Widening Participation Through Alternative Public Schools: A Canadian Example

by Nicole Etherington
The University of Western Ontario

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Abstract

In recent years, the development of the global knowledge economy has rendered post-secondary education necessary for employment and earning potential, with manual labour no longer as prevalent or secure as it once was. Yet, access to post-secondary institutions continues to be stratified based on social class. To support working-class students in obtaining a post-secondary education, some countries have opened alternative public schools geared toward this purpose. This article draws on a Canadian case study of a school for working-class students whose parents do not have any post-secondary education to investigate the discourse surrounding these institutions and their goals. Using a content analysis of newspaper articles and policy documents, I find that while alternative schools certainly have the potential to increase educational attainment amongst working-class students, they may pose significant challenges to working-class identities.

Keywords: *Alternative Schools, Working Class, Sociology of Education, Widening Participation, Academic Achievement, Post-Secondary, Cultural Capital, Symbolic Violence, Content Analysis*

Introduction

1.1 In recent years, many developed countries around the world have seen significant expansion in higher education. Canada, for example, has experienced an influx of students entering university, based on an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Working-class students, however, are still not participating to the level of their middle-class peers (Lehmann 2008). In fact, it is well documented in the literature that working-class students face considerable barriers in accessing and completing post-secondary education (e.g. Bourdieu et al. 1990; Berger et al. 2007; Brooks 2008). For those outside the middle-class, the education system can be difficult to navigate, particularly where parents are not university-educated (e.g. Devine 2004). Indeed, parental educational attainment is the most important predictor of post-secondary success (Lambert et al. 2004). Consequently, working-class students are at a higher risk of dropping out from high school and not attending university or college. This can have tremendous implications in terms of earning potential and risk of unemployment given the demands of today's job market.

1.2 The issue of increasing access to post-secondary education for under-represented groups has certainly been one of great contemporary debate. UK policy and scholarship have continually addressed underrepresentation in education through Widening Participation strategies (Fryer 1997; Kennedy 1997; NCIHE 1997). In the United States, a popular response has been the opening of charter^[1] schools targeted at specific groups, such as students from low-income families, in order to better prepare them for post-secondary institutions. In September, 2011, Canada opened the DSBN Academy with the hope of increasing post-secondary education in a region with one of the lowest university participation rates in the country (Hammer 2011a).

1.3 While not explicitly a charter school, the DSBN Academy targets only students whose parent(s) or guardian(s) are not post-secondary graduates. Pedagogical strategies may therefore be tailored to their needs, with the potential to increase educational attainment. Yet, the school has also been criticized for increasing segregation in the public school system and for possibly increasing the stigma associated

with being a 'disadvantaged' student (Hammer 2011b). In addition, the school may not be able to address the financial barriers working-class students face in attending a post-secondary school, as well as the unfamiliarity a university environment can often present (e.g. Reay 2009). Finally, it is unclear as to how the school plans to achieve its goals to seemingly lift students out of their 'disadvantaged' positions and facilitate post-secondary success.

1.4 Given the novelty of this type of school in Canada, there is currently no research that helps us empirically assess the arguments of supporters and critics. The goal of this study is to contribute to filling this important research gap. Specifically, the present study aims to determine what distinguishes the DSBN Academy from mainstream public schools and if its pedagogy has the potential to 'empower students' to attend and graduate from a post-secondary institution, as expressed in the school's mandate (DSBN Academy 2012a). In other words, what does the Academy do to facilitate this process? Furthermore, how are its goals portrayed to the public? These questions were answered through completion of a case study involving a content analysis of newspaper articles and policy documents. Essentially, it appears that instead of changing the current practices of the school system to fit working-class students, the DSBN Academy is changing students to fit the system through encouraging middle-class values and goals.

1.5 Findings from this study make both policy and sociological contributions, as they raise fundamental questions about social inequality, namely, how sociologists can work toward ameliorating inequality without perpetuating the symbolic violence we continually fight against. The research increases our understanding of alternative schooling, and can inform policy debates around such schools. Ultimately, the research provides significant empirical data on a novel educational approach that could have far-reaching implications for working-class students.

The knowledge economy and educational investment

2.1 In today's knowledge-based economy, education is integral to one's life chances. Individuals must maintain and often increase the market value of their knowledge, skills, and credentials if they wish to obtain jobs that offer a good standard of living (Brown et al. 2011). Many economies in the Western world and beyond have moved from 'muscle power to brainpower', rendering education a necessary investment (Brown et al. 2011:16). Since the relationship between capital and labour has shifted from primarily mechanical to knowledge work, the acquisition of knowledge has been deemed the key to a competitive economy. Accordingly, individuals have been tasked with greater responsibility for their own livelihoods, including educational attainment. Under this viewpoint, any individual can be successful and even achieve social mobility if they simply invest in themselves in terms of human capital.

