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Schooling**

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**‘I don’t feel quite competent here’: Immigrant Mothers’ Involvement with
Schooling***

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Abstract: Through a series of ethnographic interviews this paper discusses the impaired competence of immigrant mothers and daughters in Vancouver suburbs as they negotiate with a school system that is imperfectly sensitive to cultural diversity. The research demonstrates the resourcefulness of mothers as they advance their daughters' education despite their own linguistic and economic limitations, and the seeming inflexibility of the school system.

Key words: education, immigrant mothers and daughters, Vancouver suburbs

Introduction

During an interview, we asked a teenage daughter how much time she generally spends studying. She told us that apart from watching TV for a few hours on the weekend and a couple of hours at night, she studies. As she said this, she glanced at her mother. The mother laughed and told us that her daughter looked at her because “I’m always the police.” The mother then asked us/her daughter/herself “Am I wrong? To say study, am I wrong?” The mother’s tone was playful, cajoling, tentative and pleading. She wanted assurances. Her daughter answered “No” and one of us responded “Oh, I think it’s very important.”

One could argue that the mother’s insistence that her daughter study hard simply reflects an immigrant’s desire to enhance her children’s education. Clearly the mother strongly supported her children’s schooling:

I’m very involved with my kids. I’m the one who goes to school... and I talk...I sit down and I talk to them for an hour or so...because I not working now. So I have time to do this, I enjoy it. Yes, I’m very involved and I believe that you have to be involved with your kids. Because I have spent quite a few years studying, lots of exams, I know what a student should be like. Sometimes I am strict and they don’t like it...I went to the school and I told the teacher that ‘she spends most of her time with you’...

But the mother’s story was not just about an immigrant investing in her children’s education and future. Her statement was mediated by gender and assumptions about mothering and how it intersects with other dynamics associated with immigration.

In this paper we focus on the differentiated positions of mothers in relation to experiences of schooling and immigration based on interviews conducted with mothers and teenage daughters who had recently immigrated to Canada and who lived in an outer suburb of Vancouver.¹ We

¹ The interviews, which occurred between March 1999 and January 2000, were conducted by either one of the two research assistants who were involved with the project, or by the authors working together. The 17 mothers and daughters, whom we interviewed, came from a number of source countries, including China, Finland, Hong Kong, Iran, Korea and Taiwan. To protect the identities of the women we interviewed, we have chosen not to name the suburb. We have also chosen pseudonyms for the women. In this paper, we highlight several cases of the mothers and daughters who participated in the study. We wish to emphasize that we are not claiming that these experiences are representative of immigrant mothers in the area, but that they provide an entry-point into processes that, in analysis, need to be contextually located—in power relations and local contingencies, for example.

look particularly at mothers and how they negotiated various social and material spaces in their everyday lives in relation to their daughters' schooling.

We aim to contribute to an understanding of the 'gendering' of immigration, the ways in which gender organizes immigration and settlement to create differentiated experiences for women and men, girls and boys. As research suggests, women have been the 'absent centres', ignored discursively in immigration policy, research, and action (Rose et al. 2002). Gender-based analysis is necessary for understanding how immigration takes place and what are its consequences (Status of Women Canada 1998). We also seek an analytical focus for 'migrating gender', that takes account of the process of migration in understanding the dynamics of gender. In other words we aim to bring into question both the processes of immigration and gender in relation to one another.

In focusing on mothering in the context of migration as a gendered activity, we explore how the mothers we interviewed were involved with schooling, how they enacted their involvement in various places—home, school, and elsewhere—how they were able to draw upon various resources (e.g. economic, cultural and social), how 'productive' these forms of 'capital' were in supporting their children's education, and what these activities meant to them as mothers and as citizens at the local scale.

We begin by critically examining the concept of parental involvement, and discussing the theoretical significance of mothering work and its relationship to various forms of 'capital.' We then turn to the mothers' accounts of their involvement with schooling. Our analysis of their involvement illustrates the importance of highlighting the contexts of their lives, in particular, for understanding the meaning of involvement to the mothers themselves as well as the 'productive' value of their involvement.

