

An exploration of the ‘pushy parent’ label in educational discourse

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Abstract

This article explores the ideological function of the derogatory and polemical label of ‘pushy parent’, which, since the 1980s, has been used considerably in journalistic, popular, but also political and academic discourses in the UK and the USA. ‘Pushy parent’ is not a descriptive term, but a conceptually vague and culturally-specific label implying the existence of antagonistic agents intent on optimising their children’s educational attainment. The function of this label is to mask structural inequalities in educational opportunities and outcomes by making those inequalities imputable to individual practices. As such, the ‘pushy parent’ can be interpreted as what Roland Barthes calls an ‘inoculation’: a concept which allows for temporary discharges of indignation at a phenomenon evidencing social inequality, but which avoids a more systemic critique.

The article first explores the distinction ‘pushy parenting’ sets up between ‘fake’ and ‘real’ intelligence, and ‘deserved’ and ‘undeserved’ educational achievement. However, as detailed in the second part of the essay, it is very difficult to draw clear conceptual boundaries between the behaviours and practices covered by ‘pushy parenting’, and those covered by the ‘ideal’ parenting practices of neoliberal educational policy. To conclude, the function of the ‘pushy parent’ label as inoculation is explored, as well as its implications for the cultural politics of education.

Keywords: parenting, meritocracy, giftedness, education, equality, intelligence

A child may present as gifted, i.e. as a very high achiever, though she is not “naturally” this way at all. She is no more than a product of pushy parenting, having been trained to perform in certain ways. (Cigman 2006, 198)

A significant fraction of the academic literature on the psychology, sociology and philosophy of child giftedness explicitly foregrounds a qualitative difference between high-achieving children of parents labelled as ‘pushy’, and those who have only received what I shall for now call a ‘reasonable’ amount of parental attention. The recurrence of the threatening ‘pushy parent’ and its condemnation by scholars in that field is intriguing; whoever they may be, ‘pushy parents’ and their high-achieving children are regularly presented as the arch-enemies of gifted programming. Researchers generally oppose what could be called ‘real’ and ‘fake’ giftedness, or ‘pseudo-giftedness’ – a term coined by Ruth Strang for children ‘coached and pushed by overambitious parents’ (1960, 27). In this literature, young people ‘thrust forward by pushy parents, performing dinner party turns or showing off encyclopaedic knowledge’ (Winstanley 2004, 8) are identified, for instance, as ‘trophy-children’, the type who ‘achieves highly as a result of a pressured environment, but who seems “not bright” or only “moderately bright”, and strained or alienated by the experience’ (Cigman 2006, 201). Associations like MENSA fight the notion that gifted children are subjected to intensive parenting (Allcock 2007); articles in specialised magazines, and academic work on giftedness, regularly ‘dispel the myth of the pushy parent’, to quote Bicknell (2006; see also Radford 1990, 43; Freeman 2010). In short, the spectre of ‘pushy parenting’ hovers above the literature on giftedness, though the term is rarely, if ever, defined.

The ‘pushy parent’ label has theoretical importance beyond gifted education, though that field illustrates particularly clearly why this term should be the object of cultural critique. As I argue here, the conceptually vague, culturally specific, derogatory expression ‘pushy parent’ has, since the 1980s, fulfilled a specific function in discourses about educational achievement and equality. Perennially undefined, loaded with negative intentions, the figure evoked by the expression ‘pushy parent’ is vague enough to be impossible to capture in theory, yet clear enough to elicit immediate understanding. Though parents deserving to be typed as ‘pushy’ may exist (if only by being labelled so), the contours of the accusation are blurry. ‘Pushy parent’ is less a descriptive label than an invocation, summoning an antagonistic figure whose function is to conceal structural inequalities in educational opportunities by making those inequalities imputable only or mostly to individual practices. The ‘pushy parent’ is, in short, a discursive lightning-rod, absorbing complaints about individual strategies contributing to class inequality, but leaving unscathed the edifice of contemporary educational policy which has allowed such behaviours to blossom.

I begin with an analysis of the ‘pushy parent’ label, showing how it creates and legitimises a qualitative distinction between ‘fake’ and ‘real’ educational achievement. I then explore the notion that, while ‘pushy parenting’ is a negative term, the behaviours it covers are virtually indistinguishable from a parenting style *desired* by contemporary educational policy in the UK and the USAⁱ. I conclude by suggesting that the figure and the complaints it elicits function as what Roland Barthes calls an ‘inoculation’ within the myth of educational equality.

