

Polish migrant parents of secondary school boys in the United Kingdom'

Abstract

This article focuses on the parents of secondary school Polish boys and their capacity to realise their educational and professional aspirations for their children. Our primary finding is that although many Polish parents face considerable challenges in manoeuvring through educational system, some Polish parents display a level of agency comparable to that of white, British middle-class parents.

keywords: migrants, educational aspiration, educational engagement

Introduction

Following the EU enlargement of May 2004, Britain witnessed one of the largest migration waves in its contemporary history. Migration from Poland was estimated to form nearly 70% of all the influx from the new EU Member States ([ONS 2011](#)). Contrary to the earlier expectations that this migration would primarily involve young and single individuals, there has been significant family migration from Poland which has been reflected in the increase in the number of Polish children in the UK (White, 2009).

Given the current status of Poles as a significant migrant group within the UK and their apparent long-term settlement plans they are an important cohort to study. In particular it is important that we understand the issues associated with Polish migrant settlement in the UK. Included here are the social inequalities they may face and the barriers to social integration they could experience. Young people are a key to this. Unsurprisingly, the phenomenon of Polish immigration triggered a considerable

interest in academia ([Garapich 2006](#), [White and Ryan 2008](#), [Pietka 2011](#), [Ryan 2011](#), [McGhee et al. 2012](#), 2013, 2014, 2015, White, 2014). Alongside these literatures sits a sub-set of literatures focusing on 'education', examining the general challenges facing Polish pupils' in the British education system, school strategies for supporting young Poles, and parents' involvement in schooling ([Sales et al. 2008](#), [Lopez Rodriguez 2010](#), [Ryan et al. 2010](#), [Moskal 2013](#)). The majority of these academic papers tend to focus on parents' perceptions of the experience of Polish children in British primary schools. These studies were invaluable for understanding the experiences of recent Polish migrants to the UK and emphasised the challenges associated with language and the lack of familiarity with the UK education system as considerable issues. The experiences of a range of migrants, including both recent and longer-term Polish migrants have not had as much attention, nor has Polish migrants' experiences and engagement with secondary schools in the UK. **Notable exceptions include D'Angelo and Ryan (2011) and Tereshchenko and Archer's (2014) studies which considered young migrants in secondary education.**

This article draws on the data from a study focusing on the educational aspirations of 14- 16 years old, Polish boys in British secondary schools. The study explored how the aspirations are shaped by the experiences of migration and how they are negotiated between parents and children; furthermore it looked at Poles' ability to realise their aspirations and how they deploy resources such as cultural and social capital to achieve educational goals. This article will explore some of the findings of this study, focusing on the ability of Polish families to support and pursue their children's educational aspirations. We will argue that migrants are highly

differentiated with regards to their access to various types of capitals, we will examine the factors which influence this discrepancy; and we will highlight the strategies which Polish migrants adopt to manoeuvre through the English educational system. Our primary finding is that although a number of the Polish parents in our sample face considerable challenges (for example, in terms of language capacity) with regard to their ability to influence their children's educational outcomes, some of the Polish parents display a level of agency comparable to that of white, British middle-class parents ([Reay 1998](#), [Lucey and Reay 2002](#)).

We emphasize that our study, being based on a small-scale sample, is not generalizable to all post-accession Poles in the UK. Our contribution in this article is to develop a typology of parental capacity, which can help to understand the different experiences of these parents and the factors which influence them. We group the parents under following categories: engaged, withdrawn and reserved parents.

Methodology

The sample included eleven families and was differentiated with regards to length of residence in the UK, levels of English language proficiency, parents' education and social background. All participants lived and worked in a non-metropolitan city on the South Coast of England. **The study's location could have implications for the scope of the challenges experienced by our participants. For instance, they are likely to face less competition for a place in a preferred school than migrants living in London,**

where Catholic schools are over-subscribed. Having less schools to choose from could also make the process less confusing. Some of the participants had only been in the UK for a few months and some have been in the UK for over 5 years at the time of the interview. To recruit the participants, we invited a local Catholic secondary school with a high proportion of Polish pupils to participate in the research. The primary gatekeeper collaborated with us to deal with the ethical aspects of the study and introduced us to the pupils. The parent participants were accessed through their children participating in the study at school, and through letters sent out by the gatekeeper.

