

Choice, what choice?

Introduction

The focus on the question of choice in both policy and rhetoric around schooling can suggest that the parent or carer is king or queen of the process who should have the power to decide on the school their children attend. As we saw in Chapter 1, the neo-liberal concept of choice as an automatic ‘good’, with the parent as an individualistic and rational consumer for their child, has been a driving logic in education policy since the 1980s. Yet, as we discussed in Chapter 2, admission to schooling is generally tied to geography in terms of nearness to school being a criterion of admission as well as the practicalities of a child attending a school which is far from where they live. Much of the geography of choice is, of course, mediated by classed and racialised geographies and the level of income of the parents, as well as sometimes being dependent on the employment situation of one or both parents. Thus, as we have seen in the previous chapter, one process of choosing a school, for those who can, is to move into an area which has a desirable school or choice of schools in it. In many cases, the process of choosing the ‘right’ area is a socially structured, relational and affective process. Areas and schools are assessed in similar ways, raising similar questions for parents: do they have people living in them whom I feel comfortable with? Would I like my children to grow up and be educated with the children of these people? This process can include judgements about the wider social and political values held by people living in the area and is highly classed and raced. Being comfortable in an area is a result of a mixture of values, consumption patterns and an affective sense of ease which is both racialised and classed (Ahmed 2004a, Thrift 2004, Nayak 2010). It also carries with it memories of the parents’ own schooling – these feelings could be summoned up quite viscerally: as

Choice, what choice?

one mother put it, trying to work out what was best for her child was 'like me being back in secondary school on my first day with my little map in hand'.

Where you live and where your children go to school are both intimately linked to identity. The school you send your child to (as with where you live) will play a role in shaping who your child becomes. They both also say something about you as a person (Cucchiara and Horvat 2014). The middle-class mothers of Maud Perrier's study (Perrier 2012) engaged in an anxious 'concerted cultivation' of their children's education (Lareau 2003). They are haunted by the spectre of both 'bad' mothers, who do not demonstrate sufficient interest in their children's schooling and development, and the 'overly pushy' middle-class mothers who do too much (Perrier 2012: 658). This chapter considers some of these anxieties in the process of choosing. It considers what it means to be offered a choice – or indeed be required to go through a process of choosing – yet to have few actual choices available. Chris Taylor argues that 'there now exists a mosaic of different educational markets, where the two key components of the reforms, choice and diversity, are unevenly distributed' (Taylor 2001: 368). For many parents, the experience is in part an 'unresourced choice' (Adams 2006) as they feel they are at the poorer end of this distribution. This chapter explores parents' experience of navigating this mosaic. As Chapter 2 set out, in Cheadle Hulme parents were more likely to say that schooling options had been part of their decision to move into the area – often from relatively local areas. This was often a specific decision to move away from schools with the 'wrong' kind of children in it. In Chorlton, by contrast, respondents had often moved to the area before having children. They had been attracted by the presence in the area of like-minded people (as well as, as we shall see in the following chapter, enough of and the right kind of 'mix'). In Whalley Range, there was less of a sense of agency described in coming to the area – although many welcomed what the area had to offer – particularly in terms of green spaces, local South Asian grocery shops and mosques which made them feel part of a community. The connection between school and area was less a part of the explicit decision-making process for some of the parents in Whalley Range (as we will discuss further in this chapter).

This chapter will examine the almost universal complaint by participants in the research that there is 'no choice' at the heart of school choice. It will track how the policy that parents should choose

All in the mix

schools for their children produces a feeling of lack, both in terms of there being no ‘acceptable’ choices available and in the assumption, if there is only one school to choose from, there must be something wrong with it. Here we might see them as the neurotic citizen that Isin describes who ‘governs itself through responses to anxieties and uncertainties’, responding to a wider affect structure (Isin 2004: 223). The chapter will then explore parents’ considerations of selective schooling – in terms of non-state private fee-paying schools and state selective education in the form of grammar schools (and some academies). The chapter will argue that, as with other elements of school choice, there are distinct local discourses at play. For some Whalley Range and Chorlton parents who were Muslim, the question of private schooling was mostly focused on the merits of Islamic education whilst for others there were political or ethical objections to selective education. In Cheadle Hulme, parents tended to be more sympathetic to both private and grammar schools, but worried nonetheless about whether their children would fit into these affluent middle-class contexts which were characterised by high cultural and social capital. Drawing on a more detailed case study of a mother from Cheadle Hulme, the chapter will argue that research which considers only the experiences of professional middle-class respondents fails to capture the anxiety around school choices of working-class parents who also invest a great deal of energy in navigating the ‘mosaic’ of school choice. It will also examine the gendered nature of parents’ involvement in education. However, the following section sets the context for these affective processes of choice by examining the ways in which parents considered the choices (or in particular what they saw as the lack of choice) they were presented with as their children moved to secondary schooling.

‘Not a choice at all’

The parents in all three areas were largely agreed that the idea of ‘choosing’ schools was often a fairly empty idea with choice being strictly limited (Raveaud and van Zanten 2007). This contradicted policy rhetoric around the question of education, where emphasis is put on parental choice. Thus Meredith, in Cheadle Hulme, was disappointed in this discovery: ‘I was just under the impression that parents had more of an input into the school that the child goes to.’ Her experience was that: ‘I can only send him to a school that he can

Choice, what choice?

get to and there's only two schools he can get to. So you don't really get a choice.' For Fiona in Chorlton, the choice seemed even more restricted:

I think there's really only one choice for children in Chorlton and it's the only one they get in. Unless you are – want to go to a faith school. For boys anyway, because there's the Queen's Road High School for girls but obviously he's not going to get in there. [...] I don't feel I've got a choice. There's only one school you'll get in.

There were other schools which Fiona could have realistically expected her son to get into (for instance a boys' only school and an academy). Both of these schools were situated further away from where she lived, with a more working-class and ethnically mixed demographic and were generally less well regarded than Parkside High. It seems that, for Fiona, as with almost all the parents we spoke to in Chorlton, these schools represent non-choices which have been already ruled out before serious consideration is given to the choice of available schools. Nonetheless, both Fiona and Meredith were suggesting that they had been sold the concept of choice which then wasn't available. Choice suggests that a decision will need to be made between viable options and, for both these parents, this did not feel like a real 'resourced' choice (Cahill and Hall 2014). At the same time, many families had enacted choice much earlier in the process – before the filling in of local authority forms – in decisions to stay in, or move to, particular areas, as discussed in Chapter 2. Yet, choice and control over where to live was available only to those with the means to move and the knowledge that where they lived would determine the schools their children went to. In the previous chapter, Samer is quoted as explaining how, because he had come only relatively recently from Iraq, he had not realised that moving into an area was effectively choosing his children's schooling. This was just one of the ways in which the landscape of choice was particularly difficult for migrants to navigate (Byrne and De Tona 2012).

Despite these differences in abilities to control the relationship between residence and schooling, the account of having 'no choice' was almost universal in the interviews, with a large number of interviewees expressing frustration that they were being asked to exercise choice between a very restricted number of options. Cliff, a white NHS manager living in Chorlton, saw this limited choice as part of a financial policy which reduced the number of secondary schools:

All in the mix

We don't have a choice. No you don't have any choice if [...] everybody is clearly going to want the best local school [...] I think one of the things that's gone wrong is that, in order to make financial efficiencies, you tend to have a smaller number of very large secondary schools now with big distances in between them. And that cuts down choice because basically everyone wants to go to that one and then the next good one is so far away you can't get into it, you can't get into it. Whereas, when you had a larger number of slightly smaller high schools, then you had more choice didn't you? You might then have lived in a place where there were a couple of schools nearby that were acceptable but I don't think most people live anywhere like that now.

