

Schooling fears

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed how some parents found the process of choosing schools very stressful. These stresses were expressed by parents from a variety of backgrounds – in terms of both class and ethnicity – and in all areas of the study. Parents in part put this stress down to the frustration at the experience of being given the responsibility to make a choice yet finding that there were only one or two schools to choose between. At the same time, many parents had exercised a choice in terms of where they chose to live – either before or after having children. As we saw, for parents in Chorlton who had not been born or grown up there, the decision to move to the area may not explicitly have been influenced by schooling considerations, but it is likely that the local schools were a factor in them staying in the area. Many presented this as a happy chance. Yet, in many ways, the reasons for moving to the area were the same as those for staying – enough ‘people like us’ – which produced the elective belonging that Savage et al. (2005) described. By contrast, some parents in Cheadle Hulme had moved into the area in order to fall within the likely catchment areas of schools they saw as more desirable. However, many parents do not have the means – either financial or in the form of knowledge or cultural capital – to exercise choice through relocation. The parents from Whalley Range, for example, had frequently not chosen the area in such a conscious fashion as other parents in the study and some had not realised the significance of where they located to in terms of their children’s education.

Whatever the reason parents had come to be in the areas they lived in, and whichever schools their children were likely to be given places in, a sense of stress and anxiety about the move to high school was common. When considering the experience of applying

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for school places, it is worth remembering that sending children to school (both primary and secondary) potentially promotes many worries and anxieties which go beyond the question of the frustrations of being required to make a choice and then feeling that the options are limited. For many parents, the move from primary to secondary school is seen as a particularly significant step in their child's development which represents their growing up and potentially away from the care of their family. It marks a milestone in their child's development of independence. Schools are an important part of children's social development. Thus parents consider not only their children's formal education – what qualifications they will gain – but also how they will be shaped in other ways. This is at heart a relational process, in terms of how the children will respond to and be shaped by those they meet at school. It is here that race and class can feature in potentially prompting anxieties – or reassurances – and the ways in which this plays out will also differ according to different class positions and experiences of racialisation. The idea that parents often want to send their children to schools that are populated by 'people like us' is well established in the literature (Ball 2003, Croft 2004, Devine 2004). White middle-class parents who are sending their children to state schools do not necessarily expect *all* the students at the school to be 'people like us' – rather it is a question of 'enough' people like us. Here the question of 'mix' becomes critical (Byrne 2006a, 2006b). The mix is not necessarily solely about 'people like us'. For example, Reay et al. (2011) have shown how some white middle-class parents also seek a 'cosmopolitan' mix. In this mix, the interrelations between race and class are critical. Reay et al. found that, for middle-class white parents, ethnic mix was valued not just for its provision of cosmopolitan capital but also because ethnic others provided a protective layer insulating them from the white working class.

However the literature on 'people like us', while revealing important ways in which parents approach school choice, often focuses on the white middle class – leaving the experiences of non-white parents (from a range of class positions) and white working-class parents largely unresearched. This chapter will argue that race, class and gender are undercurrents running through the interviews with a wide variety of parents. Many parents may not consciously be thinking – or at least talking – about racial and class differences when they consider what they want from schools. However, in

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many cases it is possible to see that race and class structure their understanding of what constitutes a good school or a school to be avoided, and in particular what kind of environment their children will be happy in as well as achieve academically. For a wide variety of parents – in terms of both class position and racial identity – the anxieties they mention about their children moving on to high school are either explicitly or implicitly classed. The following chapter explores the different attitudes that parents had towards a multicultural mix (understood as multi-ethnic) which shows a range of responses – including both fears and desires. This chapter focuses on parental expressions of anxiety around schooling which were, perhaps surprisingly, not generally focused on academic success, but circulated more often on fears of a classed other or what might be described as an ‘underclass’.

This chapter will argue that, whilst arguments for increasing parents’ role in choosing schools for their children often rest on the idea of a rational agent, in fact, as we saw in Chapter 3, this is an emotional process. Parents’ views of the schools they consider, and their sense of what is right for their child, both in the here-and-now of attending school and in their future¹ lives as adults, are both considered and emotional. As Sara Ahmed (2004a: 195–6) has pointed out, emotions and reason should not be seen as inherently opposed: ‘emotional responses to others also work as forms of judgement’. Parents have a range of different emotional responses to choosing schools for their children. These include fears for the future; fears of others; anxiety about the choices and what is the right thing to do; and hope and desire for what they want in schools and education. As we saw in Chapter 3, these fears are also shaped by their own experiences of schooling, as well as the nature of prevalent ‘school talk’ in the local area, particularly surrounding local schools. Many of these emotions are racialised and classed, shaping what parents and carers want – and don’t want – for their children. Whilst emotions around race, class and schooling are highly interrelated and mutually constituted, in this chapter we will focus largely on the classed nature of these concerns. As we shall see, a key way in which parents consider potential schools is relational – in terms of worrying about whom their child will mix with socially and what impact that interaction will have on their futures. School is not regarded as solely about obtaining qualifications, but also as affecting the sort of adult the children will become. Parents’ responses to what they see as diversity in the school

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population (in terms of race, class, ethnicity and religion) shape how they narrate both their hopes and fears about secondary schooling for their children.

The emotional aspect of choosing schools can be seen in the various ways that schools seek to appeal to parents and children, through open days, glossy brochures featuring always-happy children and other forms of advertising. Schools frequently display their GCSE results or positive quotes from the Ofsted reports about the environment or pastoral care in the school. Courtney (2015: 814) argues that 'in a sense, though, all schools are required to act in a corporate way: their characteristics understood and performed through branding'. This branding, which indicates the ways in which state education is being drawn into and constructed as a market, often seeks to reassure as well as to impress. As mentioned in the Introduction, one of the schools in the study area had the tag line 'Successful, creative, happy' with an increasing font size, so that 'Happy' was written in letters twice as large as 'successful'. Sara Ahmed, in her book *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed 2010), reminds us of the need to be attentive to the work done by claims about happiness and the ideal of happiness as a point of human existence. Ahmed argues that 'happiness as a word is both mobile and promiscuous; it can be articulated lightly, can appear anywhere, even everywhere' and in this way risks being empty of meaning (Ahmed 2010: 201). She also lays out the aspirational nature of happiness: 'happiness evokes a point that lies elsewhere, just over the horizon, in the very mode of aspiring for something' (2010: 204). It is perhaps not surprising that the school, in its branding, attempts to tap into this affective register which speaks to parents' concerns about their children's happiness as well as their well-being.

