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Class and Parents' Agency in West Virginia: Between Choices and Rights

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Abstract: Universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) is a popular reform in West Virginia, offering part-time readiness-oriented instruction for four-year-olds and some three-year-olds with special needs. The reform joins public school sites and community partners (private preschool and/or Head Start resources) in the goal of pre-kindergarten for all eligible children, and has targeted the struggling lower-middle class. UPK may position parents between choices and rights by providing discrepant public and private choices for families who do not qualify for the Head Start strand while naming access “universal”. In this case study, I examine the context of access in relation to the discourses and politics of neoliberal globalism. Neoliberal globalism has shaped West Virginia’s UPK policy towards producing particular childhoods and roles for teachers and parents in service to the economic growth of the state. Specifically, I analyze the role of social class dynamics among lower-middle class parents who sought readiness opportunities in one UPK community. The results indicate that Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction is relevant. Lower-middle class parents were active and instrumental choosers within the hybrid market system. Given two groups of lower-middle class participants (RMC-recent members of the lower-middle class descended from the middle class and HMC-historical members of the lower-middle class), RMC advantageously engaged resources traditionally designated for poor and working class families while HMC used social networks built locally over time to support their choice-making. In order to re-think West Virginia UPK’s

position towards cultural pluralism and social justice, I suggest several possibilities in the areas of policy, community deliberation, and educational practice.

Keywords: universal pre-kindergarten; West Virginia; home-school relations; parent involvement; Cultural Capital; Neoliberalism

Entre el mercado y el derecho: el sentido de “agencia” en padres de clase media-baja en una comunidad con acceso universal al Pre-Kindergarten.

Resumen: el pre-kindergarten universal (UPK) es una reforma popular en Virginia Occidental, que ofrece un instrucción de tiempo parcial, orientada a la preparación escolar para niños de cuatro años y algunos de tres años con necesidades especiales. Esta reforma coloca a los padres entre el mercados y el derechos al ofrecer opciones públicas y privadas discrepantes para las familias que no califican para el programa de Head Start, mientras que nombrar este acceso de "universal". En este trabajo, se examina el contexto del acceso en relación a las influencias neoliberales globales, analizando específicamente el papel de la dinámica de clase social de los padres que buscan oportunidades de preparación. Los resultados indican procesos de clase complejos entre los recién llegados a la clase media-baja y las familias que ya tienen esa experiencia de clase.. Este artículo contribuye con información actualizada a la comprensión de la movilidad cultural y la reproducción.

Palabras clave: pre-kindergarten universal, Virginia Occidental, relaciones hogar-escuela, participación de padres; Capital cultural; neoliberalismo

Entre o mercado e o direito: o sentido de "agência" em pais de classe média baixa em uma comunidade com acesso universal a la pré-escola.

Resumo: O prekindergarten Universal (UPK) é uma reforma popular em West Virginia, que oferece educação em tempo parcial, visando a preparação para a escola para crianças de quatro anos e algumas de três anos com necessidades especiais. Essa reforma coloca os pais entre os mercados e os direitos para fornecer opções públicas e privadas para as famílias que não se qualificam para o programa Head Start, enquanto mantem o nome de acesso "universal". Neste artigo, vamos examinar o contexto do acesso em relação a influências neoliberais globais, analisando especificamente o papel das dinâmicas de classe social dos pais que procuram oportunidades de formação. Os resultados indicam processos de classe complexos entre às famílias recém-chegados a classe média baixa e as famílias que já têm a experiência de classe . Este trabalho contribui com informações atualizadas para o entendimento da mobilidade cultural e reprodução.

Palavras-chave: prekindergarten universal; West Virginia; relações casa-escola; participação dos pais; capital cultural; Neoliberalismo.

Introduction

In the US, universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) is often pitted against targeted forms of programming like Head Start in debates about for whom service delivery should occur (Zaslow, 2011; Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011). Both UPK and targeted preschool programs have as a central purpose kindergarten readiness concentrated on four-year-olds (Gormley, 2005). Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and rights to early education have been recently coupled as a “UPK-plus” framework that seeks the expansion of high-quality UPK to all three-year-olds (Kagan & Frielander, 2011). While UPK-plus is generally a sound approach, this research

extends the UPK conversation beyond a school readiness and DAP orientation to consider issues of power at play within a UPK community, as parents are positioned by the reform context to access early education and care. Naturally, there may be a danger in re-thinking out loud the conceptual and practical weaknesses of UPK at a time when fewer families are able to qualify for early education through targeted channels. I in no way want this article to be read as critical of public early education. Instead, my goal is to shine a light on why and how UPK should be re-thought as a broader, rights-based discourse that embeds critical action towards cultural groups' claims for recognition (Grant & Potter, 2011).

Social class plays an important role in how UPK is accessed by families. In fact, UPK has been framed by policy makers and scholars as a public solution to save the strained middle class from the dilemma of either struggling to pay preschool tuition, or foregoing high-quality services altogether (Barnett, Brown, & Shore, 2004; Gormley, 2005; Schulman & Barnett, 2005). Educational politics also plays a clear role, as neoliberal policies push down K-12 market-based orientations to the very youngest children, serving to narrow and standardize curricula and potentially reshape early childhood teacher education (Brown, 2009). In West Virginia, middle class access to early education plays out in the context of widespread poverty, high-stakes testing, and struggling elementary and secondary schools (Groenke & Nespor, 2010). In the fragmented UPK system involving public school sites and private and Head Start partners, some parents are positioned to compete for the "best" education (Ball, 2002). As such, individual families are positioned to engage with both rights and fragmented forms of privatization that are enmeshed in webs of power. Because this context influences access to early education and care for many families, it should be examined.

UPK in West Virginia is, on one hand, a smart policy, in no small measure because it has increased access to preschool for all four-year-olds (National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER], 2012), including the struggling lower middle-class that has sometimes been left out of early education opportunities (Gormley, 2005). West Virginia has expanded opportunities through UPK (including Head Start) from 51% of four-year-olds in 2002-2003 (NIEER, 2003) to 85% in 2011-2012 (NIEER, 2012). But, on the other hand, there remain significant waiting lists for certain services and sites, and early education access for younger children has not improved overall. For example, though the state is currently highly rated nationally for three-year-old access to the universal system (NIEER, 2012), the Mayville¹ Early Head Start Office reported a typical waiting list of 35-45 families annually, which means that one quarter of families desiring Early Head Start (poor, working class, and lower-middle class families) cannot enter on time or ever (personal communication, February 10, 2013).

Because rights for all within UPK's fragmented public-private system is currently far from a reality, I was interested in examining how the original target of UPK reform expansion—the strained middle class demographic—was experiencing UPK as full program implementation unfolded. While there is a rich literature on how the middle class engages with schooling (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Dudley-Marling, 2001; Posey, 2012), sustained inquiry of the economically pressed middle class segment is an emergent field of research. This inquiry, therefore, contributes to contemporary knowledge of social class in the context of UPK reform. Furthermore, it adds to our knowledge of educational reforms and class processes at a moment when "the resources available to low-income families to pay for their children's preschool...have fallen farther behind those of affluent families" (Duncan & Murnane, 2011, p. 5), and thus may provide clues on how to address this gap. Specifically, I sought an answer to the question: *How does the lower-middle class "fit" within the universal early education "system"?* In order to examine the effects of

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¹ Mayville is the pseudonym for the community under study.

social class at play, I view the data through the lens of the critical theory of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu.

UPK in West Virginia

UPK (West Virginia Policy 2525) started its 10-year phase-in toward full implementation in 2003, providing part-time preschool for mainly four-year-olds in association with county boards of education and local private preschools and childcare centers (Ackerman et al., 2009). The process towards implementation was spurred by the passage of Senate Bill 247 (West Virginia Code § 18-5-44) on March 10, 2002, creating UPK in the state (Bushouse, 2006). This task was accomplished by a tight inner circle of legislators and top appointed officials of the Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), such that:

The legislation mandated collaboration between the two departments [DOE and DHHS], but none of the civil servants who would be charged with implementing the program were even aware that universal pre-K legislation was being discussed, let alone drafted.

(Bushouse, 2006, p. 154)

The law was, in many ways, based on concern by politicians and policymakers for sparking economic development in a state facing a number of issues including the lowest college graduation rates in the nation and a declining school age population (West Virginia Senate, 2009²). Scholars at Marshall University in West Virginia's Center for Business and Economics Research have reported that "one of the most productive investments that is rarely viewed as an economic development is early childhood development (ECD)" (Kent et al., 2005, p. 4). And, the reform's ongoing popularity has been garnered in part by its packaging as the state's best economic hope (Kent et al., 2005) and its utility as a solution for the struggling middle class's demand for choice in early education (see Gormley, 2005).