In order to create our sample we adopted a Bourdieusian approach to social class which took cultural capital, taste and the use of the first language into consideration to make sense of and to categorise the participants' background. **It has been noted that migrants tend to experience 'class repositioning' (Lopez-Rodriguez, 2010:351). This is due to their altered status in a different social structure (Lopez-Rodriguez, 2010), and to what McGhee et al (2015:441) describe as 'disruption of occupational identities', as many Poles in the UK's labour market work in occupations which do not match those they were trained to do in Poland. Their position is further complicated by language fluency and aspirations (Eade et al, 2006, Temple, 2010). This makes the process of class identification challenging. To address this, it is helpful to consider factors relating to cultural capital and lifestyle.** Our sample consists of broadly middle-class families (graduates, graduate-level occupations and lifestyles in Poland- but not necessarily in the UK) and working-class (non-graduates, non-graduate occupations and lifestyles in Poland and the UK). This approach has been adopted in a

number of other studies ([Skeggs 2009](#), [Oliver and O'Reilly 2010](#), [Rye 2011](#)) and it has been advocated by Outhwaite and Ray ([2005](#)) as appropriate for understanding social class within the context of post-communist countries.

This article focuses on the data collected during in-depth interviews with parents. The majority (75%) were mothers since they tended to be more involved in their children's education than fathers. All names were anonymised, the school is also anonymised and will be referred to as Newman in this article.

The initial challenges of large-scale migration

Parents' ability to provide academic support and to get involved in the education of their children can be limited by factors such as ethnicity, linguistic capacity and social class ([August and Hakuta 1997](#), [Abbas 2007](#)). A parental lack of proficiency in English can complicate communication with the school and limit access to information. This introduces obvious problems for parents as it could make it difficult to gain an objective perspective on their child's school performance. Research has shown that schools often try to facilitate communication with parents by engaging interpreters or providing leaflets in the mother tongue (Ryan et al. 2010). However, in institutions with large numbers of migrants from different countries the need for such resources may exceed demand.

Polish schooling varies significantly from the British model which can cause complications for migrants who are not aware of the differences between the systems (Lopez Rodriguez et al., 2010, Ryan et al. 2010, Sales et al., 2008). Furthermore, Polish migrant parents may lack information about the process of applying to secondary

schools and colleges, and the understanding of the heterogeneity of the British secondary education (Sales et al, 2008) which may limit their ability to make informed choices. This being said, Lopez Rodriguez's (2010) study draws some interesting and novel conclusions with regards to Poles' educational aspirations. She acknowledges that Poles face challenges with regard to their involvement in their children's education, particularly due to the lack of language proficiency and limited contact with native and other communities. However, she then goes on to say that 'this insecurity might in fact generate intensified parental engagement' (2010: 355). In her interviews with Polish mothers, Lopez Rodriguez found that the majority of them held strong educational values and were very determined to transfer them to their children. She argues that this could put Polish families in an advantageous position in comparison to some other minority groups and also the British white working-class. While this is a valuable argument which recognises Poles' agency and educational capital, this alleged advantage must be contextualised within a consideration of the differences in migrants' agency, cultural and social capital and their ability to deploy them.

As the brief review above has illustrated, these literatures have made an important contribution to our understanding of some of the challenges experienced by Poles (both children and adults). However, most of the research was based in primary schools and it focused on the problems of relatively new arrivals in the UK. The nature of the migration patterns between the UK and Poland has changed since the first few years post-accession. Polish pupils attending English schools are increasingly likely to have been born in the UK or otherwise have spent a few years in the UK. Consequently, it is likely that some of the arguments that have appeared in these early studies are

less compelling now. It is important that contemporary research builds on our understanding of how Polish migrants' exercise agency within the English educational system, how they use cultural and social capital and how this varies between individuals. In this small-scale study we hope to make a contribution to these debates through focusing on parental aspirations and their access and mastery of economic, social and cultural capital.