In the phrase 'that were acceptable' we see the possibility that, before making his 'choice', Cliff has already disregarded some schools that his son could potentially get into as 'unacceptable' – i.e. ruled out before a choice is made. Nonetheless, the tendency for secondary schools to get larger, and therefore choice to be more limited in any particular area, was noted by several respondents and is borne out by historical trends which have seen a reduction in school numbers and a corresponding increase in the average size of secondary schools (Bolton 2012). Thus the rhetoric of school choice, and the increasing attention given to it by policy and media, has coincided with a narrowing of options for many parents. It was this paradox which some parents explicitly criticised. Kelly was a white teacher from Chorlton who was perhaps drawing on professional knowledge to criticise the discourse of choice:

So I think it's misleading in some ways to tell you that you have such a big choice. [...] I think it's just some daft government thing to make people feel empowered or, I don't, I think it's just getting more and more complicated 'cause you've got you know, sort of academy schools and comprehensive schools and grammar schools and private schools and church schools and they're all funded slightly differently and it gets increasingly difficult to then compare them properly doesn't it?

The experiences of Cliff and Kelly highlight how education policy in the last two or three decades has produced a proliferation of different *kinds* of schools, not necessarily *more* schools, which made processes of choosing more complicated for parents and does not make them feel, in Kelly's word, 'empowered' to choose positively. Thus school choice is made in an affective context where parents are given the responsibility to make a choice, but in an environment where it does

Choice, what choice?

not feel like choices are available, thus producing anxiety and potentially a feeling of failure as a parent.

For some, this perception of not being able to exercise real choice because of a lack of alternatives led to a potential devaluation of the school in question. As Sara explained:

It's not like oh I've chosen Parkside High because I think it's the most amazing, fantastic school. I've chosen it because, well it's not a choice, well it is a choice, but I've chosen it 'cause that's the school, that is the only school [laughs] really that I think is via ... you know, in, in the area. (Sara, white student, formerly social worker, living in Chorlton)

Rather than making positive choices for schools they wanted their children to go to, parents often ended up feeling that what they were doing was accepting the school that was most available as 'good enough'. As mentioned above, this sense that there was only one possible school did in fact reflect implicit choices where other potential schools were ruled out of consideration.

Some parents, who framed inclusion in the 'local' or 'community' in a positive way and articulated a desire for their children to go to the 'local' school, found it easier to accept what was available. As Rebecca, a white local government officer from Chorlton, explained: 'it's about them being where their friends go, being somewhere they can walk to, being somewhere that's part of the local community'. As we shall see in Chapter 5, many parents (particularly in Chorlton) put a particular value on their children going to school which they saw as part of, and representative of (in terms of ethnic and, to a lesser extent, class 'mix'), the 'local'. Where the interviewees had stayed in an area in which one or both of the parents had grown up, there could also be a sense of familiarity and ease in the school choice. Jen, a white shopworker in Cheadle Hulme, explained that her son was going to go to his father's high school: 'Martin went, you know my husband, he went to that school and he was sort of quite happy there and I think he's always assumed that Josh would just go there'.

Whereas, as we shall see below, for some parents this kind of assumption might have been countered by the 'non-local' parent, here Jen presents this as something she is happy with. Although, at this point in the interview, Jen produces a narrative on not really choosing, this is not to say that she did not make a series of choices around her children's schooling. Jen explained that the family had moved from the area she'd grown up in because she wanted to avoid a

All in the mix

particular high school. The move was required because of an effective narrowing of available options:

Well when I went to school there was a lot more sort of secondary schools. Now there isn't is there? So erm, when I, I suppose when I was going to school yeah there was, there was probably about six you could choose from.

There were others whose experiences of local schools left them more determined not to send their children to the school in question. Pam, an African-Caribbean midwife whose child went to school in Chorlton but lived in Whalley Range, explained how one school 'just wouldn't be on the list' of possible schools for her children as 'I went to the predecessor of that school and that was rubbish'.

Thus, as this chapter has shown, some parents were able to present the process of applying for a school for their children as relatively straightforward and stress-free due to an acceptance of, or accommodation with, a narrowing of choice. However, they were in the minority of cases as, for many others, the responsibility of choosing the right school for their children (perhaps particularly where the available choices were limited) was experienced as very stressful (this will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this chapter, considering the experience of Natalie). The next section will address one possible choice available (to those who can afford it) – that of opting out of the state system and trying to get into a private school, or, alternatively, pursuing selective state education in the form of a grammar school. As the section will show, the selective education system raises political and ethical questions for parents (as well as involving overcoming financial and academic barriers). Such choices are also influenced by class and questions of lifestyle and consumption, as well as summoning up memories of the respondents themselves passing or failing the Eleven-plus and the impact it had on their own educational biographies.

Selective education

A key way in which choice is driven by class and economic income is through private provision.¹ There were some differences between the parents or carers in the three areas as to how they approached the question of both private and state selective education. As might be expected, this is partly driven by income and geography (in terms of

Choice, what choice?

the proximity to grammar schools in particular). But it also indicates differing local discourses in response to both private and state selective education. This section explores these local differences in considering private and selective education showing how, in Chorlton, many parents produced a clear ethical or political response to private education and to children receiving different education because of their parents' ability to pay. Many also opposed selective grammar schools on a similar basis, given the use of tutoring to help children pass the Eleven-plus. These objections sometimes also extended to a questioning of what actually represented a 'better' education. In Cheadle Hulme, although many said that they could not afford to send their children to private schools, they tended to have a less overtly hostile attitude to the concept of private schooling. However, even within this relatively positive approach, some of the parents in Cheadle Hulme also raised questions of social justice and also asked whether private school would be the right place for their children if they could not keep up with their peers materially. The parents in Whalley Range fall somewhere between the other two in terms of their responses to questions around private schooling, but generally had less knowledge about the difference between private and state and less strong views overall. However, as we shall explore below, some of the Muslim parents in both Chorlton and Whalley Range had considered sending, or indeed sent, their children to private schools. We argue that school choice needs to be understood relationally and as experienced in particular affective contexts. People's attitudes to schools and the choices available to them are influenced by others around them – from the intimate space of the family to discourses circulating in the local area, the school gates around pick-up times and wider media coverage. We will also discuss how educational choices can be shaped by individuals' own experiences of schooling – especially in the case of those who had attended grammar schools. The impact of some of these choices on parents' friendships will also be explored. The following section examines the views of those parents who had considered private Islamic education for their children.

Private Islamic education

Four of the parents interviewed (three living in Chorlton and one in Whalley Range) had sent their children (often the eldest child and not necessarily the one about to apply to high school) to private

All in the mix

Islamic schools, either locally or for boarding. These Islamic schools generally cost about a third of the amount for the local private schools in Manchester and Stockport. The parents' reasons for sending children to Islamic private schools were largely about wanting to ensure that their children learnt more than the 'basics' of Islam. They also included concerns about mixed-sex education beyond primary level and the risk of children 'letting go of Islamic values' (Nasreen). Some of these respondents had sent their first child to an Islamic private school but realised that they could not afford to pay fees for all their children and had therefore returned to state education for their younger children.

Shahida's son went to a local private Islamic school for boys. She suggested that this was largely because 'my husband wanted to' and her in-laws influenced the decision even though they were in Pakistan (we will discuss the gendered process of decision-making later in this chapter). The fees for the school were being paid by her father-in-law. However, it was too expensive to send her daughters to a private school also, so she had applied for the local girls' state school. Whilst the school being single-sex was very important to Shahida, her husband and his family, she also asserted that she 'wants more' for her girls 'to go to college, university, be something'. She now thought that:

In some ways it's better that they have gone there [state primary school], that they've seen things in a different way, in a different light, that they've seen things other than just being cocooned in a Muslim school. And they've been able to interact with other Muslims and non-Muslims. [...] So in a way I'm glad that they've actually gone to a non-Muslim school now. Because things have changed. Your views [change] over fifteen years because things have changed, the world has changed, hasn't it? And these are the next generation, these are the ones that are going to grow up and have to go in the big wide world and get jobs and work and interact, so in a way, I think I'm glad that they've gone there.

Here Shahida is presenting a version of the discourse of mix and exposure to difference (Byrne 2006a) that we will explore more in Chapter 5. However it is also tied in with reservations about mixed-gender education and the possible threat that that might pose to her children. For Shahida, whose husband is away in Pakistan, teenage daughters in particular are a heavy responsibility.