The ‘pushy parent’ label

Despite its wide use in popular, journalistic and, to a lesser extent, academic discourses since the 1980s, the ‘pushy parent’ is undertheorised. That is, the *label* and the figure it conjures up in the imagination are undertheorised. Intensive parenting practices have been much studied in education; but the rise of a negative expression, indeed an insult, to refer to such practices has not attracted scholarly attention.ⁱⁱ Among the many ‘metaphors we live by’ in educational discourse (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), ‘pushy parent’ is one of the most evocative; it so successfully *goes without saying* that it seemingly requires no definition. The self-evident nature of the expression renders it somewhat invisible as a cultural invention; it appears transparently referential, designating parenting practices understood by most; and most people can think of parents who they believe fit the appellation.

Yet the expression ‘pushy parent’ is not securely connected to what it seems to refer to. Broadly speaking, the term evokes extreme parental pressure on children to excel in various domains; but it arrived late as a reference to this vaguely defined parental ‘style’ and, as we shall see, only covers it imperfectly. ‘Pushy parent’ is a recent coinage, while intensive parenting practices are, of course, nothing new: Leopold Mozart’s and James Mill’s parenting styles were extremely strenuous (see Radford 1990, 10-11; Howe 1990, 234; Elias 1993). One could point to the relatively recent emergence of concerns about the welfare of children under educational pressure (Stearns 2003, 90), but it would be wrong to assume that intensive parenting was always considered positively; Nannerl Mozart, in 1794, had to defend her father from accusations of authoritarianism (Starobinski 2006, 347). What is new, therefore, is the wide use of a label, across media, popular and academic discourses, for parenting practices judged to be excessive. ‘Pushy parent’ is also an Anglophone coinage; there is no equivalent in French, Spanish or German, for instance, where clumsy phrases have to be used. The time- and culturally-specific uses of the label raise questions as to what reality it pretends to capture.

In academic discourse about giftedness, which, as noted earlier, is peppered with references to ‘pushy parents’, the label generally refers to behaviours geared at increasing children’s achievements in *academic* domains; this is the aspect of the concept which is of concern here, with the understanding that an analysis of parental ‘pushiness’ in sports, acting, etc. may yield different conclusions. ‘Pushy parenting’ is often described as detrimental to children, adverse to the cultivation of ‘true’ intelligence, and potentially betraying personal problems. Prominent researcher in gifted education Joan Freeman suggests that ‘pushy parents’ may have psychological issues:

Normal kind parents quite rightly want to do the best for their children and to develop their potential into an achievement. But some press too hard and are called ‘pushy parents’, others ‘helicopter parents’ because they can’t resist hovering over all aspects of their offspring’s lives. There may be deep underlying psychological reasons... Parents may also use their children as surrogates for their own ambitions, getting them to chase the success they never enjoyed. (2010, 60)

Note the normative language (‘normal’, ‘quite rightly’), and the implication that labelling parents as ‘pushy’ or ‘helicopter’ is self-evident; they are called so ‘because’ of an intrinsic flaw, evidenced by lack of self-control (‘can’t resist’) and unspecified ‘deep underlying psychological reasons’, with the added suggestion that they are themselves ‘failures’.ⁱⁱⁱ

The referential validity of those statements is questionable. The phrases used open a wide gap between what psychological researchers on parenting such as, famously, Baumrind (1971, 1978), would label ‘authoritarian parenting’, and the efflorescence of undefined pathological attributes around ‘pushy parenting’. ‘Authoritarian parenting’ is on a spectrum of

practices correlated with specific characteristics in children. If it carries negative connotations, it is because those characteristics have been evaluated, relative to those observed in children subjected to other parenting styles, as less beneficial according to specific parameters. 'Pushy parenting' cannot partake of a similar rhetoric; whether in conversation, academic texts or the media, it belongs to a polemical type of discourse. Although what it evokes may recoup aspects of 'authoritarian parenting', its referential value is weaker. It exists mostly as a derogatory term authorising essentialistic judgements; here, it does not require evidence to sustain serious claims as to the mental health of the 'perpetrators'.