In Policy 2525, county boards of education, licensed childcare centers, and Head Start programs are expected to collaborate in UPK (West Virginia Board of Education, 2009). Head Start is often integrated into the public UPK sites. Additionally, local childcare centers contract with county boards of education, and the UPK portion of the day is provided free for qualifying children with support from the state. Special education services are typically provided as needed. Policy 2525 requires that at least 50% of UPK sites per county be contracted private and/or Head Start partners (if those programs exist in the county and if they choose to participate in UPK) (West Virginia Board of Education, 2009). This requirement is designed to "maximize existing community, state, and federal resources" (West Virginia Board of Education, 2009, p. 2) and is based on research showing that "high quality child care centers are essential to maintain economic stability, attract outside investments and support working families and their employers" (West Virginia Senate, 2009). By its very design, UPK has provided a promise to reap rewards for all those working in the state through multi-faceted early childhood investments.

In order to understand the economic context shaping UPK policy, it is important to consider the broader concerns in West Virginia in 2002, as UPK was being conceived. First were the September 11, 2001 tragedies, particularly worrisome as the Pentagon and Pennsylvania sites are in close proximity to the state. Second, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law was changing the face of educational accountability, and many counties feared NCLB sanctions because of already low test performance. Other changes were happening as well. As the state's extractive industries had been squeezed in the preceding decades, labor had shifted towards the lower paying service sector,

² This information is from West Virginia Senate Bill 498, the 2009 amendment and reenactment of West Virginia Code § 18-5-44.

and families increasingly relied on multiple and diverse economic strategies often orchestrated by women (Oberhauser, 2005). Numerous young people, meanwhile, sought employment outside of West Virginia (Carr & Kefalas, 2010). Bob Wise, the governor at the time, looked to bolster the state's human resources by expanding technology and promoting education. In 2002, he introduced the PROMISE Scholarship, which provides well-performing West Virginia high school seniors four-year tuition stipends for West Virginia public and private colleges and universities. In sum, educational "roots and wings" policies like UPK and PROMISE were designed to bolster the state economy and strengthen K-12 performance while building a human infrastructure capable of flexibly adapting to uncertainties.

Community demographics

The Mayville area is presently a home for residents from all over the world, due to the presence of a major research university and an influx of private companies due to the area's favorable business climate. There are thriving professionals and more than 30,000 students in the county providing a substantial middle class, but there is also almost unimaginable poverty. While 21.8 percent of Mayville area residents live below the poverty level, 17.5 percent of all West Virginia residents are considered poor (US Census, 2010). This statistic is complicated by the county's reputation as one of the most affluent and educated areas of the state. The high level of statistical poverty is due in part to the large number of university students present. The racial/ethnic makeup of the county is 91.1 percent White, 3.8 percent Black, 3.1 percent Asian, and 2.0 percent Hispanic. Largely due to the presence of a major university, 4.4 percent of county residents were born internationally, and 5.5 percent speak a language other than English at home (US Census, 2010).

Head Start qualifying children and children with identified disabilities were given priority for assignment to their local public school site, while there was lottery assignment to other families' preferred sites. But among sites within Mayville's UPK system, there was a wide range of desirability. For example, there was a popular private UPK partner with a multi-year waiting list that required application "at conception" and gave admissions preference to siblings. While a few families could access the highly coveted placements, some families were assigned to the open (and sometimes undesirable) private or public locations.

Figure 1 below shows the range of representative preschool and childcare sites available in the county under study. All names are pseudonyms. For reference, at the time of this writing there were 11 public UPK sites, 12 private UPK partners, and 20 licensed child care centers and preschools on lists distributed to parents by community agencies. The select sites included in Figure 1 either participated in this research directly or were used by my parent participants. Social class was distributed geographically among the preschools in the town. Generally speaking, the middle and upper-middle classes attended sites near the university, hospital, and quaint downtown areas, whereas poor and working class families generally attended childcare and preschool at either public UPK sites at local public elementary schools or at private sites in shabbier parts of the city. Nanny care was popular in Park Heights, a fashionable neighborhood of Victorian homes, while kin care was common among poor, working class, and lower-middle class families with relatives nearby. Please note that the two public UPK sites shown integrated a wide range of social classes in their programs, the only sites in this community to clearly do so.

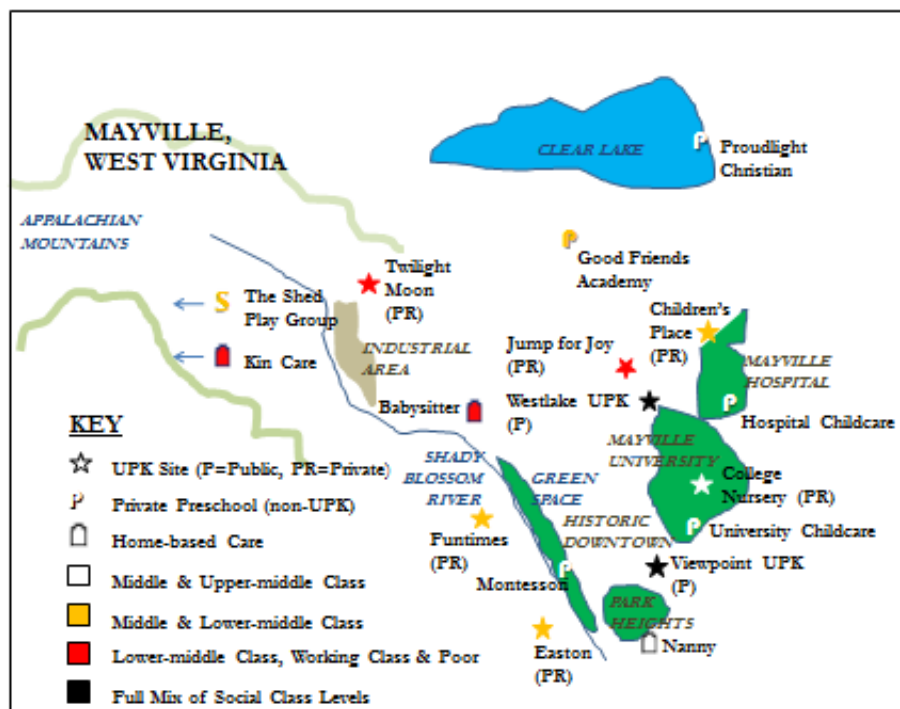


Figure 1. Map of representative preschool and childcare sites.

Source: author

Service delivery

The Mayville public UPK classrooms are housed in local public elementary schools and trailers just outside of elementary school properties, run programs four days per week for five hours per day, and there is no associated on-site before or afterschool care available. An advantage of some partner UPK programs in the private centers is that they have extended care options available on-site.

In line with prominent discourses of UPK quality rooted in DAP, Policy 2525 states the expected conditions. In addition to outlining mandated teacher education expectations and exceptions, safety precautions, behavior management protocols, hygiene specifications, curriculum frameworks, and evaluation mechanisms, Policy 2525 offers parent involvement guidelines. For example, Policy 2525 mandates a vision of “classrooms that are open to parents/guardians/families and where parents/guardians/families are encouraged to observe children in the classroom and to participate in classroom activities” (West Virginia Board of Education, 2009, p. 6). While parent involvement in the classroom may be a very good idea, it is also typically a middle class form of relating with school that assumes parents’ ready transportation, flexible schedules, and comfort (see Lopez & Stoelting, 2010). By codifying involvement as such, the policy may set the stage for those interpreting it to fail to subsume the strengths and needs of all families (Grant & Potter, 2011). This is just one example of how the discourses of UPK quality and rights may be in conflict.

State education markets

West Virginia does not currently allow vouchers or charters, like many US states. Its education markets, instead, rely on public and private schools and homeschooling.

In order to understand how UPK policy in West Virginia works, it is important to understand the underlying assumptions of the policy and how it supports the state education markets. It is crucial to see that UPK is situated within a larger context of globalization and neoliberalism, called neoliberal globalism. While often thought of as only economic in scope, neoliberal globalism has social, political, and cultural dimensions (Singh, Kenway, & Apple, 2005). In fact, it has penetrated into almost all areas of life, including education and parenting.

Globalization is hegemonic capitalism that is woven with neoliberal ideology and distributed through major institutions (e.g., The World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank) with the devastating effects of increasing the gap between the wealthy and poor both within and between countries around the world (Diniz-Pereira, 2012). These effects have included human rights violations and environmental destruction in addition to worldwide poverty (Beck, 2000).

