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Evaluating the mix: negotiating with multiculture

Introduction

The previous chapters have discussed the ways in which parents’ and carers’ discussion of school choice were infused with concerns about their children’s emotions and also how talking about school choice also frequently raised emotional responses. Chapter 4 focused in particular on ideas of threat and contamination which were produced when thinking of high schools and the presence of classed others. This ‘underclass’ was imagined as gendered, identified by both behaviour in and around the school and through dress and appearance. The classed other is seen as posing a potential threat to both the respondents’ children’s happiness and educational achievement. As we also saw in Chapter 3, the assumed source of the problem with unruly children is bad parenting. In this chapter, the focus is placed more specifically on the parents’ discussion of ethnic diversity, arguing that parents were more likely to consider diversity in general as something related to race or ethnicity rather than class, and this kind of diversity is often welcomed. However, what ethnic diversity is and what risks it may be seen to pose vary by area, with some parents in Cheadle Hulme expressing reservations about both ethnic and religious difference which they saw as potentially threatening, particularly when accompanied by ‘political correctness’. As we will explore below, in the UK schools have been a key site for the implementation and debate over multicultural policies and it is perhaps unsurprising that they also serve as a site for anxieties about multiculturalism. The chapter considers how many parents desire a ‘good mix’ in the schools and talk about ethnic diversity in positive ways. Thus, schools can be an important site for the kind of everyday conviviality (Gilroy 2004, Valluvan 2016; Rzepnikowska-Phillips 2017) which many parents view in a positive light and seek cross-cultural
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interactions and ‘exposure’ (Byrne 2006b; 2009) for their children. However, as this chapter will show, there are often limits to the exposure to difference or ‘mix’ that is desired. Some white parents fear ‘too much’ of an ethnic mix, or an ‘over-exposure’ which would mean that their children were no longer in a context where white children are the majority. At the same time, ethnic-minority parents also fear ‘not enough’ of a racial or religious mix which could leave their children more vulnerable to racism (Weekes-Bernard 2007, Rollock et al. 2015). What is notable about this complex situation of desires and fears around multicultural mix is the paucity of language for talking about diversity. As the chapter will explore, the single term ‘good mix’ is used to describe schools which differ very markedly in terms of the ethnic make-up of their student population. Thus we argue that there is no shared language around multiculturalism and no consensus on what multiculturalism might (literally or metaphorically) look like in the everyday context of a school. As there is no vocabulary to calibrate degrees of ‘mixedness’, it appears that what constitutes a good mix is largely in the eyes of the beholder. It is also worth noting the caveat raised by Reay et al. (2011: 50) about the use of the term ‘mix’: ‘it can be a misleading term since in practice it may not actually refer to social mixing per se but rather to the social backdrop, the context for living’. Thus the degrees of real encounter (Wilson 2017) and conviviality desired may also vary markedly.

As argued in Chapter 1, this book is distinct from much of the literature on school choice and ethnicity because it is able to consider the choice talk of both white and ethnic-minority parents across a range of class positions and in different geographic areas where the ethnic make-up of both the relevant primary and secondary schools and the wider areas are known. With an approach which includes ethnic as well as class diversity in three areas, we are able to see how class, race and place all shape parents’ responses to ethnic difference. In particular, the chapter will argue that there are broad, area- or school-specific discourses circulating around the question of multiculture which also serve to point up the complex intersections, and layering, of race and class. Generally all the interviewees thought that educating children in a ‘diverse’ context with a mix of children from different ethnic backgrounds was a positive element of the primary schools their children attended, and of the high schools they wanted their children to go to. At the same time, parents living in the different study areas had markedly different ideas of what a multicultural mix or diversity
looked like. Multiculturalism appears to be a widespread affective discourse conveying particular emotional landscapes and responses to difference. Yet we will argue that it is lived and felt differently in particular spatial contexts (Nayak 2010). For those white respondents living in the areas with the lowest ethnic mix, alongside a general approval of a good ‘mix’ there were also fearful discourses circulating around the consequences of having ‘too much’ diversity for their children. Thus we will explore different degrees of comfort around ethnic mix and varied levels of attachment to a whiteness that can be put at risk in situations which are ‘too’ multicultural. At the same time, for the ethnic-minority parents, the possibility of ‘not enough’ racial or religious mix could leave their children more vulnerable to racism.