Besides concerns for child welfare, the main objection to 'pushy parents' in gifted education is, as detailed earlier, that their children 'present as' but are not 'really' bright. The difficulty to label high-achieving children of 'pushy parents' as 'bright' or 'gifted' is aided by metaphorical incompatibility between the terms. The rhetorical force and ideological undertones of the terms 'gifted', 'talented', 'bright', have been amply debated; they synthesise visions of objective intelligence, which teachers and parents must nurture, but which pre-exists them (e.g. Jonathan 1988; Winstanley 2004, 9; Phillipson 2007, 3-11). There is extensive research on the enduring power of what Mugny and Carugati (1989) call 'theories of giftedness', namely narratives of giftedness as clear and natural property (Howe 1990a & 1990b; Margolin 1993; Borland 1997). Parental input is there only secondary to the child's gift; the parent *responds to* the child.

The web of evocations afforded by the terms 'gifted', 'talented', 'bright', and by theories of giftedness jars with the metaphor of a 'pushy' parent, thrusting children forwards with little consideration for their pre-existing interests. The adjective 'pushy' and its ancestor 'pushing' evoked, before their association with 'parent', a ruthless assertiveness often connected to social ambition. These connotations, and the *distaste* they elicit, are an important

aspect of the ‘pushy parent’ metaphor and of its condemnation, explainable partly in Bourdieusian terms. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), scholarly achievement is permeated by the ideology of the gift – the notion that the few students who pass the competitive entrance examinations into the French *grandes écoles* owe their success to natural intelligence, when their impressive effortlessness actually betrays the embodied dispositions of their class. In Bourdieu’s view, the upper-middle classes are not the only beneficiaries of the system that preserves their social privilege; the children of the petty bourgeoisie are needed for bureaucratic positions and ‘maintaining order’ (1977, 202), in a relation of ‘subordination and complementarity’ (id) with the high bourgeoisie. Such candidates dwell outside of the ideology of giftedness: they are characterised by hard work, discipline, a ‘docile doggedness’ (id.) disdained by the high bourgeoisie. From this perspective, parents ‘pushing’ their child to achieve – even when the child *does* achieve – are within the cultural framework of the dominant class encoded as *distasteful* in the Bourdieusian sense: lacking the ‘aesthetic of freedom’ which characterises higher thinking and aesthetic appreciation (Bourdieu 1984). ‘Pushiness’, as evidence of petty-bourgeois ‘doggedness’ rather than of a natural gift of intelligence, separates Cigman’s “‘naturally’ gifted’ child from the one that is ‘no more than the child of pushy parents’ (2006, 198).

‘Docile doggedness’ could arguably have more positive associations in a vocally meritocratic Anglo-Saxon context where hard work is a central component of ‘merit’ (Goldthorpe, 2003). But the ‘pushy parent’ narrative does not even necessarily imply that the child is working hard; rather, the parent is doing (strategic) ‘work’ on his behalf. We return here to the concerns of gifted programming; as research indicates, many middle-class parents take it for granted that their children are gifted and want them in higher sets (Lucey & Reay 2002, 333). The ‘pushy parent’ narrative implies that they do so partly through coercing teachers, and the term often encompasses this idea: Archer thus quotes a mother as saying, ‘I

do believe it's been my pushiness that got [my daughter] moved from the set' (460). There is lucid awareness here of the anti-meritocratic nature of her act; she is solely responsible for the child's place. The 'pushed child' thus has dubious merit; she need be *neither* bright *nor* hard-working; the parent is here the active agent.

The 'pushy parent' label thus conjures up a figure in whose hands a child's 'intelligence' or 'high achievement' become rewritten as memorisation, the laborious learning of methods, and parental scheming. Such narratives install the 'pushy parent' *within the ideology of giftedness* as an antithetical figure, imposing its 'pseudo-gifted' children to the educational system.