School uniforms also represent a form of branding, and have an affective impact for parents, as we will see in this chapter where uniforms, their 'smartness' and the extent to which they are enforced can serve as important markers of the quality of schools for many parents. As we saw in the Introduction, another way in which schools 'sell' themselves to prospective parents and children is through open evenings. In the study areas, we saw how schools devote serious effort and resources into putting on a good 'show' for potential parents and children which are designed to reassure and impress. Open evenings give parents and children the chance to go inside the school, hear a talk by the headteacher, be guided around the school

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by a current pupil, go into classrooms and get some feel for what it is like to be a pupil in the school. They are clearly occasions when the school presents its best face, with selected children asked to act as guides, teachers on hand to answer questions and often exciting activities for children to participate in. These can include treasure-hunt-style quizzes, flash-bang science experiments and displays of artwork, and children performing music. Free food and drink are often provided and children may leave school with give-aways such as sports bags, key rings, pencil and ruler sets all branded with the school logo. During the school choice peak season of September and October, when most school open evenings are held, the media frequently provide guidance to parents on how to get the best out of open evenings and what to look for in a school. These caution parents not to be fooled by the perfect face that schools may project on such visits, but the articles also acknowledge the emotional element of choosing schools. On the BBC website, there is a ten-point guide to choosing schools with the tenth recommendation: 'Remember – listen to your instincts'.²

This chapter will explore how the parents in the study spoke about their experience of choosing schools for their children and, in particular, the ways in which their narratives emphasised fear and anxiety. The chapter will argue that these anxieties are often centred on classed fears which are at times also gendered and racialised (the nature of racialised fears and desires will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter). The chapter will begin with exploring the relative weight given to academic considerations versus those concerned with the child's happiness and issues with child development. It will argue that, for some, particularly middle-class parents who are confident about their children's academic abilities, questions of academic success (and the kind of official reports and statistics which might serve as a guide to this) appear to be sidelined in their narratives of decision-making. The chapter will consider the non-academic issues that are stressed by many parents and the ways in which these become expressed as fears around threats to their children from other students in the school, around bullying but also a form of classed contamination which is also gendered and racialised. In these discussions, discipline and dress become key markers. The following section explores what the parents consider to be at stake in making these decisions over their children's schooling.

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Choosing schools, choosing futures

For many parents the decision of which secondary school to send their children to is framed as a decision that may decide some critical aspects of the future. Thus, even if parents were confident that their children would get admission to the school they chose, the decision could feel as if it had very high stakes. As Fran explained:

I want my child – my children – to do well and I want them to get, you know I want them to do well and I want them to get their GCSEs and I want them to get their A Levels and I want them to go to university if that's what they want at the end of the day. (Fran, white midwife, Chorlton)

However, Fran's account is relatively unusual for its explicit reference to academic qualifications. When parents discussed the factors that mattered to them in looking for secondary schools for their children, there was surprisingly little reference made – without prompting – to either qualifications in themselves or the kind of career aspirations that they had for their children. This might be because these were taken so much for granted that they did not need to be mentioned or could be referred to merely in passing. However, the taken-for-grantedness of these assumptions may be easier for some to display than others, depending on their own qualifications and life experience. In the case of Melanie and Steve, a beauty therapist and delivery driver respectively, the aspirations for the educational future of their daughter were spelled out more carefully, perhaps reflecting the way in which this was an uncharted path for them as neither of them had had further education. In this interview, in contrast with many others, GCSE results in the school were the 'most important thing' (Melanie) and were a consideration that both of them referred to repeatedly through the interview. They had already been paying for private tutoring at a reduced rate from a friend – 'we're dead mean, we make them both have a tutor'. In the following extract, they spelt out why qualifications were so important to them:

Steve: Well look at it at the moment, let's be realistic about all these people that have been to school, university [...]. And people now that are coming out of university it's, it's very hard for people to get a job isn't it in this day and age, so we want to make sure that they can. In our own mind, I don't think it, I think it'd be cruel of us if we didn't give him

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every opportunity that we can, we'd be lazy to sit back and think, oh it doesn't really matter.

Melanie: We worry about that. I don't want my kids to go and work in Morrison's for the rest of their lives, I want –

Steve: No, no they can if they want to, but we want to give them as much opportunity that, they've got a broad, a big wide horizon hopefully.

Melanie: There's nothing wrong with wanting more, I don't think.

Steve: No, so we try to do the best we can really.

Melanie: And then it's up them what they do with it isn't it?

Thus pushing for educational choices for the child is seen as a critical part of active (rather than 'cruel' or 'lazy') parenting. This is framed as particularly important in the current economic and social context. Steve shows an awareness of qualification inflation – whereby, as more people acquire university degrees, employers increasingly require degrees from potential employees and those without the qualifications are locked out of employment. At the same time, Melanie expresses a defensiveness about this type of aspiration – which is perhaps because she is consciously seeking class mobility for their daughter: 'there's nothing wrong with wanting more'. It is not clear what this defensive response is aimed at. It could spring out of a fear that they will be seen as showing a rejection of their own social position, or that they are putting too much focus on future potential against present happiness (Reay 1998). It could also reflect the slightly different positions that they take between themselves. The notion of 'laziness' was also implicit in what some parents wanted to avoid in their children. Annette stressed that what she wanted was that her children should be pushed to achieve the best they could.