2.2 The notion of 'investment', however, is inherently attached to middle-class values and beliefs, as an orientation toward working-class values and beliefs is not 'relevant to education' (Lucey & Reay 2002: 327). Still, when individuals get ahead in today's society, it tends to be viewed as the result of their ability to make the 'appropriate' choices, especially with regard to post-secondary education. Those individuals who do not succeed are deemed to have failed to strategically make use of the opportunities presented under modernity (see Giddens 1993; Beck 2004). Essentially, Western society has become characterized by individualization, fuelled by a knowledge economy that demands individuals take advantage of educational expansion to secure a prosperous future. As Taylor (2012: 2) points out, 'university education is still marketed as the correct choice to make for those who want to better themselves'. In the sections to follow, however, it will become evident that not all individuals are equally capable of making these strategic choices based on discrepancies in capital. Later, it will be revealed that the goal of alternative public schools is to facilitate students' abilities to make a middle-class investment in education.

Habitus, capital, and symbolic violence

3.1 The rhetoric of educational investment and strategic risk-taking within today's knowledge economy overlooks the fact that individuals cannot so easily step away from their own habitus. Bourdieu (1979: vii) describes the habitus as 'a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices'. This means that an individual's social location provides him or her with certain dispositions toward the world. Individuals internalize the culture of the group to which they belong, and this acts as a basis for all subsequent behavior in addition to shaping one's identity. The forms of capital, or resources, to which individuals have access as they interact in the social world are also shaped by their habitus.

3.2 The impact of habitus is particularly evident in the intergenerational transmission of social class through divergent parenting styles. Lareau (2003) finds social class differences in parenting approaches, with middle-class parents focusing on 'cultivating' their children through the development of skills and qualifications necessary for adulthood success. For example, these parents tend to encourage children to reason and use language effectively and enroll them in a variety of organized activities (Lareau 2003). Conversely, working-class parents focus on providing for children's basic needs and offering support. They speak less to their children, use shorter sentences, and have a restricted vocabulary (Durham et al. 2007). Extracurricular involvement is not deemed an essential parenting responsibility due to time and resource constraints. These general parenting differences are supported by UK research (e.g. Gillies 2005; Vincent and Ball 2007) as well as more recent quantitative studies in the United States (e.g. Bodovski and Farkas 2008; Redford et al. 2009; Bodovski 2010). Findings indicate that parental SES is positively and strongly associated with concerted cultivation. In turn, concerted cultivation is associated with children's higher cognitive skills and effective learning-related behaviours, as well as a higher GPA.

3.3 The skills and experiences middle-class children come to possess facilitate their interactions within institutions (Gillies 2005). Interactions are further enhanced by society's tendency to view middle-class

skills and experiences more positively (Lareau 2003). This is particularly evident in the school system, where working-class culture remains largely absent (e.g. Evans 2009). With working-class values nowhere to be found, it follows that working-class students experience an ever-present sense of institutional constraint (Lareau 2003; Evans 2009). This, of course, is exacerbated by their financial situations. Limited access to resources ultimately inhibits the development of socially valued skills, and working-class families are often held responsible by policy-makers and schools alike (e.g. Gillies 2008).

3.4 The premium placed on middle class values is evident in teachers' tendency to advocate concerted cultivation, regardless of school location (Lareau 2003). Gillies (2008) also reveals that working-class mothers and fathers in the UK tend to be viewed as 'bad parents' who perpetuate a cycle of deprivation, when in reality, childrearing is grounded in both social and material conditions. These findings can be interpreted as evidence that the school system rewards a middle-class habitus. As previously established, middle-class children are more likely to possess attributes associated with educational success than their working-class counterparts. The development of such traits as confidence, charisma, and eloquent speech is made possible through a middle-class habitus (e.g. Halasz and Kaufman 2008). Furthermore, these traits translate into academic rewards, as an individual's mannerisms, appearance, language skills, and so forth can have important implications for interactions with teachers in the classroom (e.g. Toshalis 2010).

3.5 The assessment criteria used by teachers are also based on 'middle-class cultural values' and the 'backgrounds, values, standards, linguistic codes, and worldviews' of middle-class children are often more alike to those of teachers (Schramm-Pate et al. 2006: 49). The school system can exclude working-class parents in this way, as they also do not possess the attributes that teachers expect, making it difficult to participate in their children's education (e.g. Lareau 2003; Gillies 2005). Meanwhile, middle-class parents are 'familiar and comfortable with the educational values' of their children's schools, enabling them to be heavily involved in furthering their children's education (Gillies 2005: 844). This contributes to the fact that working-class children are less likely to get ahead in the manner of their more advantaged peers (e.g. Redford et al. 2009), as middle-class culture is embedded in the school system.

3.6 According to Bourdieu et al. (1990), the school system is structured to favour those with the appropriate cultural capital, as defined by the dominant group in society. The cultural capital of the middle class is viewed as the only natural and proper form of capital, and it is generally taken for granted that all students have equal access to it. Educational institutions are therefore characterized by symbolic violence as the social practices and values of the working class are implicitly deemed inferior through activities undertaken as part of the official school curriculum. A form of violence is committed against these values and social practices, albeit, not physical in nature. Instead, messages are conveyed through the pedagogical action of the school itself. This is evident, for example, in the evaluation of essays, exams, and presentations in which 'the world of the classroom, where "polished" language is used, contrasts with the world of the family' (Bourdieu et al. 1965: 9). That is, the literary practices expected by schools contradict those of working-class homes.