A floating label

But within gifted education research, 'pushy parenting' is undefined, and the frontier remains uncomfortably blurry between it and more positive characterisations of 'involved', 'devoted' or 'responsive' parenting. Michael J. Howe notes: 'it is not easy to draw a line between conscientious parents, who are understandably keen to encourage their child to do well, and parents whose determination that their children will be successful makes a reasonably carefree childhood impossible' (1990a, 26). There have been claims that parents who pressure their gifted children may cause them to become too perfectionist (Miller, Lambert & Neumeister 2012), or subject to mental health problems (Morawska & Sanders 2009). However, there is also a correlation between children identified as gifted and active parental engagement and intellectual stimulation of the child (Olszewski, Kulieke & Buescher 1987), extra-curricular activities (Spera 2005) and high income and education (Benbow & Stanley 1980, Jolly & Matthews 2012). While parents of gifted children are rarely defined as

‘pushy’ by researchers, the terms used may be ambivalently close: Mudrak notes that parental visions of their children’s giftedness ‘provided the background for practices that were sometimes controlling or relatively extreme’ (2011, 208). An early study by Sankar-DeLeeuw highlights a discordance between parental and teacher views of gifted preschoolers (1999), with teachers noting ‘traits that were not reported by parents, including... a tendency of being pushed by parents’ (174).

This question is underresearched (Jolly & Matthews 2012), but it is difficult to draw from academic literature the distinction that Cigman or Freeman sees between the ‘trophy child’ and the ‘really bright child’, between the ‘pushy parent’ and the ‘devoted parent’. If such distinction exists in practice, it *goes without saying*, dwelling in the subjective appreciation of teachers and parents, unmeasurable by researchers. As Cigman argues, it is partly the teacher’s role to reveal ‘parentally-contrived giftedness’, by asking, for instance: ‘Is this child seriously over-achieving? Does her success in exams mask a manipulative adult who is pushing the child inappropriately?’ (202)

Such distinctions in the field are eminently valid and routinely made by educational professionals. But consequently, ‘pushy parent’ can only remain a fluid label when applied to real people, and parents may be rewritten in and out of ‘pushiness’ by scholars and lay people with motivations that will necessarily be open to contesting. Freeman praises a gifted musical child whose ‘devoted mother took him to live [abroad], leaving her husband and six other children, staying nearly two years’ (87). It is unclear why this mother is ‘devoted’ rather than ‘pushy’; such positive feelings may be due to the ultimate success of her endeavours, which *a posteriori* legitimised parental effort not as ‘pushiness’ but as ‘responsiveness’. Thus parents who might have been labelled ‘pushy’ if their children had failed to fulfil expectations are rewritten as ‘encouraging’ or ‘devoted’ if the narrative suggests that the child was always *deserving* of parental investment; ‘pulling’ the parents, rather than being ‘pushed’ by them.

And if one tries to define ‘pushy parenting’, the expression dissolves into assertions of ‘things pushy parents do’ anecdotally. The media contribute to the anecdotes, writing about ‘pushy parents’ who incite their children to cheat (Sheriff 2012), poison the atmosphere of schools (Boffey 2014), or are psychologically abusive (Sheriff 2013).

Again, it is incontestable that, *in reality*, extreme parental behaviours can be harmful to children and to schools, and that some children are accepted onto gifted programs by teachers under parental pressure. But such parental *involvement* and its effects are observable facts, while parental ‘pushiness’ is an element of storytelling.^{iv} *Saying* that there exist ‘pushy parents’ is enough to *make* them exist; and that existence confirms, without needing to define it, the qualitative difference between real and fake intelligence, real and fake success, real and fake hard work; in short, deserved and undeserved educational attainment.

‘Pushy parenting’ and ‘ideal parenting’: two sides of the same coin

This distinction, of course, does not dwell outside of ideology and, like the term ‘pushy parent’, it cannot be disconnected from its sociocultural context and class implications.^v Born in the 1960s, rising steeply after the 1980s, the expression coincides with the casting of the influential, choosing, intensively involved parent by neoliberal educational policy as the ‘ideal consumer’ of the educational system (Bowe, Gewirtz & Ball 1994, 68). I focus here on contemporary educational markets in the UK and the USA, which, with notable differences (Ball 1993, 15), presuppose the possibility for all parents to act as rational choosers and to influence school practices: ‘it is anticipated that parents should play a role not only in the promotion of their own children’s achievements but more broadly in school improvement and the democratisation of school governance’ (Desforges & Abouchaar 2003, 7). This