Neoliberalism insists that a competitive marketplace is essential for corporations to be maximally profitable and to compete globally, and that the private (like a private preschool) is preferable to the public (for example, targeted early readiness programs like Head Start) (Apple, 2005). Neoliberal policies are focused on making people “productive” rather than critical. In this vein, they may “reduce notions of social justice to access to markets, ignoring differences in access to monetary, legal and social resources” that impact educational experiences (Hursh & Henderson, 2011, p. 176). More specifically, “hidden assumptions about class and a considerable element of the politics of whiteness may make it hard for us to face [the effects of neoliberal globalism] honestly since it is almost impossible to understand US educational policies unless one also understands the intricate politics of race” (Apple, 2005, p. 212). Instead of confronting inequalities, “schools are more often places where teachers and students learn what will be on the test rather than seeking answers to questions that cry out for answers, such as how to develop a healthy, sustainable environment or communities where people are actually valued for who they are rather than what they contribute to the economy” (Hursh & Henderson, 2011, p. 182). This worry is as valid for early childhood education as it is for the older levels (Cannella & Swadener, 2006).

Neoliberal policies are often implemented as technical solutions that may marginalize communities in the process of trying to shape them to solve broader social and economic problems through acquiescence with the neoliberal global project. In fact, neoliberal globalism’s proponents see it as a new phase of innovation and progress (Raduntz, 2005). Neoliberal globalism creates logics that permeate educational policies and practices in local contexts around the world. Foucault’s notion of governmentality is useful in unpacking these logics (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991). The theory of governmentality helps to examine the relationships between discourses and practices, and shows how neoliberal policies are developed and carried out. As I will show, neoliberal logics in West Virginia’s UPK policy serve to construct a vision of a particular kind of childhood in line with certain imagined futures and specific supporting roles for teachers and parents.

UPK and neoliberal globalism

West Virginia’s UPK policy guidelines require the delivery of content through a state-approved curriculum and the West Virginia Early Learning Standards Framework (WVELSF), which explains the reasoning behind UPK in the state:

The foremost goal for West Virginia’s children is to be lifelong learners. Young children live in a society where information is constantly changing and the ability to function well in an increasingly global economy is essential. Children must have the ability to continuously learn. Therefore, it is essential that children develop skills which allow them to become competent, independent learners capable of higher intellectual functions. To fulfill this role, teachers of

young children must also be lifelong learners, continuously building their professional knowledge and professional competencies based on current research. (West Virginia Board of Education, 2010, p. 2)

These standards are, in turn, linked with the West Virginia 21st Century Frameworks for K-12 education (West Virginia Board of Education, 2013). Within the context of NCLB policy, the WVVELSF “provides a definition of a delivery system for, and an assessment and accountability system for, a thorough and efficient education for West Virginia public school students” (West Virginia Board of Education, 2010, p. 1). The WVVELSF was constructed by early childhood professionals from around the state and offered the opportunity to blend an early childhood-specific holistic approach and developmental framework within the broader requirements of P-12 standardization.

The stated purposes of the WVVELSF implicate teachers in the work of forming children’s subjectivities as “life-long learners”, while requiring professional yet almost child-like teachers to demonstrate the same dispositions. Children and teachers, furthermore, are required to be flexible and autonomous workers who can be responsive to the needs of the state.

Two of the primary ways in which neoliberal globalism manifests in West Virginia’s UPK policy are through its logics of: (a) parent involvement and (b) curriculum.

First, parent involvement is an expectation written in Policy 2525 (West Virginia Board of Education, 2009), delineating that the educators will create environments for these purposes:

“2.1.2 [to] be readiness programs³ that meet the needs of all eligible children” (p. 1).

“2.1.9 [to] incorporate meaningful ways of communicating with and involving parent/guardian/ family” (p. 2).

“4.1.7 ...[to be places] where parents/guardians/families are encouraged to observe children in the classroom and to participate in classroom activities” (p. 6).

“10.4.8 [to] promote, through a variety of strategies, the essential role of families as partners in planning and implementing their child’s care and education;” (p. 24).

“10.4.12i [to] includ[e] the parent/guardian as collaborative partners” (p. 25).

In the case of parent involvement, teachers are required to “incorporate,” “encourage,” “promote,” “partner,” “include,” and “collaborate” in the project of shaping parents’ subjectivities to the requirements of the universal preschool in the production of children ready for the workplace and 21st Century life. There is a range of mutuality between teachers and parents inscribed within the policy. But, rather than challenging parents to advocate for their children or to become political around issues of social justice, for example, relationships between teachers and parents are framed as manager-client or collegial.

Second, UPK policy requires an approved curriculum aligned with the WVVELSF, typically Creative Curriculum (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002). Creative Curriculum is a “package” devised in the 1970s as a child-centered, developmental framework providing teachers with ideas for setting up a daily routine in which they address 10 interest areas through purposeful play. It presumes similar trajectories for all children, while taking up an outcomes-based perspective that negates deep knowledge of local contexts (Michael-Luna & Heimer, 2012).⁴ Creative Curriculum is linked to these UPK requirements (West Virginia Board of Education, 2009):

³ Readiness is defined under WVVELSF as a “multifaceted definition and approach” (West Virginia Board of Education, 2010, p. 4) addressing multiple developmental domains and the capacities of parents, communities, and schools to support child development.

⁴ This curriculum is used by nearly 60% of UPK and Head Start programs in the US (Michael-Luna & Heimer, 2012). As is the case with packaged curricula, Creative Curriculum does offer some possibilities for teachers’ agency and therefore serves the project of creating professionals.

“9.1 ...[must] reflect a developmental continuum that enhances successful transition into kindergarten. Children shall be assessed on their individual developmental progress along the developmental continuum” (p. 21).

“10.2 ...must be based on scientifically based research and support the philosophy and techniques of the comprehensive curriculum...” (p. 21).

“10.4.1a [must address] the developmental needs of eligible children through practices that are consistent with current, nationally recognized, most effective practice;” (p. 22).

“10.4.1c [must engage] children in the learning process and [provide] them with opportunities to make meaningful choices;” (p. 22).

“10.4.1e [must support] children so they view themselves as part of a larger community” (p. 22).

“10.4.3a [must] integrate development of all domains, abilities, and content that is relevant, engaging, and meaningful to young children; by:

a. meeting the developmental continuum contained in the content standards and objectives for eligible children as prescribed by the WVBE [(West Virginia Board of Education)]” (p. 22).

“10.4.6. [must] design a learning environment that supports the curriculum and allows children of all abilities to make choices, to discover, to explore, and to solve problems;” (p. 23).

“10.4.7e [must allow] for flexibility and adaptations for individual children” (p. 24).

“10.5.1 ...must include learning centers, incorporated within the classroom, designed to support literacy, early numeracy, and language...” (p. 25)

As should be clear from the policy language, children learn to find their wings by being supported to their highest potentials as autonomous individuals. UPK policy demands that teachers be professionals by moving beyond traditional skills-based, non-developmental teaching methods towards a “quality” framework. But at the same time, the framework does not challenge teachers to work from a critical perspective. Instead, regarding diversity for example, teachers are encouraged to do three things: (a) “incorporat[e] non-stereotypical images in all elements of the environment” (West Virginia Board of Education, 2009, p. 23), (b) “includ[e] materials and activities that reflect a variety of cultures, languages, ages, abilities, and beliefs” (West Virginia Board of Education, 2009, p. 23), and (c) “[understand] similarities and [respect] differences among people, such as genders, race, special needs, cultures, language and family structures” (West Virginia Board of Education, 2010, p. 8). While these suggestions are not inherently bad, and in fact can be quite good, on their own they are limited. In the project of learning to simply “view themselves as part of a larger community” following neoliberal logic, children, teachers, and parents may be constrained regarding opportunities for empowerment through active, deliberative participation.

Conceiving UPK Policy for the Lower-Middle Class

Lately, there has been significant talk of a deepening crevasse splitting what was once a fairly stable middle class (Morin, 2008; Newman, 2008). Most of the anxiety has been directed toward what I call the struggling *lower-middle class*. There has been sociological work seeking to define middle class fractions empirically (Ball & Vincent, 2007; Butler & Robson, 2001; Roksa & Potter, 2011; Vincent, 2001). Following this line of research, I take my own grounded approach to class definition. For the purposes of this paper, the lower-middle class is a group that clearly emerged in the analysis of the data. The lower-middle class participants in this community were raised in solidly middle class homes. These individuals have middle class social networks, undergraduate and

sometimes graduate degrees, and parents who worked white collar jobs and have tended to remain financially stable. Now grown up, the new lower-middle class has sometimes had their children before acquiring a strong economic base due to delayed or extended schooling, student loan burdens, and/or underemployment in a recession economy. Thus, they have struggled economically while maintaining the knowledge, skills, and understandings of the middle class, also called a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This is a group characterized by ambiguity of social trajectory, which may instill certain pressures, as I will later discuss.

This grounded definition of a struggling middle class is not unproblematic. In fact, the French sociologist Bourdieu noted that, regarding “social class”:

There are different ways that lines of division can be drawn. ...The process of categorization is restrained both by the broad outlines suggested by objective positions and, if the category is to be historically effective, by individuals’ own commonsense constructions. ...However, the categories can be drawn up in different ways and the precise details of how they are drawn up can be contested. (Crossley, 2008, p. 97)

Therefore, it is important to explain the context that shapes the capital of the participants whose social class status is inherently ambiguous. Definitions of social class tend to focus on income as a determinant of class status, and minimize or leave out additional factors such as family background, cultivation, education, networks, and expected trajectories. Oftentimes, criteria for access are based on income, not a broader definition of social class status.