Contextualizing parental involvement

Research shows that parental involvement benefits children's schooling (e.g. Coleman 1988), and that meaningful teacher-family relations are all the more important when children and their families are newcomers to Canada (Bernhard et al. 1998). Yet, as Bernhard et al. argue, parental involvement does not offer a panacea, especially since the concept itself is problematic. It generally makes assumptions about 'parents' that are biased in favour of particular kinds of 'cultural capital' and models of participation that are associated with middle-class, dominant ethnocultural experiences. Discourse about 'parental involvement' can all too easily fall into

value-laden, culture-bound constructions of what are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parents in relation to schooling, of labeling, for example, parents who do not know what to do as unsupportive, passive, or unconcerned.

Many studies have highlighted the significance of parents’ economic, social, and cultural capital in supporting their children’s schooling.² Research shows, for example, that parents who have access to cultural capital (e.g. skills, knowledge) are able to extract more meaningful information and assistance for their children—they are more able to decode school practices and policies—than are parents who do not (Lareau 1989, Ball and Vincent 1998). Parents who have access to fewer resource, who, for example, are poor or racialized are less likely to be involved in school-based activities and to initiate contacts with educators. Further, they get less for their involvement (McNeal 1999). What they do counts for less. When parents do not meet the normative, biased ‘standards,’ schools can end up undermining and subordinating the parents’ practices (Bernhard et al. 1998).

In her study of the School Community Policy and practices of the Toronto Board of Education, Dehli (1987) examined how educational practices and discourses excluded ‘parents.’ She shows, for example, how educational discourses about ‘community’ or ‘parent’ participants in school committees clearly assumed that it was ‘articulate’ and often middle-class men and women who came to represent ‘what parents want.’ Further, she argues, ‘by defining the constituency as ‘parents’ and constituting involvement in a formal meeting and textual mode—the taken-for-granted mode of bureaucratic practice—the very openings for participation confirm subordination, silence and “apathy” (pp. 233-234). As Dei et al. (2000) argue, the idea of ‘parent’ cannot be detached from such dynamics as ‘race,’ class, gender, sexuality. To consider parental involvement, therefore, one cannot disregard power relations, community cultures and differing locations of parents. Parents and communities cannot be merely interjected into hegemonic practices of schooling.

Studies have also criticized the concept of ‘parental involvement’ for its gender-neutral assumptions—which ignore the fact that mothers are generally much more involved in children’s schooling than fathers. When studies acknowledge the significance of gender, they show that mothers support their children’s schooling in countless, routine and extraordinary ways (David et al. 1993). In contrast to the notion that mothering is a natural, easy process far removed from

² Discussions vary widely about the meaning of these concepts of ‘capital’ and their relative significance (see for example, Morrow 1999; McNeal 1999).

what counts as ‘real’ work, feminists have theorized mothering as labour, and as socially organized. As Griffith and Smith (1991: 81) note, schooling organizes mothering in specific ways: ‘the institutional order of the school requires particular activities to be accomplished within the home, a work organization usually managed and coordinated by mother.’ Not only does the regime of schooling organize mother’s activities, their unpaid labour, it also draws upon paradigmatic standards of mothering that match middle-class family resources. The practices of schooling ride roughshod over the practicalities and conditions of mothering. Even while mothers assume that they are responsible for preparing their children adequately for school, most mothers find it almost impossible to measure up to what schools require from their model of the ‘ideal’ mother.

Disparities in the ‘efficacy’ of middle-class and working-class mothers is highlighted in Reay’s (1998a) study of British mothers’ school involvement. Reay shows how central middle-class mothers are in making cultural capital work for their children. In drawing from Bourdieu’s (e.g. 1977) ideas about cultural capital and social class reproduction, she argues that, in their myriad activities in relation to schooling, mothers are the primary agents of social reproduction. Irrespective of social class, however, Reay (1998b) notes in passing, mothers who have recently immigrated to Britain are confronted with the strangeness of their children’s educational experiences which ‘undermines the efficacy of their cultural capital’ (p. 59); it is in the ‘wrong currency.’ Immigrant mothers often experience an erosion of competence and find themselves working extra hard to try to understand the unfamiliar curriculum and to find out what is happening in schools.