‘anticipation’ has been vocally advocated for the past thirty years, accompanied by the emergence of vast academic literature and large-scale projects on parental involvement,^{vi} and forms part of a general politics of accountability of the various actors of education. In the USA, Department of Education publications and policies have emphasised parental responsibility since the Reagan era (though embryonic aspects can be traced back to the 1960s) and culminated with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (for a historical overview, see Hiatt 1994; Watson *et al* 2012). In the UK, the Parents Charter (1991, 1994), then the White Paper on Excellence in Schools (1997) highlighted rights and responsibilities of parents regarding their children’s education (Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball 1994; Vincent, 1996, 53); governments have since never ceased to encourage involvement, and indeed a sense of ownership over the schools system: the title of the 2009 UK Department for Children, Schools and Families publication ‘Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future’ could not be clearer as to who children and schools belong. Often, in such texts, the importance of parents is rhetorically inflated by mentioning them before teachers: ‘education begins in the home and flourishes when it draws upon the combined efforts of children, parents, teachers, and administrators’, says then-President Ronald Reagan in a foreword to a 1986 governmental publication (iii); or even before children (for instance throughout DfCSF 2007, 2008). Rhetorically and politically, the parent is at the forefront of contemporary neoliberal policy.

The two most often spelled-out benefits of parental involvement are individual achievement and the general raising of standards; in short, higher academic success for all. But under this regime of ‘parentocracy’, to use the term famously coined by Philip Brown (1990), the suggestion that all parents have equal time and ability to be involved with schools, as expected by such documents, is highly classed; and the hope that benefits might be equally reaped by all is unconvincing. The processes through which middle-class parents intentionally and unintentionally maximise social advantage, and the extent to which the school system

itself is configured to optimise the educational success of middle-class children, are well-known (e.g. Lareau 2003; Power, Edwards, Whitty & Wigfall 2003; Ball 2003; Brantlinger 2003; Vincent & Ball 2007; Crozier *et al* 2008; James *et al* 2010). Policy-makers, of course, are aware of this; but the conclusion generally drawn is that non-middle-class families should be helped to adopt such behaviours. The NCLB was thus accompanied by the creation of local Parental Information and Resource Centers, helping parents of low-income and minority backgrounds to engage with schools and act as educational partners. Such programs do not remove the possibility for wealthy parents to stay ahead by strategising property-buying according to catchment areas, or hiring private tutors; furthermore, they do not modify the central value of such policies, namely the foregrounding of the ‘ideal parent’ as decider and consumer. Political orientations may vary, but that value does not.

The problem here is that the behaviour of this ‘ideal parent’ is difficult to distinguish from the practices loosely typified by the term ‘pushy parent’. Or, rather, the term ‘pushy parent’ often acts as rhetorical concealment at moments of academic, popular and media discourses when uncomfortable issues with ‘ideal’ parenting surface – when the contemporary ideology of parental choice risks being revealed as classed and contributing to educational inequality. In sociological studies, the term is mentioned by parent participants with ambiguity, betraying both anguish at being labelled such, and recognition of the *efficiency* of intensive parenting in the current system. Working-class parents are said to shirk the label particularly strongly, but are also aware that “‘pushy” parents and those who [are] always involved in these high profile activities [tend] to benefit from them’ (Crozier 2000, 43). Many middle-class parents reject the label (Archer 2010, 462), yet engage in practices that are uncomfortably close to what it seems to cover. This is a recurrent paradox in sociological studies: ‘Mothers did not directly distinguish themselves from pushy stereotypes of the rich, yet their avoidance of the upper-class category for themselves perhaps indicates they

eschewed those unflattering images', says Ellen Brantlinger (2003, 37). Vincent and Ball note the reluctance of mothers of preschoolers to "'pushing" the child too much'; yet, in effect, 'the mothers are at pains to maximise their child's chances of success in formal education' (2001, 639). 'Pushy parenting' seems to cover middle-class practices of academic pressure that are shameful, yet also efficient. But this asks uncomfortable questions: *why* would it 'work'? How is it possible that children of 'pushy parents' be *mistaken as bright* by (presumably meritocracy-minded) educationalists? Why is it seemingly so easy, as a parent, to 'cheat' the system?

