Re-invigorating democracy?: White middle class identities and comprehensive schooling

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Abstract

Recent research on social class and whiteness points to disquieting and exclusive aspects of white middle class identities. This paper focuses on whether 'alternative' middle class identities might work against, and disrupt, normative views of what it means to be 'middle class' at the beginning of the 21st Century. Drawing on data from those middle classes who choose to send their children to urban comprehensives, we examine processes of 'thinking and acting otherwise' in order to uncover some of the commitments and investments that might make for a renewed and reinvigorated democratic citizenry. The difficulties of turning these commitments and investments into more equitable ways of interacting with class and ethnic others which emerge as real challenges for this left leaning, pro-welfare segment of the middle classes. Within a contemporary era of neo-liberalism that valorises competition, individualism and the market even these white middle classes who express a strong commitment to community and social mixing struggle to convert inclinations into actions.

Introduction

Historically white middle class identity in the UK has been an idealised one held up for others (namely, the working class masses) to aspire to (Carey, 1992). Currently, in the 2000s the white middle classes, and particularly as they are inscribed in policy discourses, best fit this ideal of the democratic citizen – individualistic, responsible, participatory, the active chooser. Traditional notions of 'the bourgeois self' have prioritised individuality, self interest and self sufficiency alongside civic commitments. However, it has been argued that developing market forms in education and the wider public sphere are producing new kinds of moral subjects (Rose, 1998). Yet, the contemporary educational market also draws upon 'classical liberal views underpinned by a political and economic liberalism which is deeply embedded in modern

Western societies' (Ball, 2003). The self-interested and self-sufficient individual remains the ideal, in which the centring of rational choice and a capacity for transcendence both occludes group-based harms of systemic oppression and conceals the complicity of individuals in the perpetuation of systemic injustices (Applebaum, 2005). What has increasingly been marginalized in white middle class identity formation is civic commitment and a sense of communal responsibility. This is not really surprising when contextualized within a contemporary 'post-politics' culture. As Chantel Mouffe asserts 'our present Zeitgeist is characterized by a profound aversion to the political' (Mouffe, 2005: 110). Politics has not only become 'a dirty word' but the language of political intervention no longer appears to make sense of, and in, the contemporary (Zizek, 2006). Values of the market, choice and individualism increasingly stand out and over those of the fragile discourse of welfare (Ball, 2003). More specifically within the field of education, contemporary education policies promoting parental choice, competitive school enrolment, performance league tables and school specialisms generate an ethical framework that encourages and legitimates self-interest in the pursuit of competitive familial advantage (Oria *et al.*, 2007).

Recent research on social class and whiteness both here in the UK and in the USA point to particularly disquieting aspects of contemporary normative white middle class identity. For instance, Tony Giddens (2000) talks of the excluding and exclusive white middle classes, Butler and Robson (2003) discuss the importance of isolationist non-mixers in gentrified areas of London, and Stephen Ball (2003) discusses the importance of strategic, self-interested profit maximisers in London educational markets. In the US there is similar evidence of middle class practices of exclusivity and maintaining privilege with Barbara Ehrenreich's (1997) anxious paranoid middle classes with their over inflated fear of falling socially, and Ellen Brantlinger's (2003) affluent professionals with their liberal rhetoric and conservative neo-liberal practices. There is also a growing body of literature that reveals the advantages and unacknowledged normativity of whiteness (Back, 2002; Byrne, 2006; Frankenberg, 1997; Giroux, 1999; Hage, 1998; Hill, 2004; Lipsitz, 1998; Nakayama and Martin, 1997). Drawing on Australian examples, Ghassen Hage (1998) shows how within multiculturalism, migrant cultures exist in the service of the dominant White culture. He writes about 'ethnic surplus value' (128) in which the white middle classes further enrich themselves through the consumption of ethnic diversity. As Berking (1996) argues, processes of privatization and social protectionism appear to have generated a society where accrual and acquisitiveness are prioritized, and assets in solidarity have been exhausted.