The above work signals the importance of understanding ‘parental involvement’ as contextualized: as a gendered activity that produces and reproduces social relations such as gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, and social class in schooling. In our exploratory work, we contribute to this research in several ways. We place the experiences of ‘immigrant women’ at the centre of our analysis, within specific contexts, and from their point of view. We focus on the process by which the mothers negotiate schooling through the interweaving dynamics, resources, and discursive practices of their different social locations (e.g. social class, ‘race,’ ethnicity).

In our analysis, we are exploring theoretical insights that analyze experiences, grounded in the everyday, both materially and discursively (e.g. McDowell 1999).³ We are interested in the

³ We explore these ideas further in Dyck and McLaren (2002).

implications for experience of the discursive inscription of bodies, how experience is mediated by discourses of, for example, gender, 'race,' class, and normative heterosexuality. For example, what are the 'subject positions' that 'immigrant mothers' can take up in schooling? Where can they go, speak, what resources can they draw on? Can they participate in school meetings, meet with principals or teachers, become a school board trustee, help with homework? Being 'marked' through social and material practices associated with dominant discourses has effects on how one is inserted in relation to practices of power, and has consequences for access to resources. Ng (1988), for example, has examined the social construction of the 'immigrant woman.' The performance and experience of a feminine identity, while fluid and negotiable, is closely related to the material spaces of everyday life and the 'audiences' to whom a gendered identity is presented (see, for example, Dwyer 1999).

These ideas suggest that accounts of experience need to be sensitive to the significance of context, local knowledge and the discursive construction of subjects. We are interested in how place might mediate the social relation of 'difference' –set against a normative 'Canadianness' and its implicit underpinning of, for example, 'whiteness' (Bannerji 2000)—and influence the meanings given to everyday reality as the women participating in our research negotiated the locality where they had come to live. Such an approach suggests the fluidity of resources and 'capital', their contingent character, their fragility, as dislocations shape their alignment, how bodily codings of middle-class taste, clothes and comportment, for example, run up against bodily codings of the non-white 'other.'

Brah's (1992) work is useful in thinking through the spatiality of processes of identity constitution. She argues that women are situated in gendered spaces of class, racism, ethnicity, sexuality, and age and move across shifting cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries. As they journey across the fluid geographic and psychic borders, they define and redefine identities. Her notion of 'diasporic spaces' (Brah 1996) provides a way of thinking about the ways that mothers negotiate their children's schooling where the mutual constitution of gendered bodies takes place in material spaces with multiple meanings—for example, the spaces of a Hong Kong Chinese diaspora are also spaces shared with people who are not part of that diaspora.

In particular, we are exploring the ways that mothers performed their involvement with schooling and reworked their gendered identities within specific contexts. While the mothers who participated in our study shared commonalities of experience regarding gender, locale, and having children attending secondary schools, they played out their identities within widely varying contexts and dynamics: their previous experiences in such places as Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan

and Iran; their sense of ethnicity, 'race,' facility with languages, their religious orientations, and so forth. The mothers also differed in their reasons for coming to Canada, sometimes reflected in their immigration classification as entrepreneurial or investment immigrants, as independents, as dependents, as refugees. How the mothers came to Canada also varied widely from those who came as spouses, as the main applicant, or came as the only parent to reside in Canada.⁴

