an increasing presence in urban districts.

While no substitute for adequate funding or community empowerment, the presence of middle-class families in urban schools might nevertheless be beneficial. Public institutions frequently are more responsive to constituencies possessed of the “sheer political clout” that tends to come with middle-class status (Noguera, 2003, p. 33). With their higher levels of cultural, material, and social capital, middle-class parents could secure badly needed resources and raise standards for students and educators alike (Kahlenberg, 2001; Varady & Raffel, 1995). In fact, efforts are ongoing in several large cities to attract and retain middle-class families to the public schools, both to help improve the schools and to prevent middle-class flight to the suburbs (Cucchiara, 2008; Jan, 2006; Lipman, 2004, 2008; Smith & Lupton, 2008). However, middle-class parental involvement also has a troubling underside: These parents’ efforts can be narrowly focused and informed by exclusive notions of class, leading to greater levels of inequality within and across schools (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Wells & Serna, 1996).

Our study contributes to the growing conversation about middle-class parental involvement in urban schools by asking why and with what consequences middle-class parents send their children to urban public schools. Using comparative qualitative case studies of two elementary schools, we find considerable variation in the approach taken to parental involvement. Parents’ orientations fall along a spectrum, ranging from a strongly individualistic focus at one end to a quite collective focus at the other. Moreover, these orientations cluster by school. At one site, parents tended toward the more *collective* end of the spectrum, expressing a commitment to the well-being of all children and a belief in the intrinsic value of diversity. At the other site, parents took a more *individualistic* approach, targeting their efforts mostly toward their own children and expressing a normative view of social class and an interest in improving the school by attracting more middle-class families.

Our data suggest that middle-class parents do indeed bring myriad resources to urban schools and can be important catalysts for change. A comparative analysis reveals, however, that collective approaches are more successful in improving school experiences for all children in the long run. We also find that middle-class parents’ efforts, when focused only on their own children or on attracting other middle-class families, can be harmful and alienating to working-class and poor children and their families.

Furthermore, we note that involvement characterized by a more individualistic approach is not easily sustained over time.

Middle-Class Parental Involvement: Causes and Consequences

Why would middle-class parents who could afford other options, including a move to the suburbs, choose to send their children to such highly stigmatized institutions as urban public schools? The research literature on this topic is limited. Several decades ago, Sieber (1982) conducted a study of middle-class parents in a gentrifying neighborhood and found that while most sent their children to private schools, a small number chose the local public school for financial and political reasons, including a belief in the importance of public education. More recently, Reay and her colleagues (2007; see also Reay, 2008) interviewed middle-class families in the United Kingdom who went “against the grain” and chose the inner-city comprehensive schools “most white middle-class families avoid” (p. 1042). These parents criticized most middle-class parents—for seeking out more privileged, homogeneous environments—and expressed their own commitment to multiculturalism and the cultivation of a “cosmopolitan identity.”

Unlike the still-emerging literature on why middle-class parents choose urban public schools, research on parental involvement more generally is ample and potentially useful for understanding the consequences of this choice. Research over the past several decades has documented a positive link between parents’ involvement in school and children’s academic outcomes (Chavkin, 1993; Domina, 2005; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson, 1987; Muller & Kerbow 1993; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Moreover, studies have suggested that the higher parents’ income and education, the more likely they are to be involved in school; conversely, lower levels of education and income are correlated with lower levels of parental involvement (Davies, 1993; Dornbusch & Wood, 1989; Moles, 1993; Muller, 1993). The literature on social class and parental involvement, which has shown that middle-class parents tend to intervene more effectively than working-class parents, has explored these dynamics more closely. Researchers have identified social, cultural, and symbolic capital as key mechanisms through which parents—working in, with, and on their children’s schools—transmit their class advantage to their offspring (e.g., Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McDonough, 1997; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Useem, 1992; Wells & Serna, 1996).

This body of work informs supporters of economic integration of public schools. They argue that schools with large numbers of middle-class families are effective in part because middle-class parents are such powerful advocates for, and assets to, public schools: “Educated middle-class parents are more likely to be involved in their children’s schools, to insist on high

standards, to rid the school of bad teachers, and to ensure adequate resources (both public and private)” (Kahlenberg, 2001, p. 62; see also Silberman & Crain, 2008; Varady & Raffel, 1995). Of particular concern for our study, however, is the degree to which parental involvement has a positive impact on the school as a whole—rather than on only the involved parent’s child. Here the literature is less clear.

On the one hand, a few studies show global effects from parental involvement. Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) to explore the effects of parental involvement on the achievement of eighth graders and found a positive association between school-level parental involvement and reading achievement, particularly for students from low-income families. They note, “This finding suggests that a child’s academic achievement did not depend so much on whether his or her parents participated, but on the average level of participation of all parents at the school” (p. 136). Brown (1998) found that parent volunteers had a positive impact on school climate and on students’ “sense of connection” to other adults (p. 37). Epstein’s (1987) research on parental involvement found that parents’ presence in schools also influenced teachers, particularly their willingness to reach out to other parents.

On the other hand, another body of research on middle-class parental involvement characterizes it as largely regressive, self-interested, and exclusionary and warns of the negative impact middle-class parents can have on school policies and practices. For example, McGrath and Kuriloff (1999) found that upper-middle-class mothers in a suburban school tended to exclude other parents and pursued tracking schemes that were “intended to benefit their children, often explicitly at the expense of other children” (p. 624; see also Brantlinger, 2003). Similarly, in a study of the politics of detracking, Wells and Serna (1996) explored the strategies through which elite parents were able to use their class-based resources to resist efforts to reduce tracking in their children’s schools (see also Sieber, 1982).

Thus, while it is clear that parental involvement matters, and that middle-class parental involvement can have a significant positive impact, important questions remain. Specifically, we need to better understand what motivates middle-class parents’ involvement in urban public schools and to more clearly establish the extent to which such involvement increases social inequalities or, conversely, benefits all children in a school.

Methodology

This is a comparative analysis of two data sets, designed as an examination of similarities and differences in middle-class parental involvement in urban public schools.¹ It draws from two separately conducted case studies of middle-class parents in racially and economically diverse elementary schools (K–8) in the downtown area of a large northeastern city we refer to as Brickton.² Both studies explored why middle-class parents chose to send their children to public schools and the mechanisms through which they

brought their class-related resources to bear on the schools.³ We used qualitative methods since their ability to capture participants' interpretations and document local processes and dynamics were best suited to our research goals. One study is ethnographic; the other, focusing on a school that had experienced significant middle-class parental involvement since the 1970s, combines an oral history approach with some participant observation. The historical component of this design is particularly useful in revealing the ways in which parents' activities and meanings are shaped by their social experiences and by the time-specific context in which they operate. The data we draw on include 59 interviews and approximately 225 hours of participant observation. (See Table 1 for detailed information about data sources.) The research involved two stages. In the first, we each separately designed and carried out one case study (we remained in conversation throughout this process, however). The first author focused on Grant Elementary School; the second, on Monroe Elementary School. In the second stage, as explained later, we reanalyzed the two data sets comparatively.