3.7 When success in the education system requires certain forms of capital that largely differ according to social class, students are differentiated in a manner that is 'arbitrary, relative, and value-laden' (Grenfell 2009: 443). Pedagogic action is therefore 'symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (Bourdieu et al. 1990: 5). The dominant culture is indeed arbitrary and permeates school curriculums, yet society does not recognize it as such. Rather, it is viewed as something that is there by right (Bourdieu et al. 1990). The academic performance of students is then rewarded by virtue of their social background, which is mistaken for merit (Grenfell 2009; Halasz and Kaufman 2008). In this way, class-based inequality is disguised as legitimate, and working-class children come to see the success of their middle-class peers as a result of 'natural' ability or hard work. In reality, however, these discrepancies in achievement are largely the result of differential access to resources rather than individual deficiencies.

Widening participation

4.1 To ameliorate this differential access to resources, and in a sense, lift students out of their habitus, widening participation strategies have emerged. In England, there has been significant governmental commitment to widening access to and participation in post-secondary education as an attempt to address the under-representation of certain social groups in this domain, including low-income students (Burke 2012). Essentially, widening participation involves strategies of fair access to higher education for all individuals that appear to have the potential to benefit from it (HEFCE 2012). The focus of these strategies is to ensure that an individual's social background does not prevent them from accessing and succeeding within post-secondary institutions. Overall, widening participation has been posited as necessary for economic competitiveness and social justice. Thus, it bears a strong relationship to the overall discourse of the knowledge economy and a neoliberal agenda that promises individual prosperity through education (Hughes et al. 2006; Brown et al. 2011). Such a discourse has, in many ways, become quite hegemonic in the present time.

4.2 This hegemonic discourse has been found to influence teaching practices, and consequently, pose challenges to the identities of disadvantaged students (Burke 2002). These discourses can reposition students as inferior (Burke 2002), as the 'widening participation agenda' incorporates aspects of 'raising aspirations', and thus implies working-class individuals are lacking in this regard (Hughes et al. 2006: 645). That is, asking disadvantaged individuals to 'aim higher' ignores institutional inequalities that shape attitudes and ambitions (Taylor 2012). Nevertheless, engaging disadvantaged students in higher education remains an issue of great concern in many communities, as social and economic development is viewed as dependent upon educational participation and achievement. In the perceived absence of other alternatives, widening participation strategies continue to be adopted.

4.3 In Canada, attempts to increase the representation of low-income students have largely centred on need-based aid in the form of loans, grants, and loan remission payments. Still, the amount of aid offered decreases if a student works a significant number of hours per week, lives at home, or attends a relatively low-cost program. More importantly, 'only a minority of students from low-income families actually participate in student aid programs' (Berger et al. 2007: 159). In fact, less than half of all students from families with an annual income of \$50 000 or less receive student financial aid. Both the federal and provincial governments also offer non-need based scholarships, but these are disproportionately awarded to students from high-income families (Berger et al. 2007). Consequently, these financial aid programs have been ineffective in increasing access to post-secondary education.

4.4 Beyond financial aid programs, the Toronto-based Pathways to Education Program (2012) offers after-school tutoring, mentoring, and financial support to students attending schools in low-income areas. The goal of this program is to assist low-income and other underrepresented groups in completing high school and attending post-secondary education. This program, however, is quite costly, requiring an operating budget of up to \$3 million per year (ETFO 2011a). The program is funded by both private and governmental sources. For some communities, such as the Niagara region, relying on such funding is both undesirable and unattainable (see ETFO 2011a). In the following section, I will therefore examine the conditions under which the DSBN Academy has opened, largely as a Canadian adaptation of widening participation and alternative to previously existing Canadian programs.

The DSBN Academy

5.1 The DSBN Academy has emerged as an alternative to a mainstream school system in which students from poor and working-class backgrounds are largely disenfranchised. The school's mandate centres on 'supporting and empowering students to attend and graduate not just from high school, but also from college or university' (DSBN 2012a). This goal is especially relevant to the Niagara region where the school is located as the number of students who apply for post-secondary education is 10 to 15 percent below the provincial average (ETFO 2011b). In addition, the District School Board of Niagara (DSBN) also reports a dropout rate of 10.6 percent (Boesveld 2011). This compares to Ontario's rate of 7.8 percent (HRSDC 2012). With Canada redefined as a knowledge economy, the traditional blue-collar industries that once dominated Niagara are now in serious decline. As a result, school boards and local politicians felt it necessary to examine ways of increasing participation in post-secondary education. Former career pathways in manufacturing no longer exist, giving the region one of the highest unemployment rates in Canada at approximately 10 percent (Hammer 2011b). With 5400 students in Niagara living in poverty, and only one in five people over the age of twenty-four possessing a university education (Hammer 2011b), a substantial economic and social issue has emerged.