I want a school that's going to stretch the child so that they, you know, they reach their full potential, whatever that potential might be. I mean the potential of one child – one of my children might not be as great as another, but you still want them to do the best they possibly can. And I also want them to value good behaviour and, you know, expect that of all the pupils that go there. So I think it's really behaviour and the quality of teaching. (Annette, white, Cheadle Hulme, pre-school teacher)

As we saw in Chapter 3, some parents also discussed differences in the academic ability of their children, and the potential tensions that these differences created in the process of choosing schools. Here the focus rests more on schools helping them to reach their 'full potential' which is expressed as an individualised desire,

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without any sense of social justice that sometimes underpins these assumptions.

Whilst choosing school may seem like a heavy responsibility to many, some parents did acknowledge that the support their children get at home may be just as significant as the school they go to. Jas, by his own admission, did not play a huge role in the education of his son. He wasn't very engaged in the decision of which school his son should go to – and he also admitted that his ex-wife was the one who supported his son in his homework. As we saw in Chapter 3, this was a common pattern between father and mothers – even when they were living together. Jas was however unusual in not expressing any serious parental anxiety about the decisions around schooling: 'I'm not really too fussed. I think he'll do well in any school he goes to.' He went on to argue something less often acknowledged by parents:

I am a firm believer that if somebody has got the ability to do well at school, they will do well at school really, even if it is a poor performing school, I think it depends on the parents pushing the child. (Jas, South Asian, regional manager)

Jas was unusual in explicitly arguing that home life was more significant than school context. Michael, also from Chorlton, put it slightly differently:

I just think schools are there to do certain things, but they won't provide everything. And now the parents have got to provide, you know, hell of a lot more of what they had to provide when I was a kid. So I think the schools are important to give him a structure and a grounding, but it's only half of the story really.

Other parents downplayed the importance for them of the schools' exam results per se. Kelly (a white teacher living in Chorlton) said that:

We're not, we've never been massively concerned with like exam results and things. If we looked at an Ofsted report we'd be looking at things like behaviour and sort of pastoral care more than exam results.

Kelly was not necessarily saying that she didn't think exam results were important for her children but rather that this was not an important criterion in assessing a school. Kelly went on to admit that this lack of concern for academic results may be 'because they're doing okay, we've not had a problem with any of them yet [laughs] so far it's

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been fine'. The laugh perhaps suggests an unexpressed anxiety about academic achievement. The downplaying of academic results often went along with the suggestion that Ofsted reports were a limited source of information. Kelly continued by explaining her attitude to Ofsted:

I've never been a parent going: 'my child must achieve, achieve, achieve, we must go to a school that has high Ofsted reports and SATs results and all that'. Because my children – I've worked very hard for my children to be sociable and confident, because I was very shy as a child myself and I felt it held me back [...] Ofsted reports are pretty boring, aren't they, and it usually just ends up with something like they're satisfactory, satisfactory, oh but the children don't like the toilets very much.

Here we see again how many attitudes to schooling are formed through a consideration of the parents' own experience (see Chapter 3). This can shape a desire that their child or children should have the same kind of opportunities, or alternatively that they should not suffer the same experiences. This attitude to official reports and assessment accords with the findings of Ball (2003) where 'hot' information gathered from local knowledge was preferred to the formal 'cold' information provided by Ofsted or the promotional material provided by schools. This position on Ofsted was common among the interviewees and is also present in popular discussions. For example, an article in *The Guardian* in September 2014 proclaims that Ofsted reports 'have all the value of wet toilet paper'.³ Ofsted (and published league tables) were regarded as giving insufficient information about things that matter. There was also a strong sense that the statistics, reported in league tables, could be manipulated. As Emma put it:

I'm not going to talk about league tables because I don't believe in them one iota. I work in an environment where you can fiddle figures to make them look however you want to make them look. So I don't lay a lot of weight to league tables. (Emma, Cheadle, white, primary school teacher)

Apart from the possibility of figures being fixed, there appeared to be a discourse, particularly strongly featuring in Chorlton, that the competent parent had better sources of information than Ofsted. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly for parents who generally expressed high levels of concern over the education of their children, it was quite common for parents to claim never to have read Ofsted reports.

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For some this may spring from a lack of knowledge or access. But for others it appeared to be presented as a badge of pride. By claiming that they knew about, but disregarded, the reports, we would suggest that some parents were positioning themselves as invested in an approach to education that went beyond the quantification that the reports represented.⁴ Rejecting the importance of Ofsted reports could be a means for parents to present themselves as another kind of expert in this context with the 'logic and taste' (Ball 2003: 59) required of them to make choices. As we can see from Emma, for some there was also a professional competence being expressed, that they knew that the information in Ofsted reports could be 'gamed' and should therefore be disregarded.

For many respondents, as suggested by the literature on the importance of 'hot' information (Ball 2003, Croft 2004), the opinions of 'people like us' were more important than the dry Ofsted reports. Terri, a white health visitor living in Chorlton, explained:

I think you'd get that feeling from the other parents whose children have already gone, they've made a decision to send their children there, they have similar views on education, so I think that influences me more than maybe an Ofsted report would.

She went on to summarise these 'similar views' as:

What they want for their children, you know they want the children to be safe, they want them to be educated well and pushed and, you know to achieve and they expectancies probably that they might go to college or university or, you know that sort of [thing].

These views as described by Terri of wanting children to be safe and secure might be safely assumed to be universal for parents and carers. However the classed nature of the desire (and the question of whose opinion would be valued) is indicated by the reference to aspiration, of children being pushed (perhaps both by the school and by the parents themselves) and wanting their children to go on to further education. This nonchalance around consulting Ofsted directly was perhaps also enabled for some by the fact that they could get the same information from others, as Sara explained: 'you don't need to, in my circles you don't need to read Ofsted reports because people tell you [laughs]'.