The research at Grant was undertaken as an ethnographic investigation of middle-class parental involvement in a diverse urban school. The study, conducted from 2003 to 2006, involved 21 interviews and approximately 200 hours of participant observation. The research focused on the school's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) because it was a key site for parents' efforts around school improvement, was accorded a great deal of power within the school, and brought together a diverse group of parents.

"Purposeful sampling" (Maxwell, 1996) was used to develop a pool of interviewees from the school community who were diverse in race and ethnicity, social class, levels of involvement, and geographic area of residence. Most parents in the sample were selected because of their involvement with the PTO; some were recruited through "snowball sampling." Several parents were interviewed multiple times. The interviews were staggered throughout 3 years of data collection. Many were preceded with and followed by multiple casual conversations and observations. This approach provided opportunities to further explore interview themes, check conclusions, and ask additional questions as events unfolded. Interviews also were conducted with four teachers, the principal, and two school district administrators. The selection of educators was also purposeful, designed to create a balance of race-ethnicity, years of experience, and grades taught. All parent and educator interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours; were held in the participant's home, at the school, or in a coffee shop or restaurant; and were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were open-ended and in-depth, focusing on the participants' experiences with the school, goals for their involvement, and views of race and class dynamics at the school.

The research at Monroe was intended to understand the role parents, particularly middle-class parents, played in transforming the school from a low- to a high-performing institution. To accomplish this goal, the second author conducted an oral history of the school community as well as limited participant observation of present-day activities. The research included 34

Table 1
Data Sources by School

Data Sources	Grant	Monroe
<i>Interviews</i>		
Parents	14	21
Teachers/administrators	7	11
		(including school secretary)
Former students	0	2
Total no. of interviews	21	34
<i>Race/ethnicity of parent sample</i>		
White	5	16
African American	7	5
Asian	2	0
<i>Class status of parent sample</i>		
Middle class	9	17
Working class or poor	5	4
<i>Race/ethnicity of teachers/administrators</i>		
White	4	10
African American	3	1
<i>Observations</i>		
No. of hours	200	25
Activities observed	PTO meetings, PTO-sponsored events, school fund-raisers, classrooms, school arrival/dismissal, prospective parent tours, student performances, spring carnival	Harvest Day celebration, winter concert, spring musical, Play Day, Home and School meetings, school dismissal, prospective parent tours
<i>Documents analyzed</i>		
	School publications, newspaper coverage, school website, PTO minutes, school district documents	School publications, newspaper coverage, school website

Note. PTO = Parent Teacher Organization.

interviews with parents and school staff and 25 hours of participant observation from 2005 to 2006. "Purposeful sampling" (Maxwell, 1996) was used to develop a sample that reflected diversity in race and ethnicity, social class, and eras of involvement with the school.⁴ Six parents had been or were currently Home and School Association officers (president or copresident). All three principals from the 30-plus-year period under study were interviewed.

Interviews focused on changes at the school, the role of parents in creating and supporting these changes, and how parents understood the goals

and consequences of their activities. Interviews ranged between 40 and 90 minutes; most were conducted in the participant's home or at another mutually agreeable location (e.g., coffee shop). All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Participant observation was conducted to observe the school community as a whole and to see and meet parents.

Oral histories provide unique insights, but they also have limitations: Because of "euphoric recall" (Walker, 1996), respondents' accounts of past events can be overly positive. In the Monroe study, some participants were reflecting on events that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s and may have been viewing the past through "rose-colored glasses." However, many respondents were currently involved in the school, and their portrayal of Monroe parents' ethos and involvement matched the descriptions provided by earlier generations of parents. In addition, recent published accounts of the school's history, written by journalists when Monroe's longtime principal retired, resonated with our findings. Thus, while some accounts of involvement at Monroe may be overly positive, we feel confident that the overall picture we provide here of the school and of parents' efforts is accurate.

Data Analysis

The data sets in this research were analyzed twice. Initially, each set was assessed separately, although the authors were in conversation throughout the 3-year period of data collection and analysis. As with all qualitative analysis, the process was iterative and involved moving between data, codes, and emerging hypotheses (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). In both cases, the analysis began with the development of coding schemes that balanced codes related to our specific questions and theoretical frameworks (such as middle-class parents' activation of social and cultural capital) with those that emerged from the data (such as the special status of "neighborhood" parents in the Grant data and references to the civil rights movement in the Monroe data). Though the sets were coded separately, because the research questions in each study were similar, the coding schemes were also similar. Both authors used qualitative data analysis software—Hyperresearch for the first author and Atlas.ti for the second author. In both cases, the final coding schemes focused on class; race; parental involvement; parents' goals, motivations, and actions; and the ways in which parents' actions were experienced by different groups within each school. Both authors were also interested in the relationship between parental involvement that benefited the individual child and more global types of involvement that affected the whole school.

Conversations we held regularly throughout this process led us to believe that key differences across the two data sets centered around why parents became involved in the school, how they understood issues of race and class, and how parental involvement affected the schools. To conduct a formal comparative analysis, we exchanged all data related to these issues and compared Grant and Monroe data along each point. Then, through a

Table 2
Grant and Monroe Demographic Data, 2005–2006

Demographic	Grant	Monroe
Total student population	490	414
% African American	42	40
% White	12	50
% Asian	41	5
% Latino	3	4
% Low income (district average: 73%)	47	46

several-month process involving multiple written and oral exchanges, we distilled the data still further into the major points of contrast we discuss here.

According to Maxwell (1996), validity in qualitative research can be threatened in three areas: description, interpretation, and theory. We each addressed threats to description and interpretation in our respective research processes—for example, by transcribing all interviews and typing up field notes shortly after an observed event and by triangulating findings with multiple sources of data. We jointly addressed threats to theoretical validity by seeking discrepant cases in the data, subjecting various iterations of our arguments to multiple rounds of peer review, and using conversations with one another (and other colleagues) to develop increased reflexivity.

The Case Studies: Grant and Monroe Schools

Grant Elementary School serves nearly 500 kindergarteners through eighth graders in downtown Brickton. Grant is located in Cobble Square, one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. Homes and buildings date back to the city's colonial era; several streets are still paved in cobblestones; and large, brick townhouses lend an air of refined dignity to shady streets. Real estate values in Cobble Square are far higher than in the rest of Brickton. In 2002, for example, the area's median sale price (\$477,500) was 6 times that of the city's median and was the highest in Brickton. Grant's catchment zone also encompasses some neighborhoods adjoining Cobble Square, including the city's Chinatown. (See Table 2 for demographic details about both schools.)

Because Cobble Square is an affluent neighborhood, and because Brickton's school district—which serves a largely disadvantaged and minority population and has a history of low student achievement as well as chronic fiscal shortfalls—is often avoided by residents who can afford other options, most Cobble Square families send their children to private schools. At the same time, since Grant has a good reputation in Brickton, each year hundreds of students from across the city apply to transfer to the school. During the 2005–2006 school year, 51% of Grant students lived in

the catchment area; transfer students were largely African American and came from low-performing schools.