5.2 Public discussion surrounding the creation of the DSBN Academy began in December, 2010, with the Academy being granted official approval on 24 January, 2011 (Gray 2011a). The school is located at the former Empire School in Welland, Ontario, and opened in September, 2011 with 124 students. There are two grade six classes and three grade seven classes, and the board plans to add an additional grade to the school every year. To attract students, 3000 application forms were distributed to elementary schools throughout the region and information sessions were held. Students are bused in from around the region, with some from as far as 50 kilometres away (Hammer 2011c).^[2]

5.3 In terms of curriculum, the Academy's 'strategies for success' include: a single track academic program, mandatory parental involvement, after school programs, transportation, a school-wide focus on post-secondary preparation, mentoring opportunities, and a breakfast and lunch program (DSBN Academy 2012a). The school day begins at 8:25 a.m. with a mandatory breakfast club (Gray 2011a). There are 35 minute fitness and nutrition breaks at 10:25 a.m. and 12:45 p.m., and mandatory extracurricular activities take place between 3:15 and 4:15 p.m. Students head home at 4:20 p.m. Parents are required to volunteer 15 hours per year at the school, with an additional 10 hours per child enrolled.

5.4 The strategies proposed by the Academy target several key issues that affect students' abilities to learn, and that may be of particular importance for working-class students. Family involvement, for example, is associated with higher academic achievement, increased attendance, fewer disciplinary problems, and an increased likelihood of graduation (Epstein 2001; Desforges & Abouchaar 2003; Cox 2005; Jeynes 2007; Grothaus & Cole 2010). This is significant given that working-class parents tend to be less involved in their children's academic lives than middle-class parents (e.g. Lareau 2003; Gillies 2005; Bodovski and Farkas 2008). In addition, the DSBN Academy offers students access and stability in terms of the school they attend, which is important given that the educational achievement of children who change schools frequently is negatively affected (Schafft 2006; United States Government Accountability Office 2010). Families with limited financial resources tend to move often, but once students enrol at the Academy, they can continue their attendance regardless of where they live or may move to in the Niagara region as they are bussed in. If they were to attend a mainstream school, they would have to change schools each time their family moved out of the catchment area. Thus, the DSBN Academy can serve as a steady source of support for disadvantaged students.

5.5 While the DSBN Academy offers several potential benefits, many in the Niagara Region have remained skeptical concerning its purpose or value. The school has been criticized for increasing segregation and stigma in the public school system, diverting resources from mainstream public schools, and implying that mainstream schools are performing inadequately (e.g. Beech 2011; Blizzard 2011). Based on these public concerns, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation District 22 Niagara withdrew its support in the development of the DSBN Academy (Greco 2011a). General concerns can also be raised regarding financial barriers to university, feelings of not fitting in, and leaving university earlier than those students whose parents did go to university (Lehmann 2008; Reay et al. 2010).

5.6 Perhaps the most pertinent issue is that the Academy might encourage students to go to university who might be much happier pursuing other goals, such as an apprenticeship or trade (e.g. Lehmann 2005). In this way, the school may be perpetuating a form of symbolic violence of its own in that it is adhering to a middle-class standard of education that emphasizes post-secondary attainment and the values associated with this type of 'success'. It is therefore the goal of the present study to assess the language and strategies used by the DSBN Academy to provide an empirical basis for the policy debates surrounding this issue. It is quite possible that the DSBN Academy can increase the academic success of its students, similar to other alternative schools. Yet, the way in which success is conceptualized within this form of alternative schooling may actually be part of the problem insofar as it brings working-class students into a culture that is deemed superior to their own.

Methodology

6.1 This study is based on a review of 22 policy documents and 42 newspaper articles concerning the DSBN Academy over a two-year period, from the first public mention of the school in December 2010 to the most recent DSBN Academy publications in 2012. Every school board document available to the public via the DSBN, DSBN Academy, and Elementary Teacher's Federation Ontario (ETFO) websites was used in the analysis. It should be noted that available resources were limited, given that the school was only in its first year of operation at the time of the analysis. Again, every publicly available document was accessed online and retained for analysis.

6.2 News articles used were obtained from five local newspapers and four national newspapers. Both newspaper articles and policy documents were incorporated into the analysis in order to provide multiple perspectives on the development of the Academy and its goals. Together, these documents provide extensive information on the discourse surrounding the Academy. Meeting minutes from the school board as well as newspaper reports also feature direct quotes from key administrators involved in the creation of the school, as well as from the Academy's teachers and principal. Once again, such perspectives are invaluable. A content analysis was undertaken as the goal of this case study was to get a sense of conflicting public and media perceptions of the DSBN Academy, as well as the general discourse concerning the school in terms of how it has been both portrayed and received. Data analysis followed a coding process which involves moving from initial coding of data into relatively open categories to establishing more specific coding hierarchies and developing more selective empirical and theoretical themes (see Strauss and Corbin 1990). In other words, all documents obtained were analysed qualitatively for underlying themes. A quantitative component was also included in terms of identifying the number of times particular themes emerged.