Choice, what choice?

Not all Muslim parents wanted to send their children to Islamic schools. Sadia, who taught in a mosque, also explained how her brother had regretted his choice to send his daughter to an Islamic girls' school in Bolton, as this meant that she was required to do a long, tiring daily journey. Saira, who had considered an Islamic school for her children, decided against sending her children there: 'I would rather have my kid in a state school [...] because it's a mix of different cultures, different religions, that's the thing.' Similarly Samer, an Iraqi living in Whalley Range who felt socially isolated from the Pakistanis who lived nearby, explained that he saw religion as a 'private matter' and so did not want his son to go to an Islamic school. Whilst the question of religious schooling raises particular questions for parents which relate to family dynamics and their relationship to their religious identity and to community, the following section considers parents' responses to other forms of private schooling and shows, in particular, the area-specific nature of discourses around private schooling.

Going private

Samer, as we have seen, was uncomfortable with the idea of Islamic schools; he had also considered sending his son to a non-Islamic private school but couldn't afford the fees. He thought that a system based on ability to pay was unfair: 'if you are rich you can put your children in a better starting point in life, you know, because I pay taxes'. Here he is making an ethical claim to fairness which should be achieved through the tax system and publicly funded schools. You could also argue that, through his assertion that he pays taxes, he is making a claim for belonging and rights within the UK (see Byrne 2014). Samer's son was sitting the Eleven-plus for entrance to the nearest grammar school (which will be discussed further in the next section), but he regretted that he had decided not to get private tuition for his son: 'I didn't believe in it, I thought I could teach him, I could prepare him, you know.' Samer's son went to school in Chorlton, and Samer was not alone in this context in providing a critique of selective education. It is perhaps unsurprising that some parents in Chorlton, a generally left-leaning area of Manchester, had quite strong views about private education. The only interviewee in Chorlton or Whalley Range who was currently considering a private education for their children who were about to finish primary school

All in the mix

was a parent intending to send their child to an Islamic school.² Opposition to private education was explained by Kelly, a teacher, and Cliff, who worked in the NHS (both are white):

We don't really believe in private education. I don't think it's ... I don't know, I think if you're part of the community, it's important to go to the community [school]. (Kelly)

From an ideological perspective [...] I don't agree with private education because people's wealth already gives people an enormous advantage and if you're eager then to buy a bespoke education it just feels uncomfortable. (Cliff)

However, Cliff's partner Ann interjected: 'but you would use it if the alternative was appalling', to which Cliff conceded: 'if the alternative was appalling, yeah, absolutely, yeah, of course yeah'. Here we sense some of the struggle behind certain school choices, where parents might find themselves in contexts which might lead them to go against beliefs which make up part of their sense of self as individuals and as parents (see Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) for an example of this). These choices and beliefs can also lead to a sense of important fault lines between people. Fiona, a white freelance project manager, explained how she differed from some of her friendship groups:³

I've got lots of friend that'll fight tooth and nail, some without question, haven't even considered the local high schools. They've just paid for them to go to private schools. We're just different in that way.

Here she sees herself as 'just different in that way' from others, presumably white middle classes, in a way that fitted into Fiona's sense of living in Chorlton as discussed in Chapter 2. Here, not trying to get one's child into a private school is presented as a positive choice which was bound into her relational view of herself and her family. Fiona's sense of relaxation about her position was not shared by all. Pam, a single-parent midwife who had come from Jamaica as a child, described a feeling of exclusion for herself and her children from the opportunities that fee-paying parents achieved for their children:

Everyone would like their child to go to a private school. It's the best start in life really if you had the finances but it's just not possible. [...] It's like, it's almost like a closed system to those who haven't got the finances to even step beyond the door. It's like it's a different world altogether. [...] You see I'm not going to win the Lottery tomorrow and if

Choice, what choice?

I had all the money in the world I'd send the kids to private school but it's not gonna happen.

For Pam, the inability to send her child to a private school was perhaps part of a more general feeling of exclusion what she saw as a 'different world altogether'.

Ken, a white courier living in Chorlton, shared Pam's conviction of the superiority of private education. He explained how, because of the underfunding of public services, a state-educated child 'cannot compete with fee-paying children' whose parents will make bigger demands on the school because they are paying so much for their children's education. Ken sets out a market-logic in schooling in which it would be safely assumed that the best education would be received by those who could pay for the best, leaving those without sufficient resources automatically given an inferior education and their parents feeling a sense of exclusion.

In Whalley Range, there was a relatively unusual situation where a former private school had been converted into an academy under New Labour in 2007. This was also a potential school for children from Chorlton and other areas as only a small proportion of decisions on admissions were based on distance from home to school. This school's reputation was shaped by its former fee-paying status, which was enhanced for visitors to the school on the open days by the original Victorian wood-panelled building and assembly hall, the academic-gowned sixth-formers who greeted visitors and the army cadets who displayed their military kit in the dining room. As Helen (a black British teaching assistant who lived in Whalley Range) explained, 'because it was a fee-paying school, I assumed that they [the students] had a positive attitude to learning'. Here we see that the benefits on offer from a private schooling may be not so much the facilities on offer but a sense of a better kind of fellow pupil. Class is rarely mentioned in parents' accounts, but it is clear that partly what is being bought is a disposition of *both* other parents and their children. Cindy, a white social worker living in Chorlton, explained why she was so keen for her child to go to this school, which spells out these assumptions:

And I kind of felt, and so did Mark [partner], that obviously there are still going to be children in that school up until like last week who were fee-paying children, do you know what I mean? So I kind of – sounds a bit kind of wrong this but in some respects I think, you

All in the mix

know, education's really important and I just thought possibly parents (not that I could have ever afforded it) who are willing to pay fifteen thousand pounds a year to put their child through education are going to have like some kind of mentality, ethos, about their child's academic learning.

Cindy expresses a feeling of guilt about this preference to have her child surrounded by richer parents. She worries that it 'sounds a bit kind of wrong' and stresses that this is a considered choice on behalf of her children: 'education's really important'. This is, perhaps, a suggestion that, although following a fee-paying – or pseudo-fee-paying route – might clash with some of her values, this could be justified because of the importance of education. There is also perhaps feeling that these are altruistic choices, made on behalf of her children, rather than for herself.

In some sense, the prospect of a school which looked and felt like a fee-paying institution seemed to destabilise some of the choice-making of the local area in Whalley Range and Chorlton. This was not helped by the uncertainties caused by this school's admissions criteria in which only had a small proportion of decisions were based on catchment area. This uncertainty in Chorlton and Whalley Range was also fuelled by the possibility of applying for admission to state selective education in the form of grammar schools in the neighbouring local authority area – this will be discussed in the following section. Nonetheless, there were some exceptions to the idea that private was always best. Whilst many parents took for granted that private fee-paying schools would offer a superior education for all children, Michael, a white company manager living in Chorlton, cautioned against the assumption that every child would benefit from going to a private school with high academic standards:

It suits some kids and not some others. We have seen, we've got friends and they put their kids through [a prominent local private, fee-paying school] and they've come out with really poor results, really poor. [...] A lot of people, a lot of parents think their kids are incredibly intelligent and they are not. Unfortunately, they are not and they cannot accept that. And that doesn't mean that you can't make them better, and they can do well, but not everyone is a genius in this world.

Despite his apparent hesitation about fee-paying education as better for all, Michael still suggested an implicit hierarchy where the most 'intelligent' children would be better served in private schools.

Choice, what choice?

Whilst the general consensus in Chorlton was against private education, in Cheadle Hulme it was possible to detect a different local discourse around school choice and the private/state difference from the parents' accounts. Rachel, a white student nurse and single mother, explained that she was not considering a private school for her child. Nonetheless she expressed the pressure she felt at pick-up times from after-school activities:

I think, see in Cheadle Hulme there's a lot of private schools as well, so in Cheadle Hulme it's quite: 'what school do you go to?' and you say: 'Cheadle Hulme' and they go: 'oh the private one' and then you go: 'no the other one' and they go: 'oh'. Just like the way some people ..., but I think you can be educated just as well in one, I just think maybe the discipline, because they have to be paid for your child to go, they do a lot more with them.