During the study period, a group of middle-class parents, mainly from Cobble Square, were trying to increase the number of “neighborhood” children at the school. In this context, the term *neighborhood* referenced middle-class (or upper-middle-class) status. Parents hoped that a critical mass of such families would bring resources and demands for higher quality, thus making the school more appealing to other neighborhood families and ushering in a cycle of parental involvement and school improvement. Operating independently and through the PTO, parents engaged in various marketing and public relations activities designed to achieve these goals.

Grant parents’ campaign to attract more middle-class families from the downtown area coincided with the Downtown Schools Initiative (DSI), a partnership between a local business organization and the school district. DSI was designed to bring downtown professional families into the public schools—thereby adding to the area’s appeal, slowing middle-class flight to the suburbs, and furthering downtown revitalization. DSI involved a marketing campaign, enhanced school choice for downtown families, a “customer service” focus for the public schools, improved “curb appeal” for downtown schools, and support with school fund-raising and other improvements. Perhaps not surprisingly, since several Cobble Square parents helped develop DSI, the initiative’s goals and strategies—particularly, the emphasis on marketing and on recruiting professional families—resonated with those of the Grant effort.

The second case study site, Monroe Elementary School, is also a large (417 students) K–8 institution located in Brickton. Its neighborhood has long been home to both artists and public housing projects. The area’s streets are narrow and tree lined, with homes that date to the early 1800s as well as ones built by developers in the 1980s. In the mid-1970s and early 1980s, homes here could be bought for \$50,000 to \$100,000. Many sell now for \$600,000 to \$800,000. A few blocks from the school, there is a commercial strip of stores, restaurants, and other businesses. Around the corner sit a well-maintained playground and tennis court. Two major arts organizations also are located in the neighborhood.

Monroe was selected for study because of the remarkable strength of the school community and its unique 30-year history of parental involvement. In the late 1970s, it was one of the worst schools in a largely failing district, its student population was largely Black and poor, and its dwindling enrollment had made it a target for closure. The school is now at capacity, enrolls a racially diverse population, and reports results on the state’s standardized assessment tests that are significantly above the district average.⁵ Monroe is particularly well known for its arts program. In addition (and like Grant), it is one of three or four public K–8 schools located in the city’s core that draw a large number of applicants from outside their catchment areas. Some families now deliberately purchase homes inside Monroe’s boundaries so that their children can attend the school.

Differences in Motivations, Goals, and Consequences of Parental Involvement

We focus our discussion of Grant and Monroe on four dimensions of parental involvement: parents' motivations for becoming involved, their conceptualizations of diversity, their goals, and the consequences of their efforts. While there were certainly variations within each school in parents' understandings and actions, the variation *across* the two schools on each of these dimensions was quite striking and had serious implications for students and the schools. It is this degree of variation that leads us to argue for a more complex understanding of the role of middle-class parents in urban schools.

Parents' Motivations: Involvement for Whom?

At both Grant and Monroe, involved middle-class parents were interested in making significant improvements to their children's schools. In both cases, the parents were aware that the schools their children attended had limited funds for physical, instructional, and programmatic amenities; and in both cases, parents hoped to use their resources as professionals and members of the middle class to create changes. However, parents at the two schools differed in how they talked about their efforts and, particularly, in whom they saw as the primary beneficiaries. If the Monroe and Grant parents' approaches could be placed on a spectrum, with involvement focused solely on one's own child at one end and involvement targeted entirely toward all students in the school at the other, Grant parents would occupy the more individualistic end and Monroe parents the more collective.

Parental involvement at Grant: "For my child." Parents at Grant wanted to add new programs, replace an unpopular principal, and make significant improvements to the school's infrastructure. When they described their involvement and plans for the school, they discussed these changes in relation to their own children's needs and interests. They often spoke of their decision to send their children to Grant as largely a financial one—private schools were "incredibly expensive" or "way too much" money for families with more than one child—and expressed concerns that the school's resources, instruction, programs, and climate were less than ideal. They were trying to make the school "good enough" to permit them to continue sending their children there. In this context, benefits for other children were seen as a happy result of their efforts, but they were not considered the main point.

A focus on one's own children was naturalized at Grant to such an extent that parents invoked it without hesitation. For example, in discussing their reasons for joining the PTO, parents said they became involved primarily because it was good for their children. As one White middle-class mother explained, "I really did it for [my son], 'cause I know how much he enjoys seeing me around the school." The dominance of this perspective

was evident also in a teacher's comment. Describing the middle-class parents' work, this longtime teacher observed, "I mean, as a secondary interest, they want to see the school do well. But their primary focus—it comes with the territory. It comes with being a parent. You know." Though their efforts did in many cases benefit all students, parents generally spoke of this as a corollary benefit rather than as the main purpose. They used very private, individually focused language to describe their motivations. This is clear, for instance, in an e-mail message a parent shared. She had written to the principal about her concern that rules governing student behavior in the classroom and hallways were not being adequately enforced:

Please know that you have my support and I am firmly on your side. However, the safety and security of my children and their educational experience will take precedence over all else. I hope you will take the necessary steps to ensure that we can remain at Grant in the years to come.

Here, middle-class parents' ability to speak forcefully in their capacity as guardians of their own children's educational experience is apparent. At the same time, this parent's lightly veiled threat to leave the school if her concerns were not met reveals her primary focus to be the well-being of her own children rather than that of the school as a whole.

Of course, Grant parents did not always use such individualistic language. One Cobble Square mother, who was also a former public school teacher, described her decision to send her child to Grant as a way of putting her knowledge as an educator to work:

So it was a little bit of financial issue, a little bit of . . . We could really make a difference with all these really great people involved. . . . Let me put my money where my mouth is, and shut up and stop complaining about my neighborhood school if I'm in a position to maybe help do something about it.

In the sample of middle-class parents at Grant, this mother—perhaps because of her previous occupation—was the interviewee most likely to refer to helping the school as a whole. But she was the parent of a kindergartner and, despite her more collective language, targeted her efforts almost exclusively toward the younger grades. For example, she was the driving force behind a new reading program that was implemented one grade at a time—beginning with kindergarten. In another instance, a different Cobble Square mother, following a PTO meeting in which the group had discussed their success in pushing for greater enforcement of traffic rules around the school, remarked laughingly that she was headed outside to determine whether police were posted on the east side of the school. "I'll be pretty pissed if they [the traffic officers] are only on the west side," she joked, "because I come from the *other* direction!" She resolved to call the city to complain if she was

not satisfied. Observations and conversations with parents suggested that they were *able* to think and act collectively, but the dominant, default approach was unapologetically individualistic.

This focus on one's own children did not go unchallenged. Several low-income African American parents who were very involved with Grant's PTO expressed frustration many times that the PTO (led by middle-class parents from Cobble Square) tended to focus its energies on the younger grades, where most of the middle-class children were enrolled. For example, when a Cobble Square mother acknowledged that a new tutoring program she was promoting would not place any volunteers in Grades 7 and 8, an African American mother from outside the downtown area spoke up: "We have to make sure we're supporting all the grades. This is only for K-6. Once again, we're not affecting the upper grades." Though the tutoring program never materialized, two of the PTO's major efforts—the reading program and a new playground—both targeted younger students. A middle-class mother acknowledged this as a concern. When asked how her activities and those of other middle-class parents affected students, she mused,

Anyone that contributes in any way, I think, helps. . . . [When] I looked around at the faces of the people that were involved, a lot of them were involved in the younger grades or in kindergarten. . . . It helps kindergarten. It may have helped first grade. Did it help the seventh graders? Probably not. Did it help the eighth graders? I don't know. On average, did it help the average kid? I don't know.