A notable exception to this claimed disregard for statistics was the case of Samer, a chemical engineer, who, along with his son, knew all

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the potential schools' GCSE results from memory. He also was one of the male interviewees who was most engaged with, and worried about the process of school choice (see Chapter 3 for more discussion of parental choosing and gender). As an immigrant to Britain and as an Iraqi feeling isolated from his Pakistani neighbours, he and his family struggled to get clear information about the schooling choices, and the exam results gave him a basis for comparing schools. Despite his high level of education, his relatively low social and cultural capital in Britain also made him less able to decode the 'talk' around school choice. As a result, Samer put great emphasis on the 'facts' and solidity provided by the tables of exam results.

This section has shown how many parents are relying on considerations which potentially complicate the process of school choice. Rather than focusing on more cut-and-dried measures of the best exam results or official assessments in the form of Ofsted, parents are looking for a more holistic range of markers of what might be the right school for their children, which speak to the affective nature of schooling and school choice. The following section focuses more directly on the affective and shows how negotiating school choice often produces a range of fears and anxieties in parents which coalesce around a classed, raced and gendered other.

Choosing schools: what's fear got to do with it?

This section will discuss how parents expressed fear, anxiety and worry about their children's future experience of schooling. These fears were the most common sentiments expressed by parents in their discussion of secondary schooling. In particular, the behaviour of (other) children in the school and the related question of discipline cropped up frequently in the interviews. Behaviour and discipline were important from the perspective of children's safety and happiness – as Fiona explained:

You want them to be safe, you know, this place is awash with scare stories about children having knives pulled on them and things stolen and bullied and, you know [...] some children have been in situations where they've been in really frightening situations because you've just got a real mix of people there, haven't you? (Fiona, Chorlton, white, freelance project manager)

Here we see the question of 'mix' representing possible dangers – although what kind of 'mix' is potentially dangerous is not explained.

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Through much of this chapter, we see fears, desires and aspirations around schooling which centre on questions of mix and exposure to difference. As we shall see, there can be a 'good' or 'bad' mix (Byrne 2006a), but what is being imagined is often left vague, as in the account given by Fiona. We will argue that differences of race, class, ethnicity and religion can be at the heart of these notions of mix, even when they are not very clearly articulated. Thus analysis of the data requires attention to what is assumed or left unsaid as much as what is said (Byrne 2006b). With exposure come possibilities also of contagion, and some parents were concerned about how their children might be influenced, and how this might change their behaviour and even personalities. The issue at stake, mostly unvoiced, appeared often to be 'what will my child end up like?' Halima, a full-time parent, living in Chorlton, who was hoping to pursue university education once her children were older, was one of the few to actually spell this fear out:

I would be so mortified that she went to high school and within a few weeks her character was completely changed, her personality had changed completely, that what I know of how she is has changed completely because of being in an environment with girls, a few girls that were swearing or were shouting or were being disrespectful to the teacher. (Halima, Pakistani, homemaker)

Change is inevitable as children grow and, for Halima at least, this prospect caused anxiety. The fact that going to high school coincides with children entering adolescence may particularly heighten concerns around character change and the influence of peers. Halima expresses fears associated with a lack of control over her daughter's development and the potential negative influence of the 'wrong' kind of mix. In her interview, Jessica repeatedly said that her children's happiness was at the centre of her thinking – 'I want my children happy'. This focus on happiness meant that her son's response to the schools was an important factor guiding her decision around choice of school. But she did also have an eye to concerns about academic success:

I think the main factor was my son and what he wanted to do, I think, and where he wanted to go. Because it's him that's going to the school not me. I want the best for him but I think a lot of getting the best out of him is if he's happy. If he's not going to be happy somewhere there's no point even if it's the best school in the whole country, if he's not

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going to be happy there he's not going to do well at the school. (Jessica, Cheadle Hulme, white childminder)

Parents felt that much of their children's future academic and potential working future is shaped by the choices they make in school now. School has a critical role in shaping the social mobility – or reproducing the social position – of their children. In addition, the aspirations they have for their children also help to construct the way they see themselves (and others see them) as parents and as a family. We saw in the previous chapter how school choice is often discussed with friends and can at times become a fraught issue (see also Byrne 2006b). Yet, for many of the parents interviewed, the most immediate anxieties they had about potential schools was the nature of the experience that their children were going to have in the next few years. Transition to high school means putting your child into a very different landscape: 'I'm absolutely petrified. She's going from a school now of 240 children, potentially to a school of 1500 children. That in itself is just mind-blowing' (Natalie, white, office worker). As Fiona explained, much of the concern was about the emotional well-being of their children and the loss of control that parents have over their children once they are in school:

And also, you know, you're sending them there for the majority of the hours in their day and you don't want them to be miserable do you? You wouldn't be sending them somewhere they're terrified or learning nothing or vegetating or just feeling upset. (Fiona, Chorlton, white, freelance project manager)

These parents were talking about children who were, after all, already in school full-time. However the shift from primary to high school is seen as an additional step away from the world of the family, as Halima suggested:

And the thing is, it's just that jump, because you know your children are so – when they're at primary school they're so innocent, in the way that you want to protect them, they're so young and everything, and you protect them from certain things and seeing really horrible things. But then when they go to high school, they're totally exposed to people and crazy children. It's such a big school as well, from having been in a small school to going to somewhere where there's eight to nine hundred students, very overwhelming. And I think that really is daunting for the child and daunting for the parents as well, because how are they going to fit – you know, they have to adjust. (Halima, British Pakistani, homemaker)

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This fear of the numbers of children involved at high school is understandable in terms of thinking of a child navigating more crowded contexts. However, at the same time the idea that they will be ‘exposed to [...] crazy children’ is an interesting – and quite strongly expressed – fear. It perhaps reflects the shift from a relatively knowable space of the local primary school to the more unknowable space of high school. We would suggest that this unknowability arises in part from the different relationship which primary and secondary schools tend to have with parents. Primary schools and primary school teachers often have a fairly close relationship with parents whom they might see on a twice-daily basis, at drop-off and pick-up times. At secondary level, children make their own way to and from school or at least between a waiting car and school. Parents may only rarely engage directly with secondary schools and therefore have a more distant relationship. In addition, once their children go to high school, parents will also have only limited contact with other parents whose children go to the same school. Thus, for parents, some of the known features of state primary school arise from its relationship to a relatively constrained catchment area. This geographical space is relatively well defined and has known classed and racialised characteristics. Primary schools may have a sense of belonging to a known ‘local’ which a secondary school may not. In secondary schools with higher numbers of children, children are coming from a wider area which may not be seen as ‘local’ in the same way.