This is a very different account of the school-gate or other parental discussions as represented by parents either from Chorlton or from Whalley Range. However, Rachel also expresses more equivocation about the inherent superiority of private schools. In Cheadle Hulme, five parents (out of a total of 19) had entered their children for exams for entrance to fee-paying schools and several more expressed having thought very seriously about the idea of applying to a private school. Several had also sent their children to private tuition in order to support their learning and/or prepare for entrance exams. The anxiety around this issue can be felt in Sharon's account. Sharon, a white single parent working in the public sector, acknowledges that there might be social justice questions around private education, but she presents private schooling as a way of providing her daughter with a better education than she had herself:

I'm not saying it's right, I'm not saying it's wrong but I, and I feel that every child should have the opportunity. I don't think it's fair that they don't but I do believe that private education, I just [feel] right down to my core [it] is the best education they can have. You know, it's – it's – it's, oh I don't, I don't even know. I'm not so educated myself that I know how to express it all, and obviously I want better for, for, for Rose [...] I feel like the – the – the ... there's an overall; the – the teachers are more enthusiastic to educate, the children that go there seem to be a – a better thing of child, they're not as disruptive. I'm not saying that, that you – that you – you don't get naughty disruptive but I don't think it's allowed as much in a private school, it would be dealt with a lot quicker.

All in the mix

That child would be removed than they would in a State school. I just think everything is dealt with as a whole in these schools in a much better way.

As with Rachel above, discipline becomes a key marker of what a private school has to offer. In both their accounts, there is perhaps a suggestion that what lies behind this improved discipline is the *exclusion* of the wrong kind of child (who possibly has the wrong kind of parents). However, Sharon expresses a sense of her uncertainty and feelings of inadequacy faced with questions around education. The hesitation she expresses may partly root from the sense that she is treading in difficult ethical terrain, particularly when describing the qualities of other children. But yet she is presenting the narrative that the most important element that a fee-paying education provides is not so much physical and pedagogical resources but other children with the right dispositions, as much as academic ability. Sharon also makes clear the extent to which the desire to get the 'best' education requires both financial costs and a daily effort to ensure that her daughter will become the 'disciplined' child who will not only pass the entrance exam but also be able to perform the role of the ideal student:

For the last year she's being going to a private tutor. She goes once a week, but then I sit, we have all the work that he sends home and I sit and do all that with her. She hates that part of it, but I make her do homework every night as a structured thing in the house, she has some kind of homework. If she finishes, she does different things, she does a bit of dancing, and she does karate. [...] She doesn't like it, but I know that their, their homework regime is going to be very high standards at this next school, if she gets there. So I'm kind of trying to get her used to it now. So but she does go to a tutor, once a week, and I do as much at home with her, on top of that as I can.

In Cheadle Hulme, several of the children in the school were applying for admission to private schools. This, and the fact that some teachers promoted private or selective education, prompted others to think of it more seriously, and face the possible reality that they couldn't afford the fees. Melanie, a white beauty therapist working in Cheadle Hulme, explained that a teacher at the school had suggested that her son would do very well at private school. As she couldn't afford the full fees, if she wanted her son to go to private school he would have to apply for a bursary, which also seemed out of reach:

Choice, what choice?

One of the ladies that comes into the salon, she works at [a local fee-paying school] and she was telling me about an open day there and I think it was like, I mean don't quote me because this is completely a load of rubbish, but as an example maybe for every three thousand children that apply for a bursary maybe only, I don't know, five actually get one, so they've got to be the best of the best.

Alongside the unreachability of private schooling, Melanie, in common with several other parents in all three areas, worried about whether her son would be made to feel different in private schooling because he did not come from a wealthy family:

And I thought about it and actually thought, 'Well even if he did get through, I don't [think] it'd be fair to him because I don't think you could, we personally, could give him the lifestyle that the other kids would have'. [...] Like your house and you know if he's used to mixing with children from a private school and they're all from massive houses and they've got unlimited money and the school trips are costing hundreds and hundreds of pounds, we couldn't afford to compete on that level could we?

This led her to criticise inequality in the schooling system:

And I don't think, and I don't think that's fair, I mean [...] the lady I work with, her son goes to [a prominent fee-paying school] and it is a different life, and Jack, her child, has been to a private primary school and he's completely different to my kids, no disrespect to either of them but they are, they're worlds apart.

She went on to describe what she saw as the cultural or 'lifestyle' difference, or what Bourdieu might call *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991, see Chapter 1) between her own state-educated children and the boy from the private school. This included his eating practices: 'Taylor and Nancy would want pizza and chips, whereas he would be ordering sushi.' The boy in question acted 'like a mini-adult and all he wants to do is have a debate with you'. In the end, she felt that her son would 'probably be happier with people like him[self]' rather than those so different. Melanie's concerns reflect an awareness of a set of different cultural practices, and embodied cultural capital, which mean that if her son went to private school he would face a need to learn a whole new way of being, which was not necessarily conducive to his happiness.

As with Melanie, another parent in Cheadle Hulme had been encouraged by the headteacher of the primary school to consider

All in the mix

selective education for her daughter, including applying for a bursary for the local private school. Natalie, a white office worker (whose account we shall discuss in more detail below) described herself as 'tied up in knots' about the schooling decision. She was also concerned about what it would be like for her daughter to be surrounded by children with many more material resources:

If other children are coming from very affluent financial background and then you've got Grace that we're struggling [...] we're scrimping and saving in order to pay to give her that sort of education. [...] children will take any opportunity to pick on another child: 'where did you go for your holidays?' 'we went, you know, to Wales in our caravan. Where did you go?' 'I went to the Maldives darling, for six weeks!'

Thus parents have not only to navigate their own affectual responses to schooling and school choice but also to imagine how their children will cope in the different contexts. Natalie's daughter had weekly private tuition and she describes being reassured by a tutor that there were many other parents who were equally conflicted about their decisions: 'He said "I've got other parents that one day they think this, the next day they think that."' Annette, who had a very academically able son, described how she had 'sleepless nights' over the decision of whether to send her son to a private school (which her husband favoured). The question of whether or not to send him to a private school had become a matter of debate in her wider family. Her sisters pushed her one way – 'just send him to the local school' – whereas her brother thought he should be sent to a private school because he was 'exceptionally bright'. This pulled her in two different directions: 'you just feel like an awful mother. You know, am I doing the right thing? So it was really, really difficult.' Here we see some of the pressures on parents, but perhaps particularly mothers (as we shall see in a following section), where others' perceptions of whether they were making the right choices for their children could position them as an 'awful mother' with all the social sanction that that label could imply. For Annette, a key part of the decision was to think of the impact this would have on her elder daughter who was already at a state high school:

She already – she quite often says oh, I feel like I'm the younger sister 'cause he's so much brighter than – it's obvious to her that he's brighter than her. She asks him things and he's two years younger than her. So I thought if we were to actually isolate him more and put him into a

Choice, what choice?

private school, it would make her confidence – she hasn't got a lot of confidence anyway and it would reduce her confidence level more.

As we shall see below, the question of the impact on siblings of failing to follow their older siblings into selective education was also raised by parents in discussing grammar school education.

Being made to feel 'poor' and the impact on siblings were not the only reservations that parents had in considering private schooling. Several also expressed opposition to the social selection that fee-paying schools necessarily involved. Meredith, a white working-class woman who lived in Cheadle Hulme, had considered the most local private high school. But she worried that her son might stick out 'for having a K reg car, that kind of thing'. But she also raised the question of what her son might miss by not going to a school with more of a social mix:

I'm not into snobbery and stuff so I think it's good that all schools get a mixture of people because otherwise, that's what life is isn't it, a mixture of people so if you're only used to one type of person, it's not preparing you for the real world.

Meredith is expressing an idea that the cultural capital offered in private schools might be too narrow (or even outdated). This echoes some of the findings of Reay et al. (2011) where middle-class white parents making 'against the grain' choices to send their children to inner-city high schools hoped that exposure to this 'cosmopolitan' mix would help their children in the 'real world'. Emily, a white local council worker, also felt that private schooling was not necessarily a good preparation for life.