Shifting economic factors, however, do affect the topography of social class relations. The US has experienced such a shift with exploding debt and meager salary increases for lesser wage earners (often called the middle class “squeeze”) since the early 2000s (Wolff, 2010). Since this time, middle class indebtedness has shot upward, and the holdings of wealth have shifted from young households to the old (Wolff, 2010). The situation now seems worse, as there has been a 36.1% drop in wealth since the 2007 peak of the housing bubble, and the hit has fallen firmly on the shoulders of the middle class (Domhoff, 2012). Those at the bottom quintiles of wealth distribution have been most affected by the economic downturn (Wolff, 2010).

UPK and Parents’ Agency

I set about the literature on parents’ roles in education with the question of what clues it can provide about social class and the nature of parents’ involvement in early education. This literature provides a basis for framing new questions about the lower-middle class.

Nature of parents’ agency

First off, it should be no surprise that the “burden” for parent involvement has been found to fall squarely on the shoulders of the mother. This responsibility has been present regardless of social class (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Vincent & Ball, 2006). The process has involved the positioning of mothers relative to a normalizing discourse of “mothering for schooling” that is thick with emotion, morals, values, and knowledge. The discourse is differentially accessible by various class groups, positioning each as better and worse mothers (Griffith & Smith, 2005). Flexible notions of a mother’s time work hand-in-hand with discourses of child development to reproduce the “normal” middle class.

Middle class fractions

While very few educational researchers have specifically considered the lower reaches of the middle class in their analyses, Vincent (2001) is a notable exception. More than a decade ago, Vincent (2001) investigated fractions within the middle class and linked differences in parent

involvement to educational, occupational, and lifestyle differences. The results indicated that White, stable, professional parents were deemed “risk managers”, unwilling to trust the school with their children’s futures. Meanwhile, parents with less educational attainment who had worked their way up into white collar jobs (what Vincent termed “the lower middle class”) were more likely to intervene when home-school issues involved the child’s personal welfare; academic tinkering was much less of a priority for the low middle class group.

The difficulty in using Vincent’s work on class fractions, however, is that its definition of “lower-middle class” catches parents on an upward cycle of attainment, instead of those who have *descended*, as is the case for many families in the current economic climate (Newman, 2008), and the families that I encountered in this research. By reconceptualizing the lower-middle class fraction to capture families with high educational attainment but underemployment and low income (perhaps temporary, perhaps not), I present an updated perspective on social class. Again, the parents I am concerned about were raised in middle class homes, are currently low income, and *may* expect to regain middle class status in the future. My new class categories provide a somewhat different scheme than that set forth recently by sociologists Josipa Roksa and Daniel Potter (2011), who posited the category “new working-class” to capture downward mobility among parents whose class of origin does not match their current position. I conceptualize this group as a fraction of the middle class, whereas these researchers see transfer to the working class. I will return to this research later in the theory and discussion, in order to consider further the different perspectives on social class as they relate to parents’ early education agency.

How does the lower-middle class “fit” within the universal early education system? In order to explore this question properly, let us consider a conceptual framework that considers the roles of class in shaping parents’ agency.

Understanding Social Class

Social class is *embodied* (Bourdieu, 1984), or in the body. That is, the ways in which people look and dress, mannerisms, habits and dispositions reflect class. This concept is central to the analysis and discussion presented. There are debates, however, about how and when embodied class processes are acquired, and how they play out (Henry, 2013). As a further introduction to embodiment and other class practices, I will introduce Bourdieu’s basic concepts used in my analysis. His concepts: capital, habitus, and field, work together dynamically to produce social class phenomena. For Bourdieu, class is a complicated phenomenon that relies on many more tools than current income. *Capital* is one of the most central concepts in class analysis, and it is essential to understand in this study. It is the accumulated social, cultural, and symbolic strategies, as well as the economic means, that social class groups learn to activate in the production of life trajectories (Bourdieu, 1984).

A second key concept is *habitus*, the “durable but not eternal” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133) class-based knowledge and understanding constructed most saliently in homes and schools. Different class groups acquire different kinds of capital through the varied childhood scripts that they encounter, both at home and in schools. Agency, in Bourdieu’s terms, is thickly enmeshed in his notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). That is, action is socially constructed at a cultural level, rather than individually and rationally conceived.

A third important Bourdieuan concept important to consider is that of the *field*. Put simply, a field is any social location in which power inheres through capital activation (and non-activation) (Bourdieu, 1998). An application of Bourdieu’s field theory that is very useful for a study of early education policy is the construct of “misrecognition”. Misrecognition is defined as the habituated

tendency to focus so strongly on class-based ways of seeing and doing that one cannot see the workings of power that perpetuate stratified class relationships (Bourdieu, 1998). Misrecognition often comes into play in attributions of fairness and deservedness of privilege as policies are enacted.

There are some who do not agree fully with Bourdieu's theory (e.g., Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; DiMaggio, 1982), suggesting that it focuses too strongly on the role of the family and early education in shaping educational capital when this process is spread throughout the lifespan. Generational shifts in class status are evidence of this idea. Scholars who hold to the view that class is based on characteristics and experiences that provide capital throughout the lifespan are called cultural mobility theorists. Such theorists see that parents' family of origin has less influence on their choices than do their present circumstances. Cultural mobility theorists may predict that parents who were raised in the middle class but who are presently earning a low income would act more like the working class than the middle class and that these parents would not experience much success with concerted cultivating their children.

A Community Case Study

This case study research is based on data from the first year of a longitudinal study about access to early education in Mayville, West Virginia. I obtained my data through observations of educational practices and interviews with teachers/providers, community resource managers/administrators, and parents. I made careful notes of additional information and interpretations alongside of the interviews. In addition, I collected program and policy documents from my participants and traced the development of the UPK program through state and local newspapers. Obtaining data from multiple sources enabled me to better understand the nature of the educational relationships among various educators and stakeholders. The following section details the methodology used and the choices made in the research.

Bounding the case

As a researcher I could capture this fragmented field only partially. However, I designed the study to sample the levels of community ecology based on my personal knowledge of the community and prior conversations with its residents. As schools and community-based supports (including the Head Start and UPK systems) are typically organized at the county level in West Virginia, I limited sampling to people and organizations in one county. The city of Mayville is the prime hub of education, employment, and commerce for the county, and its political center. It is the site of a university drawing students from around the state, region, and globe to study in popular engineering, mining, business, medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, and law programs.

Participants

I worked with 40 participants in total. The participants were from three groups: parents (n=28), preschool and childcare providers/teachers/directors (n=8), and community resource managers/administrators (n=4). I used these multiple data sources so that I could compare the perspectives of the participants in order to obtain a multi-dimensional understanding of the community ecology.

As I had done demographic and socio-historical research on the community and had many conversations with early childhood personnel upon moving to the state in 2011, I structured sampling to broadly reflect patterns of family social and cultural capital and class existing within the community. I sampled diverse parents of preschoolers with recent (within two years), current, or anticipated involvement in UPK and different relationships with the community. I specifically sought 6-8 participants who were professional newcomers to the community (within the past five

years), 6-8 who were long-time community locals (who grew up in the community), 6-8 who were currently university student families, and 6-8 who were not students and were unemployed or worked minimum wage jobs and used resources like local food pantries, Early Head Start and Head Start. In each of these groups, I oversampled for international and minority parents to receive their perspectives. Each parent interviewed provided, in the form of a questionnaire, in-depth information about their educations, work histories, and childcare budgets/assistance received. The interviews started with life history questions that touched on childhoods and early schooling. From there, I designated the social class categories for each of the participants (middle class, lower-middle class, working-class/poor) determined through an analysis of the participants' life histories, employment and education histories, as well as SES and family questions presented in their personal questionnaires and in the interviews. Middle-class positions were designated by middle-class current employment, education level, stable SES, and middle class life histories. Lower-middle class status was designated by below-average SES and/or underemployment (temporary or perhaps more permanent), generally high education levels, and middle class life histories. Poor and working class participants were named by current employment (or unemployment) as well as work history, SES, and poor and working class life histories that have remained fairly stable. Generally speaking, the participants' characteristics did cluster fairly neatly into one of the class categories described. Occasionally making a designation was challenging, for example when the mothers had much higher educational attainment and employment trajectories than the fathers. In such cases, I weighted the mothers' contexts more heavily. The lower-middle class became the focal category, as I have described.