As the mothers engaged with their children's schooling, they also reworked their identities as mothers (e.g. as mothers in relation to their daughters, to schools, to paid labour, in their sense of belonging as citizens, and as participants interacting locally). In this paper, we focus particularly on the uncertain spaces of their locality where the mothers negotiated their subject positions in supporting their children's schooling. We show how they negotiated potential boundary markers that distinguished 'normal mothers' from 'spoiled' or stigmatized identities, identities that were 'not quite competent' (associated with 'race,' ethnicity, social class, language, etc.), with differentiated positions in particular spaces (e.g. homes, neighbourhood, schools). While the mothers worked hard at performing what they perceived and experienced as codings of Canadian mothering in relation to schooling and some could draw on various forms of 'capital' (e.g. supporting homework; visiting schools), it was difficult for them to overcome marginalization from 'normative mothering' and 'normative schooling', and the resulting exclusion and social subordination. In speaking English (a form of cultural capital), for example, the mothers could find that not only was their speech 'inadequate,' but that it marked them as 'racially different.' As they negotiated their children's schooling some of their activities generated cultural and social capital (e.g. knowledge of schools), others did not. The mothers also reworked their subject positions as citizens. As they engaged with their children's schooling, they had differentiated opportunities of taking up positions of local participation (e.g. attending a school meeting). Despite their variable experiences, the mothers' involvement in their daughters' schooling, on the whole, suffered from cultural 'deficits' and its practical effects that marked them as 'other.'

⁴ See Boyd (1988) who discusses the implications of admission policy that labels women as spousal 'dependants' of men.

Negotiating children's schooling

As the mothers negotiated their locality, they reconstructed their daily place, which included deciphering what 'Canadian schools' meant, decoding 'normative schooling.' In doing so, they were often having to confront the 'extraordinary'—their 'difference' and those of their children—from the taken-for-granted routines of the schools. Their activities were, in effect, mediated by the social relation of 'difference.' Moreover, how the mothers negotiated the schools were contingent upon how they played out their widely, varied circumstances and resources. Some mothers lived in spacious homes, possessed two cars; others lived on social assistance, in cramped apartments, could not afford to take the bus. Some mothers were very active outside the home interweaving family, community and work-related experiences and others were depressingly tied to their homes. Their negotiations with schooling were uneven as they drew upon various resources and played out their discursive and spatial context.

We start with 'Yeu Lai' who, of all the mothers we interviewed, engaged fully with schooling in multiple sites and capacities. As she crossed many 'geographic and psychic' borders, she drew upon various resources, with varying degrees of success in generating useable 'capital.' The family's spacious home that they owned underscored the economic capital at her disposal as well as the possibility of supporting her children's schooling by providing adequate space and quiet for homework. The family's two cars allowed the mother to use the neighbourhood flexibly (e.g. day care, library). She could also afford to hire tutors for her children and provide extra-curricular lessons.

But most significantly, she traversed the school walls and participated in school space directly as a 'concerned parent', as a supporter of her child's education. Such a position was one of many possibilities. As Gill (cited in Dei et al. 2000) notes, parents and local communities may take up a wide variety of subject positions in their involvement with schools: as partners, as collaborators and problem-solvers, as audience, as school supporters, as advisors, co-decision-makers and as educational advocates. As Yeu Lai negotiated her children's schooling, she put into play various resources and a sense of 'competence' and entitlement to engage in schooling. She was able to assure in her own mind that she played a key role in obtaining the best schooling for her children that was available. Yet, her experiences in negotiating ESL and racialized incidents, at the boundaries of 'normative mothering' and 'normative schooling', signified her placement in dominant discourses of assumed 'whiteness' and of relevant knowledge and curricula (formal and informal) at the margins. She was able to enact practices of a 'concerned' and 'competent' parent but within a script that limited her subject position. She was, in effect, a

non-normative, racialized mother, who reacted to certain situations of devaluation in her daughter's schooling, but who did not claim a wider variety of subject positions potentially available to citizen participation in family-school relations. She was able to work at the 'edges' of hegemonic schooling, but not at its transformation.