There was a time we talked about the private school. I said no because maybe they've got better facilities, but I've seen people who go to ... And again, it's only what you see with your own eyes. They come out and think that they're sort of better than everybody else. You know, it happened to me [...] The girl round the corner, Heather, went to [a local private school], and actually, we both came out with the same number of GCSEs. She just came out with a real chip on her shoulder and thought the world owed her a debt of gratitude because she was elite, superior. And actually, do you know what? She wasn't. It was just because her mum and dad had a big bank balance and nothing more.

It could be argued that both Emily and Meredith, who would be very unlikely to be able to afford private schooling for their children, might

All in the mix

also be shaping these discourses as a defence against the hurt in not being able to offer your children what is considered 'the best' which Pam described above. Yet this concern about private school education providing too narrow a social experience was also expressed by other parents. Samantha, a white nurse living in Cheadle Hulme, explained:

Some children, you know, go to a private school and they come out with lots of exam results but socially they're not able to make good social relationships with other people. And lead a, you know, a full social side of their life and that would be just as bad I think as coming out of school with you know poor qualifications.

For Stan, a waiter living in Cheadle Hulme who had migrated as a young adult from China, this construction of a narrow social group in private schools also had an ethical element:

If I put my kids into private school then does that mean that I'm teaching her to don't mix friends with a state school? Right so I think it's very wrong. [...] And I feel that a lot of kids go to private school, they feel that they are very special, right? Especially with England. English kids or whoever kids go to private school, they really, really believe that their classification is higher than anybody else. Under the circumstance I feel that it is not a good way of educate my kids and I'm a foreigner and I have – I have no intention to bring up my kid being prejudice in their mind to start off with. So she will be doing state school with everybody else. [...] Right and that's – that's fair.

Stan identifies a classed element to English national culture, although he went on to argue that this was shared (or adopted) by many others in the Chinese diaspora living in Manchester – an approach to class and education which he rejected.

This section has shown that there were different discourses circulating in the different areas about private education. For some, notably those living in Chorlton, the question of private education raised political and ethical issues which shaped the way they spoke about the sector and how they saw themselves in relation to parents who would pay for private education. For others, their inability to pay the private fees meant their children were automatically ruled out for financial reasons from what they assumed to be a superior form of education. At the same time, they harboured doubts as to whether their children would in any case be happy in a setting where the other children would be so different from themselves. For most of the

Choice, what choice?

respondents, grammar schools⁴ do offer a form of selective education which is (largely) not based on financial status. The following section will discuss how, just as earlier experiences of schools in an area can influence parents' perceptions, the respondents' own experience in different sectors within the educational landscape sometimes shaped their views of the available choices, particularly in relation to grammar schools.

Selective education: grammar schools

None of the three areas in which the parents lived had selective grammar schools.⁵ However, in all three areas, it was possible to apply for admission to the selective state grammar schools in the neighbouring authority of Trafford – although this would require a longer journey to school for their children. The journeys involved were perhaps most feasible from Chorlton and, to a lesser extent, Whalley Range and Cheadle Hulme. Thus it was in Chorlton that the question of selective state education was a particularly contested topic. It is also interesting that it is with reference to discussing grammar schools that the question of the parents' own educational experience seems to have the most direct impact. For those interviewees who had sat the Eleven-plus⁶ and therefore either been (or failed to go) to grammar schools, this pass or fail provided a linchpin on which educational narratives would pivot. As Reay et al. (2011: 38) found in their study, educational choices as parents were often shaped by a person's own experience of education – although this would vary between those who were seeking to avoid their children experiencing what they had done, and those who sought to replicate it. Cliff, a white NHS manager living in Chorlton, explained how he had failed the Eleven-plus in the early 1970s and went to a secondary modern school which 'basically was a holding place for people who had failed the Eleven-plus. There was no expectation that anybody would come out with any proper qualifications.' Before discussing the question of his preferences for his son he stated:

It might be worth noting that I am ideologically opposed [to] sending my children to a Trafford school because they still make a distinction between grammar schools and secondary schools. Which I absolutely ideologically oppose. [...] Well it's just mad, you know. Everyone talks about how good grammar school is but nobody actually ever talks about the other schools where people who failed the Eleven-plus go to and

All in the mix

generally they're poor schools. Schools and where people don't flourish as well. So I'm opposed to them.

Cliff's sense of the overall effect of selective state schooling on educational outcomes and social mobility is supported by current research (Boliver and Swift 2011a, 2011b). Cliff had an elder son, who had had to take the Eleven-plus because they were living in Trafford at the time. His son had also failed the exam and, drawing on his own personal experience of education, Cliff felt that his son's later educational success ('which only shows how ridiculous a test at the age of eleven is') was due only to their move into the Manchester educational authority. In a similar vein, Rebecca, a white local government worker living in Chorlton, explained that she had specifically avoided living in Trafford because she didn't want her child to be in the Eleven-plus system:

I just think it's really cruel. Why would you want to put your child through an exam if they didn't need to, to get into a school? I think it's really cruel to do that to a child at eleven, it's a lot of pressure on them. Because it's not like an exam [where you can say], 'oh you can do better next year' or whatever. It's like a real – that affects the rest of your life. So I think it's wrong to put children through that at that age.

Rebecca had gone to 'the local school' and she raised issues of the social mix in a similar way to accounts about private schools detailed above:

I wouldn't want to send them to a school where there's any sort of selection really. Where it's only a certain type of person, whether that's only girls, or only people that have passed their Eleven-plus or only people from a certain religion. I think, well, we live in a community full of lots of different people, so why on earth would you want to separate out groups for your child's education? Part of growing up is mixing with people from wherever.

As Rebecca described, the outcome of the Eleven-plus is often seen as a moment which 'affects the rest of your life'. It was certainly something that framed several accounts of parents' choices. At times, experience of the Eleven-plus was credited for producing different attitudes in a couple toward the choices available. Meredith, who lived in Cheadle Hulme, explained that:

My husband wouldn't agree, but I would like for him to have the option in Stockport of like – some sort of state grammar school. But there isn't so, there we go.

Choice, what choice?

Why would your husband not agree with you?

I think because he failed the Eleven-plus [laughter]. So he thinks it's a waste of time, anyway, but I don't know.

However, it is not only those who had failed the Eleven-plus who opposed the system of selection. Several of those who voiced opposition to grammar schools had themselves passed the Eleven-plus and attended grammar schools, but they still rejected the system. It was almost universally taken for granted that children would need tutoring to pass the exam. Many parents objected to this need for tutoring to pass the exam and also worried that a child who had been tutored to pass might struggle once they were in the school. Harrison, a white homemaker, living in Chorlton (and also discussed in Chapter 2), was concerned that, if he went to grammar school, his son might not flourish without a lot of support. As someone who had gone to grammar school himself he also had reservations about 'the old stuffiness about it, being a grammar school' so he was relieved that his son was interested only in going to the local comprehensive. Sara, a white student who lived on the Chorlton–Trafford border, characterised her objections as both political and personal:

I object to them on political principle. And personal principle, 'cause I went to a grammar school and I ... I mean it was, you know, years and years ago, but I hated it, I hated everything about it, so for me I wouldn't want her to go to that school. [...] All they banged on about was results and education and this, that and the other. And I came out with, with very little because they were only focused on academia, academia, academia, so for me, I'm just thinking, ooh I don't want, you know, I don't want that for my child.

This objection follows a Bernstein-type distinction between instrumental and expressive education cultures (Bernstein 1971) in which, in the former, academic or formal school knowledge is given priority, as opposed to, in the latter, a focus on values and character. Interestingly, Sara thought that the particular primary school her children went to was characterised by this discourse of opposition to grammar schooling, which distinguished it from other schools in Chorlton:

I think at a lot of other schools it's a bit of, some of the other schools in Chorlton they're a bit of, 'oh my God what school?' They don't want to send their children to Parkside High [...] they want them to go to Blessingham Grammar and dah, dah ... you know. [...] I mean

All in the mix

especially at our school I think, you know, it, it's a bit frowned upon for people wanting to send their children to the grammar school, there is, because there's a political motivation there, it's like, why send them to a grammar school?