We adopt a Bourdieusian definition of social capital, while also recognising Putnam's distinction between bridging and bonding capital. Bourdieu's conceptualisation is the most convenient for the study of migrants as it provides a sophisticated and critical framework for accessing the value of social capital and the migrants' ability to accumulate it, by linking it to other types of capital. Hence, the social capital is of high value if it enables an agent to accumulate other forms of capital, most notably economic capital (Wells, 2011). This is usually achieved by connecting the agent to individuals who possess other forms of capital valued in a given field ([Patulny and Svendsen 2007](#)). **This often implies establishing networks with people of higher social position and could also mean networking with people outside of one's own ethnic group. Importantly, as Ryan (2011b) notes, the existence of resources within a network does not mean that they are accessible to all its members. To generate social capital the agents must be willing to share these resources (Ryan, 2011b).** Drawing on social networks can be a useful strategy to improve access to information and educational resources. There is a body of literature illustrating how social networks helped recently arrived Poles make their way to Britain, find employment and accommodation ([Ryan et al. 2008](#), [Ryan 2011](#), [Ryan 2011b](#)). **These recent papers**

provide a more nuanced appreciation of the importance of migration and migrant settlement upon social capital and networks. Recently, a few scholars have begun to examine the complexity and diversity of post-accession Polish networks in forms of internal community divisions, class differences, competition and mistrust amongst Polish social networks in the UK ([Gill and Bialski 2011](#), [McGhee, et al, 2015](#)). This researchers focus on the strengths and weaknesses of social capital amongst migrant Poles according to differences in social class.

This brings us to the distinction between ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital may connect individuals of a different social class, ethnicity or economic position whereas bonding social capital exists between people who already share such characteristics. Bridging social capital is often associated with ‘weak ties’, connecting diverse, more distant individuals and providing them *‘with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle’* (Granovetter, 1983: 209). In contrast, *‘strong ties’* imply intimate, close relationships between friends or family (Granovetter, 1983). It has been recognised that in the absence of the ‘weak ties’, bonding social capital can have detrimental effects on individuals, for instance by limiting their access to information and employment options (McGhee et al, 2015, Portes, 1998). In this article, the categories for assessing the bridging and bonding capital among Poles were based on ethnicity and social class. The parents were asked if they were involved in networks with other Poles, with non-Poles and people inside and outside their occupational circle. We also asked them what sort of benefits they could draw from these networks, for instance **in the form of access to information on educational options, improving English**

language skills, emotional support and practical help (lending money, providing childcare etc.). We were thus able to understand the nature of the networks and explore whether they generated social capital.

Parental Aspiration

The vast majority of Polish migrants (both parents and children) who took part in our study shared a generally high academic aspiration with the ultimate goal being entry to British higher education for their children. This for many families was associated with the aspiration that their child should achieve a non-physical, well-paid, graduate-level job with a high status attached to it. This was evidently linked to parents' own loss of status and the feelings of stigma and shame which many of them shared working in low-skilled jobs in the UK which they perceived to be less respectable than the jobs they had in Poland. At the same time, they tended to see their age, language difficulties and lack of employment history in the UK as a burden for professional development. Consequently, many of the parents in the sample articulated their migration as a form of sacrifice that would only yield real benefits for their children, who will be fluent English speakers, be educated in England and gain qualifications recognised in the country. It was evident that they tried to convey these sacrifices and aspirations to their children, by promoting the importance of education and the array of opportunities England offers.

The majority of Polish parents perceived the UK as a 'land of opportunity' and argued that it offers higher wages and more employment opportunities than in Poland. We

found that both parents and pupils appreciated aspects of English schooling such as the more relaxed atmosphere, the free provision of educational resources and the ethos of creative learning. Some parents believed that English schools provided their children with an environment in which they are much more likely to realise their potential, than in their homeland. However, their accounts were sometimes idealised and some parents lacked detailed knowledge of their children's actual educational performance.