We can find some of the reasons for the fearful retreat of the white middle classes from the public sector in the wider social and economic context. The contemporary cultures of individualisation and privatisation have eroded commitments and investments in the public sphere. Furthermore, the reduction of graduate jobs at the same time as the rapid expansion of higher education has resulted in middle class anxiety and a loss of certainty. In

addition, the growing gap between the rich and the poor has exacerbated class divisions and increased mistrust and fear of the classed and racialised 'other'. Local democracy and civic engagement, particularly in our inner cities, is becoming increasingly elusive as state centralization continues apace and local power becomes vested more and more in the hands of a small privileged minority. Teresa Caldeira (2005: 335) argues that 'among the conditions for democracy is that people acknowledge those from different social groups as co-citizens, that is, as people with similar rights'. But that recognition is probably less characteristic of the white middle class majority in the 2000s than it was 100 years ago (Szreter, 2006), and appears to have diminished over the last twenty years as egalitarian and more inclusive perspectives on social differences, and especially class differences, have faded in the onslaught of neoliberalism (Bourdieu, 1998).

Our research

It is against this social and conceptual terrain that our ESRC research project on Identities, educational choice and the white urban middle-classes has been conducted. We were interested in those white middle classes who actively choose urban comprehensive schooling. Our project is an optimistic one that explored the nature of those middle class identities that are more likely to be grounded in sociality and a commitment to 'the common good' than the middle class 'norm'. We hoped to uncover the ways in which such identities might work against, and disrupt, normative views of what it means to be 'middle class' at the beginning of the 21st Century. The focus is on those white middle classes who still appear to actively embrace diversity and are open to difference, who remain class and ethnic mixers, in other words a socially inclusive middle class as opposed to Giddens's socially exclusive middle class.

We felt the best place to try and find these middle classes was in ethnically diverse inner city comprehensives – to research the educationally integrationist middle class – what we might see as the educational equivalent of the participatory democratic citizen within three urban conurbations – London, a North East city, Norton, and a South West city, Riverton. We chose these three different areas because, as recent research evidence increasingly demonstrates, geographic locale is central both to identity formation and educational experience (Butler with Robson, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2006; Ball and Vincent, 2007; Butler and Hamnett, 2007).

This paper focuses on themes that emerged across the entire data set. We have conducted interviews with 63 London-based families (a total of 125 interviews), 30 families in a west of England city called Riverton (64 interviews) and 32 families in a northern city called Norton (67 interviews) Just over a quarter of the 125 families were self-identifiers, responding to a *Guardian* newspaper article about the research project which specified that its focus

was the white middle classes. However we also used the National Statistics class classification scheme to identify households as middle-class, as well as gathering information about both parents' educational levels. In all the families, subjective class definition matched objective socio-economic categorisation and in only two of the families were neither parents graduates.

Because our main target group were middle-class parents committed to comprehensive schooling as an educational principle, those who deliberately eschew 'working the system to their advantage', we focused on those families sending their children to comprehensives with average or below average GCSE results. At the time we carried out the fieldwork (2004–5), 90% of the comprehensives to which the London families sent their children were performing at or below the national average, while comparable figures were 82% in Riverton and 88% in Norton. Children in the majority of the families (100 out of 125) were attending comprehensives that would be termed ordinary or 'bog-standard' (Miles, 2007).

The sample constitutes a very specific middle class grouping distinguished by high levels of cultural capital, a caring perspective and liberal and, in a few cases, socialist political orientations. Their choice reflects a principled position, and a display of their liberal, 'soft' left credentials. Whilst only a tiny minority (ten parents, nine in London and one in Norton, all except for one Labour party members) are currently actively involved in party politics, many describe themselves as 'very soft left, *Guardian* socialists' (David Gordon, father, Norton) or an 'old hippy socialist leftie type person' (Sarah Smith, mother, London). A further important characteristic is that the parents comprise a very specific occupational fraction of the middle classes. Almost 80 percent work in state and liberal welfare professions and the arts and media, with two thirds of the parents working in the public sector (Crozier *et al.*, 2008). They are Savage's welfare professionals (Savage, 1992) with varying degrees of commitment to state provision of education, health care and welfare services. They identify with the political left even though many find themselves disillusioned with New Labour.