At the same time, this sense of fear around the impact of ‘crazy’ children may also reflect anxieties around the idea of adolescents and their potential to be ‘crazy’ and dangerous. For Halima, it was important that, post-puberty, her children were in single-sex schools:

if you go to secondary school and all that free mixing environment where you’re going through puberty and your hormones are all over the place, it’s better for us as Muslims [to have single-sex education].

Apart from concerns around developing sexualities, an important feature of the fears that parents have about high school is the spectre of the bully (interestingly, while several parents raised the question of bullying, no parent worried that their child might bully others). The fear of bullying was tied to questions of ‘mix’ (which will be discussed further below). Fiona explained that Chorlton was ‘awash with scare stories’ which told how

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Some children have been [...] in really frightening situations because you've just got a real mix of people there, haven't you? [...] just age groups and some people have kind of got a more aggressive lifestyle than others. I don't want to put it down to money or anything like that. I just think it's, you know, you've either got a more aggressive personality or you find yourself in a situation where you, you know, you can either be a bully or be bullied. And the bigger the school, I suppose statistically there's more chance of that happening and statistically there's more places within the school where you can end up finding yourself feeling vulnerable. (Fiona, Chorlton, white, freelance project manager)

Here we see a hesitation to describe the 'aggressive lifestyles' which may lie behind bullying. Fiona chooses her words carefully and explicitly denies the idea that this might be down to class or 'money'. It may also be shaped by racialised discourses around 'hyper masculinity' (Williams et al. 2008). In Fiona's account, both the parents and children seem to be feeling 'vulnerable'. Certainly the language of fear was common among parents. This can be seen in Sharon's desire to keep her daughter safe at home:

If I had my ultimate choice I would wrap her up in cotton wool and teach her at home. [...] Because I'm just terrified of her going to these big schools and the things that gone on in them and you know. My worst fear, and I don't know why because it never happened to me personally but [...] my worse fear is the bullying point of view. But that is the thing that I'm most afraid of. (Sharon, white, Cheadle Hulme, civil servant)

Thus, for many parents, their children's emotional experience of secondary school is understandably a high priority. In Cheadle Hulme, one of the local secondary schools was on a split site which was connected by an underpass. This, for several parents, was the focus of much concern. Jen described children having to go 'crawling under the road' and Meredith, a white unemployed homemaker, also raised the subway as one of her concerns:

Boundary Road High again has had the same reports but it's on two sites, it's on two campuses and they have to use a subway and a pelican crossing which I'm not happy about and a friend of a friend is a teacher there and she says that the subways become a no go area for teachers because they're scared of the pupils. Because of gangs under there so I'm not – I don't want my son to go there.

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The idea of a ‘no go’ area is reminiscent of media treatment of highly deprived (and often perceived as racialised) areas which present ‘no go’ areas for the police.⁵ This particular physical feature of the school was the focus of many concerns which parents had about the school in Cheadle Hulme, which were exacerbated by the subway not being included in the open evening tours. Sara, a white student, whose daughter was at school in Chorlton, explained how some of her choices (and the choices she saw around her) were driven by fear:

there’s a level of fear ... this is my opinion, I think there’s a level of fear, isn’t there? That you want your child to be secure and comfortable and safe, and your level, your barometer of fear goes up, so, so I think in terms of your circumstances, in terms of how you are. [...] I suppose my level of fear is, is quite minimum compared to some people, but I do have it.

Sara explained that some of her friends had looked at the choice of schools in Manchester and decided to move to the Lake District: ‘that’s extreme’. Nor had she tried to take the grammar school route as an attempt to get her children into a school with more ‘people like her’.

While this section has examined how the process of choosing schools can be seen as both emotional and relational, in the next section we will explore how parents tried to get a better sense of the school populations with a particular focus on discipline and behaviour.

Discipline, behaviour and ability: markers of class, race and gender?

Apart from considering officially available reports and canvassing the opinion of other parents and carers, parents had various ways of getting a picture of what behaviour was like at the schools they were considering. One of these was through observing the children as they left school and their general behaviour on the streets. Although class and race or ethnicity are not frequently referred to in these accounts, given the visual and embodied nature of both class and race it is likely that both impacted on how parents *saw* the school populations. In an earlier study of parents of primary-school-age children, Byrne (2006a, 2006b) found it common for white parents to over-visualise ethnic minorities present in schools when giving estimates of the ethnic make-up of their children’s schools. In this research, we have found that these visualisations often demonstrate the intersections of

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class, gender and race (Byrne 2015). Rachel, a student nurse living in Cheadle Hulme, explained what she looked for:

When I'm driving, or I see them and I say they look a bit more [...] I see the children from Boundary Road High, I said they look a bit more respectable, a bit, they look like their school is very strict and in their policies and things. I don't know that, I've not researched it, but [I] look. Just when I see the children come from Poplar High School, some of them, not all, some of them skirts are a bit shorter, make-up on, hair dyed different colours, and I know children like to experiment but, in my eyes, I moved to Cheadle Hulme because I want them to have a straight education, not be swayed by anything.