Despite a shared high academic aspiration, we found that there were considerable differences in the Polish parents' capacity to achieve it. This was determined by their access to and mastery of resources namely economic, linguistic, cultural and social capital. Consequently three groups of parents emerged, all characterised by different access to resources and levels of engagement with their children's schooling. In the next section we will examine the disparities in access and mastery of economic, linguistic and social capital among the Polish parents. We will then proceed to explore in subsequent sections how these impact on the parents' cultural capital and their agency in the English schools.

Economic capital

Access to economic capital amongst the parents was characterised by relatively small disparities, compared to other forms of capitals. Economic capital is defined here as the living conditions and financial resources which can be mobilized to support a child's education through, in particular, extra-curricular activities but also through providing children with books and other means for supporting their educational

achievement. The most significant differences amongst the parents in our sample appeared at the level of accommodation. Of the eleven participating families three owned their own houses, four rented houses (with relatives), two rented flats and two rented rooms in shared accommodation. The latter were single carers, a mother and grandmother, both over the age of 45 with uncertain prospect for employment. As others have noted a lack of privacy and space, unstable living arrangements and alternating housemates (in multiple occupancy accommodation) could undermine young people's sense of safety and psychological well-being (Spencer et al. 2007). The other parents in the sample were in a more comfortable financial position. Most of the families could afford to live in single-family households, either rented or owner-occupied and were pleased with their living conditions which, they informed us, were usually better than they had in Poland.

Apart from living arrangements, there were discrepancies in family expenditures on major items such as cars, or annual holidays, however we noted that smaller, weekly-expenses such as extra-curricular (sporting, leisure, 'club') memberships, were similar across families. Regardless of their material circumstances the parents were motivated and prepared to economise on other things in order to spend money on their children's education and extra-curricular activities. Thus the economic capital did not appear to be a source of any significant inequalities in the access to education. This contrasts with the findings of **Chin and Phillips' (2004) study** into class difference in educational and extra-curricular activity expenditure among the non-migrant population (Chin and Phillips 2004), as well as some studies focusing on other minority groups (Abbas, 2007).

Linguistic capital

Possession of language capital is a far more marked source of difference and inequality amongst the parents, with some participants being fluent in English, others less so and a few being unable to communicate in English. Whereas the length of residence in the UK was associated with better language skills, social class appeared to be a stronger determinant of proficiency in our sample. The only middle-class parent who could not speak English had only been in the country for five months at the time of the interview and admitted that she was planning to take language lessons as soon as she settled. What emerged from the interviews with parents was an overall sense of embarrassment and shame caused by the loss of independence and having to express themselves in English at a level which they considered to be below their cognitive ability. The response to this situation was however, differentiated. The middle-class participants were far more likely to be active about addressing the challenge by taking lessons and forcing themselves into interactions with members of the host community. In contrast, working-class parents more often avoided these uncomfortable situations, remained dependent on interpreter's services or their children's help and lacked an active approach in dealing with their communication problems. A selection of quotes illustrates these differences:

It hurt me very much that my boss shouted at me that I'm an 'empty head' and all that [laughs] and I was thinking- 'not empty, I just can't speak English!'. It gave me such a kick- I cannot defend myself?! I cannot argue or at least express my stance?! I went back to learn English and in my entire life I haven't studied as hard as I studied English then! I don't understand people who are here for years

and years and can't speak English. I don't know how one can live like this. (Kamila, 35, middle-class mother)

First parents' evening, September, we had a translator, who worked there as bilingual. So she came, but it was the only one time. After that I never asked anyone, we coped by ourselves. Because I was ashamed, that someone has to do things for me. (Patrycja, 39, middle-class mother)

Miss Nowak talks to me at parents' evening because I don't know English But Robert [son] doesn't report anything, that anything is wrong at school, so it seems fine. But it's hard if you don't know the language... hard to do anything by yourself... and to ask anyone is also hard . We just need to wait. (Grazyna, 48, working-class mother)

Some participants had the confidence to face a new situation, take an active approach and learn whereas others felt highly dependent and unable to change this situation. Three of the five working-class **participants** in our sample could not communicate in English. These discrepancies can have important repercussions for the parents' ability to access information about their child's progress, their ability to communicate and collaborate with the school as well as their access to information about educational options. These limitations will be explored in the latter part of this article.