This deliberately pragmatic stance epitomizes the general understanding at Grant regarding motivations for parental involvement. Middle-class parents' tendency to focus their efforts primarily on behalf of their own children was perceived as natural, so much so that this approach rarely merited comment from any quarter. As a result, the benefits these parents brought to the school were not expected to reach very far beyond their own children or their children's immediate peers.

Parental involvement at Monroe: "So that all kids are enriched." Involved middle-class parents at Monroe also viewed their efforts as helping their own children, but at the same time, they were committed to securing resources or advantages for the school as a whole. While they varied somewhat in how they dealt with issues of individual and collective good, these parents generally occupied the collective end of the spectrum, channeling their efforts toward *all* students in the school. Unlike at Grant, the ethos at Monroe was characterized by the assumption that parents would be motivated by more than just their own children's needs.

The collective nature of involvement at Monroe can be seen most clearly in how parents approached their volunteer work and which programs they sought to implement. For example, because they believed the work being done at the school was too important to abandon, many parents

continued to volunteer at Monroe after their own children had moved on. A teacher who had been at the school from 1986 to 2001 described a pervasive sense of responsibility. She noted with approval what she saw as parents' beliefs that middle-class families should become involved in urban public schools:

Okay, so if everyone who is White, who is educated, who has some money pulls their kid out of city schools, what happens to those city schools? Well, we know, let's be realistic, and do we have a responsibility? There I think we do.

A parent from the 1990s applied this philosophy to curriculum and instruction as well, arguing that programs for mentally gifted students should be implemented in a way that benefited all students. This comment is particularly striking because it shows a parent with a child already in the gifted program struggling with the tension between advancing her own child's interests and wanting to share enrichment with all children:

I thought mentally gifted should be an enrichment that comes into the classroom, not pulling the kid out of the classroom. Meaning they can come in, they can enrich a program, and that the kids who really are performing above, they can take out for short times to do additional work on the same topic. So that all the kids are enriched by it.

In contrast to research that has documented middle-class parents' interests in maintaining and even increasing within-school hierarchies (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Sieber, 1982; Wells & Serna, 1996), this parent expresses a viewpoint that elevates collective goals above individual ones—but at the same time leaves space for some degree of exclusivity.

The extent to which parents at Monroe shared a vision of creating a school that served all children well was also apparent to students. An interviewee who had attended Monroe from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s spoke glowingly about her experiences:

Monroe was like lightning in a bottle. . . . I think it brought out the best. I think they had working-class or middle-class White families that were moving in, but not trying to supersede or take over anything that the poorer minority families had already established, and were trying to work together with them. And doing it under the premises that this is going to be best for all of our kids. And it was.

This former student considered it important that middle-class parents had been respectful of the other parents at the school and that they had communicated an interest in serving all children and promoted a sense of interdependence within the school.

Of course, not all parents shared these values. At times, some had more individualistic motivations. For one of the early "pioneer" parents,

concern about her child took precedence over more global goals. Her explanation for becoming involved at Monroe was quite similar to those provided by many Grant parents:

Well, I was doing it very selfishly. It was for my family, my group. Which, of course helped other people. . . . Because my main goal was not to—well, in a way it is, to improve society. Because if you improve society you've got to improve yourself. But I was focusing on doing it for [my daughter], for her education.

Note that even while articulating a more individualistic stance, this parent also makes a connection between individual and collective good, rejecting the notion that the two are in opposition. A parent from Monroe's middle years (1982–1994), recalling a difference of opinion about the ways in which resources should be allocated, succinctly captured the school's prevailing ethos:

[There was] one parent who, I remember them saying, "Well, if they want computers, they can fund-raise for their own." I was, like, "Wait a minute. We're fund-raising for the school. We're not fund-raising for this class because my son's in this class. Or this class because your daughter's in that class. We're fund-raising for the whole school."

As these recollections make clear, when individualistic orientations surfaced, they existed in tension with the dominant, more collective ethos at the school.

Decades after the first generation of involved middle-class parents, the collective nature of parental involvement at Monroe remains strong. As the African American mother who was copresident of Monroe's Home and School Association in 2005 explained,

The parents want to also be involved because it helps the children. You don't get the parents that just come in the classroom and just want to help with their child. They want to help with all of the children.

The fact that parents at Monroe still reference their interest in benefiting all children at the school—despite the many ways that our society has moved away from the idealism of the 1960s and 1970s—is testament to the persistence of the unique ethos that developed at the school.

Parents' Conceptions of Integration and Diversity

Middle-class parents in urban public schools are aware of the ways in which their children differ from many of the students in their classrooms. Class and race are key issues, and parents' understanding of them affected their choice of school and the activities they undertook after enrolling their

children. These actions, in turn, had significant consequences for the schools and students. As we discuss in the following sections, there was a great deal of interschool variation in how parents thought about diversity and integration.

Grant: The special status of middle-class families. A powerful discourse circulated at Grant that positioned middle-class families as central to school improvement efforts. In terms reminiscent of the literature on economic integration of schools (e.g., Kahlenberg, 2001), parents and teachers spoke frequently of the ways in which middle-class families could benefit Grant. A teacher explaining her support for the PTO's effort to increase the number of "neighborhood" (middle-class) families at the school, said,

When you're dealing with an affluent neighborhood, you're dealing with parents of interest. They care! As opposed to other areas. It sounds horrible, I know it does. But that's it. Realistic. I mean, that's the way it is. So if the common sense here is that if the neighborhood children came to this school and it's an affluent neighborhood and it's caring parents, then all the parents that send the children here would care about their children, the education, and maintaining Grant to where it's a very good learning environment.

Similarly, a parent (and former school district employee) perceived the presence of middle-class families as "obviously," and strongly, positive:

Obviously, children who come from affluent families have more of an advantage [over] students who come from poor families. . . . They're more willing to listen, more willing to learn. Whereas the children from not-so-advantaged homes, they don't tend to care about education as much. They just want to play.

Other parents, teachers, and district administrators echoed these comments, arguing that middle-class parents would be more involved and more able to bring important resources to the school and that their children would "help the diverse population in everything. You know, academics, behavior, helping the students be better citizens."⁶ Many middle-class parents and educators saw the benefits of economic diversity as flowing in one direction only—from the middle-class students and their parents to the other children.