Rachel had a strong discourse of working-class social mobility (as was discussed in the previous chapter) and desire for her children to have a better class position than her own. Here she is describing the kind of class work that Bev Skeggs explored in the workings of working-class respectability, where working-class respondents make a concerted effort *not* to risk being cast out of respectability (Skeggs 1997). Here respectability is visible and can be read off the clothing and comportment of children. Rachel's account also reminds us how discourses of class respectability are highly gendered – another interviewee spoke about disliking 'number one haircuts and jewellery'.⁶ Melanie, also from Cheadle Hulme, and who, as we saw in Chapter 2, had experienced being judged for being a young working-class mother, also had a strong account of an underclass, which included a fear of contagion:

That's the sort of people you want your children around, that's sort of how you want your children to grow up and be like, you know I don't want my daughter to end up in a council flat when she's sixteen with two children on benefits for the rest of her life, and if that makes you a snob, then who cares, I don't want that. (Melanie, Cheadle Hulme, white, beauty therapist)

Melanie was one of the few parents to say that class influenced her choice of school, and there is a discourse of gendered respectability similar to that given by Rachel. While these were accounts given by working-class respondents who were particularly wary of being cast out of respectability, other respondents also referred to markers of class and particularly the undesirable working class in their discussions of what they were concerned about in thinking about high schools. In these accounts, visual markers and forms of embodied

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and abjected cultural capital are particularly important. The figure of the 'benefit scrounger' is an increasingly stigmatised figure (Tyler 2013a). The unemployed are assumed to be less interested in education. Samantha explains why she wouldn't have been happy for her children to go to a school where she used to live:

I think they're good schools but I think the area, the ... the population that they cover is there's higher rates of unemployment and there's higher ... you know the results are generally lower quite a bit lower. (Samantha, Cheadle Hulme, white, nurse)

The pauses are particularly expressive in this account, signifying that an uncomfortable idea is about to be broached, which is a common response to talking about class and race (Byrne 2006b). In the following account, Mark, a white social worker from Cheadle Hulme, explains his understanding of class and shows how the notion of 'working class' has been reduced to households dependent on benefits and dominated by single parents. Earning money and a 'successful' nuclear family are the markers of respectability:

I would say working to middle class is saying both parents who are working, not where by unfortunately one parent – if it's a one-parent family then the one parent can't work because they've got the children to look after and they're having to claim off the state. I would say the majority of people at Cheadle Hulme, the majority of the children I would say, have got both mum and dad at home and they come from a nice family background rather than the parents being split up. And that's what I mean by middle class, I would say.

He goes on to elaborate what are for him signifiers of 'nice family background' which seems to be associated with middle-classness. Mark describes taking children on holiday and eating a good diet:

You try and give them good food like fresh vegetables and pasta and meat and – whereas low – you know, if somebody's got a low income coming in they might be on egg and chips a couple of times a week and, you know what I mean?

This account echoes that of Melanie in Chapter 3 where she sets up the contrast between eating sushi and pizza and chips. It demonstrates both the classed nature of food practices and consumption and the extent to which people are aware of how food makes distinction (Bourdieu 1994, Wills et al. 2011). For others, the focus was more on behaviour and appearance than food.

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Marion, a white grandmother, who lived in Whalley Range and worked as a hospital cleaner, was a carer for her grandchildren. She wanted the school to be somewhere where her grandson would be happy but also where he would be kept out of trouble by giving him a firm direction. Marion wanted her grandson to do better at school than she (or his father, who had never learnt to write) had done, but she was less concerned about exam results. Her grandson had struggled with academic work, but improved through one-to-one intervention at primary school. Her goal was for her grandson to join the army and she thought results were less significant than physical fitness. But she did want a school to give him a sense of direction:

He needs secondary school to sit him down [and say], 'Right Peter, you can't do what you want [...] you need to help yourself' ... 'cause it's harder when you get to secondary school. [I want them to] sit him down and say, 'Right Peter, you sit there and you listen.'

It is worth noting that Marion was looking for a school that would provide the strict boundaries and behaviour requirements for her grandson, rather than having the more common concern that *other* children's behaviour should be kept in check.

Talking about appearance rather than behaviour, Cindy suggested that her experience as a social worker made her value strict discipline and conventional notions of respectability:

I like the fact that Sasha cannot wear make-up, that she can't wear earrings, that she, do you know what I mean, she just goes to school like that. I say: 'at weekends you can do what you want, Sasha', but, you know what I mean, in school and I – I don't know, I just think some of the other schools that I work with, I don't like a lot of the stuff that happens in the schools. (Cindy, Whalley Range, white, social work manager)

It was certainly common for 'smart' uniforms to be a key marker for a good school. Indeed, one of the high schools in the research area had large banners up on the school's external fence to advertising that it gave a free blazer to every new child, suggesting that it recognised the symbolic value of the uniform. In the following account, Sam describes how a school in Chorlton had been transformed in recent years:

Seven years ago it didn't have a good reputation. The uniform policy was quite poor, they just wore casual uniform and since then they've

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got a new headteacher that's changed the school quite a bit. The results have improved. And the appearance of the children has gone up. And the ethos of the school I think is genuinely better so people we've spoken to have a better feel for that school now. (Samantha, Cheadle Hulme, white nurse)

In this account, Sam directly relates the ethos of the school to the uniform. Similarly Annette, a white pre-school teacher living in Cheadle Hulme, describes what she looks for when she drives by a high school at the end of the school day:

Just looking whether they look like louts or whether they [...] You know, if they look like, you know, if they look very rough and whether they look very smart and stuff, I suppose.