Thus, this chapter will demonstrate how parents of children in the school in Chorlton, and to a certain extent Whalley Range, had a particular range of responses to ideas of cultural difference which differ from those of the Cheadle Hulme school, where the talk tended to be more fearful and tentative in its embrace of mix. The relaxed approach of the parents in Whalley Range and Chorlton might be expected from the fact that they all appeared happy with their children’s current primary schools which had high levels of ethnic, religious and, to a certain extent, class diversity. Many of them stressed the ‘comfortable’, ‘friendly’ or ‘nice’ atmosphere they found in the schools their children already attended. This orientation towards multicultural or everyday conviviality (Gilroy 2004) is shared by white and non-white respondents and of people in different class positions in these areas to a large degree, but with some significant differences. In the case of the parents from the Chorlton school, it is also accompanied by a sense of a liberal and sometimes ‘alternative’ lifestyle which has classed characteristics, also shared by white and ethnic-minority respondents. Whereas, for the non-white parents of both areas, there was an element of what Reay and Lucey (2003), considering children’s approaches to school choice, call ‘ethnic choosing’ or what we have characterised as ‘safety in numbers’. This chapter will briefly consider the relationship of policies of multiculturalism in the UK education sector which perhaps go some way in explaining how parents have an, albeit limited, vocabulary to express a valuing of ethnic – as opposed to class – mix. It will then explore the ways in which, in Chorlton, an espousal of multiculturalism and a high value placed on diversity often coincided with a broader range of what were seen as lifestyle or ethical concerns including, for example, vegetarianism.
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and openness to same-sex relationships. The chapter will also explore how diversity also included a sense of proportion or balance and the ways in which the mix might not be right. The chapter will then explore how, for ethnic-minority parents, the nature of the mix might be particularly urgent as the dominance of white pupils at a school might expose their children to experiences of racism and hostility. The final sections of the chapter will consider the accounts of those white parents living in Cheadle Hulme who express serious reservations about ‘too much’ diversity and multicultural mix. Here the discourse of embracing difference espoused by both middle and working class in Chorlton is rendered much less enthusiastically. Instead, a sense of fear creeps in to accounts of ethnic diversity. Although the parents in Cheadle Hulme are living in areas with much lower levels of ethnic diversity and the schools their children go to are also much less ethnically diverse, they at times gave quite resentful and embattled accounts about the impact of ‘political correctness’ which suggest a sense of whiteness under threat.

Multiculturalism and diversity in education

Anne Phillips (2007: 3) argues that in the early twenty-first century ‘Multiculturalism became the scapegoat for an extraordinary array of political and social evils, a supposedly misguided approach to cultural diversity that encouraged men to beat their wives, parents to abuse their children and communities to erupt in racial violence’ – and she could have added the threat of terrorism. Multiculturalism has also been held responsible for breaking up what are nostalgically imagined to be cohesive communities and has become what Sara Ahmed calls ‘an unhappy term’ (Ahmed 2004b: 122). Multiculturalism is also positioned as one of the causes of a ‘crisis’ of national identity in Britain and/or England (Byrne 2007, 2014b). Trevor Phillips (the chair of the then Commission for Racial Equality in the UK) controversially declared the failure of ‘multiculturalist’ policies in 2004. These policy discussions around multiculturalism also need to be understood in the context of a post 9/11 ‘war on terror’ and also as shaped by responses to the disturbances in Britain in 2001 which focused on a perceived rise in segregation (particularly in cities of northern England with large Muslim populations) (Cantle 2001; see Phillips et al. (2008) for the counter-argument). Recent debates around multiculturalism have tended to have an increased attention
to religious difference (particularly Islam), alongside the older focus on racial or ethnic difference.

In February 2011, David Cameron, the Conservative Prime Minister of the coalition government launched a ‘war on state multiculturalism’ which he blamed for encouraging separatism and therefore being responsible for the radicalisation that can lead to terrorism. David Cameron has also focused on definitions of Britishness set in the context of a declared ‘crisis’ of national identity. In his 2006 Party Conference speech, Cameron declared that ‘every child in our country, wherever they come from, must know and deeply understand what it means to be British’. Sara Ahmed argues that ‘this nostalgic vision of a world “staying put” involves nostalgia for whiteness, for a community of white people happily living with other white people’ (Ahmed 2010: 121). The nostalgia can also be seen in some of the campaigning around the 2016 Brexit referendum, where imperial fantasies of national sovereignty and control of borders seemed to have a strong purchase on some voters. Thus, although it is frequently unspecified, ‘diversity’ is generally considered to be a positive attribute of British society and within education. Yet, at the same time, there has been a distinct ‘turn’ in terms of government policy towards religious, ethnic and racial difference. This turn, which draws to a close the era first initiated by Roy Jenkins in the 1960s, has an affective register which often produces ideas of wounded and vulnerable whiteness and contradicts some of the positive more convivial associations with multiculturalism. Roy Jenkins, as the Labour government’s Home Secretary, argued for a policy move away from an assimilationist approach which sought to assist (and require) migrants to relinquish cultural difference in the quest to become British. Jenkins favoured an understanding of ‘equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance’ (Grillo 2007).