Social capital

We examined whether the participants felt they had many connections to people in their locality, and what form of benefits they felt they could draw from these connections. With regards to their efficacy, we found three types of social networks amongst our sample: well-developed, limited and scarce. The former corresponds to participants who were confident that they had a range of friends and acquaintances who they could rely on. Those with limited social networks had fewer such connections and were less certain of their reliability. Finally, participants described as having very scarce social networks were those who felt they only had their family to rely on. In terms of the type of social capital, we found that some parents had access to bridging capital through networks of Polish and non-Polish friends and acquaintances and support and others, like Paulina, had very limited networks altogether.

I don't know many people, really. Mostly I see the people we live with and my older son who lives in the city. (Paulina, 56, working-class grandmother)

It was apparent that the middle-class parents in the sample **developed networks** with greater ease. Four middle-class mothers had well-developed networks, and in the case of three of them, their networks included non-Polish individuals. Tomasz (middle-class father) had limited but mixed social networks based in his work place and Aniela (middle-class mother) had minimal connection (she had only been in England for a few months when she was interviewed). In contrast, three of the working-class mothers had very scarce networks. Among the two remaining working-class parents, Przemek had limited networks with Poles only, and Sylwia had well-developed networks but again only with her co-nationals. This resulted from the

language limitations and lack of confidence and empathy with non-Poles. **Our findings suggest that while the cross-class networks within the community were limited, the parents who established connections outside of their ethnic group were in better position to extend their English language skills, to gain useful information and get involved in their children's education. These were concrete forms of bridging social capital generated by these mixed networks.**

The Polish Club and the Catholic Church played a limited role in creating bonds between the Polish parents. A number of the participants regularly attended Catholic Church services in Polish but none had made any durable connections through the Church. Research among other ethnic minority groups illustrates that the community and faith organisations can be crucial for facilitating social networks and mutual help (Modood 2004). Shah et al (2010) emphasise that such institutions can generate 'ethnic capital' in the form of cultural and social capital developed through cross-class relationships in these contexts. Recent research among Polish migrants in Britain found a considerable level of distance and mistrust within this group (Ryan et al. 2008, Pietka 2011, Torunczyk-Ruiz 2008, McGhee et al 2015). Post-2004 Polish migrants to the UK are diverse in terms of age, reasons for migrating, in background and in social class (Garapich 2006). These differences, often coupled with economic competition have the potential to fuel group divisions among Poles who fear being associated with people who may be very different from them but share the same nationality. As such, there are limitations to the extent of 'ethnic' capital amongst Polish migrants. Most importantly, our findings suggest the existing networks did not really 'cross classes' and were often short-lived and random which contrasts with the findings of Shah et al

(2010). This prevented the flow of differentiated information, knowledge and experiences within the community and consequently disadvantaged the groups which were reliant on co-ethnic networks alone.

Parental engagement with the school

We have discussed the different types of capital among parents and highlighted the disparities in migrants' access to these capitals, arguing that social class was a particularly influential factor as it affected the parents' acquisition of linguistic and social capital. The possession of these capitals very much defined the participants' ability to gather cultural capital which influenced their position in the educational field and consequently their ability to realise their goals. A prominent example of the differentiated levels of cultural capital was the parents' ability to effectively communicate with the school. Polish schools tend to be more direct in communication with parents and any concerns are made explicitly. This is illustrated in the quote of an EMAS co-ordinator who used to work as a teacher in Poland.

Polish school is a pain in the neck. If there are problems with a child, first thing we do, we immediately inform the parent, with honesty. Tell them everything like it is. We don't put it in a silver packaging, just straight in the face. (Natalia, EMAS co-ordinator)

Research **with** white British working-class parents found that they are likely to experience difficulties when reading between the lines in their communication with teachers (**Gewirtz et al, 1995**). As immigrants, Poles are similarly disadvantaged with regards to picking up on the subtleties of a school's messages. Nevertheless, we found

that whereas some parents struggled to grasp these cultural differences, others were very aware of them. Having linguistic and social capital made it easier to accumulate cultural capital through enabling migrants' to mix with more experienced and knowledgeable individuals and learn from them. Altogether, the combination of different forms of capitals put participants in very different positions in the educational field, affecting their ability to engage with their children's schooling and to realise their aspirations. While analysing their capacity to do so, we observed and distinguished three groups of parents with different levels of agency which we labelled as the 'engaged', the 'withdrawn' and the 'reserved' parents.