6.3 A note should also be made here on the term working-class student, which is used throughout the analysis. Parental educational attainment has been shown to be the most important predictor of university participation (e.g. Knighton and Mirza 2002). Furthermore, many studies have used it as a measure of social class, given its association with occupational status and income (e.g. Andres and Looker 2001; Krahn 2004; Lehmann 2007). It is a particularly relevant indicator when examining social reproduction within the school system as the transmission of capital from parent to child is of utmost importance in this process (Andres and Looker 2001; Krahn 2004; Bodovski 2010). Accordingly, parental education and social class are associated, albeit not perfectly. Nevertheless, demographic information gathered in this study confirms that the majority of students in attendance at the school are from a working-class background, which has significant implications for their educational experience.

Results

Policy documents

7.1 In order to assess how the DSBN Academy portrays itself and its goals, 22 policy documents at both the school and board level were examined. From this analysis, it appears that the ideal of university education as preferable is largely embedded in the culture of the DSBN Academy, while working-class destinations are ignored. Table 1 demonstrates the clear expectation that every student at the Academy will go on to 'higher learning', or university. That is, the number of times 'university' or 'post-secondary' education is given as an aim of the Academy is more than twice the number of times 'college' is mentioned^[3]. Most striking is that trade, apprenticeship and/or workplace entry is not once mentioned as an expectation. Consequently, considerations of manual or blue-collar work appear to be largely absent.

Table 1: Policy Document Portrayals of DSBN Academy Expectations

	University	Post-secondary	College	Trade/ Apprenticeship	Workplace
Appearances	43	41	33	0	0
TOTAL	84	33	0	0	

7.2 The middle-class expectations of the Academy are made quite explicit by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2011a), which reports 'the purpose of the DSBN Academy is to provide a culture of success that surrounds students and reinforces in them that they will attend and graduate from post-secondary school'. This type of environment is deemed essential because '...education is key for children

to live more enriched and fulfilling lives' (DSBN Academy 2011). It is not acknowledged anywhere that an individual can lead a prosperous life by some other pathway that does not necessarily involve the completion of post-secondary education. Working-class life appears to be dismissed from the possibilities of enrichment and fulfillment. This is certainly reflective of the current widening participation debates that present university as the proper choice to lead to a better life (see Taylor 2012).

7.3 Where working-class culture is referenced, it tends to be portrayed as inadequate to that of the middle-class in terms of preferred lifestyle and preparation for 'success.' As Table 2 indicates, there are two primary and complementary messages that can be found in DSBN Academy documents. The first message is that a working-class background is something to be overcome or a deficiency, and it appears 35 times. The second message concerns pathways to success, whereby middle-class ideals and qualities (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 2002; Lareau 2003; Bodovski and Farkas 2008) are deemed necessary. This message makes 51 appearances throughout the documents examined. In total, 86 messages can be found in which middle-class values are clearly given preference. It should be noted that coming from a working-class background was only legitimated once in the 22 documents examined.

Table 2: Primary Messages Found in DSBN Academy Policy Documents

Message	Appearances
Working Class Background as Deficiency to be Overcome	35
Middle Class Qualities as Preferable Route to Success	51
TOTAL	86

7.4 A middle-class bias is also evident in the DSBN Academy's (2012b) mandatory extra-curricular activities, including various clubs and athletics, under the school's 'Encore Program'. There is a clear focus on developing qualities that are associated with a discourse of middle-class leadership and values. This is reminiscent of middle-class parenting investments revealed by Lareau (2003), Gillies (2005), and Bodovski and Farkas (2008) as well as the development of a middle-class habitus in general. Table 3 provides a list of these qualities and the number of times they appear.

Table 3: Middle Class Leadership Qualities Portrayed by DSBN Academy

Quality	Appearances
Respect	8
Optimism	4
Belief	12
Responsibility	9
Excellence	11
Commitment	10
Initiative	3
TOTAL	57

7.5 These traits are used exclusively in a middle-class context. For example, the following statements are taken from the DSBN Academy's (2012c) Core Values, listed on its website:

We are focused and committed to our education and our goals... We demonstrate commitment by... participating in all activities especially our Encore Program [and] dressing for success...

We demonstrate optimism by believing with confidence that post-secondary is part of our future...

We demonstrate excellence by... communicating effectively in academic language to express thoughts and ideas... [and] developing and following-through on individual goals and action plans for academic achievement at DSBN Academy to access college or university in the future.

As can be seen from Table 3, in addition to the quotes provided, these qualities are explicitly stated 57 times, making the Academy's middle-class rhetoric quite apparent. Indeed, middle-class parents tend to value and teach such qualities/skills as initiative, independence, communication, and leadership (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 2002). Dressing appropriately and participating in organized activities are also elements of concerted cultivation and the cultural capital that it transfers. Again, the school appears to be aligning itself with middle-class parenting approaches.

7.6 This tendency is further evidenced by the Academy's expectations of parental engagement. The application for admission states: 'Parents are required to complete 15 hours of service to the school for one child and an additional 10 hours per additional child each school year' (DSBN Academy 2012d).