However, whilst sharing many things in common even this fraction of the white middle classes are internally differentiated along a number of different dimensions (Reay *et al.*, 2007). We focus here on one of these dimensions, namely how the 125 families position themselves in relation to discourses of communitarianism. They range from those who draw on a strongly communitarian discourse characterised by a commitment to social justice and opposition to the marketisation of education. These parents would not contemplate selective or private schooling in any circumstances, expressed a total aversion to 'playing the market', and were strongly community orientated to relation to schooling and locality. However, a majority of the parents drew on weaker discourses of communitarianism, that, whilst supportive of comprehensive schooling, remain grounded in securing and maintaining advantage. For these parents commitment to comprehensives is conditional on ensuring their children's educational success.

Valuing the other

It was common for parents in all three locales to draw on discourses of 'community' and multiculturalism when asked about their motivations for choosing the local comprehensive school. Relatedly, rather than parents identifying choice of inner city comprehensives as either simply a political or a pragmatic decision, most talked in terms of a more complex moral agenda. Their rationales included aspects of both pragmatism and political persuasion but also emphasized the sort of adult they not only hope but anticipate that their child will become. Many of the families feel passionate about the need to produce well-rounded, tolerant individuals and see urban comprehensive schooling as making an important contribution to this process. They stress a social and cultural fluency in which an active engagement with difference is signalled as a highly valued attribute. Like the white mothers in Bridget Byrne's (2006) study they are searching for 'a good mix', a school that has the right class and racial mix of students:

> Part of why we chose the school was for social reasons. I think Guy's going to get a far better education going to the local comprehensive where he is going to be meeting and dealing with a complete range of children. (Gill Harris, Riverton mother)

> Ella will be, already is, totally different to us, all our friends are white and middle class, hers are from all sorts of class and ethnic backgrounds. And to be honest I'm quite uncomfortable with people from different backgrounds I never had the experience either at school or university and we didn't want that for Ella. We wanted her to be a fully paid up citizen of the twenty first century and I think she is and that is all down to the school. She has a real social confidence and can get on with anybody. (Richard Harding, London father)

This positive value in comprehensive schooling emerges strongly in what both Christopher and Deirdre say below. We also glimpse in Christopher's words a more communitarian impulse, the desire to contribute something positive to one's local school:

> If sending our kids to the local school can help that school continue its improvement and development and attract more middle class people to send their kids, then their kids can get a more rounded experience of where other kids come from and what their experiences are like and just a greater social mix. (Christopher Dunn, Riverton parent)

> Michael has an incredibly ethnic range of friends and it is a marvellous advantage I mean it is not something that most people of my generation would have I think. At his 15th birthday party last year 19 friends came and

they were from 9 different ethnic origins from all round the world and I found it rather moving actually. They were just lovely; they were just lovely; they were all over the house they were doing whatever they were doing. They have got this bond of popular culture that unites them you know for getting on with people in all ways in the future I don't think I could have given him a better education. (Deirdre Johansson, London parent)

As Richard and Deirdre make explicit, this valuing of comprehensivisation, particularly in the London context, is closely tied to a commitment to multiculturalism. The parents are seeking schools with a wide social mix because they see value in their children being educated with children from different cultures. Attending comprehensives has a compensatory value, providing multicultural experiences that home life cannot. As Fred Drummond, a Norton parent explains:

Because our local community isn't multiethnic, it's not part of our normal existence to be achieving the kind of intercultural mingling that we should be doing that, you know, would make the world a better place, whereas at The Park [the local comprehensive] it is.

Diversity and ethnic diversity, in particular, is viewed as a valuable asset. In a related way, socially diverse comprehensives are seen as contributing an education that is much broader than the National Curriculum, one that gives children experiences of, and the ability to deal with, 'the wider world':

Meadow Wood School was just an amazing education for my kids. There were dealers outside the gates at lunchtime, well they had to cope with that, they've got streetwise and they've not been over-protected from the seamier side of life. And there were the political refugee children. They (my children) had so much education. (Linda Smith, Riverton parent)

As the quotes above show, for a majority of the parents, commitment to comprehensive schooling is both complicated and more messy than the straightforward enactment of communitarian principles because they also anticipate gains in terms of their children's cultural knowledge and social skills. As Burbules (2000) argues:

The framework within which multiculturalism often takes shape, a broad (and sometimes patronizing) 'tolerance' for difference, leaves dominant beliefs and values largely unquestioned – indeed even insulated from challenge and change – because they are shielded within the comforting self-conception of openness and inclusivity.