The 'Engaged' Parents

There was a small group of three parents who felt highly confident within the British educational system and who did not have any trouble engaging with the system to ensure the best outcomes for their children. They could all be described as middle-class; two of them had Master's degrees and one had vocational training. They have all been in the UK for at least 5 years and all were fluent in English although none of them knew the language when they first arrived. Kamila was a housewife, Ania a line-manager at a chain retailer, and Patrycja a teaching assistant who had the advantage of an insider's knowledge, personal contacts with teachers and understood the working of the British schools system. Kamila and Patrycja owned properties in England and Ania was a single parent living in council accommodation. Ania and Patrycja had mixed social networks, while Ania made friends exclusively outside of her national group, actively avoiding Poles. Kamila preferred the company of Poles and

was very engaged in the Polish community. However, she was confident about contacting teachers and still had access to mixed networks, through her husband.

The high level of linguistic capital and involvement in mixed social networks generated bridging social capital in the form of knowledge of the educational system, and cultural capital understood as the ability to negotiate the subtle messages they received from teachers on their sons' performance:

You know, they say he's a lovely boy, he's a lovely boy but it doesn't mean anything. The kids get these merits etc., but this doesn't mean much either, you can get it just for giving an answer to teacher's question. (Patrycja, 39, middle-class mother)

The system is different in Poland. If the child cannot manage with something the teacher will simply tell you about it and say- 'he must improve at this or this'. This doesn't happen here, nobody will tell you straight, no, just 'everything is great, everything is good'. (Kamila, 35, middle-class mother)

These quotes illustrate that Kamila and Patrycja understood the cultural differences in the school-parent relationship which provided them with greater agency. In the absence of effective communication between the school and the parents, the pupils may withhold information about their problems at school from their families. Kamila's cultural capital enabled her to take action when such an incident happened. She found out that her son was attending a group for pupils who needed support with adapting at school. At this point, Kamila and her son Tomek had already been in the country for

two years and she felt he was well-adapted and that he only attended the group to avoid going to lessons. She discussed the issue with teacher and demanded to have Tomek removed from the group immediately. With her knowledge and understanding of the English educational system and her linguistic capital she was first able to identify the problem and then to be assertive and take action. Patrycja and Ania were similarly confident and active in their relationship with the school and they did not hesitate to approach the teachers to get additional information.

I have a good access to information. Yes. I have a very good contact with the school, with teachers, no problem. Whenever I need something, because I am generally a very obtrusive kind of parent and I do it with pleasure [laughs].

(Patrycja, 39, middle-class mother)

When it came to choosing a secondary school all the parents were aware of league tables, but only Ania and Kamila had actively consulted with teaching staff in making their decision. Thus, in two cases it was the mothers' choice of secondary school, whereas Patrycja negotiated and followed her child's preference. Kamila described what variables she took into account while making her choice.

We don't live in a very nice area. But kids from here go to the local school, because it's easier for their parents. Those who go to Newman are usually from around there. And now, if there are kids behaving badly [in Newman], they will stay there, in their neighbourhood, far away. My son will only be in contact with them at school, but not in the afternoons because they live in a different area. And he won't make friends with the troublemakers from our neighbourhood because they go to a different school. [laughs]. (Kamila, 35, middle-class mother)

Kamila's strategy is one of ensuring the best educational outcome and protecting the child from the bad influence of 'troublemakers' in the local area. In terms of the next educational choice facing the families (the choice of the 6th form colleges) the mothers were already aware of league tables and different educational pathways. They were all inclined to discuss the choice of college with their children and encouraged them to make the best choice but they all stated that the decision was ultimately their sons'. The engaged parents were also aware of the costs of higher education in England and the recent increase in fees.