Given that working-class parents tend not to participate in their children's education on the basis of discrepancies in capital and/or time constraints (e.g. Lareau 2003; Gillies 2005), such requirements fail to recognize working-class parents' experiences outside of the school. In addition, much of the burden for their children's academic success tends to be placed on parents. For example, the admissions application specifies that 'parents are an important part of a student success'. It then asks parents 'What will you do to contribute to the academic success of your child at DSBN Academy?' (DSBN Academy 2012d). Middle-class ideals in terms of acceptable parenting approaches are therefore perceptible.

7.7 Neo-liberal ideals are also evident in the DSBN Academy's heavy emphasis on individualized responsibility. For instance, a section of the Academy's creed, recited daily, reads: 'We never fail because we never give up. We make no excuses. We choose to live honestly, respectfully, and optimistically. We respect ourselves and in turn respect all people. We have a future for which we are accountable.' It appears that students are tasked with believing in themselves and working hard for 'a future'. This rhetoric of an individual working hard to be successful can be seen as an expression of individualization under the knowledge economy. This is particularly evident in the DSBN Academy's current pathway 'Academy Students as Risk-Takers' (DSBN Academy School Council 2012). Essentially, Academy students must make the appropriate academic decisions that will result in a university degree and 'good' job. In this way, the Academy seems to be fostering an ability to engage in strategic risk-taking (e.g. Giddens 1993; Beck 2004) in order to ascertain a certain standard of achievement.

7.8 Achievement, for the DSBN Academy, is ultimately embodied in admission to and graduation from a university. University is also conceptualized as 'an investment', whereby students strategize about how to get there and what the benefits will be in terms of earning potential in order to compensate for the cost. As the ETFO (2011b) reports,

Although there is recognition that there is a financial challenge, this is counteracted by the understanding that post-secondary education will provide them with opportunities for earning potential that will more than compensate for the costs they will incur. Furthermore, well before Grade 12, the students will understand how to apply for OSAP, student loans, etc. Their post-secondary education is an investment as they will see it as such and understand how it has to happen, and how there are lots of opportunities in Canada.

It appears, then, that students are encouraged to engage in a cost-benefit analysis in which they are provided with a host of information and must make the appropriate decisions in order to arrive at the desired end of post-secondary education. The concept of investment is also inherently classed as it is attached to middle-class values and beliefs (Lucey and Reay 2002). Working-class values and beliefs are not seen as 'investment' because they do not promote increased educational attainment.

Newspaper articles

7.9 To further assess how the DSBN Academy is portrayed in terms of media coverage, 42 newspaper articles were examined. Table 4 provides a summary of both local and national newspapers used.

Table 4: Newspapers with DSBN Academy Coverage

Local		National	
Newspaper	# Articles	Newspaper	# Articles
Niagara Falls Review	4	Globe & Mail	4
Niagara This Week	2	Toronto Star	2
St. Catharines Standard	10	Toronto Sun	3
Welland Tribune	14	National Post	2
Hamilton Spectator	1		
TOTAL	31	TOTAL	11

From this analysis, it is quite clear that both local and national newspapers have picked up on the Academy's focus on middle-class values in terms of its mandate to send working-class children to university. As Table 5 indicates, university and post-secondary are indicated as DSBN Academy expectations far more than college is. Once again, manual work does not appear.

Table 5: Newspaper Perceptions of DSBN Academy Expectations

	University	Post-secondary	College	Trade/ Apprenticeship	Workplace
Appearances	115	66	96	0	0
TOTAL	181	96	0	0	

7.10 Manual work and post-secondary education are starkly contrasted in both local and national reports.

For example, in one newspaper's description of the school, the reporter writes: 'At DSBN Academy, kids skip shop in favour of more reading and math in the hopes of getting into university' (Pearce 2011). In addition, many articles (e.g. Hammer 2011b) describe the manufacturing industry as 'withered' and the DSBN Academy as 'a golden ticket to university'. Finally, newspaper reports give the impression that in order to obtain a job that is one of 'the good ones', a student must obtain a university education (e.g. MacDonald 2012). The emphasis on university is also clear in reports referring to the culture at DSBN Academy in which 'teachers are "faculty", students are "young men and women", and the school is the "campus"...' (MacDonald 2012). Additionally, several observers, including Brown (2011) note that one could accurately call the DSBN Academy a 'prep school for the Ivory Tower'.

7.11 While both local and national newspapers are similar in that they portray the Academy's primary goal as university education, they differ in the evaluation of this goal. That is, local newspapers tended to perceive this goal more positively than national newspapers, as illustrated in Table 6. Both varieties of newspaper were generally consistent in their evaluations.