This reminds us that the school from which the Chorlton participants were drawn, as discussed in Chapter 2, represents only one (potentially self-selecting) section of the area. Interviews with parents whose children went to other schools in Chorlton might have thrown up different experiences and different accounts of Chorlton itself. It also suggests that some of the discursive and affective contexts or habitus that parents operate in and relate to are small and may vary considerably from others which are geographically relatively close. At the same time, it also demonstrates the extent to which the respondents themselves had an awareness of how discourses around schooling circulate and differ from each other.

As we have seen in the case of Cliff (above), some parents we interviewed also drew on previous experiences with older children. Serena, an African-Caribbean nurse whose daughter went to school in Chorlton, had an older daughter, now in her twenties, who she felt had been blighted by failing the Eleven-plus:

I wish I'd never let her take the Elven-plus because she failed it [...]. It damaged her self-esteem and she didn't do so well at school and I think she carried that on with her even though I encouraged her, I helped her and it took a lot she then felt that, that she wasn't intelligent enough and I don't like kids to go by this intelligence. [...] It took her ages, her self-esteem was terrible until she went to college [...] and it started to pick up really slowly. [...] Her self-esteem it took ages, about ten years for her to get that back.

Several interviewees had got private tutoring for their children who had taken the Eleven-plus. For those whose children failed, it had been a difficult experience. Tej from Chorlton explained that it had been her son who really wanted to try for the exam, influenced by his friends who were also taking the test. When he failed 'he was devastated [...] I must admit. I was quite surprised about how upset he was'. In the following section focused on the experience of Natalie, we shall see a very similar account of parental surprise at how strongly their children had taken success or failure at the Eleven-plus to heart. However, other parents told of children who did not want to engage with tutoring and the Eleven-plus exam, who had managed

Choice, what choice?

to drag their heels enough to put their parents off the idea of grammar school. Although we consider later in this chapter the gendered nature of decision-making over schooling, we do not discuss at length the balance of generational decision-making power between parents and children. This was largely because the parents interviewed almost overwhelmingly suggested that children were consulted but the final decision was steered by the parent. However, it is clear that some children had more power than others to influence the process, and non-engagement with tutoring for the Eleven-plus is one example of this. Alia, a British Pakistani homemaker who lived in Cheadle Hulme, had been to grammar school herself and both she and her husband thought that it would be good for her son to go to a grammar school. She had also been encouraged by the school to consider it:

But if you want to try for grammar school, you have to prepare a year beforehand. He wasn't interested in trying, so basically the decision [was made]. You know, you can't do it at the last minute, you have to prepare a year beforehand. I mean, I would have liked him to go, but I wasn't going to push him.

Similarly, Kelly's daughter was opposed applying to grammar school:

She refused to do the entrance test for that because she said it was discriminatory and she didn't agree with it [...] because it's a test of intelligence and she thought it wasn't fair to just skim off the brightest children and put them in one school together. [...] So I thought, 'fine, if she's made that decision [laughs] that's her choice. I can't argue with that'.

In contrast, Samantha, a nurse living in Cheadle Hulme whose elder daughter had passed the test to go to a highly regarded grammar school, decided in the end not to send her daughter there. Samantha also did not like the fact that the school was only for girls and she was confident that she 'would have done equally well at a local school'. This confidence about one's child's education was not particularly common among the respondents and is not fostered by the affective context in which school choice operates which appears to be driven by anxiety. As we saw in the discussion of the impact of the Eleven-plus on the respondents' own educational biographies as well as their general approach to choice, navigating the question and mechanics of school choice was at times an emotional process for the respondents. In the following section, we consider the example of someone who

All in the mix

presented herself very clearly as an 'active chooser' who took a range of measures to exercise choice. Natalie gave a striking account of her anxieties over schooling and the steps she took to achieve her desired outcomes which illustrates how the focus on professional middle-class respondents in much of the literature misses the levels of concern and effort displayed by those who are less securely middle-class. The section also considers some of the affectual processes that choosing and applying for schools involved.

Natalie: 'I know my child'

Natalie, a white part-time office worker from Cheadle Hulme, took a very different position from those who accepted the limited choices available and embraced the idea of a 'local school'. For Natalie, the process of taking control of the schooling of her daughter had begun when she was considering primary school. The family lived very near to the school that her husband Chris (a paint sprayer) had been to as a child and it seemed as if everyone (including family and friends) had taken it for granted that her daughter Grace would attend that school. Natalie presents her struggle to resist the idea that you should go to the nearest school and to feel some control over the education of her children:

I actually suddenly thought, well, why, when it comes to going to school do I as a parent not really have that much say in where my child goes? Why should that be? So I said to Chris: 'No. I'm not going to take that. I want to look at the schools within the area and I want to make the right decision that I think it is right for Grace.'

This moment set the tone for the account that Natalie gave, where her narration of the decision-making and application process was told in the first person singular. When asked directly who made the decision, Natalie responded:

Me! Well no, that's unfair. I've initially made my preferences [...]. Chris's [...] gone along with [my choices]. He, I'm sure, would say he knows I'm making the right decision.

Natalie went on to explain how her daughter had not been accepted at her first choice of primary school which presented her with a dilemma described in a dramatic narrative:

Choice, what choice?

I only got initially an offer of a place at one school which was our local school here. You then had a two-week window with which to either accept or decline the place [...] and I left it right till the death 'cause I really was quite reluctant – I knew I didn't have a choice but I was quite reluctant to accept the place we'd been offered because it wasn't my first choice as a parent.

At the eleventh hour, Natalie found out that her daughter, who had been put on a waiting list for her preferred school, had got into it (we shall see in the next chapter what Natalie was looking for in a school). Although her husband seemed to be happy with her choices, the decision to go against the local school was questioned by a friend and fellow mother:

She said, 'I think you're being really, really unfair sending Grace to a school that isn't her catchment school'. So I said: 'Why? [...] if that's the best option for her, why am I wrong in doing that?'

The other mother thought that Natalie's daughter would miss out on making friends. Natalie explained that she had responded by comparing choosing schools to her friend selecting a day care nursery for her child. This also involved asserting her rights as a citizen and consumer:

I said, so why shouldn't I have that choice over where I send my child to school? Just because I'm not paying doesn't mean somebody's got the right to tell me automatically: your child will go there. I should have a say in that. That should be part of my decision – I know my child, Stockport council have not got a clue. [...] I know my child and I know what's the right decision.

When asked about when she had started thinking about secondary school for her daughter, Natalie joked: 'when I started? In reception! I was like that.' Natalie gives an account of the information gathering and considerations she took into account in order to make the right choice for her daughter. Unlike some of the respondents in Perrier's study (Perrier 2012), Natalie does not seem to worry about presenting herself as the 'pushy mother'. She cheerfully concludes, 'I'm a bit of a control freak at the end of the day'. Nonetheless, she also emphasised at various points in the interview how stressful she found the process:

It's always been at the back of my mind, it's such a huge step and probably I started – in all seriousness, I did probably start thinking about

All in the mix

it when Grace got into year 3, when she moved up to the junior side of the school.

Honestly, I've found as a parent it is mind-blowing. It absolutely – it ties you in knots, it really – you know, you think one thing, then you think another.

It was the hardest decision I have ever had to make [...] if you get this wrong, potentially, this is the rest of Grace's life. [...] [it is] huge [I've been] petrified.

Natalie champions a neo-liberal market-based approach to schooling, where the individual parent has the most knowledge about the child and should have the right to have the decision-making power over their education. She was frustrated by what she saw as a lack of power over her daughters' educational choices and resisted the logic of local-as-best. However, whilst Natalie asserted her desire to choose, the process had an impact not only on herself but also on her daughter. Having consulted the teachers about whether they thought Grace had the ability, Natalie paid for nearly a year of weekly tutoring for her daughter. Initially in the interview she presented Grace as relaxed about the process of choosing schools and sitting the Eleven-plus. However, she also admitted that she herself had not predicted the impact on her daughter: 'She was absolutely devastated to have failed the exam at the end of the day [...] heart-broken. I was really surprised at her reaction to it. [...] hindsight is a wonderful thing.'