The longer length of residence of the 'engaged' parents, their desire for independence and the ability to be active and to get involved predisposed them to **learn English and form useful social networks** with greater ease than some other parents. The acquisition of **linguistic and social capital** and the subsequent accumulation of cultural capital provided them with the agency to critically verify information about their children's progress and to get engaged in their schooling. Consequently, they felt comfortable approaching teachers and asserting their rights to be informed. They were therefore the most privileged among our **participants** and indeed, particularly for rather recent migrants, they had an informed ability to manoeuvre through the system and take action to increase the chance of fulfilling the child's educational aspirations.

The 'Withdrawn' Parents

The majority of the parents in our study were limited in their knowledge and agency to pursue their goals. We identified two further groups: the 'withdrawn' and the

'reserved' groups. The 'withdrawn' group were particularly detached from the English schooling system. The group involved Grazyna, Monika (who both had been in England for less than two years) and Paulina. All had vocational education. Monika was married and living with her spouse. She was employed full-time. Grazyna and Paulina were single carers who lived in shared housing. Both were searching for work. All of these participants were identified as working-class. None of them could comfortably communicate in English which has put them in a particularly vulnerable position. At the same time, none expressed any concrete plans for learning English. Their communication with school was facilitated primarily through Miss Nowak, the Polish Teaching Assistant. At the same time, these parents were aware of Miss Nowak's limited time resources and were rather apprehensive in asking her for help. All of the withdrawn parents spent their free time almost exclusively with their families. Their lack of wider support networks hindered their opportunities to **access social capital**. A couple of **participants** admitted that they tried to gain some advice from random sources, such as work colleagues, housemates or other Polish parents that they would meet in the street. In the absence of other resources, this may well be the only strategy for these Poles however such information may be unreliable. The interviews revealed a considerable lack of information among the group who struggled to understand how the English school system works. Many, like Monika, were surprised by how well their children were doing in Newman, compared to their schools in Poland. In reality, this was not always the case (Monika's son was actually in the bottom set) but the parents took the positive feedback, merits and diplomas their children received as an indication of actual achievement. Their **limited social capital hindered their access to cultural capital, resulting** in them being unable to 'read between the lines' which could

have serious consequences for their ability to gain a realistic picture of their children's educational progress and to take action when needed.

There was also a level of uncertainty about streaming, the organisation of GCSEs, or even grades, for example:

To be honest, the only thing I heard is that he will have some tests in 3 months.

But I still don't know... these merits-shmerits and what not, some levels, what is it, I haven't got a bloody clue! Even when they send me his grades, I haven't got a clue what this is about! (Monika, 41, working-class mother)

Monika quoted above, did not understand her sons' grades and claimed that she was never offered any explanation or advice. She did not push the school or the Polish TA to provide her with information **and she lacked other useful connections. The lack of confidence and linguistic skills deemed the social capital generated through school unavailable to her. This is in contrast to the 'engaged' mothers who were able to access it. It was Monika's son who translated the letters from the school.** This left her virtually excluded from his education. The interviews also exposed the fact that the parents in this group were not aware of different educational pathways and that not all colleges provided access to higher education. This was a concern considering that all of the parents interviewed said that they would like their children to go to university.

Grazyna explicitly stated that she would like her son to go to one of the local colleges where many of his peers were planning to go to. She assumed, that the college's popularity indicated its good reputation. Whereas she stressed how important it was for her son to go to university, in contrast to what we are calling the 'engaged' group,

she was not aware that this college provided vocational training only which was unlikely to lead to progression to higher education.

The **participants** in this cohort were clearly in a vulnerable position. The withdrawn group stands in stark contrast to the engaged parents and they resemble Gewirtz et al's (1995) 'disconnected choosers'. Within the UK context, there is evidence that British working-class parents experience significant challenges in their ability to get engaged with children's education, and these are linked to the lack of economic, social and cultural capital (Ball et al, 1996). The disadvantage experienced by our participants was amplified by the fact that they had moved to a foreign country where they lacked experience of the host country's education system and the ability to speak and understand English. Furthermore, their limited social capital, in terms of information and advice deprived them of access to cultural capital. They were unable to communicate with teachers without the help of a Polish TA, unable to 'read between the lines' and unaware of the functions of the educational system in England. Consequently, they lacked agency which likely undermined any sense of confidence and assertiveness in pursuing their goals.