Yeu Lai immigrated in the independent class from Taiwan several years ago with her husband, younger child and teenage daughter 'Lily.' Both Yeu Lai and her husband were well educated. Her husband, 'Pak Ming' who worked as a computer analyst, at a distant time-consuming job, usually returned home late in the evening. Yeu Lai was one of the few mothers in our study whose husband was employed in Canada. She was distressed, however, about not finding employment for herself and described the labour market as 'unbelievably bleak, even for Canadians.' On week days, Yeu Lai regularly took her son to day care, went for job training in computerized accounting, often met her daughter after school at the library where they both studied for awhile, and then at the end of the day picked her son up from daycare, and returned home with her children. Around 5:30, she said 'we will start family life.'

Lacking confidence in speaking English, Yeu Lai would have liked to have attended a school, like her daughter, whose English had improved so 'fantastically.' Despite doubts about her ability to speak English, Yeu Lai participated directly in her children's schooling, both in routine and extraordinary ways. For example, she made sure that she attended all parents' nights at the school and talked to all the teachers. When Lily was sick, Yeu Lai contacted all her teachers, had conversations with them, checked her homework status, and talked to her counselor.

Yeu Lai, however, went beyond negotiating the 'home-school' relation in taking various steps to ensure that her daughter's schoolwork was on track. Yeu Lai also negotiated at the boundaries of 'normative mothering' and 'normative schooling', examples of which were her interventions in challenging a vice-principal's interpretation of events that the family considered were racist, and a teacher's placement of her daughter in an ESL class. These examples highlight the family's 'marked difference', its impact upon mothering work, the availability of resources and strategies, and their 'productivity.'

Yeu Lai recounted Lily's first year at her current school, when she 'had a little trouble because some of her classmates would like to mock her...' In response, Yeu Lai and Pak Ming went to the school and spoke to the vice-principal. He belittled Lily's experience and he 'advised that that was very common and it was just a way of life here and we shouldn't have treated it so seriously.' Yeu Lai stood firm in her belief that it was wrong for her daughter to be treated this way by her classmates. She described how she 'told the vice-person that we didn't want to get the

special treatment, we just want to be treated like every other, and if we do not enjoy that kind of jokes, could we just say no.’ The boy who made the remarks later apologized. Yeu Lai also felt compelled to take on a teacher who maintained that her daughter should stay in the ESL class. ‘And I mean I made that move, and at beginning she was not convinced that I should move my daughter from ESL to normal class. And after that, she admitted that it was the right move for my daughter to move forward.’

In relation to schooling, Yeu Lai crossed many social ‘borders’ and used many spaces with relative ease. She was able to draw from her sense of competence and entitlement to perform effectively as she contested the meaning of ‘jokes’ that the vice-principal discursively managed as harmless, and as she contested the teacher’s version of linguistic capability in the context of ESL. As such, Yeu Lai engaged in ‘extraordinary’ mothering work in an educational setting that read ‘race relations’ and English literacy in particular, normative ways (from the point of view of ‘whiteness’, English-language dominance, and their interaction). Moreover, when she had concerns about her children’s schooling, she could turn to an active social network of Chinese friends who sent their children to ‘very good’ schools such as Montessori. As a result of sharing information with her friends about schooling, for example, the family had decided that Lily should attend a particular high school with a strong academic reputation. Despite her social network, however, Yeu Lai talked about feeling alone, not really belonging anywhere. She stated that she did not feel herself to be Canadian, explaining succinctly: because ‘I don’t feel quite competent here.’

Yeu Lai’s daily practices and heavy involvement in Lily’s education almost ‘go without saying.’ She did ‘what mothers do.’ Yet what she did was context-specific as she worked with particular resources, drawing upon her previous experiences and current location. She drew, for example, upon various forms of cultural capital—her own education (BA degree), employment history (a secretary for many years), ongoing employment training, lessons for her daughter, information about schooling, and her husband’s ability to tutor. Moreover, Yeu Lai generated social capital—which could have a multiplier effect on cultural capital—in drawing upon a network of Chinese friends, their experiences, knowledge and information. Finally, she had access to economic capital in being able to pay for tutors, lessons, swims, to provide comfortable home space and so on. As Yeu Lai actively constructed her life out of various resources, they were not simply constituted by her social class, but also her gender, racialization, ethnicization, linguistic abilities, and immigrant status, all of which troubled the normalized identity of

‘Canadianness.’ Despite all her activity, various resources, and practical help with her daughter’s schooling, Yeu Lai still saw herself as marginal and isolated.