Class is underlying much of this talk around uniforms – it is discernible in terms such as 'louts' and 'rough' versus 'smart' and 'strict'. However, class itself was very rarely explicitly mentioned. It is clear that, for some parents, talk of class was taboo. To some extent, this contrasts with what was said about racial, ethnic or multicultural mix, as we discuss in Chapter 5. When asked directly about whether the class make-up of a school was important to her, Serena tried to accommodate our interest in class as 'sociologists', but otherwise was opposed to talking about it:

And I don't think we should actually talk – I don't even think we should be look – I know, I know you know not, I'm not a sociologist and that to look at class. Um, Well I think if you're doing it in that type of manner, in – in a sociological way, and you'll, yes look at it, but if you're doing it as a parent, even if you look, I don't think you should be looking at class and things like that as a parent. Because I think once you don't have those sort of view, you bring up children who, who, who value themselves. (Serena, African-Caribbean nurse)

For Serena, talking, and even thinking, about class are likely to have an impact on her children – perhaps that they will see themselves as less worthy because they have a working-class background. We see a similar reluctance to name class with Jen as she tries to explain why her parents had moved areas so she didn't have to go to a particular school:

I suppose Woodley School, the people they had at the time, I suppose it's for, it's, gosh, how can I say this, it's, I suppose it's the people that go there you want, you want people that are sort of, that are going to go

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and make the most of the school and not be disruptive and so perhaps get the support from home and whether you imagine people in a certain area will give more support. Uh huh, yeah. It's getting social now isn't it? [Laughs]. (Jen, white shopworker, Cheadle Hulme)

We can see her real hesitation in naming the problem as associated with class. This contrasts, as we shall see in the following chapter, with the ways that racial, ethnic and religious difference are often spoken of. Ann, a white accountant from Chorlton, was one interviewee who was more openly considering questions of class, with the assumption that working-class children would be less successful academically: 'I mean, at Parkfield High, you're never going to get the best results in the world because of its catchment area. But it does do well, I think, in both groups really doesn't it?' Ann described 'two sets of kids' at the local school. Here classed (as well as possibly raced) markers may be inferred through reference to those who do well at school and those who need to be 'controlled':

There's a two-tiered system and there's two sets of children and there's the kids that do well at the school and there's the kids that don't do well at the school and they're like two different societies and these kids never mix with these kids, at all, ever. They don't socially mix, they don't do anything and I think probably – I think probably that's where education is going really, is that they're – they're intense with the children that can do well or they see the potential of and the other children, they control them. It's behavioural control and I think there's a lot of that in schools basically, you know the kids that can get on and do well they'll teach and the other ones are controlled.

Whilst Ann is suggesting that academic ability is what divides these children who 'do well' from those who don't, she nonetheless also raises questions more related to classed habitus by referring to the two 'societies' never 'mixing' and the role of behaviour as the clear marker of difference. In this quotation, Ann does present this as a problem – that some children appear to be disregarded by schools in favour of those who will 'do well'. However there may also be an element of reassurance that her children will be kept away from those who need to be controlled. Her husband Cliff added later in the interview:

I suppose I'd like to think that we have a school where the middle-class high achievers aren't dragged down by the fact that there are people from poor backgrounds and that the people from poor backgrounds might be helped by having that mix.

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Whilst he is supporting the idea of a mix, in this account only the middle-class children will be 'high achievers' and those from poorer backgrounds appear not to contribute to the others but are constructed only as potential recipients from their middle-class peers. At the same time, for Cliff, there is a risk that middle-class children might be 'dragged down' by their poorer peers. Many of the parents expressed hesitation around their child or children mixing with a classed other. Ken, a white courier whose children went to Longford School in Chorlton, also characterised Chorlton as divided by class:

Well it's very much the two-tier thing that we said – there's this end of Chorlton where it's all middle-class and there's the other end of Chorlton near the school where there's a huge ... council estate and it's definitely a two-tier feel to it.

He went on to discuss with his wife a conversation he'd had with another parent who already had children at the high school, and was critical of the kind of class talk that this parent produced:

Ken: What was it he said, he said something quite poignant about class didn't he [...]?

Fran: Yeah he said she's doing all right because she's ... [laugh]

Ken: Because she's middle class or something.

Fran: No it wasn't like that. It was just like she's in the top group so at least she's getting...

Ken: Yeah, it was about – she's separated from the rabble or whatever you know? The half of the school that are just you know left to rot. (Ken and Fran, white courier and midwife)

The abandonment of the half who were seen to be failing was presented as 'poignant', but at the same time it appeared that separation from 'the rabble' was also reassuring because it didn't impede middle-class or brighter learning. Similarly, in Cheadle Hulme, Bea explained how she guided her children in avoiding the 'wrong crowd':

Stephanie knows who not to mix with; she chooses her friends and when they're growing up like I'll say to Ben I don't want you playing with him any more, he's – you know, I just don't want you playing with him and he's started to say 'yes' or 'no mum, I know what you mean'. And you sort of guide them don't you but if they get in with the wrong crowd you can – do you know what I mean? You try and nurture them the best way and the people that you want them to be friendly with.

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It is unclear from this account what might constitute the ‘wrong crowd’. Nonetheless, the discourse of contagion favours the safety of separation. Similarly, Michael explained his satisfaction that his son’s friends tended to be of a type (he later described his son’s friends as ‘very middle-class’):

but his friends they are all a certain type really; he hasn’t got many that don’t fit with the [mould]. [...] I try my best to get him away from the scum [laughs].

Carla: Scum being?

[Laugh] I don’t know, ah he knows. You know, I think you make a decision when you think the kids are right for each other, it’s not based on anything.

Michael’s laughter here would indicate perhaps that he knows that he is using particularly hostile class language, in the concept of ‘scum’ and then also backtracks on the idea of class altogether: ‘it’s not based on anything’. However, the classed narrative is continued through his interview as he characterises Chorlton as a ‘funny area’:

I think, it’s funny, Chorlton is a funny area, ’cause there is a load of rough next there and there is a load of people who are really posh and rich. [...] It is a good area for Manchester generally, compared to a lot of other areas, so, but it is a strange mix really. I think of, you know, I don’t know, Chorlton people, [...] I think some will have a shock when they get the kids in Parkside High. [...] they will have a shock some, some will be all right but a lot, uh-uh, they won’t, when they go to Chorlton High. [laughs].