The children, attending socially mixed comprehensive schooling, are seen by their parents to be developing key citizenship skills of tolerance and under-

standing difference that they perceive to be increasingly vital in a global society. Yet, amongst the high principles and moral integrity is a powerful strand of the gains to be made from urban comprehensive schooling. This is hinted at in Deirdre's assertion of 'the marvellous advantage' accruing to her son from attending schools that, in Lorraine's words, make 'our kids more real'. Here, we can see clearly Hage's 'ethnic surplus value' (1998: 128) in which the white middle classes further advantage themselves through the consumption of ethnic diversity. While Berking (1996: 195) describes 'a solidary individualism among the 'liberal' middle classes these parents seem to be pursuing 'an individualistic solidarity'. While there is a strong commitment to, and support of multiculturalism across the families, this was underpinned by a strong sense of the benefits for their own children; of the gains to be made in encountering rich cultural diversity. And these benefits were primarily seen to come through contact with ethnic rather than classed others. Despite valuing 'the other' there is still enormous ambivalence about children connecting with or become allied with the working class majority in the comprehensive schools they attend (Reay *et al.*, 2007). As Raveaud and van Zanten (2007: 117) found, while it appears unacceptable to attribute negative educational effects to the presence of minority ethnic children there are no such strictures on criticism directed at the working classes. The paradox that Binnie *et al.* (2006) articulate between simultaneously embracing certain forms of difference whilst devalorising others is evident in the distinction many of the parents made between the desired ethnic and the feared working class 'other' (Reay, 2008). One consequence is a semi-detachedness from the working classes despite sending their children to school with them. This was evident in what one of the young men said about his comprehensive when contrasting it with the far more middle-class sixth form he moved on to:

> Unlike them I did know the kind of world of Denton and the estates and all of that stuff. Obviously I have not lived there and I've not really experienced it, I am not going to pretend to have that kind of empathy but I certainly know them and I know it is there (Ross Davies, London student).

In fact when these white middle classes talked about the working classes, rather than expressing empathy, they often conveyed an instrumentalising impulse; that to know about their classed 'other' was a useful resource for later life. So Audrey, after commenting that her son's friends were exclusively white and middle class, goes on to assert in relation to the working class children in his comprehensive school:

> He doesn't bring these children home but he knows they are there and he meets them in school and I know when he grows up and he's going to be a lawyer or a teacher or whatever at least he'll know where these people have come from. (Audrey Caisey, Norton Mother)

Audrey echoes the semi-detachedness expressed by Ross. The 'at least' that Audrey qualifies her comment with is telling. The aim is not to befriend and mix as equals with working class others but rather to know them in appropriating ways that resource the self.

Despite an enthusiasm for comprehensive schooling among the families there was often ambivalence and anxiety about too close a contact with working class others:

> I have to say for me as great a fear was that my son would get in with the scrap metal dealer's son who was given everything from this age and that he would think he should have that lifestyle as well when we wanted it to be balanced and even. (Sheila Moss, Norton mother)

Although most parents did not display such overt feelings of fear of contamination, almost half referred to attending comprehensives as 'a toughening experience', the opportunity for their children to develop resilience and become 'worldly-wise'. These parents rationalise their choice of urban comprehensive as, in part, a matter of ensuring their children become used to operating in an unequal society. However, this is different to actually opposing inequalities. Rather, children are to become inured to, and learn to cope with a socially unjust world.