I involved eight teachers, providers, and directors, most of whom were either part of or very familiar with the context and history of the UPK system. This sample was purposive. As a newcomer to the community, I spoke with several colleagues at my own university with knowledge of this area as well as a range of parents and teachers informally to identify the various roles available in this community of 35,000 permanent residents plus 30,000 university students. In sampling teachers, providers, and directors, I chose one representative from each of the categories mentioned often as popular in town (kin care, nanny, Christian preschool, private Montessori School, company-sponsored preschool, varied UPK sites). I sampled UPK sites by designating one example of each of the UPK site types (public school UPK, "average" private center UPK partner, elite nursery school UPK partner). It was not easy to find public UPK principals willing to approve the study. I received county permission to contact five public UPK site principals to explain the study. Only two of the five principals returned my emails and phone calls, and just the Westlake administrator was willing to allow me to contact UPK teachers (the other principal checked with the teachers and apparently they were not interested in doing the study). While I am uncertain, I hypothesize that some of the hesitancy might have been the confusion and tension between principals and early childhood programs about how UPK should work (this issue was reported in multiple interviews). In order to better capture the tenor of the community, I also tried to sample UPK partners with negative reputations. I contacted two (Jump for Joy and Twilight Moon) and was, unfortunately, not able to arrange for observations and interviews. In the case of Jump for Joy, when I explained to the center director that I was a professor studying access to preschool, I was told that she would not be at the center until the following fall (after my data collection completion) because she ran several other businesses simultaneously. In the instance of Twilight Moon (no longer in business at the time of this writing), I was told each of the three times I called the center that the owner was unavailable, and she did not return my calls. Through participants who had worked at or with these centers, or whose children had attended these centers, I did obtain some information about the type and quality

of care and education that these centers provided. In all other cases, teachers, providers, and directors were willing to do an interview and allowed me to observe the programs.

Four community resource managers and administrators were crucial participants. Similar to my strategy for selecting preschool and childcare teachers and providers, I designated the key community resource personnel by discussing local roles with several colleagues in the early childhood department at West Virginia University familiar with state childcare contexts, as well as a range of teachers and parents in the location under study. Because of the limited size of the community itself, there were only four main agencies/individuals that came up as crucial supports, and each of these participated. Within the agencies, I inquired as to the member who had the most knowledge of UPK-related issues as well as a history with the agency. Each of the community resource providers was very generous with her time and seemed glad to participate and educate me about the community. These individuals held a number of positions. One managed child care resources at the county level, another provided instructional leadership to the UPK system at the county level, one managed and promoted child and family resources for the university, and one designed and promoted alternative childcare solutions for the community. Please see Table 1 below for a summary of the class positions of the community resource managers, teachers/directors, and parents.

Table 1
Participants

Participants' Roles	Social Class
Community Resource Managers (n=4)	4 middle class
Early Childhood Educators/Providers (n=8)	5 middle class 2 lower-middle class 1 working class
Parents (n=28)	9 middle and upper-middle class 10 lower-middle class 9 poor or working class

Data sources

All interviews were semi-structured and ranged from 45 minutes-90 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted in person and were tape recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim in their entirety. The interview questions explored participants' perspectives on how early education access worked in the community. The questions were designed to provoke the families, community supports, and providers to answer in terms of their specific experiences, and in regard to what they knew about the circumstances in the community more generally.

In order to become more familiar with the local early childhood culture, I observed for a half-day in each of eight early education and care sites representative of the availability in Mayville (three variations on UPK [Westlake, College Nursery, Easton], three private preschools running independent of the state UPK initiative [Hospital, Montessori, Proudlight Christian], nanny care, and kin care). The observations were ethnographic in method and focused on patterns of educational practice.

Also crucial to this analysis were the informal memos that I made immediately after the interviews. Early on in this study, I became fascinated in the bodily differences among my participants, which seemed to connect in interesting ways to the agency, resistance, and struggle that they experienced within their searches for appropriate early education and care. I analyzed these

documents along with the other texts and report some of my tentative understandings of the role of appearances as part of the findings and discussion.

Analysis

I followed traditional techniques of case study analysis (Yin, 2009). Specifically, I evaluated the fieldnotes, transcripts, and post-interview memos using external codes taken from my theoretical framework and the supporting literature on capital activation and social class strategies within the education markets (Miles & Huberman, 1994). My use of NVIVO software facilitated the analysis. I also did inductive, internal coding that prompted new codes. I looked for patterns and variation among the parents' voices and appearances, examining themes by parents' social class, race/ethnicity, RMC (recent members of the class—descended to the lower-middle class within the past five years)/HMC (historically members of the class—have remained in the class longer than five years) and the types of early schooling and childcare experienced.

Based on the findings from the initial analysis showing interesting patterns of access to UPK and childcare resources by the mothers in the study, I turned to give more attention to the interviews of mothers who fit the lower-middle class profile. Table 2 presents basic information about the ten lower-middle class mothers examined for the purposes of this report, organized by the time they have spent in the lower-middle class (recent or historic).

Table 2
Lower-middle Class Participants

Name, Age	Race/Ethnicity	Marital Status, Partner Name, Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education, Occupation, Hours Worked per Week	Partner's Education, Occupation, Hours Worked per Week	Child/ren's Age(s)	Childcare/Preschool Context and Budget
RMC (Recent Members of the Class—became lower-middle class within the past 5 years)							
Selma Coat, 32 5 years in Mayville	White	engaged Mark, 37	White	B.S. server, master's student, 25+	B.A. delivery driver, 40+	1yr.	a friend babysits in Ms. Coat's home, seeking permanent childcare childcare budget=\$360/mo.
**Jessica Collins, 30 3 yrs. in Mayville	White	married Kyle, 31	White	M.A. outreach coordinator, 40	J.D. recent law school graduate, 0	1 yr.	University Childcare Center childcare budget=\$50/mo. Ms. Collins asked for a slight wage reduction to qualify for low-income childcare rates.

Table 2 (Cont'd)
Lower-middle Class Participants

Name, Age	Race/Ethnicity	Marital Status, Partner Name, Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education, Occupation, Hours Worked per Week	Partner's Education, Occupation, Hours Worked per Week	Child/ren's Age(s)	Childcare/Preschool Context and Budget
RMC							
**Malika Rahma, 27 2 yrs. in Mayville	Middle Eastern	married Farookh, 30	Middle Eastern	B.A. home-maker, 0	PhD student research assistant, 20	2.5 yrs.	Early Head Start, Shed, trades care with friends childcare budget=free
Abir Saba, 28 4 yrs. in Mayville	Middle Eastern	married Salem, 39	Middle Eastern	M.A., Ed.D student, graduate assistant, 20	high school self-employed	4 yrs. 3 yrs. 1 yr. 4 mos.	two eldest children attend Westlake UPK, younger children attend Jump for Joy childcare budget=\$60/mo. for the two youngest children, free for the two eldest
Shouka Tehrani (did not interview) 31 1 yr. in Mayville	Middle Eastern	married Mohammed, 33 (did interview)	Middle Eastern	B.S. home-maker, 0	PhD student, 40	3 years	seeking Head Start, attends Shed, trades care with friends childcare budget=free

Table 2 (Cont'd)

Lower middle-class participants

Name, Age	Race/Ethnicity	Marital Status, Partner Name, Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education, Occupation, Hours Worked per Week	Partner's Education, Occupation, Hours Worked per Week	Child/ren's Age(s)	Childcare/Preschool Context and Budget
HMC (Historic Members of the Class)							
Lynne Landsman, 35	White	married Oliver, 30	White	high school, some college home-maker, 0	B.S. military, 40+	7 yrs. 5 yrs.	homeschooling, kin care childcare budget=free
**Terri Sanders, 28	White	married Glen, 28	White	B.A. master's student, graduate assistant, 20	high school cook, 45	2 yrs.	Children's Place childcare center childcare budget=unknown
**Kit Wexler, 31	White	divorced Aidan, age unknown	White	B.S. restaurant server, will be inventory & audit specialist, 40	high school, some college restaurant manager, 50	5 yrs. expecting	Viewpoint UPK childcare budget=free
Jolene Wormeli, 31	White	engaged Joe, 33	White	B.A. small shop manager, 60	high school, some college golf pro, 20	1 yr. expecting	watches her child at work, kin care, seeking formal care before second child arrives childcare budget=free

Note: ** highlighted in the article.

Researcher identity and trustworthiness of analysis

In order to increase the accuracy and to verify my interpretations, I sent initial drafts of the results section of this paper to two participants (Stake, 1995). Both of the verifying participants have a long history of working with the Mayville early childhood system. These trusted comments and perspectives, while they did not sway my analysis in a particular direction, added to its validity. As an additional step to enhance validity, I engaged in a triangulation across data sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Another issue of trustworthiness involves the masking of the data. I needed to navigate a slippery ethical slope when reporting on "bodily" data: that is, the appearances, vocal qualities and gestures of my participants. While I promised confidentiality, I also needed to be honest in the presentation of what these individuals looked like and sounded like. Therefore, in addition to the standard technique of using pseudonyms, I masked a number of very subtle personal characteristics that did not interfere with the embodied class characteristics important to the analysis.