In this account, there are apparent contradictions about the area of Chorlton, where the ‘rough’ and ‘posh’ are in relatively close proximity. Nonetheless, when Michael refers to ‘Chorlton people’, he is referring to the middle classes who might be shocked by the make-up of the high school. Kelly, a white primary school teacher living in Chorlton, demonstrates the interplay between race and class in talk around diversity where cultural difference, when it applies to a racialised or ethnic difference is celebrated (this is discussed in Chapter 5). Yet her response to class difference is more equivocal:

There’s a really good mix at the school. Lots of different backgrounds, lots of different races, lots of different languages spoken there, lots of different, you know, sort of home lives they’ve come from, different kinds of families and it’s sort of well celebrated there. The children grow up very tolerant of people’s differences. But I suppose a lot of

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people in Chorlton are sort of teachers or social workers or you know those sorts of professions and well ... I think when you have your kids first of all you can be a bit snobby about wanting them to have friends whose parents you like which tells, it doesn't sound very nice now [laughs] but you ... I think you want your children to have friends to choose from that are going to be nice people to play with.

It would appear that, for Kelly, the markers of who is not 'nice' (and not to be 'celebrated') would be shaped more by class than ethnicity or religion. These findings echo Reay et al.'s research which found, in their research on white middle-class parents choosing inner-city high schools, that a 'mix of ethnicities was far more likely to be sought out and celebrated than a mix of social classes' (Reay et al. 2011: 74; see also Harries 2017). It is notable that educational policy on diversity tends not to refer to class differences or 'working-classness' as something that might be celebrated and may also impact on how parents view such differences. This is not to say, of course, that ethnic minorities are not working-class and that working-class ethnic-minority children would not be viewed ambivalently by white and ethnic-minority respondents alike.

Despite this general trend across parents in both Cheadle Hulme and Chorlton, for one of the parents, class and race were equally part of the mix that was desired. Rebecca explained what she liked about the local high school:

There's things that I like about Parkside High which is that it's really mixed, it has children from lots of very different kinds of backgrounds and it seems to bring them together in a really positive way [...] although it wasn't the reason I chose that school, it's something that's really strong. ... there's something about kids that come from there that feel like that confident in being themselves and not just going with the crowd. (Rebecca, white, local government officer, Chorlton)

Rebecca then went on to explain the impact she felt going to Parkside High had had on her eldest daughter who was now at university and who maintained good friendships with her school friends:

And they are a really mixed group. Some of them are at university, some are working and done different things with their lives, but they're still really good friends, a mixed group class-wise and ethnicity-wise. But the people that she sees at university are a very narrow group of people who've mostly come from private schools, mostly come from very narrow social backgrounds.

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This was a rare example of a white middle-class respondent who felt that there was something positive to gain from her children growing up in a class mix. This is somewhat different from the sense given by Cliff, earlier, that middle-class children represent a contribution to a school whilst working-class children posed a risk. As we shall see in Chapter 5, this sentiment was more common when parents were considering a multicultural mix, as marked by ethnic difference.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored some of the emotions stirred up in the process of choosing schools and the ways in which these feature questions of class and contagion, and how these fears are also often gendered. These anxieties and responses demonstrate how parents view schooling as an intensely relational process. When they are interviewed at the moment of making decisions around school choice, the focus is much less on the likelihood of their children achieving success through formal qualifications than on their fears for the well-being of the children. Rather than express aspirations for their children, it was much more common for parents to express a range of anxieties about who their children will be spending their days with. In Chapter 3, we saw how some parents worried that their children might have a difficult time in private education if their lack of cultural and material resources became a reason for *exclusion* from friendships and activities. In this chapter the fear is the opposite – not exclusion, but inclusion and contamination, where friendships might lead their children off the correct path. Fears about other children included questions such as: will they be bullies; will they be teaching their children ‘bad ways’ in terms of dress, behaviour, lifestyle, work ethic? In order to assess these possibilities, directly observing the everyday behaviour and dress of current students was an important route to judging the social make-up of the school, as well as asking parents with children already at the school. Open days could tell parents about the school facilities and the approach of the teachers, but watching children on an ordinary school day could reveal more about the children who are likely to be surrounding your child. The chapter has shown how class, gender and to a lesser extent race (which will be discussed in the following chapter) feature in parents’ accounts of stigmatised groups who will be potentially detrimental to their children. Those who appear to be members of an underclass (‘the

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rabble' or 'scum') might be bullies and they might also lead children away from the path to respectability. As many parents expressed a discomfort or unwillingness to talk in terms of class, reservations were sometimes expressed in coded ways. Thus questions of class and gender would be indicated through wearing the wrong clothes and having the wrong aspirations and lifestyles. In these accounts, notions of discipline and general adherence to rules around uniform are used as shorthand for markers of respectability.

In the case of talking about these fears, there were less clear differences on the basis of area in the way people talked about class. Similar fears were expressed in Chorlton, Cheadle Hulme and, to a much lesser extent, Whalley Range. Ethnic-minority respondents shared these fears, but perhaps a more limited sense. Whilst in all of the study areas parents expressed fears of contagion from what might be called an educational underclass, the following chapter focuses on parents' responses to ideas of a multicultural mix. Although we do see from some interviewees a celebration of ethnic mix as found by Reay et al. (2011), we argue that it is important to be attentive to the local contexts in which such 'celebrations' take place. Once we do this, we can track how different discourse of multiculturalism circulate in different contexts and see how these differences are expressive of different fears about the other.

Notes

- 1 See Reay (1998) for a discussion about the potential classed shape of these different responses to present happiness as opposed to future happiness.
- 2 www.bbc.co.uk/schools/parents/open_days, accessed 6 October 2017.
- 3 www.theguardian.com/education/2014/Sep23/choosingsecondaryschool-teachers-guide-for-parents, accessed 6 October 2017.
- 4 In fact, Ofsted reports cover more than academic results. They also report on pastoral care, behaviour and the general learning and cultural environment of the school.
- 5 See, for instance the controversies around Donald Trump declaring that Europe has 'no-go zones' because of the presence of Muslim radicals: www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/08/the-met-blasts-donald-trump-for-london-police-in-fear-muslims-claim, first accessed 10 January 2018.
- 6 'Number one haircut' refers to the shortest guard attachment on hair clippers which produces a short cut of hair, which, like shaved heads, is sometimes associated with working-class 'skinheads'.