Yeu Lai’s involvement with schooling illustrates the multi-dimensionality of such mothering work, its many facets, its hard work, its extra burdens, and its limits of participation. Some of the other mothers whom we talked to were also involved with their children’s schooling in multiple places that included the schools, but their use of that ‘public space’ was more limited.

‘Youngsook’ emigrated from Korea with her husband and teenage daughter, and entered Canada as an entrepreneur. She was the main applicant, in part because she had studied English in university. In Korea, she had managed a business with her husband and they had planned to set up a business in Canada, but due to unexpected economic difficulties, he had returned to Korea. Youngsook recently began to volunteer at a local shop to learn how to make Canadian food and run a ‘small’ business in Canada. After spending less than a year in Canada, her daughter had a better command of English than she did. Even so, her daughter didn’t have much opportunity to speak English in her school that had a large Korean student population. A tutor came to her home to teach her English, but she and her mother were concerned that she would not know English adequately enough for university, a prevalent anxiety of many of the mothers and daughters we talked to.

The family was comfortably well off, living in a large, well-appointed apartment, and owning two cars. The family also could afford to pay for private tutoring, and arrange for extra classes. When the family settled into their home located in the outer suburb of Vancouver, the mother made the long drive with her daughter to and from an ESL summer program in Vancouver. Yet, while the mother drew on various material resources and embodied middle-class cultural attributes (e.g. well-dressed and coiffed, good English-speaking abilities), she recounted in the interview how she had felt when she had attended a parent-teacher meeting at her daughter’s school. Her elegant composure broke down as she discussed with us her attendance at a school parent’s meeting: ‘(W)hen I attend some meeting, and when there is, when there are only Canadians, Canadian parents there, I feel very nervous. And when I speak English, always I feel nervous. They are looking at me, they are listening to me then.’ As she described how bewildered and ashamed she was of her ability to speak English, she brought her hands to her face, as if trying to cover or remove her linguistic ‘difference.’ Her experience of marginalization was clearly memorable and visceral. She knew English, but she could not ‘speak’ it with the other

parents and the teachers. The context of the school underscored the fragility of her 'cultural capital.'

Youngsook's interaction with her daughter's schooling primarily served to underline her sense of being an outsider. She negotiated school space and attempted to engage with it as a 'concerned parent' in a public forum, at a school meeting. But she did not feel competent in articulating her views; she did not feel effective, or entitled to participate. Further, Youngsook's middle-class resources did not prevent her and her daughter from experiencing what they thought were racist responses to their presence in their apartment building. Someone had scratched their car, which the apartment manager said was probably due to the fact that someone knew they were Asian. Moreover, a neighbour in the building had complained several times about their 'noise.' As a result, we held the interview in a whisper, the daughter could not invite schoolmates home, and the mother and daughter felt anxious about living where they did. Youngsook had a few Korean friends but has had little opportunity to meet people born in Canada. Recently, she began to go to a Korean church to make more friends and to find out about immigrant life, but this experience felt strange since she wasn't religious and didn't go to church in Korea. She still felt lonely and isolated and that 'every day was worse than the one before.'

Youngsook's experiences with schooling suggest that her participation in school space was mediated by the social relation of 'difference' set against a normative 'Canadianness' and its implicit underpinning of, for example, English speech and 'whiteness.' While her 'home' was materially comfortable, she and her daughter did not feel secure. Nonetheless, like Yeu Lai, Youngsook did participate within the school walls, moved easily about her neighbourhood through use of a car, could use the home space for quiet study, and hire tutors, if need be.