So, for the parents, comprehensives are one of the best ways of preparing children for the real world, and here the contrast with private and selective schooling is apposite. Talking about private schooling Tricia Simpson, a London parent, asserts that 'it doesn't prepare you in any way at all for real life once you leave.' She goes on to argue:

> I mean our best friends down in this road, their daughters are exactly the same age as ours and they go through the private system. And I just look at their daughters and I think at some point you're going to have leave school and you're going to have to be out there with some rough dysfunctional people and you won't know what's hit you. Whereas my daughter's in classrooms with some very, very difficult behaviour of children, and she's having to learn to concentrate and get on with what she's doing. And I think that is tough for her, and she does say sometimes you know God its dreadful.

Here knowing the other is not the same as empathising. Rather, Ross, Audrey and Tricia demonstrate the dispositions of the white middle class cosmopolitans that Beverley Skeggs writes about. She argues (2004: 158) that 'to be cosmopolitan one has to be able to appropriate, distinguish and claim to know the other in order to generate authority and disposition from this knowing'. And Ross, together with Tricia and Audrey's children, is acquiring this appropriating knowledge that becomes a resource for the self rather than an empathetic connection with the other.

Bringing back local community

So are these families grounded in sociality and solidarity? Are they contributing to, and members of, rich, ethnically and culturally diverse communities? Community has always been a morally charged concept because it is about the obligations to, and expectations of, individuals one lives closest to (Revill, 1993; Williams, 1976). It links personal responsibility, commitment and identification with people other than the family. However, within dominant, including political, discourses on both the right and left, there is seen to have been a demise of community dating from the 1980s. This view that communities, and, particularly those in the inner city, no longer work as a conduit for social activity, commitment and collective action was exemplified in Margaret Thatcher's pronouncement that there is no such thing as society. In the twenty first century we still have powerful imagined communities but there is scant empirical evidence that communities rooted in the local with the power to reach across class and ethnic boundaries still exist. People may share neighbourhood as a living space but this does not mean they will interact together as a community (Lee and Newby, 1983). Rather in relation to social class, both geographical and sociological research has found that the 'new' professional middle classes tend to be positive about living in close proximity with working class families within inner cities without either wanting or having any social interaction with them (Ley, 1996; Butler, 1997; Savage *et al.*, 2005). In a similar vein, despite frequently citing a communitarian commitment to the local as a contributory factor in choosing their children's schooling, a majority of the 125 families appeared to be almost free-floating socially from the predominantly multi-ethnic working class catchment areas of the comprehensives their children attended. They often expressed strong emotional attachments to their localities (May, 1996), and particularly places within them; the 'elective belonging' (Savage *et al.*, 2005) that comes through choosing a locality rather than being brought up in it. However, apart from sending their children to local comprehensives, their most significant social networks, comprising extended family and friends, were independent of the local area. We can glimpse this rhetorical allegiance undercut by what is in effect a disengagement from the locality, in what Trevor Wells, a London parent, says:

> We believe in schools being a community project . . . If my politics
> is anything to do with it at all it's the politics of the community.
> Q: but are you a member of anything locally?
> I don't think so, Jackie will know. No, no, I don't think so.

When parents were able to articulate a sense of belonging, an embeddedness in a tangible as opposed to an imagined community, the communities they described were white middle class ones. So Sheila Moss asserted that:

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> We have settled here mainly because of the benefits of the community and it really is a strong community and most of that is based around the primary school for people like us. (Sheila Moss, Norton parent)

The families were either detached from their localities with, in particular, the Norton families suspended in a global world that rarely made contact with the predominantly working class residents of their city, (Nayak, 2003) or else their communities of reality rather than desire were located in a small number of adjacent streets. These were almost exclusively populated, as Sheila points out, by 'people like us' and frequently focused on the predominantly white, middle class primary schools their children had attended. Despite strongly expressed desires, particularly in London, to be part of wider multicultural communities, the majority of the families were most at home in small almost exclusively white middle class enclaves. So Lindsey Malone, living in East London, felt 'a local almost as soon as I got here'. However, as the quote below shows, her locality is very narrowly bounded both geographically and culturally:

> This street is a cul-de-sac which helps I think. In the summer there are games of street cricket, things like that and people go in and out of each other's houses so I know people on first name terms, certainly in this half of the street. I do feel very much part of the community.