Generalizability

Case studies can provide sets of questions that can be asked of other settings, and thus the questions themselves are generalizable. This is what Stake (1978) has called naturalistic generalizability. While not a positivistic method, case study research has practical utility for stakeholders and researchers.

Lower-Middle Class Relations in Early Education and Care

The variation among the ten lower-middle class families identified in my research was notable, yet an interesting pattern was visible among the RMC families. I describe this phenomenon, and then contrast the RMC and the HMC to better illuminate lower-middle class agency.

Becoming “vulnerable”

Why might lower-middle class families use resources traditionally designated for poor and working class groups? The two family snapshots presented first in this section show how the RMC navigated early education.

RMC snapshot #1: The Collins family

Before the interview, I met Jessica Collins in the parking lot, and noticed that the car she drove was a better model than my own. Never would I think that “lower-middle class” looked like Ms. Collins. With her impeccable suit, glimmering jewelry, and confident posture, she could have been a wealthy lawyer’s wife, I imagined. Yet, her husband was studying for the bar while she provided the full family income.

Ultimately, Ms. Collins received nearly free childcare at the coveted Mayville University childcare center and received assistance through the Parent Network Center (PNC). This is the primary childcare resource in the community, and it provides financial support for families who meet income requirements *and* have primary parent(s) either working or attending school during the time in which childcare is used. While partnered with the state’s Department of Health and Human Services, the PNC is Catholic in its mission:

Our mission is to alleviate poverty, distress, and injustice by providing comprehensive social services to the poor and vulnerable, advocating for social justice, and calling all people of good will, especially those of the Church, to service. (PNC Mission Statement, 2012)

So interestingly, parents who grew up middle-class but who are currently attending the university, are underemployed, or are working in poorly-paid service jobs are technically deemed “poor and vulnerable” by the PNC’s rules. Meanwhile, very low income parents are unable to access PNC resources if they are not presently working. Ms. Collins described how she attained this service:

Ms. Collins: Since I work for a government program, I’m familiar with a lot of the services in the area, different resources. So I was familiar with the Parents’ Network Center (PNC). ... When I went there, I was very upset when they told me I didn’t qualify. ... And [the counselor] told me that she had only had one other lady come in there that had asked her work to lower her salary. I didn’t know that was an option. And the lady told me you can ask [your employer] to do this, if they will fill out the paperwork, you will qualify.... I made \$180 or something too much. ... It was I was either going to pay \$159 a week, or \$2.58 a day. ... *And even though it is temporary until my husband is working full-time, we happened to be one of the families who really could use the program while we’re trying to get an education.* (from interview)

Given the mission of the PNC as providing social justice and charity for the poor and vulnerable, this case represents an interesting interpretation of what attributes may constitute “deserving”.

The next case represents a second form of agency among the RMC.

RMC snapshot #2: The Rahma family

Malika Rahma, wearing the hijab, joked about what staying home with young children does to the body. Though longing to re-join the professional world (she had been a translator in the Middle East, and was the daughter of an accountant and an advertising manager), Ms. Rahma stayed in a small apartment with her preschool-age son while her husband completed PhD studies. Unfortunately, she had been unable to obtain permission to work in the US and could not yet pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a key to entering graduate studies at Mayville University⁵. Now low-income and relying on social services and local charities as part of her resource network, she taught new friends with similar language and religious backgrounds about these supports:

Ms. Rahma. It's our rule here, when there's new people, you must help them. And you are now ready to help new people. And you know that. When I come here, my friends... they arrange us an apartment, and have a car. They give us a ride everywhere. To get some items for home, and show us playgroups. ... There is some support for the low-income people, there is some WIC for us. ... If you don't have insurance you must go to Health Right in downtown... you don't pay money for shots and some food pantries every month. And this place can give you Pampers. ... All this information, I learn it. And sometimes there is an activity in the Shed School, there is Early Head Start. They give me a lot of information.

There is some activity there and there is events here. So I learn all of this. (from interview)
Ms. Rahma took up a new identity in the US, retro-fitting herself as a low-income mother (as she calls herself in this text). She could not work and attend school in the US like her husband, but she used her energies to support her family in other ways. This is what she said about the need for the expansion of UPK:

Ms. Rahma. I want more programs in Mayville. ... You know the Early Head Start has a condition to take you. It's to be low-income as a limit. We are low-income, but at first when we apply they told us no, you are more than low-income for Early Head Start.⁶ How come, I don't know. But they have let you know they are from the federal program. They have something to do to count if you are low-income or not. So OK, but I don't like programs only for the low-income... But I like a program for all. For everyone, yeah. Because some people they can't be accepted in the Early Head Start. (from interview)

As we see here, Ms. Rahma's pressing concern was access to early education prior to age four. She had eventually acquired a rare over-income Early Head Start spot for her son by getting on a waiting list when he was a toddler, and then checking back over the course of a year until a spot opened up. But she was concerned about her friends who were more isolated because of language and transportation issues. She wanted everyone in her group to receive services because of the challenges of English language learning for their children.

Local ties

In this section, I discuss the experiences of two HMC families negotiating early education in the community. As we will see, the HMC were positioned to act somewhat differently than the RMC on the part of their children.

⁵ Though all of my participants spoke English, the international parents in the lower-middle class group spoke Arabic at home. Some additional parents in their network were not yet conversationally fluent in English.

⁶ Early Head Start placement in Mayville guarantees early admission to Head Start in public UPK at age 3 for children with IEPs in order to preserve continuity of services. These three-year-olds are mixed in public school classrooms serving four-year-old Head Start students and other four-year-old UPK students.

HMC snapshot #1: The Sanders family

Terri Sanders was quite emotional in the interview because she hated being away from her young daughter while she worked and attended school. Although her mascara was running down her cheeks as she spoke, I could see that Ms. Sanders reflected the part of the well-coiffed school teacher she was training to be. After visiting several mediocre daycare centers, Terri Sanders and her husband found The Children's Place. Although the waiting list was long, the Sanders' received priority treatment. Why? Ms. Sanders explained:

Ms. Sanders: Well, I wasn't aware of it at the time, but when I went to interview them, I actually knew the owner of the place, Mason Ross.

Researcher: How did you know him?

Ms. Sanders: Because he rented a house to me when I was in my undergrad. ...So I guess maybe I got a little treatment on that, because I got bumped to the top of the waiting list, they had a real long waiting list, they bumped me to the top. ...

I had gone to high school with [the director] too, and I wasn't aware of that either. But she left before we got there because she was pregnant herself. And then, I guess that probably helped us a little bit too. ...Once we started there, and then I went to work at the bank, my boss there was pregnant and I got her into The Children's Place. She started taking her daughter there when she had her baby. And then my other friend, I had told her about it and she put her name and got bumped up on the waiting list there too, but she eventually decided to go somewhere else anyway.

Researcher: So, OK. How do you get bumped? Like if you just have a personal connection?

Ms. Sanders: Well, I mean, yeah. He wants to trust his clients as much as he wants his clients to trust him.

Researcher: So people with a personal reference or connection?

Ms. Sanders: Yeah, it's kind of like anything else, it's who you know. (from interview)

In this case, there was no shame in potentially displacing families unknown by the owner. The goal was to construct a warm, comfortable business environment in which the families were connected and trust was established. The key was fitting well with a daycare owner looking for compatible clients, which likely meant being a financially reliable family agreeable to policies and procedures, and comfortable with receiving special benefits. Ms. Sanders used local networks to obtain what she saw to be high quality services.

HMC snapshot #2: The Wexler family

Kit Wexler came to the interview wearing jeans, a hand-knit sweater, and an artsy scarf. Her manner was easy-going, yet Ms. Wexler was articulate and quick-witted. Through the interview, we shared a number of laughs. Ms. Wexler was the divorced mother of a son currently attending UPK. She had tried to qualify as a Head Start applicant, but missed the income cutoff. Fortunately, she had completed an internship at Viewpoint UPK during her college years, and had learned through that experience that there was also a lottery available for general free admission to the program.

Ms. Wexler: I was one of those people who was put in the lottery and luckily I got in early and Will was put in, he got in. So it's still free for me, but I didn't know for sure if he was going to get in or not....It is a lottery, but from what they told me if you didn't qualify for Head Start and then you're put into the lottery for UPK, if you're one of the first people in, you're more likely. (from interview)

Unfortunately, some of Ms. Wexler's friends had missed the lottery because they were unaware of the timeline and rules. She credited her UPK internship to her general understanding of how to apply to access the UPK system. While Ms. Wexler had also considered using a "partner" UPK site housed in a local childcare center because it offered daycare services outside of the free

UPK hours, she ultimately took the spot she won in the lottery. Her college internship had been in the very same classroom that her son now was attending, and being certain of the quality of the teacher was worth the additional hassles of arranging off-site extended childcare.⁷

Analysis across contexts

Clearly, the goal of each of these four lower-middle class participants seemed to be class reproduction. I would argue that a goal was not simply to mark time in the lower regions of the middle, but to accelerate trajectories in order to boost up the next generation above the lower-middle class margin. The RMC and the HMC mothers were similar in that neither seemed to understand that their own activation or complicity with class advantage could displace others more in need. Indeed, this was a clear example of Bourdieu's misrecognition.