Middle-class parents' activities at Grant focused heavily on the task of attracting more families "like them" to the school. They reached out to potential parents in the neighborhood and at local playgrounds, they held special events for "neighborhood families," and they were very concerned about how prospective parents viewed the school. These efforts were discussed often at PTO meetings and other school functions. For example, parents erupted into spontaneous applause when, at a meeting with the district superintendent, a mother announced that a dozen neighborhood families were enrolling their children. As this same mother later explained, her goal was to

generate a “critical mass of involved parents” who would respond to seeing “an educated family who looks kind of like them” using the school. In this discourse, middle-class families benefited the school simply by sending their children there, because any such family’s involvement could attract other, similarly advantaged families, who would also help make the school better and attract still more families.

The discourse around social class that circulated at Grant thus involved a series of normative assumptions about the superiority of middle-class families. It assumed that “educated” families would also display other desirable behaviors (e.g., parents would be involved and children would be studious and obedient). At the same time, however, these assumptions positioned low-income students (particularly, Grant’s largely low-income and African American transfer students) as less desirable, as the embodiment of the inner-city influence that middle-class children were supposed to dilute. While parents sometimes referred to Grant’s diversity as one of its assets, unlike Monroe parents, they did not speak of their children as learning from low-income or minority children. These students and their parents were seen as the beneficiaries of middle-class parents’ efforts but as having little to offer in return.

Monroe: The benefits of public school diversity. Middle-class parental involvement at Monroe emphasized the value of racial and social class diversity. This emphasis appears to have been rooted both in a basic respect for and appreciation of difference *and* in parents’ interest in preparing their children for success in a diverse world. In this sense, some Monroe parents resemble the middle-class British parents in Reay et al.’s (2007) study, who sent their children to urban comprehensives in part because “multiculturalism is increasingly a source of social and cultural capital” (p. 1046).

Parents varied in the extent to which they expressed this more instrumentalist view of diversity. During a joint interview, a couple who had been involved in the school in the 1970s spoke at length about their views on the value of diversity:

It was also for my kids to benefit from them [the non-White, non-middle-class students], too. I wanted my kids to have every, to just, this was their city. These were their people. These were—they may be different, yes, they’re different, isn’t that great. Learn about that. Embrace it. . . . I wanted my kids not to grow up in this little world that protected them so much. (Mother)

They took public transportation, they knew their way around the city without a car, and they were able to get on a trolley, subway, or bus. (Father)

Susan [her daughter] feels she is a good social worker because of her experience growing up. She says, “I know the people. I know the stories . . . and I can go into anybody’s house.” She’s got a certain savvy and a street smart to her. (Mother)

These parents believed that the years their children spent at Monroe helped them feel comfortable and competent in diverse urban environments. In addition, they credited Monroe for having contributed to their children's professional success by giving them important forms of capital.

A White middle-class father, who at the time of data collection had two children at the school, offered a slightly different perspective:

I think in order for society and urban life to maintain itself and get better, kids have to have respect for other kids and other viewpoints and other ways of life. And if you don't get that early on, you're not going to appreciate it, you're not going to understand it, and you're not going to respect it.

This parent underscores a larger social benefit: that the respect for difference that comes from early exposure to diversity contributes to the creation of more positive communities.

A parent from the middle years expressed both perspectives, arguing for diversity's inherent and societal value *and* for the ways it benefited his children. He used his own experiences growing up in the suburbs to argue for the value of a more diverse environment:

What I often said to people who were thinking of moving, my standard comment was, "I grew up in the suburbs and I wouldn't do that to my children." And I always felt that living and working and going to school in the same neighborhood made for community. And it made for interaction with people on all levels. And raising your children in the city would mean that they would be better able to deal with all kinds of people that they would run into throughout life.

He believes there is an inherent good in exposing children to others of different backgrounds and that parents who fail to provide that sort of exposure do a disservice to their own children and to society at large.

Valuing diversity, according to many parents, resulted in an enhanced sense of community and inclusiveness. They perceived the environment at Monroe as nurturing all children at the same time that it celebrated differences. A middle-class mother who was involved with the school from 1986 to 2000 spoke very fondly of her children's experiences:

They [her children] felt a sense of community. They felt like they belonged. They had got to know people very different from themselves. Cross-class and cross-race. And that mix of people, wealthier and poorer all together, was very important. It was very nurturing. It nurtured their spirits on some level.

Importantly, parents like this one did not see themselves or their children as having had to *overcome* the challenge of a diverse student body. Rather, it was diversity that made Monroe a desirable choice. Thus, whereas academic as well as popular discourse about mixed-income schools (e.g., Archer,

2005; Bazelon, 2008; Gottlieb, 2004; Kahlenberg, 2001) tend to emphasize the benefits accruing to lower-income children, Monroe parents saw reciprocity: low-income students do benefit from the presence of middle-class children, but middle-class students also gain from their association with low-income children.

Of course, as some Monroe parents acknowledged and as the parents Reay et al. (2007) studied remind us, the middle-class embrace of diversity can be seen as simply another strategy for accruing capital. Most Monroe parents, though, appeared to value diversity less for its strategic or instrumental uses and more as an important aspect of a broader approach that included a dedication to egalitarian goals and to using the resources associated with their class status to advance those goals.

Parents' Goals for the Schools

What did parents want for their children's schools? How did they talk about their goals and how did they pursue them? Parents at both Grant and Monroe wanted "good" schools for their children; where they differed was in what "good" meant and in how they could make the schools "better." At Grant, parents' goals focused largely on enhancing the school's market position, with the idea that this would make it more attractive to other middle-class parents, who would further improve the school. At Monroe, in contrast, parents drew on their experiences with the civil rights movement—or from the civil rights movement as a symbol—to articulate their goal of creating a vibrant, urban community.

Improving Grant: The power of markets. Middle-class parents at Grant had clear and ambitious goals for the school. As one mother explained, they wanted it to be "the kind of school it needs to be to cater to Cobble Square." Given their assumption that an influx of middle-class families would lead to improvements, much of parents' work at the school was done with an eye to attracting such families. The metaphor of the marketplace informed their efforts; they hoped to influence the ways prospective families chose schools and thus enhance Grant's ability to compete with other public, private, and charter options.

The presence of market-oriented discourse is hardly surprising. In the current era, neoliberal ideology—which valorizes markets and the pursuit of individual interests—is widespread (Harvey, 2007). Indeed, the Grant parents' orientation was affirmed by their immediate context, particularly, DSI's goal of improving the "market positions" of downtown schools and the growing emphasis within the district on school choice and customer service (Gold, Simon, Cucchiara, Riffer, & Mitchell, 2007). In addition to their frequent references to marketing or public relations strategies that would make the school appealing to middle-class families, when middle-class parents discussed substantive improvements to programs or facilities, they also tended to see these school improvements through a marketing lens

as well. For example, a middle-class mother who was instrumental in bringing a “cybrary” to Grant explained that she was invested in the project mainly because of its power to attract other middle-class parents to Grant—what she referred to as the new library’s “interior curb appeal” and “wow quotient.” She was pleased that children who did not have access to computers or libraries would benefit from the cybrary, but that, she said, was “a collateral benefit,” not a primary goal. The cybrary and similar improvements were important instead because they would add to the school’s appeal in the educational marketplace.

Another middle-class mother, describing the ways her efforts could benefit the school, concluded,

And then hopefully [people] like ourselves over time will be like a—an ad for the school. Like, here are all these people that are going to Grant. Like, you know, oh wow, cool. You know, maybe I’ll send my kid there!