Other mothers, who were less fortunate in having access to economic resources, had home space that was cramped and poorly furnished; they did not possess a car, and could not afford to hire tutors. Their 'ability' to support their children's schooling was hampered materially, even if the mother were highly educated. For example, a well-educated mother, 'Homa', whom we introduced at the beginning of the paper, lived with her family in a small, cramped, rented apartment. They did not possess a car, and had little extra cash at their disposal. Neither she nor her husband were employed. They had come to Canada as 'independent' immigrants; the mother was more highly educated than the father. Desperately unhappy about not being able to find a scientific job, the mother's life was focussed on her children's education. She had few contacts outside the home and seldom left her barely furnished apartment.

When Homa went to her daughter's previous school (in another Canadian city) to say she was having trouble in a particular subject, the advisor said 'you have to hire a tutor.' The school, unwilling or unable to meet the needs of the daughter, assumed that the parents could hire a tutor, which, as the mother indicated, was not possible: 'So how can I hire a tutor when I don't have a job?' The mother was happier with her daughter's current school: 'the advisor was very good, and she gave me some books and said "go and read with her." So we came home spend the Christmas break, so I studied with her, now she's like other students. Yeah.' The daughter added: 'I got from 50 percent to 98 percent.' According to the mother, the two schools differed in their responses to her daughter's educational needs; she was clearly happy about the second school's advice. But in both cases, the schools assumed that the parents could 'take up the slack,' that they were readily available to tutor or could hire a tutor, that they could trouble-shoot when problems happened at school. When her son had difficulties in the previous school—he was intimidated by other students—because the school was unable to resolve the problem adequately, the children came home for lunch. The mother had to be there, which limited her possibilities of finding a paid job. Also when her daughter experienced racism, the principal said he could not do anything about it, which meant it was the family's job.

Fortunately, since Homa did not have a paid job, she was able to be at home to provide her children with lunch, as a form of protection from racist incidents at school.⁵ She also gained some satisfaction—due to her own educational resources and cultural capital—in effectively working with her children and improving their position in school, even if it meant sometimes that she was the 'police' in the family. Having been highly educated and being fluent in English, the mother was able to help her children with their homework, to supplement the school curriculum. She was also able to contact school staff, converse with them in English and respond to their suggestions.

Other mothers were less able to engage with schools in the sense of contacting teachers, attending parent-teacher meetings, and so forth. In a family from Iran, because the father was more able to speak English, he rather than the mother talked to teachers and attended teacher-parent nights. Another family who had come to Canada as refugees was barely surviving on social assistance, the father had been ill, and both the mother and father were suffering from depression and were largely confined to their home. The mother, 'Haideh', was fearful that

⁵ See Collins (1994) who argues that mothers' 'protective work' against racism becomes central when a dominant group racializes their children.

welfare services would take away financial support, and was anxious about unexpected welfare visits to her 'home.' She despaired of finding a job, even though all she wanted was to clean shops, where she wouldn't need to know a lot of English.

Because she lacked money, Haideh was unable to develop social networks or 'social capital.' For example, she could not invite people to her home from her faith community because she could not afford to provide them tea. Further, she could rarely afford to take public transit, which inhibited her ability to attend her church, to gain access to other community resources, and to find a job. Since she was unable to engage in reciprocal exchanges, her chances of developing 'strong ties' were diminished: social networks that could provide her with support and knowledge in relation to schools. With her lack of various forms of capital, she also had difficulties in developing weak ties.⁶

This mother was unable to help her daughter directly in her schooling but was proud of her daughter's ability to speak English and hoped that she would attend university. The mother, however, had few resources that she could draw upon (e.g. exchange of information in a social network, or tutoring opportunities) to enhance her children's schooling.