A notable difference between the RMC and the HMC was the degree to which the RMC activated capital in ways that seemed antithetical to the mothers that they were becoming. The HMC, in the meantime, activated their capital for access, but never dipped down to access resources from non-UPK sources. While I am unclear of the exact reasons for the RMC's willingness to use resources traditionally designated for poor families, I have a couple of theories.

Firstly, it is possible that the mothers saw their new location as a space for acting instrumentally to a degree that they might not imagine otherwise. Unlike the HMC, the RMC would be leaving the area soon and did not need to worry about fracturing enduring habituated identities. Indeed, Ms. Collins was very careful to qualify that she was, in essence, pulling her family up by their bootstraps—a temporary boost made possible by luck and savvy. Ms. Rahma also misrecognized the needs of poor and working class families by focusing so strongly on the needs of her own language and religious groups. Neither mother had a need to fully assimilate and settle within the local culture.

And secondly, unlike the HMC sampled, the RMC likely possessed steep trajectories. Ms. Collins would likely soon be the wife of a practicing lawyer and Ms. Rahma would very likely be married to an engineering professor. Though they had descended into the lower-middle class, they were now quite likely headed skyward. Activating more “vulnerable” class identities as a form of capital was, perhaps, less threatening in light of these futures than it was for the locals whose opportunities were likely more limited because, overall, they possessed lower levels of education and stated that they were tied to the finite work opportunities in the region due to their desire to remain near extended family and (often) draw upon extended family for secondary child care and support.

While the lower-middle class group (both RMC and HMC) possessed knowledge, understandings, and skills that they used instrumentally, there was sometimes a “disconnect” between how the individuals looked and how they acted. For example, all of the lower-middle class mothers that I interviewed looked middle class given their casual brand name clothing or lovely native dress and current-yet-conservative hairstyles, make-up and accessories. Ms. Collins could even have passed as upper-middle class. None of the mothers sampled appeared to be financially strained, yet on paper they each claimed that they were currently located not far above the poverty line.

Mayville presented a difficult context that many international families were bound in, a context that assumed them to be providing intellectual capital. As Jolene Wormeli, a lower-middle class HMC who watched her young son as she ran a small shop, explained:

Being that I'm from here... they say that Westlake Elementary is the most diverse and you get the best education for a child. Because there's so much diversity there, and international

⁷ Ms. Wexler referred to UPK entrance policies that took place for admission to UPK for 2011-12. Community resource advocates have indicated that as UPK has expanded its opportunities toward full implementation, there may now be less competition for enrollment and also relatively less confusion about the entrance process. However, I have no specific data to support such local improvements at this time.

students from like... their parents will be at the med. school, and that's what they say. (from interview)

At the same time, international families were ostracized. A community resource advocate, Sandra Dawkins, explained the issue of some international families recently being pushed out of their desired UPK site:

There were a lot of unhappy parents at Westlake UPK this year... And it's not nice. But they were really mad that there were “foreign kids” in, and you know, “And *I'm* paying my taxes!” You have to say, “Westlake UPK, you have to do a better job!” Because these are kids that should be in UPK, and you're telling parents they got to go somewhere else. (from interview)

To be sure, “mixing” with international RMC had a dual function in this community—it was a preferred strategy when done “tectonically” (Butler & Robson, 2001, p. 2157), like two plates of earth overlapping and shifting without real cultural integration. The pay-off for HMC was cultural capital built up in the schools. The case of Ms. Rahma may represent not only the class-based processes of the RMC, but may also signify resistance to the lower-middle HMC and White middle and upper-middle classes who sought to “own” the space of UPK and early education and care networks.

The role of the body in the production of agency is difficult to ignore given this data. What, indeed, do we make of the finding that clothing, jewelry, makeup, vehicles driven, gestures, and expression potentially contributed to mothers’ quests for resources? It is difficult to imagine that Ms. Campbell, with her rich attire and manner, would be advised to maneuver her salary so she could enter the competitive Mayville University Childcare if she looked otherwise. But it is difficult to imagine that any of the US national mothers in this study could easily access supplies and food from the local pantry, as did Ms. Rahma. However, community resource specialists were sensitive to particular issues facing international student families, for instance PNC manager Mary Ellsworth noted the difficulties in borderline-income international families with children who were not US citizens in obtaining non-UPK support:

Our families that are [internationals] struggle more so than our local families, I would say. And that's because I know here we have a citizenship policy that they have to adhere to. So their child either has to be born in the United States, or be able to provide us with qualified alien status, which is very difficult for most of them. Mainly when they come over, their passports will be given a certain code on them, and most of the codes for those families that come over to pursue their education, they're signing off on a waiver that indicates while they're in the United States they're able to fully support their family without government assistance. Which means we can't offer them childcare services. (from interview)

As presented, the HMC were certainly able to compete for the best UPK and childcare by pulling strings and using personal resources. The RMC were equally successful, although they needed to repackage themselves to receive the resources they deserved. Table 3 summarizes the kinds of strategies used by the RMC versus the HMC.

Table 3. Lower-middle Class Access Strategies

RMC	HMC
-Accessing resources traditionally designated for working class and poor families	-Using local social capital links/networking
-Collectivist orientation within language and cultural group (for international families)	-“Tectonic” instrumentalism
-Looking the part	-Pushing out newcomers
	-Do-it-yourself pre-school
	-Looking the part

Conclusions: Potential and Possibilities for UPK

Let us return to the question that has guided this analysis. That is the question of how the lower-middle class “fits” within Mayville’s early education system. In short, we have now seen that the relationships were characterized by instrumental actions. The mothers tinkered within a local early education system constrained by market influence and competition, even with the welcomed addition of UPK. There seemed to be an understanding that in this community, you do what you need to do for your own child. The instrumental stance is, of course, not especially conducive to creating an engaged early education system.

Notwithstanding, UPK has almost infinite potential to become 0-5 education rooted in participatory democratic action. This would be a system that recognizes that all children have the right, from birth, to be part of a rich, relevant and responsive educational system. But, UPK in West Virginia is not now such an early education.

This analysis of lower-middle class agency showed that UPK in a challenging economic context can create the consumption of *opportune* early education (O’ Loughlin, 2009). Four-year-old pre-kindergarten has been deemed necessary for all, and so the old battle for kindergarten readiness (Graue, 1993) has been pushed down further. Whereas access to education was problematic for four-year-olds before UPK, the field of struggle has now shifted down to the three-year-olds. It follows that parents may persist in finding increasingly creative ways to secure agreeable attainments as individuals working the system.

Currently in Mayville, instead of recognizing 0-5 education as a right in a democratic nation, lower-middle class families are positioned to maneuver for what should be rightfully theirs (Harlin & Brown, 2006). Because UPK was generated in a system in which “universal” refers to a forced collaboration of organizational structures designed to preserve state education while responding to consumer demands and pressures for increased levels of readiness, it has never *really* reflected an underlying epistemology of 0-5 early education rights. To the contrary, it is a veneer-like policy that may position many parents as individuals searching within a system of individual coping and competition for quality and space. In a market system, even one that is partially regulated by the state, the complex burden on the individual to make the best choices may obscure the opportunity for local vision while feeding competition, classism, nativism, nationalism, and racism.

Conceptual implications

In this project, we can glimpse class with regard to the forces of neoliberal globalism at play in West Virginia. Specific elements of UPK policy geared towards forming productive, efficiency-minded individuals and communities were apparent in tectonic instrumentalism as practiced in Mayville. The data supported Bourdieu's (1987) dynamic notion of class, in which he has described the boundaries as "a flame whose edges are in constant movement, oscillating around a line or surface" (p. 13). In the examination of class processes, individuals activated power in ways that conformed to class-based goals. Mothers' "bootstrapping" was a significant process in this research. And mothers' attitudes towards the past and the future were especially relevant when they pondered and acted upon visions for their children. Their identity work presented in this paper seems to represent striving for the constitution of a more solid middle class habitus.

As social class fractions have been "pushed down" and labor has been reconfigured under neoliberal globalism, analyzing the data of the lower-middle class provided a fresh take on class-based processes. I suggest that while UPK itself can be a tool to mediate the realities of shifting class positions and mitigate the competition within the markets, under-the-surface evidence indicates that what appears to be a leveler may lose its potential if we are not aware of the class-based social and political processes at play in communities. I hope that similar readings of agency will be possible in other settings because of this work.