Because the derogatory term 'pushy parent' represents the Mr Hyde to that Dr Jekyll of education in the age of parental choice: the 'ideal' involved parent, carefully picking schools and extra-curricular activities and engaging with teachers. That parent, who strategises their child's educational progress, provides support and resorts to pressure to ensure educational success, is not so much a 'cheating' parent as a parent who has internalised the rules of the game; who is within the current educational system like a 'fish in water', to quote Bourdieu's famous analogy. Pressuring their children to achieve, negotiating with the school to put them into gifted programmes, parents whom Vincent and Martin label 'high interveners' (2002, 115) do not *bend* so much as *comply with* the rules of the education system.

Of course, there is a vertiginous gap between 'high interveners' and 'pushy parents', between 'involvement' and 'pushiness'. Yet the fact that this gap may be principally rhetorical is occasionally evidenced when it is breached unambiguously. David Laws, then Schools Minister in the UK, thus declared that 'pushy parents' were the ones actually 'doing their job' in society, inciting them to be unrepentant about their 'pushy' tendencies: 'To do all you can to help your children to succeed in life is exactly what we want everybody to be doing' (quoted in Adams 2014). This quotation clarifies the connection between 'pushiness' and 'playing the educational game according to its rules'.

The 'pushy parent' figure as inoculation

'Pushy parent' is a contradictory label. Principally understood as an insult, it evokes a selfish adult narcissistically invested in their child. Yet it is difficult to distinguish the behaviours it seemingly covers from those of the 'ideal' *parentocrat* of neoliberal education. Why do we have, then, this derogatory label? If what 'pushy parenting' covers is at least partly aligned with dominant educational policy, it could be a positive identification. Used as it is now, it constantly threatens to denounce the ideology of parental choice for what it is – classed and detrimental to equality. Why does 'pushy parent', therefore, exist at all? It is particularly paradoxical as the middle classes are the main social category targeted by the label; and yet they are the ones benefitting from the current system, and who should have no interest in their children being seen as 'not really bright'. Does the label, then, go against the interests of the middle classes?

It does not, because the existence of this label, and its uses in discourse as developed above, function not as a progressive denunciation of social inequality, but rather as what Roland Barthes calls, in his dissection of myth (1957, 225), 'inoculation' (*la vaccine*). Myths are, according to Barthes, cultural narratives which generally *go without saying* and tend to maintain bourgeois order in society. Inoculation defines the process whereby 'the accidental evil of a class institution is confessed, the better to mask the originary evil' in order to avoid 'generalised subversion' (225). By showing itself to be self-critical in places, the bourgeoisie 'immunises the collective imaginary' (id.) against a larger critique. Thus it allows for temporary indignation at phenomena which evidence social inequality, but implicitly minimises those phenomena by highlighting their apparently exceptional character – severing

them from a wider system of domination, and making them sound anomalous rather than as products of that system.

The 'pushy parent' figure is an excellent example of inoculation within what could be called the egalitarian myth (see Boudon 1994), or more explicitly the 'myth of education-based meritocracy' (Goldthorpe, 2003). That is, the belief that, within contemporary neoliberal education, everyone stands an equal chance of academic success, with a mixture of talent and work as sole fuel of achievement; and that there is an increasingly weakened connection between class of origin and class of destination.

Within this myth, the 'pushy parent' narrative can be summed up as such:

There exists a type of parent who is unreasonably invested in their child's educational attainment, pushes the child to achieve, strategises the child's schooling to hoard educational advantage and reproduce privilege. Because of such parents, who, frequently, are middle-class, children who are not really bright succeed, to the detriment of other children who may be of superior intelligence.

This narrative (regardless of whether it refers to anyone or is purely abstract) is an inoculation insofar as it admits and denounces the existence of isolated disruptive agents who cause educational inequality, *instead of* admitting and denouncing the structural reasons why this inequality exists. This denunciation has three central characteristics. Each yields a consequence which maintains the idea that the current educational system is egalitarian and/or meritocratic:

1) The 'pushy parent's' children are not really bright.

→ Brightness is a thing that exists: *preservation of the ideology of giftedness.*

2) The children of 'pushy parents' who succeed unfairly take the space of children who 'should' be succeeding; the 'pushy parent' cheats the system.

→ There is a system which, when not cheated, is equal and meritocratic: *preservation of the myth of equality*.