The mothers who were less educated and had fewer cultural, social or economic resources than others still supported their daughters' schooling in daily routines: helping them to prepare for the school day, being concerned about how well they were doing in school, how well they were learning English, and how well prepared they were for university. The mothers often presented themselves as isolated and incompetent, but they revealed that, as mothers, they were actively involved in their children's education. They strongly favoured their daughters' schooling, unfamiliar as it was, and supported it in countless ways. They had great hopes for their daughters' schooling, ability to speak English, and possibilities of attending university. They were proud of their daughters' achievements though they also worried about the obstacles they faced and the various identities available to them. The mothers' sense of themselves as marginal contrasted, sometimes acutely, to the sense of the potential for their daughters to belong and fully participate in their new country.

⁶ For discussions of immigrant women's 'weak' (e.g. community and public services, casual contacts and acquaintances) and 'strong' ties (e.g. family and friends), see Rose et al. (1998) and Jones-Correa (1998).

Conclusion

The mothers who participated in our study were an important force, both inside the home and beyond, in engaging with their daughters' schooling. The mothers negotiated the unfamiliar world of the many social and material spaces they traversed in their daily lives in relation to their daughter's schooling with resources or forms of capital that were sometimes useable in the process and sometimes not. The 'currency' of their various resources and 'capital' shifted in value, depending on the context, and its discursively constructed subject positions. Despite the wide diversity of experiences and resources, the mothers shared commonalities of being on the margins. As 'immigrant mothers' they negotiated entrenched practices of various forms of capital, and the inversion of their own capital—the devaluation of what they possessed, what they knew, their embodiment—even while the mothers did reveal their 'agency', their attempts to transform their situation, to engage as citizens in relation to schooling in their everyday lives. The mothers were positioned as 'not quite competent' (associated with 'race,' ethnicity, social class, language, etc.), with differentiated locations in particular places (e.g. homes, neighbourhoods, schools). Further, how the mothers got around socially and spatially was interwoven with the locality of their suburb (e.g. its demographics, locations of immigrants, its public transit system).

The mothers who were highly educated and spoke English quite well were generally actively involved with their children's schools (e.g. talking to teachers, the principal, going to meetings, etc.). Some also had spatial comforts and spatial mobility. They had comfortable home spaces for homework; they used many resources of the neighbourhood (e.g. libraries, community centres), they sometimes had well-developed social networks based on ethnic and/or religious ties, that could enhance their knowledge and practices, as well as those of their children. They were not completely isolated. But they struggled with their English fluency, getting to know 'Canadian' culture, with their interactions with 'Canadians.' Other mothers had much greater difficulty interacting with schools. They had far fewer material, cultural and social resources that could be converted into 'capital' in Canada. They were much more isolated, and under threat, spatially and socially.

While the mothers reworked the constructions of ESL programs, English-speaking adequacy, racialization, and cultural differences, they had few resources available in a discursive environment that denied its own normative framework, that belittled or denied, for example, the existence of racist incidents or pervasive, routine forms of taken-for-granted whiteness. The mothers 'involvement' rested primarily on their own resources, those of their families, and possibly those of their social networks—whatever they were, however they 'matched' with

schooling, and however schools devalued and subordinated them through taken-for-granted practices. The mothers had to decode and negotiate the standardized mothering in the dominant culture that assumes certain kinds of cultural capital, linguistic abilities, whiteness, and middle-class material conditions in the richly-coded, cultural space of schooling.

The mothers produced and reproduced relations, in varied ways; within a context of few state/social supports, in which the dominant Canadian discourse of immigration normally writes mothers out of the script as social agents who as citizens have entitlements and are contributors to society. The mothers did not benefit, for example, from such community initiatives as those in Toronto described by Bernhard et al. (1998) in which similarly-located parents participated in groups to address school issues. In their study of a parents' group, the researchers found that the members were able to negotiate their children's schooling without devaluing their own cultural capital.

The mothers we talked to used a variety of strategies (e.g. at home and at school) to transform their children's experiences. The mothers' zeal and resourcefulness often enabled their children to flourish in school. The mothers who had more cultural and material resources than other mothers were more able to engage with schools, but even so were not able to take up the position of cultural 'competence', let alone full participation as citizens.

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