Specifically, this study has brought up the importance of thinking *generationally* about social class distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984). If I did not probe participants about their own families and educations as they grew up, I would not have been able to situate these families as I did. Who the participants' parents were was significant to the kinds of agency they could deploy. Time and global economic contexts also became important, as trajectories were interrupted, (re)interpreted, and (re)framed in order to match up identity work and instrumentality within policy contexts and locations. In reality, the mothers engaged in micro-practices not of simple social reproduction, but of *social reclamation*, by finding ways to remain middle class while being poor on paper.

My findings differed from those already presented on the nature of class fractions, adding complexity to the literature. Consider Ball and Vincent's (2007) examples of two types of middle class agencies that were constituted as more democratic when families held human services and arts occupations versus more instrumental when families were rooted in business and banking establishments. In the present research, this pattern did not hold. Ms. Rahma's husband was in engineering and she held a collectivist orientation, while Ms. Collins worked in the human services field and used her occupational connections as a personal stepping stone. Class fractions may, it seems, interrelate with cultural differences in mothering discourses, shaping unique orientations for navigating early education systems.

This research is also important to consider given the recent literature in sociology on parents' transmission of educational advantage based on cultural mobility, an argument critical of Bourdieu because it sees capital as transmitted all throughout the life course and not most strongly in childhood. Roksa and Potter (2011) have discussed, based on quantitative data analysis, how parents of various class trajectories internalize possibilities of success given shifting class positions. They see that cultural mobility is very important in downward mobility. Also, they say that while class of origin is also important, research is needed to determine precisely the processes involved in downward mobility. While I agree with these authors that understanding downward class movement involves examining the nuances of new class positions, my research indicates that the cultural mobility framework has relatively more limited application (at least in this case) than Roksa and Potter would, I believe, allow. When it comes to practices that appear to be downwardly mobile, I concur with these authors that we need to clarify the circumstances. I take a step in that direction by

showing how contexts are both similar and different for the RMC and the HMC, and exposing how the circumstances of downward mobility can be used advantageously in the project of (re)attaining the class status of origin.

Practical implications

In this research, families handed down educational advantage, as fits the classical Bourdieuan goal of middle class (re)production. Between markets and rights, the lower-middle class saw themselves as wisely and nobly “borrowing” resources that would shape family futures positively and contribute to children very ready for English-speaking kindergarten and the promise of positive educational outcomes. These were the goals that parents saw in a policy context rooted in investment and intervention.

The case presented illustrates the complexity inherent in thinking about “UPK plus” (see Kagan & Frielander, 2011) when we consider the roles that neoliberal globalism and the inherent power dynamics play in how policies are enacted. As we have seen, “quality” rules may sometimes obscure or simply not address broader issues of UPK equity within communities. To a large degree, inequities are shaped by the fragmented and neoliberal orientation of the current UPK system. More broadly, UPK is a system of privilege that encompasses agencies and practices that exist even outside the bounds of the discrete entities in which part-day UPK instruction takes place.

In this context, community child care agencies that used simple measures of income level or employment status to determine eligibility were used instrumentally. Those policies should be revised to better support and guide all families. Because the intense methods that the lower-middle class has been positioned to take up had the potential to negatively affect poor and working class children, there should be community-wide education regarding the current limited nature of early childhood resources and the very real consequences of lower-middle class instrumentality for those less well-positioned.

Inequalities are also shaped by the ways in which the neoliberal aims of UPK policy serve to construct the child as an individual subject of the state, the teacher as a professional arm needing management in her own right, and the parents as clients or co-managers in the project. Further, inequities are also structured in the limited ways in which the UPK policy positions diversity. Both roles and discourses serve to divert a critical focus on democratic engagement.

These issues should be addressed at multiple levels. These include: (a) policy, (b) community deliberation and action, (c) teacher education and professional development, (d) early childhood leadership, and (e) documentation of UPK practices.

First, regarding policies in states such as West Virginia, it is important to recognize the variation among local contexts. Recognizing differences among locations, groups can work towards re-imagining UPK policy discourses by a process that may include:

1. Examining privilege by class and race, as well as the roles of social context (broader policies and events) in shaping community ideas about the meanings and purposes of education for various groups. This is not a “culture of poverty” orientation (Bomer et al., 2008; Payne, 1996/2005) but rather a critical reading of privilege, assets, and equity.
2. Scrutinizing the ways in which children, teachers, parents, and communities are currently positioned within the UPK policy.
3. Studying the limitations of the current positioning and imagining alternative, social justice-oriented meanings and purposes of education.
4. Critically considering how and why a social justice-oriented UPK policy would be different than the policy as currently written.
5. Weighing up the elements of the policy that should be preserved.

Second, teachers, parents, community members, and leaders should create spaces in which honest discussions and debates about power in UPK could take place. There may be possibilities for sharing discourses cross-culturally and unpacking them in early childhood communities that include diverse families in the conversations.

A 0-5 education rights discourse would mean that we consider, locally, the power of dialogue and presence in constructing culturally relevant, responsive, and inclusive systems of early education and care for all children and families from birth. Researchers have most recently called for bi-directional involvement of traditionally marginalized families in dialogue with institutions (Graue & Hawkins, 2010; Graue & Sherfinski, 2011; Ochoa, Olivos, & Jimenez-Castellanos, 2011). This is a new kind of relationship that is rooted in cultural pluralism—meaning that universal rights are not enough, but that we must instead construct together in communities understandings that strive towards cultural groups' claims for recognition (Grant & Potter, 2011). This means going beyond the mostly unidirectional criteria for parent involvement inscribed within Policy 2525, and instead creating more local opportunities for dialogue and action across class, race, language, and national origin that expand to families with children 0-5. These are the kinds of relations that may transcend class and crumble the walls between home and early education. And these are also the spaces in which it could be possible for educators and families to have conversations about what “universal,” “inclusive,” and “equitable” access could truly mean within early education reform. For this to happen, we would need to shift the meaning of “universal” from collaborations across programs-in-place to more inclusive and social justice-oriented readings of practices. It is possible that these conversations could lead to thinking and acting that could disrupt the “tectonic” present by engaging families deeply across class, race, nationality, and geographic origin to act on issues that affect them all (e.g., Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Noddings, 1992; Swadener, 1995; Weller & Bruegel, 2009). These conversations should consider where power is concentrated, how it flows, and what implications these dynamics have for education (Hursh & Henderson, 2011).

Third, teacher education and professional development including action research in home-school relations for socio-economically diverse early education settings are recommended mechanisms for initiating change. Several scholars have offered frameworks and suggestions for doing this work (Allen, 2007; Earick, 2009; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Montero-Sieburth, 2011).

Fourth, while teachers and parents have key roles, it is important to recognize that community and agency leaders and teacher educators are often responsible for developing learning frameworks, policies, and policy evaluation for the state. Therefore, it is important that leaders work together with communities to examine the complexities of privilege, class, and race; question; and critically transform UPK.

And fifth, it is important that researchers and individuals begin to document the issues of power that arise within UPK. These narratives can become the basis for examining and addressing challenges specific to local communities.

In sum, a transformed field of 0-5 education rights would focus not on the production of “ready” children (ready for standardized tests, ready for kindergarten, ready for UPK, ready for college and career, etc.). Instead, it would translate the language of “pre- this and pre- that” to a new language that recognizes the possibilities for equitable relations inherent within a community marked by differences in class, race, and national origin.

A limitation (and strength) of this paper is that the community studied was a county containing a small university city. The state of West Virginia is generally even more rural, and rural counties have the highest rates of participation in UPK (Geraghty, Holihan, & Gyekye, 2012). While Mayville provided a rich view of class-based processes, in many parts of West Virginia, UPK would

look a bit different, and so state-wide policy generalizations should be made with caution and care. Given the examples of misrecognition revealed in this study, an imperative for future research is unpacking the experiences of poor and working class families in UPK. These findings would provide more information about what is happening currently, and where change may be most possible. We are in need of more US and international examples showing the broader educational possibilities inherent in 0-5 early education and care. Of these cases we should continue to ask in future scholarship: What can and should home-school (and home-center, and home-agency) relations in a universal (and genuinely inclusive) early education context look like, taking fluid cultural and socio-economic diversity into account? How can an agenda of early education rights and cultural pluralism become a dialogue (and action) that is taken seriously? How can these conversations occur in this locale given the historical resistance by the culture of power towards discussion across difference and acceptance of equity-based paradigms?

Lower-middle class mothers have agency, acting on what they believe is their children's best interest. They do typically figure out how to configure early education opportunities for their children, well before it is time for UPK.

While UPK in West Virginia was, at least in part, sold to stakeholders to protect the rural state's educational machine from "hollowing out" in a pressure-filled economy, it has been marketed to and supported by lower-middle class families seeking high-quality readiness opportunities. But, given the power of class and culture in local communities, it may now be time to think more deeply and act more broadly on how this rich investment in early education can expand to best meet the needs of all children and families.

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