The 'Reserved' Parents

Finally, the last group involved five parents, Kasia, Aniela and Tomasz who were middle-class and Sylwia and Przemek who had a working-class background. At the time of the interview, Sylwia and Przemek had both been in England for 8 years, Kasia migrated less than 4 years ago, Tomasz 3 years ago and Aniela had only done so a few months before the interviews. Aniela still had very scarce social networks mostly due

to her short time as a resident. Tomasz had limited mixed networks and Kasia well-developed networks mostly with other Poles. The two working-class parents **built networks exclusively with their co-nationals**, Przemek's networks were limited and Kasia's were well-developed. The parents in this group had a basic understanding of the English education system including issues such as grades, streaming and the organisation of exams. They would usually gain this knowledge as their children went through the system. Four of the parents could communicate in English and were therefore capable of contacting the school. Aniela who could not yet speak English claimed that she still felt able to communicate with the teachers, either through the Polish TA or the help of her older children, both of whom were fluent in English. She was a quite remarkable illustration of the importance of class. Despite being in England for only a few months and thus having limited opportunities to gather linguistic, social and cultural capital, Aniela was already familiar with the costs of higher education, student loan opportunities and the ranking position of the local universities. She established a very positive relationship with Miss Nowak and she did not hesitate to contact her about her son's progress or his options after GCSEs. The remaining parents either lacked this understanding or simply did not think it was necessary to get involved, beyond what was expected, for example attending parents' evenings. The reserved parents could be compared to Gewirtz's et al (1995) semi-skilled choosers. They were not as lacking in confidence as the withdrawn parents, most had the linguistic capital but, as they expected the school to let them know if any problems arose, they did not see any benefit in chasing the teachers for additional information or adopting other strategies used by the engaged parents. Both of the working-class parents in the 'reserved' group had been in England for almost a decade and their

ability to get involved was comparable to that of middle-class parents who arrived less than 4 years ago. We would argue that this group illustrates that whereas the longer length of residence has a positive impact on parents' access to cultural capital and information, it is social class that determines the scope of the involvement and engagement of the parents with the school and thus their influence on their sons' education.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to consider to what extent Polish parents, whom we found to share relatively high educational aspirations, are capable of realising their goals for their children. At the outset all of the migrants experienced difficulties and faced challenges associated with entering an unfamiliar education system with limited economic, social and linguistic resources. However the response to these challenges together with the capacity to develop strategies to cope had been strongly differentiated. Their predisposition to accumulate linguistic and social capital resources and capacities had particularly important effects on the parents' access to information about schooling, their ability to gain cultural capital and to realise their aspirations.

Whereas the longer length of residence would largely allow the parents to get a better understanding of the ways in which the English educational system worked, it was social class which proved most significant. Middle-class Polish parents were more confident in their encounters with non-Poles and more assertive and active about improving their position, which enabled them to learn English quickly and develop

useful, mixed networks. For these migrants, achieving language proficiency was a basic requirement to live with dignity in England and they saw it very much as their own responsibility. In contrast, the working-class parents were more inclined to rely on translation which was provided by the school or their children and, we have argued, was a consequence of their lack of confidence and their more passive 'engagement' with the school. Altogether, class featured prominently in the consideration of the parents' agency within English schooling which resulted in significant disparities in the parents' ability to effectively engage with the school, to access information, assert their rights and make informed choices. Some possessed the type of cultural capital which enabled them to gain a very high awareness of the system and its cultural context and to engage in sophisticated strategies to achieve the best outcomes for their children. Others lacked the necessary cultural capital and were unaware of the inner workings of the British educational system and unknowingly made plans which contradicted their aspirations. Ong (1999) argued that we need to pay attention to structural factors enabling or preventing the realisation of imaginations. We have argued here, that migrants in different structural positions, despite sharing the imagination of the possibilities available to their children in England, differ significantly with regards to their ability to realise their children's imagined future. For some of these families, lack of information and access to social and linguistic capital could have dramatic consequences for the children.

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