Similarly Karen Sollazzi in Riverton asserts 'I am very into community. We have street parties here which I was quite big in setting up' but she goes on to describe her street as 'a very homogeneous street, I must say, very white homogeneous, safe though, a very nice place to bring kids up'. There are similarities here with Butler and Robson's (2003) white London middle classes grouped together in small tightly bounded white middle class enclaves which provide the security they need in order to venture further afield culturally (May, 1996).

Invigorating democracy? A minority within a minority

Yet there was also a countervailing discourse of public engagement. In total almost 60% of the London families (36 out of 63 families) had a least one parent who had or still served as a school governor. In 8 London families (12% of the total) one of the parents was or had been Chair of Governors of their children's secondary school. However, the figures in Norton and Riverton were lower at 22% (7 out of 32 families) and 30% (9 out of 30 families) respectively. This high level of civic engagement was both complex and contradictory, and the parents' rationales reveal some of the ambiguities and ambivalences embedded in these families' relationships to their locality and, in particular, local schooling (Ball and Vincent, 2007). For a majority becoming a school governor was as much an issue of developing insider knowledge as a

desire to make a civic contribution. They thought they could intervene more effectively by becoming involved in their children's schooling:

> I just thought a way to be attached to a school and know what is going on is to become a governor (Sandra Hayes, London mother)

> Secondary schools tend to keep the parents at a distance, which again is why I've become a governor so I could actually find out a bit more what was going on. (Jane Taylor, Riverton mother)

> So I got to know the school very well and obviously got insider knowledge (Victoria Williamson, London mother)

For a majority of the parents then school governance became an additional way of managing the risks in sending children to inner city state schooling (Vincent, 2000), a way of subjecting the school to surveillance as well as a means of supporting it. As Savage *et al.* (2005: 65) point out, such narratives of support have 'an edge of instrumentalism'. This 'edge of instrumentalism' is particularly powerful in Linda Querey's account of being a school governor:

> Well I thought if they're going to go there I need to find out what it's like, I need to make a really informed decision so I became a governor, and I'm still a governor now I'm in my second term, erm and I was chair of governors and now vice chair . . . so I decided that I would get involved and become involved in their education and I am now the ultimate busy body. I know almost every teacher in the school, I know exactly what's going on, erm I'm always in e-mail contact with the teachers like today for example I've e-mailed the head of Spanish. Poppy erm got a grade B in her mock and was predicted a grade B but she's only two marks away from an A so I'm saying can you please explain to me why you didn't predict her an A. Not saying 'how dare you' but I just want to know why. You know because she's now thinking about applying for De Veres school in Westborough, you have to have 6 As and so that A's gonna make a difference to her. (Linda Querey, London parent)

Linda makes explicit the individualised gains to be made from formal participation in schooling.

However, a significant minority of the white middle class families, 16 (of whom 13 included at least one parent who had been a governor) 14 in London and 2 in Riverton still possessed a strong 'vocabulary of association' (Jordan, Redley and James, 1994: 43). These families had a commitment to a local community that was broader than 'people like them' and expressed strong views that it should be the focus of civic responsibility with local schooling as a key community project:

We have each got the responsibility to get the best for our own children but not at the expense of abdicating the responsibility for the local community that we are a part of or whatever. (David Johnson, London parent)

Going to the local comprehensive makes us part of the community and that is a slightly yucky thing but in a way I feel we are contributing to the community rather than withdrawing our children. I mean it's part of our general philosophy, I'd definitely try to move them away from thinking they want jobs that have good money to jobs that have a benefit to society. Both Bill and I think it's important to put something back . . . or at least not harming people, I suppose. (Sally Rouse, London parent)

We should all have equal access to good education and good health and I believe in that and I think that's what any government should be trying to do and not be trying to create areas or sort of separate, either wittingly or unwittingly, people in society, so that some people have better opportunities than others, or that you end up with situations where schools do end up on sort of tiers and you do end up with stupid league tables reflecting that, because some schools aren't getting a cross section of the community, because people are being encouraged to think that they should choose something better, because what's there in the community isn't better and it's a mindset. And I just feel that principles are important and that we should support things for the benefit of everyone as a whole. And I suppose they're the basic socialist principles or whatever and I sometimes think perhaps we're terribly naïve and other times I think, no we're not, I think we're just really trying to hang on to a really good idea that has been beaten to death by successive policies over the years. (Alice Featherstone, Riverton)