Serving as “an ad for the school” represented a contribution to Grant because it would make the school a readier sell to other middle-class parents.

Grant parents were more invested in distinguishing the school from the rest of the district’s “inner-city” schools than they were in developing ways in which their involvement might benefit other schools or the city as a whole. To these parents, it was critical to show that in contrast to the “war zone,” Grant was a place where rules were respected and children were safe. Parents worked in many ways to create and strengthen this boundary. They highlighted Grant’s location in downtown or Cobble Square (e.g., “this is a *downtown* school” or “this is a *Cobble Square* school”); they emphasized the professional status of the middle-class families who sent their children to the school; and they strove to cast the school—and their group of parents—as a district favorite that received special attention. Believing, not unreasonably, that district administrators were often unresponsive to Brickton public school parents because so many were low income and not adept at “working the system,” middle-class parents at Grant used implicit and explicit shows of status to demonstrate that they were a more powerful constituency that could not be ignored.⁷

Improving Monroe: Thinking globally, acting locally. At Monroe, parents’ involvement was linked to a larger vision for social change. They wanted to show what was possible when different groups came together around a common good. They wanted to create a diverse school that could be a model for other urban schools, and, more generally, they hoped to build a diverse community that embodied the richness and possibilities of urban life.

In talking about their efforts, these parents frequently referenced the social movements of the 1960s as the source of their faith in citizens’ ability to create change. The idea of working in a school as a way to create broader social change is a sentiment shared by Monroe parents from all eras, but it was

particularly true of the “pioneer parents,” those who sent their children to Monroe in the late 1970s. As one pioneer parent said, “We’re children of the ’60s, idealistic in that regard. And in my own case a little bit, you know, maybe as I said, almost defiantly so. ‘Just show ’em!’—that kind of thing.” Another parent from the same period explained, “You know, you think globally, act locally. . . . We were acting locally to make a larger—but to help change something.” At once a set of ideas, a shared experience, and a rallying cry, the 1960s-era social movements shaped parents’ goals for the school and also served as a symbol to parents as they thought and talked about their actions.

Schools played a key role in the Monroe parents’ social-change agenda. Like many Americans, they believed the health of a society depends largely upon the health of its schools, and they were committed to having an impact on the schools in their community. A parent from the middle years described her involvement in public education as having larger social ramifications:

I believed in public education, and I believe one good way to advocate for it is to be a consumer of it. You have a certain standing when you’re a parent and not just someone who sends their child to [a local independent school] but attends a rally or something. I wanted to be part of improving a system that’s important for the country.

The term *consumer* here is reminiscent of the Grant parents’ market-oriented language. However, this parent is using it differently: to index a commitment to a public institution and a means of leveraging change.

Monroe parents’ vision for the future had a markedly urban character. They wanted the school to be a model of collaboration across lines of class and race, but they also wanted to reclaim the city as a place to raise children and create community. The early 1970s was a particularly difficult moment in Brickton’s history, one characterized by racial strife and inner-city blight. During that time, parents’ decision to send their children to an all-Black public school was, as one father put it, “a statement of faith in the City of Brickton, that’s for sure . . . very clearly a political statement.” Another parent, who had two children enrolled at Monroe during the study, explained that he saw the city as uniquely suited to this sort of activism:

I think a lot of like-minded people getting together can effect positive social change. And I think that is one of the most fantastic things about living in the city and having a point to rally behind. And what better place to rally behind than a public school?

Parents at Monroe believed that by “rallying” behind a school, they could contribute to the creation of a more vibrant, nurturing city and help ensure the viability of the urban life they so valued.

Consequences for the Schools

Thus far, we have used broad strokes to paint a picture of parental involvement that shows the very different perspectives, ideological

orientations, and goals of middle-class parents at two urban elementary schools. Now we explore impact, returning to our focus on the complex issues overlooked in the often-celebratory discourse about parental involvement. At both Grant and Monroe, middle-class parents donated untold hours of their time as well as significant personal resources to the schools. They felt strongly and spoke passionately about their involvement. Yet the consequences of their efforts were by no means clear-cut. In fact, while our data lend some support to arguments about the benefits of middle-class parental involvement, they also illuminate unintended—and inequitable—consequences.

Grant: A complicated story. Consistent with the literature on class and parental involvement, middle-class parents at Grant were quite successful at bringing new resources and programs to the school. But these resources came at a cost. They negatively affected a group of largely low-income and minority students and their families. Because Grant had a good reputation in the district, large numbers of students who lived outside the catchment area (and outside the downtown altogether) transferred to Grant as a way of escaping low-performing neighborhood schools. The majority of students who transferred to Grant from other schools—and, particularly, those from outside the downtown area—were African American. The schools they came from served large numbers of low-income children, and in many cases, these schools also had been identified by the district as failing.⁸ When parents and educators spoke of the value of attracting more middle-class families to the school, this group of transfer families was the implicit *other* against which middle-class virtue was compared, and their status at the school was depressed by the involvement of middle-class parents. Also, middle-class parents' commitment to Grant seems to have been fragile: Many "pulled" their children after only a year or two, moving to the suburbs or sending them to a different public or independent school.

Middle-class parents had a rich store of social, cultural, and financial capital from which they could draw to influence the district and other local decision makers, raise funds, make sure resources were directed to the school, and hold teachers and other school staff accountable (Lareau, 2000; Wells & Serna, 1996). During the 2-year fieldwork period, middle-class parents at Grant attained a new playground for the school; convinced the district to lower class size for kindergarten by allocating an additional teacher; increased security and traffic enforcement around the school; implemented a new reading program; replaced an ineffective principal; and transformed the outdated, unused library into a state-of-the-art cybrary. As one low-income African American mother noted, remarking upon the numerous positive changes "neighborhood" parents had helped bring about, "People from the community get things done!" In many instances, parents' efforts benefited students across the school. For example, the kindergartners gained from smaller class sizes, all the children in the school benefited from having a resource-rich library, and the parents' vigilance about traffic enforcement kept all children

safer. In addition, whereas the ousted principal had alienated teachers and parents of all race and class backgrounds, the new principal was warm and charismatic and significantly improved teacher morale at the school.

However, parents' efforts to attract more middle-class families to the school had a negative impact on low-income, African American students, especially transfer students. During an interview, a teacher argued that the campaign to attract middle-class families stigmatized low-income and minority students. She described an incident that occurred during an open house for prospective parents. A sixth-grade class, lining up just outside the school, was behaving in a loud and disorderly way:

And the two parents who were running—and this class is predominantly Black, I would say, Black and Asian—and, you know, it was two White parents who were running the open house, and they came *flying* and they said, “You’ve gotta get these kids in the building! The parents are coming!” And so, I mean, it was obvious: They’re Black, these White parents are coming.

In her view, this incident communicated to the students that—because of their racial status—they were not valued at the school:

The kids are not stupid. They know . . . They knew that these potential parents were coming. They knew that they were putting on a show, you know? And that [the message was] “You’re not as important.” And I mean, it doesn’t take—people get to that conclusion before they can think of words.