Table 6: Newspaper Evaluations of DSBN Academy

	# Local Articles	# National Articles
Positive	24	1
Negative	4	8
Neutral	3	2
TOTAL	31	11

Interestingly, local news reports appeared to be most concerned with the economic implications of the school. In other words, it was felt that the school would increase post-secondary education in the Niagara region, which would then have positive implications in terms of decreasing unemployment, amongst other economic issues. Conversely, national reports centred on the implications the school might have for education as a whole, which tended to be largely negative. These newspapers tended to be skeptical as to whether the Academy could accomplish its goals. Furthermore, the word 'poor' tended to be used as a descriptor of the school in most reports. This divergence between local and national reports can be observed by simply considering the headlines used by each. Table 7 provides a sample of some of these headlines.

Table 7: Sample of National and Local Newspaper Headlines

Local	'Need for DSBN Academy program displayed at former steel plant site.' (MacDonald 2012)
	'Mother applauds plan for low-income school.' (Greco 2011b)
	'DSBN Academy will make a difference.' (Waler 2011)
	'DSBN Academy: Building grades - and confidence.' (Bolichowski 2011)
	'Parents, teachers loving academy.' (Gray 2011a)
National	'A ticket to university or segregation of the poor?' (Hammer 2011b)
	'Niagara's school board of dunces needs an education in life.' (Kay 2011)
	'"Poor school" a poor idea.' (Blizzard 2011)
	'School for low-income kids sets lofty goals.' (Rushowy 2011)
	'"Poverty" school aims high.' (Brown 2011)

7.12 The differing perceptions of local and national newspapers with regard to the Academy are primarily concerned with whether or not the school is a 'good' idea or if it will be successful. No reports mention a concern about the school having a middle-class bias, although this is certainly portrayed in the language used. As previously mentioned, university and post-secondary education are presented as aims of the Academy. Reports include interviews with administrators and teachers that appear to sanction this goal. For example, one teacher is quoted as saying 'This is a teaching utopia – a whole school created to build a culture where kids are expected to go on to post-secondary education, even if it's not an expectation in their home' (Brown 2011). If this kind of teacher support is true, it would not be surprising given Schramm-Pate, Jeffries and D'Amico's (2006) findings that teachers tend to align themselves with middle-class values. This quote also serves as evidence of the divergence between the home and the school, a phenomenon discussed by Bourdieu et al. (1965), Lareau (2003), Schramm-Pate, Jeffries and D'Amico (2006), and many others.

7.13 With regard to the Academy's portrayal of middle-class values, the newspapers examined also reveal the theme of concerted cultivation. Commonly, the way in which the Academy addresses students' appearance and habits is reported on. For example, Gray (2011b) describes the school's uniform policy in which students must 'come dressed for success'. A typical day at the school is also described, where each morning students enter through the 'Doors of Excellence' and '[the principal and teachers] shake each student's hand, look them in the eye and say, "Good morning"'. Each student is expected to do the

same' (Gray 2011b). Therefore, it appears that the school is focused on shaping its students in a particular manner. As Gray (2011b) comments, 'the curriculum is the same as at other schools in the DSBN, but [the principal] says the difference is in the extra efforts staff take to mould the students into young adults.'

7.14 Part of the moulding process at the DSBN Academy also appears to involve strategic decision-making and investments. For example, Bolichowski (2011) reports that '...academy students... learn how to look for work, manage debt, find and apply for scholarships and put cash away for the future' (Bolichowski 2011). It is quite apparent that the school is perceived by the media to be engaging in a process that boosts the cultural capital of its students in order to align them with middle-class values. Thus, it is clear that just as the DSBN Academy appears to affirm the middle class in its policy documents, so too does it appear in the media. Most importantly, no source – policy or media – questions a mandate to send children to university and that dismisses working-class culture, albeit unintentionally.

Discussion and conclusion

8.1 According to Bourdieu et al. (1990), the school system commits symbolic violence against working-class students through its embodiment of middle-class ideology and tendency to delegitimize cultures outside of the dominant group. The results discussed above can certainly be interpreted in this light given the strong focus on university education in the discourse surrounding the DSBN Academy. In addition, an emphasis on developing particular leadership qualities, participation in extracurricular activities, parental involvement, and so forth further demonstrates the operation of middle-class values. In a sense, the DSBN Academy appears to be set up to 'compensate' for perceived working-class parenting deficiencies (see Gillies 2008). Such values culminate in what appears to be a dismissal of a working-class habitus in general. Thus, despite what the DSBN Academy may fulfil in terms of increasing the educational attainment of its students, it still creates problems around working-class identities in that it maintains a middle-class ideal of success. In other words, to be successful is to aspire to go on to and complete higher education (see Hughes et al. 2006; Taylor 2008). What occurs within the walls of the DSBN Academy, then, can be interpreted as symbolic violence, even if this is not its intention. Through dismissing the values and practices of working-class students, the DSBN Academy may indeed threaten their identities.

8.2 This kind of symbolic violence is further demonstrated in the Academy's focus on individual responsibility, as revealed by its policy documents. Such messages convey aspects of individualization under the knowledge economy as well as middle-class investments. That is, an individual's ultimate 'success' is the product of his or her ability to make decisions in a way that propels him or her into a middle-class lifestyle, particularly through developing the middle-class values and beliefs associated with educational investment (e.g. Lucey & Reay 2002). Should an individual 'fail' at achieving middle-class goals, it is because he or she did not work hard enough. Essentially, the Academy aims to supplement the cultural capital (see Lareau 2003; Bourdieu 2006) of its students through cultivating them into 'responsible' young adults. In so doing, there exists an underlying notion that if students' develop a middle-class habitus, they will succeed; if they retain their working-class habitus, they are likely to fail.