We see a hint of a regret in this account – that although Natalie solidly defends her views and actions, perhaps with 'hindsight' she would have behaved differently. In this more detailed example, we can see how what are often presented as middle-class anxieties and practices over school choice are also shared by working-class or less securely middle-class parents, albeit with a potentially narrower range of options. Whilst Natalie was able to pay for her daughter to have one hour of tutoring each week, this was the limit to her ability to buy education. Although she had considered private schooling, if she wanted to pursue this option, she would have been reliant on her daughter achieving a bursary which was very competitive.

In terms of the stress involved in making decisions around schooling, Natalie was not alone in feeling a heavy weight of responsibility. Sharon, a white civil servant also living in Cheadle Hulme, explained:

Choice, what choice?

It's absolutely awful because you just, it doesn't matter how much research you think you've done, you know you're never a hundred per cent sure as to whether you're making the right choice.

In this account, the responsibility of making 'the right choice' is what weighs particularly heavily. While this anxiety was undoubtedly real, it was also perhaps part of the performance of being a parent. To be a good parent is to choose and perhaps also to worry about one's own acts of choosing, as Ball found in his study of parents choosing schools:

Their failure to be rational, to be an ideal consumer, to live up to the expectations of the consuming subject discursively embedded in guides and tables leaves them with a sense of not being good parents. (Ball 2003: 102)

The nature of the anxiety is likely to differ depending on the context in which choice is taking place, shaped by classed and racialised practices and concerns as well as the locally available options and the prevalent discourses surrounding schooling in the social group. Worry was described by many as an inevitable part of parenting. Worrying was so ingrained in the performance of parenthood that it was also something that could also be joked about. When asked when she started to think about secondary choices for her son, Fiona from Chorlton responded: 'I don't know it's always been on the horizon really. [...] I'm already worrying about him being forty [Laughs].' As Michael, whose son also went to the Chorlton primary and had explained that he didn't play much part in choosing schools, summed it up:

Everything is anxious with children no matter what. Whether it's schools, or anything. [...] So yeah, you worry, you gotta give them the support, that's the main thing. He is got the support, so, yeah, you know, I don't worry about it too much, but yeah you do worry about it a bit.

As we saw in the example of Natalie, there was often a gendered division in how parents divided the labour over the task of negotiating school choice, with mothers – in the vast majority of cases – taking the most prominent role. The next section will consider the different ways in which the process of selecting schools plays out through the gendered relations of the family. Despite changes in family forms, and with some exceptions, we can see the continuation of the dominance

All in the mix

of a traditional gendered division of labour in the accounts of families making choices, where the various labours involved in overseeing the education of children are left to the mothers.

Shall I be mother? Gender and the negotiation of school choices

Whilst children were often consulted about their preferences for high schools, of the parents interviewed few said that they let their children choose which secondary school to go to. It was the mothers who took the main role in seeking out information about schools and therefore played the major role in the decision-making around schooling (Stambach and David 2005). The information was accessed through official sources of information about schools (such as Ofsted reports and school results tables which are published every year) and more informal social networks of friends and parents of older children. These latter networks remain largely gendered (Ball 2003). The gendering of social networks can be seen in the following exchange between Ken and Fran from Chorlton:

Fran: I think more that I talked to the mums and stuff because I was picking the children up from school at the time and asking them you know how their kids did.

Ken: Yeah, yeah that was – I was working till late and Fran was working earlier enough half the time to go to the school so she was you know, she was talking with the mums, mums and dads.

Fran: Yeah I think, it is quite interesting because as a comparison I've got a friend that is a mutual friend and they're a couple and I talk to Sarah quite a lot about choices of school and I just wonder did you ever talk to Alan about it?

Ken: I think once or twice but not as much as you, I didn't.

Whilst most women felt they did most of the labour (or 'groundwork' as Annette called it), they appeared accepting of and even happy with this division of labour. This might be partly an inevitable result, as Emily explained, of an already gendered division of labour which meant that women were better placed to make the decision:

So I did the playground duties and you build up a social network around the school. So I have a set of friends that I have for friends, but I also have a set of friends that evolve round the school. So we had that input with each other and there's lots of talk about lots of different things either round the table drinking coffee or in the school environment

Choice, what choice?

that the men don't necessarily have a lot of input with. So I think when it comes to making decisions about education – and again, you know, you might hear lots of different sides to this – but I think that probably with the woman, the mother is probably the better person to make the decision anyway.⁷

Here Emily presents her role in networking as akin to a job (in the phrase 'playground duties') but seems to be happy that this has given her superior information and decision-making capacity on the question of her children's schooling. There were also several cases where the mother was the one who made the decision with little consultation with or involvement of the father, even though he was present in the family. In the case of Meredith, her husband was 'quite happy for him to go wherever'. It seems that some fathers, rather than taking the role of the anxious parent, performed the confident 'laid-back dad'. As one father said, 'I think he'll do fine wherever he goes'. In other cases, particularly with some of the ethnic-minority respondents in Whalley Range, the father was sidelined in the decision because he did not have good enough English to engage with the schools, or because he had less knowledge of the British education system than his wife (although in the case of Samer, quoted earlier, he played the major role partly because his English was better than his wife's). Sabah explained:

I think because my husband is from Pakistan and my English is better than his, I'll do all the running around mainly [...] so when it comes to a decision like that, I think you'd, I'd have to [make it].

Leyla tried to more explicitly exclude her husband from the decision

I wasn't listening to what he said. Because he didn't do it. He left school at sixteen and just worked for his brother. He regrets it all now [...] he knows I went to uni, so they are going to uni. And I think he just leaves me [...] he doesn't interfere.

Leyla went on to explain that she thought her husband and his family's views in favour of separate or Islamic education were 'extreme' so she wanted to resist his input.

For those single parents in the sample, it was the mother as primary carer who played the most important role in decision-making over education, although sometimes in consultation with the father. In contrast, for Sharon, it was important to keep as much distance as possible from her daughter's father:

All in the mix

He'd like to know more I think, but I – I try to, we had quite a violent ... he was quite violent towards me and that's one of the other reasons why we left the area we lived in before and came here. So, I tried to have as little contact as possible and he does show an interest. Yes, he tries to more as she's getting older, but I try to have as little to do with him as possible.

There are structural reasons why women are more involved in childcare than men and this was largely responsible for the mothers' greater role in gathering and assessing information and making the decisions about school choice. Nonetheless, for some women there was a concerted attempt to ensure that they were the primary decision-maker. One exception to this gendered division of labour over educational choices, as well as over childcare, was Harrison, who was the primary carer for his children while his wife worked full-time. This meant that he was also there to do the informal 'groundwork' that the mothers described:

Yes, I will be in the playground asking a lot of mothers. And quite a few fathers as well, because Chorlton is very much like that. But asking parents what they're doing, what they've put down for their school. And finding out [information].

Whilst Harrison got the most of the information about the schools and the likelihood of their son getting into them, he presented a model of shared decision-making which suggested more equal involvement of both parents than was described by most of the mothers:

I think we tend to – I suppose, like any relationship we kind of thrash things out with a bit of talking, forgetting about, talking, argument, forget about it, talking until we kind of get there. But it depends [...] it's more about your character and what's important to you. We have slightly different ideas on education.

Harrison also showed how anxiety around school choice was not limited to mothers. He had explained how he had thought his son's primary school was a 'feeder' school (implying automatic entry to the secondary school). This not only proved not to be the case, but the option or implicit requirement to put down three choices made him question his chances of getting a place for his son in the most local school. His use of the term 'vulnerable' to describe the impact of uncertainty over choosing schools was particularly striking. He summed up his experience of choosing at the end of the interview:

Choice, what choice?