A Cobble Square mother, recounting the same incident, expressed her frustration that the teacher had not removed the students. She also described the incident in a letter to the principal decrying the faculty’s failure to support efforts to make the school appealing to downtown families:

The faculty conduct at the open house demonstrates their apathy/opposition to embracing a better environment and recruiting [downtown] families. . . . Ms. Franklin left her loud, out of control class in the lobby as guests were arriving. . . . [Faculty need] training on the do’s and don’t’s of selling your school.

In addition, some parents encouraged the school to limit intake of transfer students. According to an administrator at Grant, “behavioral issues” spurred these parents to push for a reduction in the number of children who transferred into the school under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Though reluctant to make this change, she noted, “I think they have taken it beyond me . . . [telling the central office] that they would like those kids not to be here.” Several months later, a parent spoke positively about the principal’s decision to tell the district that the school had no spots for additional students transferring under NCLB and to “weed out” transfer students

who were discipline problems. In her view, since these students did not live in the catchment area, they were “guests” in the school and not entitled to be at Grant. As these actions and reactions make clear, by pursuing a vision for Grant that depended largely on *changing* the student body, middle-class parents contributed to the marginalization of an already vulnerable population.

Parents of transfer students were also negatively affected by the marketing campaign. They reported feeling insulted by the constant references to “neighborhood families.” As one mother, who transferred her children to Grant from a low-income neighborhood outside of Brickton’s downtown area, explained,

Every meeting we go to, they’re talking about, “And two more families coming in. They’re neighborhoods!” What’s so important about this person from the neighborhood coming here? . . . When they’re saying that to me, it’s kind of like I’m supporting this school that’s not even supporting my kid, because he’s not from the neighborhood.

Several parents spoke of feeling more than merely insulted. They believed their right to be at the school was seriously jeopardized by new policies and practices related to the effort to woo middle-class families. A key component of DSI was a change in district admissions policies that gave families in the newly established downtown region precedence over other families in transferring into downtown schools.⁹ Because schools like Grant were in high demand, both within and outside the downtown area and particularly for kindergarten, this policy would effectively end transfers from outside the downtown area in the early grades.¹⁰ In addition, like the middle-class mother quoted earlier, district administrators drew distinctions between within-catchment and transfer students. For example, during a visit to Grant to discuss DSI and other issues, the district superintendent suggested that parents require a commitment of support and involvement from transfer parents. He continued, “That would be my criteria. I can’t do anything about within-catchment students. We can do something about transfers.” A few days later, at a PTO meeting, another district administrator spoke several times about removing transfer students who were behavior problems.

Understandably, these changes and proposals for additional ones made transfer parents feel anxious and threatened. In interviews, they repeatedly mentioned their hesitancy to advocate for their children, saying they would “have to watch,” keep their “mouths shut,” or “tread lightly” regarding problems, because “they’ll get rid of you, because you’re not coming in from the area . . . you don’t *have* to be here.” In contrast to middle-class parents, who felt quite comfortable speaking up for their children, the parents of transfer students felt disempowered and were reluctant to voice their concerns.

A final problematic aspect of middle-class involvement at Grant was its fragility. One year after the research at the school ended, only about 23 of the 42 “neighborhood” children who had enrolled at Grant over the previous

4-year period remained.¹¹ Parents removed their children for a variety of reasons, including frustration with their lack of progress, concerns about the quality of instruction, and interpersonal conflicts among parents. After one more year, only a handful of middle-class students were left.¹² This exodus is consistent with the parents' individualistic focus: They worked tirelessly on behalf of the school, but their commitment was to their children's education, not to the school itself. As a result, if the school did not seem to be meeting their children's needs, they simply sought another alternative.¹³

Monroe: A collective tradition. Middle-class parents at Monroe—like those at Grant—were able to use their higher levels of social, cultural, and economic capital to bring resources to the school; advocate on the school's behalf at the district level; and collaborate with school staff to support various programs and projects. As one parent involved in the 1970s put it, "I do remember how influential we were as parents. It was like, when we went to the school board, we were empowered." This "empowerment" continues. Recently, middle-class parents at Monroe played an important role in working with the district to address a budget crisis and in renovating the school's library. The school is now one of the highest performing in the city, known for its strong arts program; racial and economic diversity; and motivated, activist parents.

In addition to raising funds and lobbying for particular programs, middle-class parents had a major impact on the school's physical resources. For example, unlike most schools in the district, Monroe is largely air-conditioned. This is a direct result of parents raising money to purchase powerful window units and parents' success in working with the district to get these units installed throughout the school. Similarly, long before the district was able to equip and wire all schools for computers, one middle-class parent took on the project of wiring the entire school over the summer, donating his own time and funding others to work with him.

Parents also worked to provide assistance to families who needed it. A former president of the Home and School Association from the middle years recounted,

One of the policies we created at Monroe was we did a book fund so that books were on—that kids' lost books, we could replace them so that parents weren't necessarily responsible, because so many parents couldn't do that. We did any trips, any special programs; all a parent had to do was come to the Home and School and say, "I can't afford it," or say to a teacher, "I can't afford it," or a teacher came to the Home and School and said, "I know this family can't afford it." We'd ask no questions and they would get it covered.

A teacher similarly observed, "And parents began to get wonderful about that because some parents couldn't afford the bussing. And parents would pay for others. We had a fund; after a while, I had parents actually making the arrangements."

Thus, in contrast to Grant, the benefits of middle-class parental involvement at Monroe more often reached all students. In addition, middle-class families have remained a constant presence over the years. Whereas long-time observers at Grant spoke of the parents who participated in the study as representing yet another “wave” of involved, middle-class families, middle-class involvement at Monroe was—to push the metaphor—more like a river. Its course was set many years ago by the first generation of parents, and it has flowed steadily ever since, to the benefit of thousands of students. In many ways, Monroe’s story is consistent with the expectation that middle-class parents could help improve urban schools. However, even at Monroe, the relationship between parental involvement and widespread benefit is neither simple nor automatic. Parents’ efforts benefited the school as a whole because parents worked—consciously and deliberately—to make sure that happened.

Discussion

The idea that middle-class families could help improve urban public schools has a strong pragmatic appeal. Decades of efforts by educators, administrators, policymakers, researchers, and politicians to reform urban education have met with disappointing results. Why not test the possibility that the actions of a motivated, influential parent constituency could succeed where others have failed? Our study shows that this idea does have merit. The data indicate that the presence of a significant number of middle-class families in a school has the potential to bring important resources to cash-strapped schools and important benefits to low-income student populations. But our data also challenge the sometimes simplistic discourse around middle-class parental involvement by showing that it may not create widespread improvement. We found that middle-class parents’ efforts can contribute to increasing inequality in the very same schools their actions sometimes benefit.