8.3 It seems, then, that the DSBN Academy is in a particularly difficult position, indicative of the struggle between wanting to 'do better' and maintaining one's identity (see Sennett & Cobb 1993). This struggle is perfectly articulated in national and local news coverage regarding the Academy. As has been demonstrated, local newspapers tended to portray the Academy as something that would improve the livelihoods of those living in Niagara, a primarily working-class region based on a manufacturing industry experiencing severe economic setbacks. Conversely, national newspapers questioned what such a school would do to the education system as a whole. This highlights the dilemma facing the DSBN Academy, as well as educators and sociologists: how can the situation of those in lower socioeconomic groups be improved without denying who they are? Indeed, the Academy's very mandate separates children from their parents through its primary goal to send them on to post-secondary education.

8.4 Of course, the argument can be made that because parents do make the choice to send their children to the DSBN Academy, the school does not constitute a form of symbolic violence. It cannot be denied, however, that the school appears to treat where its students come from as a deficiency to be overcome, while skills and values associated with the middle class are portrayed as necessary for success. Working-class students are essentially portrayed here as 'problem kids' in need of an 'educational intervention', much like many of the students in Taylor's (2008: 159) examination of widening participation in the UK. Therefore, there is certainly an element of symbolic violence involved. In any case, this reveals the struggle facing working-class families in today's knowledge economy, wherein parents may want their children to do better than they did through obtaining post-secondary education. Yet, in so doing, their child may find it difficult to relate to his or her working-class parents who are not university or college educated. Furthermore, if that child wishes to drop out of post-secondary education and lead a blue-collar life, he or she risks betraying the goal set by his or her parents. This can also be a trying situation for the child to be in, as everything he or she has known suddenly appears inferior.

8.5 In considering the experiences of working-class students in post-secondary education, O'Dair (2003:603) points out that not only may it be 'structurally impossible... to create a smooth transition' but also that it may not even be desirable to do so. Accordingly, she calls for the school system to recognize that post-secondary education is not for everyone nor is it required for individuals to 'lead good and satisfying lives' (O'Dair 2003: 603). O'Dair (2003: 603) recommends a pedagogy that teaches working-class students heading for the middle class that 'middle-class culture is not superior to' working-class culture. Perhaps, then, alternative schools like the DSBN Academy could start encouraging apprenticeships and trades in addition to college and university. There could also be recognition of

working-class culture as well as working-class oppression. For the DSBN Academy, this could involve teaching students the history of their manual region and highlighting its accomplishments. Whatever the strategy, it is clear that the language around working-class students and education must change.

8.6 It should be acknowledged that this study was based upon a case analysis of one school. As such, it is not generalizable to all schools that may target the needs of working-class students. In addition, due to the limited availability of school documents, not every document concerning the school was able to be included in the analysis. Nevertheless, this study does reveal the difficulty of reducing inequality without compromising working-class identities, and raises questions beyond the specifics of the case. Specifically, the study adds to sociological debates concerning working-class mobility and the conflicts associated with it. Simultaneously, it challenges policy makers to be reflexive about which values are being placed on the life experiences of the students they wish to help. Future research should further examine how educational institutions under widening participation strategies can influence the identity formation of students. This could be done through examining the sentiments of students attending the school as well as their parents in order to assess the underlying motivations, feelings, and pressures that may have been involved in the decision to enroll at the Academy. Additional research should also examine whether or not administrators and teachers are aware of the middle-class rhetoric the school seems to be promoting and if they consider ways in which it is problematic. Finally, a broader analysis that includes a combination of alternative schools would also be useful in further evaluating these novel educational approaches.

8.7 The education system is certainly central to modern life, particularly given the trends of the knowledge economy coupled with rising credentialism. Indeed, individuals are contending with one another on a daily basis to acquire the necessary educational credentials to increase their employability. At the same time, educational disparities among socioeconomic groups have persisted, in spite of post-secondary expansion (Davies and Guppy 2010). Evidently, this is a problem with a myriad of complexities. As demonstrated by this case study, working-class students face numerous barriers in educational attainment, but in overcoming these barriers through efforts like the DSBN Academy, also risk leaving their own habitus behind. It therefore remains to be seen how the education system can reconcile increased opportunities for working-class students with legitimization of working-class identities.

Notes

¹A charter school is a publicly funded primary or secondary school with a special purpose that is not subject to the same rules as a traditional public school. In exchange for funding and autonomy, it must meet its specified accountability standards (see NCES 2012).

²Transportation for the Academy accounts for \$431 600 of the DSBN's budget (DSBN 2011).

³While 'post-secondary' education certainly could include college as a destination, in the context of the Academy, it appears to refer exclusively to university.

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