It gave me an opportunity to explain to her about life, about putting into the community that you are living in, not just getting the best for yourself and bugger everyone else. But actually giving and not just taking from society. That there is some value in trying to be a good person and part of that is giving back to the community you are part of and that includes your school and where you live and on both counts my kids are very privileged compared to other kids so its even more important for them. Everything we believe in is about putting into your community and not taking from it, this encompasses everything we believe. (Yvonne Scott, London parent)

If we deconstruct how community is being envisaged in these four quotes, we can see ideas of community that emphasise notions of group solidarity, collective action and responsibility, all concepts that Burke and MacFarlane (2001: 71) argue lie at the 'root of socialism'. Such socialist values of community, solidarity and collective responsibility are further reinforced in Sally and Yvonne's priorities around 'giving back'. We are presented with a discourse that concentrates on citizenship obligation and the public good and, we would argue, notions of social justice that attempt to connect it to a coherent vision

of the good society. The social practices these families endorse are those that contribute to community and benefit society. However, all the parents in these sixteen families made strong statements about the imperative to invest in local state schooling. All expressed the view that education is fundamental to the sort of adults children turn into. While only Patricia stated explicitly that 'if you pull the middle classes out of state schooling society as a whole loses out' it was clear in their transcripts that there was a vital link between individual investment in inner city state schooling and collective gains. As Ian asserts, 'if your local school isn't good you bloody well make sure it's good.' In a similar vein the most upper-class parent in the sample (with parents firmly located in the aristocracy) commented, 'I just don't think you can talk about a real democracy if everybody is, almost secretly everybody, is being educated according to their class background'. Perhaps the greatest contrast between these 16 families and the other 109 was that they held powerful political commitments grounded in a conception of 'the common good' as an objective that still held value:

> Everybody is only concerned with their own child, but if you could see the bigger picture, it doesn't work like that. If you're concerned about your own child, somebody else is disadvantaged. (Louise Naylor, London parent)

Threaded through the narratives of these families' relationships with their locality and local schooling is a powerful language of democracy and civic engagement. The possessive individualism of Linda and Victoria's narratives is muted and in its place there is a rhetoric of community responsibility. We gain a strong sense of public values and a collectivist repertoire (Jordan *et al.*, 1994) in which these parents attempt to link their choice of comprehensive schooling with discourses of democratic participation and active citizenship. Yet, even in these white middle class narratives that profess the strongest commitment to the 'public' and civic values, we glimpse the same contradictions and confusion over how to translate social democratic discourses of collectivism and community into effective action as citizens that Jordan *et al.* (1994) found. Within those families with the strongest commitment to comprehensivisation and community, children still mixed in almost exclusively middle class, predominantly white social networks. Although all these parents were resolutely opposed to choice and markets within education and often asserted that real choice was a myth for most parents, they continued to accept 'the dominant principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu, 2000: 143) within society. In fact it all seems even more difficult 15 years on from the period Jordan *et al.* were writing about. In a twenty-first century society, increasingly stripped of languages for creating visions of egalitarianism, civic and community responsibilities and 'giving back' (Reay, 2002), even those white middle class who combine the resources with the will to invigorate democracy seem to have little if any deliberate involvement in actions that would benefit less advantaged others despite sending their children to school with them. As Andrew Sayer pessimistically concludes:

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Even actions which are not driven by struggle for advantage over others, indeed, even those that have egalitarian motives, are likely to be twisted by the field of class forces in ways which reproduce class hierarchy. (Sayer, 2005: 169)

Yet, it is parents, such as the ones in our study, who offer the best prospect for a fairer educational system. As Richard Webber, director of a large statistical survey of school performance argues 'the best educational achievement for the largest number of pupils will be achieved by having a broad social mix of pupils in as many schools as possible' (Taylor, 2006: 1–2). Although we would point out, from the analysis of our own data, that the key factor is social mixing rather than social mix. We can see the democratic and communitarian possibilities of comprehensive schooling, where children of different class and ethnic cultures actually mix and become friends, in Avril Smart's words:

There is definitely something about producing a different kind of middle class child. This is a speculation but I think there is definitely something about not being arrogant or not appearing arrogant. There is some kind of modesty that some people might see as them not being confident, read as lack of confidence. I think it is a sort of modesty. You are not being educated to be a woman of the world; you are being educated to take your part, a place. But I think that is one of the most important things. And an openness and also I think it is an understanding of others you can only have if you are sort of with them all the time. It is something to learn of other cultures, but to actually learn with other cultures, of other cultures, it is a completely different thing . . . and that can only come through comprehensive schooling.

Avril articulates strong democratic aspirations for her children and the possibilities of achieving these through comprehensive schooling. However, practices of attending the same schools as class and ethnic others whilst maintaining a safe distance from them both through structural arrangements of setting, streaming and gifted and talented, and the personal cultivation of distinction through social distancing, constitutes a weak form of openness to difference.

Conclusion

There is a key distinction between the domain of the ethic of care (Fraser, 1997) obtaining in relation to people who have a strong personal attachment or dependence and the domain of social justice. It is perfectly natural and understandable to make a distinction between the welfare of one's own children and those of others. In Honneth's terms (1995) they involve different kinds of recognition. It is important to acknowledge this care-justice distinc-

tion as legitimate and to distinguish it from the differential treatment of one's own class from other classes. However, this distinction is over-determined for most of the parents by attitudes and behaviours that make additional distinctions on class grounds.

Contemporary research, which examines middle class relationships to the public sector, indicates that normative middle class practices are increasingly underpinned by elite separatism rather than public welfarism. A selfish individualism has become hegemonic among the white middle classes, exacerbated by growing privatisation, consumerism and the market culture (Ball, 2003; Brantlinger, 2003). Our research focuses on those middle classes who think and act otherwise in order to uncover some of the commitments and investments that might make for a renewed and reinvigorated democratic citizenry. The parents in the study stand out against normative white middle class practices because, for the most part, they do not choose 'the best' schools for their children. Rather, they choose schools they feel are 'good enough'. It is this acceptance of 'good enough' that marks out these families from those who 'play the market'. They are choosing not to use their privilege as much as they might. Yet, as Byrne (2006) argues, the desire for multiculturalism and cultural diversity might be in conflict with other desires for their children's experiences of schooling, such as stability, security and educational success.

Attempting to live an egalitarian lifestyle in a society, which is structurally unequal, is difficult, conflictual and tension laden (Sayer, 2005). It is vital to recognise the relations of distance, power and conflict that living with difference is embedded in. As Anne-Marie Fortier (2007: 111) argues 'the illusion of tolerance with multicultural intimacy is that power relations and conflicts will be somehow suspended through intimacy, and that the distance and hierarchy between those who tolerate and those who are tolerated will dissolve'. As our research demonstrates, living in the same neighbourhoods and going to school with class and ethnic others rarely dissolves distance and hierarchy. As Byrne (2006: 120) found, openness to difference and multiculturalism fitted into general liberal desires for freedom, creativity and friendliness, but only as long as there was not too much difference.

While a significant minority of the parents feel passionately about local community and comprehensive schooling with a strong sense, as one father asserted, that those who are more privileged should be engaged in 'the giving back side of things', giving back and a concern with civic renewal was not on the agenda of most of these white middle class parents. While we have found a great deal of commitment, we also found more troubling aspects of white middle class investments in inner city comprehensives. There was more self-interest than altruism and a superficial endorsement of social mix rather than any actual commitment to social mixing. Like Stephen Ball (2003: 142) we found that, 'there are lines to be drawn within social diversity and there are limits to community and social mixing'. Although this is far removed from the élitist and narrow version of citizenship of the socially isolationist, exclusive

and excluding white middle classes that both Butler and Giddens write about, it is also miles away from egalitarian notions of democratic citizenry.

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