I just wanted to get over that fact that it was very stressful. Even though I didn't think it would be, the information was mixed and I didn't feel particularly supported from, as I said, everybody telling us – acting like a feeder school, and using the word feeder school but then when it came down to the forms there was no mention of it being that and [...] you'd better not [only put down one school] just in case. I think it was more the shock of that that threw me [...] Yeah, and just suddenly I felt very vulnerable.

In reality, Harrison lived near enough to be certain of his son getting a place, but he described the conflicting advice he got from other parents about whether he should 'just in case' put down other school options. Rebecca, also from Chorlton, described these conversations with other parents as contributing to what she called a 'collective' stress:

There's the kind of collective stress like other parents start to get really kind of, you know, concerned and start asking and you know, yes. [...] everyone starts to, you know, be talking to each other and where are you going to send them and then I think that kind of starts to rub off on the children as well because they realise that maybe some of their friends won't be going to the same school as them. And they start to get a bit upset about that.

This stress was something that Rebecca did not think was inherent to parenting, but was perhaps produced by the way in which the system was structured and the idea that there were 'worse' schools that needed to be avoided:

I just think if all schools provided a good basic standard of education then it shouldn't matter which school your child goes to. They should all be of a certain standard and children ought to be able to – you know, every child ought to be able to do well in any school.

This group anxiety led some people to opt out of socialising with other parents as a way to insulate themselves against the pressure. As mothers tended to be more involved in these networks which centred on children, they were more likely perhaps to feel the pressure:

I try not to have an opinion on it just, I just again it's, you'll hear the mums having a good whinge in the playground so, I try to sit in my car now because they, there's at least something that they're moaning about and I think oh shut up, because not everything's perfect all the time, it can't be can it? (Sharon)

All in the mix

Some parents presented themselves as not one of ‘those’ worrying parents and here we can hear anxieties about being seen as pushy parents, as discussed in Perrier’s work (Perrier 2012). This can be seen in the embrace by Molly from Chorlton of being a ‘relaxed parent’:

It’s not caused any hassle for us, but I could imagine it’s caused a lot of anxiety for other people that perhaps might have been better left undone, I don’t really know. It’s nice to have the choice but I think if you’ve got parents who are anxious – we’re quite relaxed – but if you’ve got parents who are anxious about these things, I could imagine it causing a lot of problems.

Molly’s more relaxed attitude might also be shaped by the fact that this was her third child going through the system. How parents positioned themselves in terms of styles of ‘choosing’ could potentially have quite profound effects. Fiona, also living in Chorlton, explained how the politics of education could impact on friendships: ‘And they’re people who are best friends, so suddenly when it comes to education, they’re poles apart. [...] it’s a bit like the elephant in the room that nobody mentions.’ Byrne (2006b) found a similar sense that school choice could be a point of tension between friends.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored parents’ experiences of making choices about their children’s secondary schooling in what they often regarded as a very limited field of potential options. A sense of limited choice – sometimes exacerbated by an awareness that those with greater financial resources would have more choice – often produced high levels of anxiety for their children and their futures. Navigating the educational system at this moment in their children’s lives involved engaging with a range of options which were not equally available. Weighing up schools also involves deciding what you want in a complex field of potential choices which are not equally obtainable. There is a confusing array of different types of schools and also of entry criteria which potentially make decisions more fraught. We have argued that these choices need to be understood as relational and affective. Furthermore, this chapter has continued to show how parents’ discussions of schooling and school choice are often area-specific and shaped in part by the areas in which they lived. Chapter 2, ‘Imagining place’, explored how living in a particular area was

Choice, what choice?

often understood relationally, where people consider the extent to which they feel like one of the people who would be expected to live in the area and whether they like being with other people who live there (in ways which are frequently classed or raced). The choices are assessed in relational terms as parents consider what the impact of other children in the school will be on their own children's education and social development. There are more or less desirable children and, by implication, more or less desirable parents whose attitudes are often felt to lie behind the behaviours of their children. This chapter has shown how it is assumed that more selective schools would be populated by those more desirable children. The following chapters will explore further how the assessments made by parents are classed and racialised. It was frequently assumed that private schooling would logically have more of these better, more disciplined children – at least partially through an exclusionary logic. For some Muslim parents, a religious education was particularly important, but for others there was an appreciation that their children might benefit from being educated with other children who were not Muslim (and some felt that non-Muslim children could also benefit from being educated with their children). In the case of private schools and grammar schools which select their intake on the basis of educational achievement, it was assumed by most parents that there was a benefit to attending schools which had children whose parents were regarded as committed to education and who were often assumed to be more disciplined. However, parents also worried that their children's (and possibly their own) lack of cultural capital might be exposed in the context of private schooling. Could their children feel comfortable in a school where the lifestyle of the other children – what they ate, what they did on their holidays – was so different from their own? Other parents, particularly those living in Chorlton, also raised more ethical concerns about private schooling while not necessarily questioning assumptions about superiority.

In addition, we have seen how, in some cases, the choice of school also reflects on the parents' sense of themselves in relation to other parents. Thus, school choice involves navigating a complex field of affect which is influenced by ideas of parental responsibility and the 'good' parent; and by long-term and short-term future happiness of children; and is shaped by the parents' own memories of and emotions about their own schooling. In particular, the discussions of state selective education in the form of grammar schools in this chapter

All in the mix

also revealed how navigating questions of school choice can stir up emotional responses of parents which are in part driven by their own memories of education. In this context, the Eleven-plus was frequently remembered as a pivotal moment on which academic success or failure was determined, with important implications for the future. The views of parents on selective state education were often framed by an explanation of their own, or their partner's or even their older children's, experience of going through this process of academic sorting. For some parents, this reflection on the system of state and private selection, both of which relied on financial resources, also raised questions of ethics and social justice. By focusing on Natalie's account of her experience of choosing schools for her daughter, we have shown how this can be an emotionally taxing process for both mother (or parents) and child.

The chapter also discussed the way in which parents' engagements in the processes of choosing schools were narrated as gendered, with the majority of parents (of either gender) describing mothers as more engaged, and better positioned, to do the labour involved in choosing schools and generally steering the process. This was often because it rested on a gendered involvement in parenting, with mothers more integrated in parenting networks which were an important source of information on secondary schools. There were however some exceptions where fathers – particularly if they had been more present at the school pick-up times – took a leading role. Whatever their role in information-gathering, almost all of those interviewed for this research expressed feelings of anxiety around the process of choosing school, to a greater or lesser extent. This anxiety was often felt to be exacerbated by the expression of other parents' worries about schooling. Chapter 4 will explore in greater depth these emotions around school choice and the ways in which they are often shaped by racialised and classed fears which often determine who are considered to be undesirable children who should be avoided.

Notes

- 1 Around 6.5 per cent of the total number of school children in the UK are in private or independent education (with around 5 per cent of those overseas students): www.isc.co.uk/research.
- 2 Of course there may have been many children living in Chorlton who attended and were planning on continuing attending private schools, but

Choice, what choice?

they are excluded from the sample which contacted parents through a state-funded primary school. However, nationally, pupils often move from the state to the private sector after primary school (see ISC annual census 2017: www.isc.co.uk/research/annual-census/ first accessed 21 December 2017).

- 3 See Byrne, (2006b) for a discussion of school choice and its impact on friendship groups.
- 4 Grammar schools in this context are those state-funded schools which remained selective on educational ability despite the move to non-selective comprehensive schools in the 1960s and 1970s. Grammar schools have a skewed socio-economic intake, with in 2016 fewer than 3 per cent of students in grammar schools eligible for FSM (compared to the 17 per cent of children eligible for FSM in the grammar school areas): <https://fullfact.org/education/grammar-schools-and-social-mobility-whats-evidence/>, last accessed 4 January 2018).
- 5 Although, confusingly for many parents, they did have schools with 'grammar' in their titles (these were either private schools or, in one case, an academy).
- 6 The Eleven-plus exam governs admission to grammar schools and some other selective secondary schools. It includes tests of mental arithmetic, writing and general problem-solving.
- 7 See Byrne (2006b) for a discussion of the distinction between long-term friends and 'mothering' friends.