In each case study school, there was evidence of some variation among parents’ motivations and perspectives. Still, in each, an overall ethos was easily discernible. At Grant Elementary, middle-class parental involvement was largely characterized by an individualistic orientation, a normative view of social class, and a focus on attracting more middle-class families to the school. Though Grant parents believed they were having a positive impact on the school, the benefits of their efforts were less widespread or long-lasting than at Monroe because of the ways they—individually and collectively—thought about their involvement and set their goals. While parents did make positive contributions, their work also reinscribed status hierarchies, elevating the middle class while marginalizing low-income students and their families. In addition, their commitment to the school was relatively fragile. The same parents who spoke of being “ads” for the school moved their children elsewhere after spending only a few years at Grant. At Monroe, parental involvement was much more collective. There,

a commitment to the well-being of all children and a belief in the value of diversity and social justice were considered just as “natural” as the focus on one’s own children was at Grant.¹⁴ As a result, the presence of middle-class families at Monroe more often benefited all children, and collectively oriented middle-class parental involvement has persisted over several decades.

Our analysis highlights the role of social and historical context in shaping parental involvement and its consequences. The original group of middle-class parents at Monroe was composed of “children of the ’60s,” whose outlook had been formed by that era’s idealism and concern for social justice. Grant parents were the product of a very different historical moment. Their ideas and attitudes have been shaped by the post-1980 embrace of more individualistic goals, with the quest to advance one’s own position in the marketplace gaining currency at the expense of concerns for equity. At the same time, global competition and growing financial insecurity have raised U.S. parents’ concerns that their children not fall behind or lose social status (Marano, 2008). Indeed, popular thinking about education reflects this shift, with a focus on education as a “private good” becoming increasingly prominent (Labaree, 2000). Whatever the reality of middle-class children’s futures may be, these changes in the larger economic and social context push parents toward arming their own children for competition and away from concerns about “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1995; Marano, 2008). Thus, even the more troubling aspects of parental involvement at Grant are best understood as consequences of this shift and not as evidence of a heedless or heartless lack of concern for others.

At the same time, our analysis points to the ability of individuals and groups to go against the grain of larger ideological trends. A number of Monroe parents interviewed were involved at the school very recently—during the same period, in fact, that the Grant parents were active. Yet contemporary parental involvement at Monroe has retained the same focus on collective good and embrace of diversity that characterized parents’ work in the 1970s. This implies that a strong ethos with a history of positive outcomes may continue to shape school community members’ actions and attitudes despite significant social and economic changes in society at large.¹⁵

Conclusion

In examining middle-class parental involvement at two urban public elementary schools, we found that the relationship between this involvement and widespread benefit was mediated by parents’ own goals and perspectives as well as by the larger social context. Furthermore, our analysis indicated that compared to a more individualistic approach to parental involvement, a collective orientation is more sustainable and has greater potential for benefiting all children in the school, without regard to their social class.

We caution against a simplistic interpretation of these findings. Much of the research on parental involvement has an either–or quality. Some proponents of parental involvement promote it in an undifferentiated and

uncritical fashion, failing to note the ways in which some kinds of involvement can be detrimental to certain groups of students and parents. Other research focuses too narrowly on the problems associated with middle-class parental involvement that is individualistically oriented, especially how it can exclude low-income parents. Our findings suggest that recognizing the spectrum of motivations for parental involvement and subsequent kinds of involvement might create more authentic and useful models. Similarly, it is important to recognize at both theoretical and practical levels that regardless of the overall ethos of involvement at a school, parents' efforts inevitably reflect mixed motivations and can produce outcomes with mixed consequences. These conclusions lead us to a final suggestion about strategies for capitalizing upon middle-class parental participation—particularly in schools serving large numbers of low-income students—and for increasing parental involvement more generally. We believe efforts in this direction will be more effective if parents' needs to protect and promote their children's interests are honored while simultaneously encouraging the kind of collectively minded, community-based efforts that support strong, diverse school communities.

Notes

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¹The definition of *middle class* is contentious. Class definitions are extremely complicated and are the subject of a large body of sociological research (e.g., Lareau & Conley, 2008; Weeden & Grusky, 2005; Wright, 2005). One common (but not universal) way of determining middle-class status involves a combination of income, education, and occupation. Here, we categorize a family as middle class if at least one of the parents is college educated and at least one of the parents is employed in a professional or creative capacity or is the owner of a business.

²All proper names in this article are pseudonyms. In some cases, we have also changed identifying information to protect the confidentiality of our informants.

³Low-income and working-class parents were also quite active at both schools we studied. These parents were also interviewed, but we do not focus on their involvement in this article.

⁴The interviews cover the years from 1974 to 2006. Interviewees were distributed across this time period: 9 were associated with the school during the early years (1974–1984), 13 during the middle years (1982–1994), and 16 from the recent past (1993–2006). There is some overlap here, because some individuals were associated with the school for extensive periods.

⁵Monroe's combined advanced and proficient level percentages in reading for the period from 2002 to 2004 are 39.1% (2002), 56.9% (2003), and 70.2% (2004); for math, they are 37%, 45.1%, and 65%, respectively.

⁶This view did not go uncontested, particularly by some low-income and/or African American parents who were not allied with the "neighborhood" parents.

⁷In some instances, middle-class parents' successes were a result—directly or indirectly—of their ability to leverage their class status. For example, when the kindergarten classes were overcrowded, a middle-class mother convinced the district to allocate an additional full-time classroom teacher by contacting district and civic leaders and threatening that she and other middle-class parents would leave the school if improvements were not made.

⁸During the 2005–2006 school year, 71% of the transfer students at Grant were African American. The bulk of all transfer students came from schools that had been identified by the district as chronically underachieving or from schools in low-income, African American neighborhoods outside of the downtown area.

⁹Historically, schools have been filled in two stages. All students in the catchment area were automatically entitled to attend the school. Any remaining open spots were made available to students across the district, who participated in a lottery to attain a position in a desired school. The Downtown Schools Initiative (DSI) changed this policy by creating the new downtown region, which covered the downtown area as well as gentrifying neighborhoods to its north and south and giving students within the region priority in admissions to downtown schools.

¹⁰Once DSI went into effect, no students from outside of the downtown area achieved admissions to kindergarten at any of the three most desirable schools through the normal transfer process. Spots in the upper grades were much less difficult to attain.

¹¹Because district data on student residence and enrollment were unavailable, this information was attained through a search of Grant yearbooks and with the assistance of a parent. It should be viewed as an estimate.

¹²As one district insider familiar with the school and the research said to the first author, "All those people you interviewed are long gone now."

¹³This is not surprising. Hirschman (1970) points out that when individual interests are assumed to take precedence, the "exit option" becomes very easy and appealing.

¹⁴It is possible, however, that parents at Monroe would have abandoned their collective orientation had the school failed to meet their standards around safety or academics and that Grant parents would have become more collectivist had the presence of middle-class families been more stable at the school. Our data cannot speak to these possibilities, but they do raise questions about the extent to which this process occurs in "stages," with parents' understandings and actions changing over time as schools become increasingly "middle class."

¹⁵Another possible explanation for the difference between the two schools is that the Grant and Monroe parents represent different subsets of the large and difficult-to-define "middle class." While this is a tempting explanation, our data cannot confirm it. At both schools, the contingent of involved parents included small business owners, artists, and members of more traditional professions, such as the law and architecture.

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