3) The 'pushy parent' is a scheming, obstinate and amoral (middle-class) parent, detrimental to everyone.

→ 'Pushy parenting' is an individual practice: *Concealment of classed practices in education*.

The claim that the 'pushy parent' is middle-class is not necessarily present, but the power of the inoculation is all the stronger if it is: the discourse is thus given a progressive edge by condemning the attitudes of *some members* of the social categories in power. Establishing the 'pushy parent' as archetypal enemy of the education system has a precisely contrary effect to what a truly progressive discourse should entail. The 'pushy parent' narrative permits a critique of individual actions, rather than a critique of the reasons why such individual actions are encouraged by the current system.

There are two different explanations of how the inoculation might take hold. On the one hand, the concept may operate without the conscious intentions of any agent; the bothersome implications of parental choice policies, blurrily identified by numerous agents from all social categories, and fuelled by observations of actual behaviours, may have favoured the emergence of complaints about 'pushy parents'; and this figure, expelled from 'normal' practice, became integrated within hegemonic discourse. On the other hand, there may be both unconscious *and* conscious causes to the success of the 'pushy parent' narrative. In the past twenty years, awareness has grown of the degree to which middle-class parents *know* that they are engaging in 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2003) from which their children benefit

only because others do not (Kohn, 1998), and are conscious or semi-conscious of the necessity to conceal this fact through storytelling (Brantlinger 2003). It is not possible to establish, in a theoretical study like this, whether the ‘pushy parent’ inoculation persists fully unbeknownst to, or with the complicity of, the agents who benefit from it.

To conclude, the ‘pushy parent’ absorbs anger against unequal educational opportunities and outcomes, but protects the central values of neoliberal education and their corresponding social hierarchy. It provides a buffer between legitimate anguish concerning educational equality, and genuine transformative action upon the system. The label conjures up forceful agents engaged in maximising educational advantage for their children, but numbs critical judgement towards an education system which would be so easily ‘fooled’ by this behaviour. It is understood that the ‘pushy parent’ is middle-class, yet in common discourse the consequences of this realisation are not to state that the middle classes disproportionately and structurally benefit from the education system; rather, this realisation constitutes a gentle inoculation against this critique. Wrapped around the ‘pushy parent’ narrative, the ideology of giftedness strengthens the faith in meritocracy, with the hopeful note that in ‘truly’ intelligent children lies the ‘real’ power of the education system; and that it is only a matter of time, or teachers’ shrewdness, until the fake are distinguished from the genuine.

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ⁱ I am in this article using examples and texts mostly drawn from the United Kingdom and the United States. The ideas developed here might have applicability in other Anglophone Western countries which, like the US and the UK, have a broadly neoliberal approach to education foregrounding parental choice and involvement.

ⁱⁱ Unlike ‘helicopter parenting’, which has been the object of a recent book chapter by Jennie Bristow (2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ This extract makes lexical allusions to early psychoanalytical writing on parenting. By referring to the child as a distorted mirror of parental ambitions, Freeman echoes the Freudian view, developed in ‘On Narcissism’ (1914), that the child represents for the parent an external object of narcissistic investment. However, for Freud this phenomenon is not restricted to ‘some’ parents, but common to all ‘affectionate’ ones. As such, ‘using children as surrogates for one’s own ambitions’, as Freeman puts it, is only ‘normal’. The pathologisation of ‘pushy parenting’ is not justified by the Freudian tradition.

^{iv} This is picked up by Furedi, who, in his study of ‘paranoid parenting’ (2001), briefly mentions (without defining it) the ‘archetypal pushy parent’.

^v There are undeniably also gender and ethnic variables at work in the concept, which could be studied with reference to research on mothers’ involvement (Reay 1998), or on ethnic minorities’ likelihood to engage in intensive parenting practices (Chao 1994; Leung, Lau and Lam 1998). Amy Chua’s controversial book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) and the debate surrounding it provide an example of intersection between dynamics of gender, ethnicity, and class in the engagement in, and denunciation of, ‘pushy parenting’. It is worth noting that Chua, despite her unashamed reclaiming of intensive parenting, did not use the term ‘pushy’, coining a different term with less obviously negative connotations.

^{vi} See in particular the Harvard Family Research Project, founded in 1983.