In the context of education, in the 1980s, there began to be a focus on schools in white areas as well as inner-city multicultural areas to promote respect and tolerance for other ethnic groups and religions (Tomlinson 2008: 83). The Swann Report of 1985, Education for All, argued for cultural pluralism and opened the door for a range of multicultural policies from schools and LEAs (Rattansi 1992, Tomlinson 2008). As Tomlinson argues, ‘[t]he Swann Committee took the view that the aims of a multicultural anti-racist curriculum were synonymous with a good education designed to produce decent, tolerant and knowledgeable citizens’ (Tomlinson 2008: 93). This approach
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has been criticised, both by those who worry about the ‘dilution’ of British culture and by those who oppose multiculturalism from an anti-racist perspective (Tomlinson 2008). Nonetheless, schools have played an important role in the politics of multiculturalism where they have generally been seen as a site both of tension and risk around culture and diversity but also as a possible solution to racialised prejudice and inequalities. As Rattansi argued, ‘the basic educational prescription [of multiculturalism] is the sympathetic teaching of “other cultures” in order to dispel the ignorance which is seen to be at the root of prejudice and intolerance’ (Rattansi 1992: 24). Nonetheless, many anti-racists criticised the multiculturalist approach for failing to address racist structures and ideologies and assuming that a ‘dose’ of ‘other cultures’ – often read as religion (Yuval-Davis 1992: 283) – would cure ignorance and thereby end racism (Hesse 2000). This is not to say that ‘multiculturalism’ consists of a coherent political or policy discourse: as Stuart Hall (2000) argues, it should properly be understood in the plural. Lentin describes it rather as ‘a patchwork of initiatives, rhetoric and aspirations’ (Lentin and Titley 2011: 2). Nonetheless, despite its relatively modest ambitions and partial implementation, it seems clear that we are facing what Derek McGhee describes as the ‘systematic dismantling of multiculturalism as the organising rhetoric of public policies’ (McGhee 2005).

The discourse within education has shifted from multiculturalism to ‘diversity’ and with associations first to ‘active citizenship’ and then to ‘British Values’ (Yuval-Davis 2007, Byrne 2014b). In this shift, schools are again central to the attempt to create a new form of citizenship based on the elusive ‘common culture’ of the nation in a reframing of cultural debates within a ‘reinvigorated nationalist discourse’ (Alexander 2007). Parents are unlikely to be aware of these policy debates, but we would argue that they still have an impact on schools as spaces and on ideas of education. Schools as spaces are marked as multicultural by the posters in receptions and other areas saying ‘welcome’ in multiple languages. But they have become in recent years a site of resurgent nationalism as signalled by the return of the Union Jack in displays of British values. The following section will consider the accounts of parents whose children went to school in Chorlton who generally have a positive response to the idea that their children will go to schools which have a ‘good’ ethnic mix, or at least are in a context where to question multiculturalism would appear to be breaking a taboo.
Chorlton talk: ‘enough of a mix’

You wouldn’t have somebody in Chorlton saying, ‘I don’t’ ... ‘I want my children to go to a school where people have nice families and that they are white, and nice middle [class]’ ... [...] that might be what they felt, but you wouldn’t openly say it. (Sara)

Sara, a white student, whose daughter goes to school in Chorlton, tries to explain that there is a kind of ‘Chorlton talk’ around diversity which, she suggests, enforces certain silences. The sensitivity of the issue is perhaps expressed in her false start – she tries to first say what might not be desired (otherness) but fails and switches to an alternative, positive phrasing of the issue. The hesitancy in this quotation alerts us to the difficulties of interview-based research on questions of ethnicity – as well as class and gender and other social divisions – that respondents may tailor what they say to what they think is acceptable. This requires greater attention both to silences and to what is not said (Byrne 2006b, Harries 2014, 2017). Nonetheless, it can sometimes be surprising what people do feel able to say in an interview context about ethnicity (and about class as we saw in the previous chapter), as the chapter will demonstrate. Furthermore, we argue that what people feel is appropriate to say differs in this research in part according to the areas they live in. Much of the talk around school choice happens most intensely in local spaces (Wilson 2014) – in homes, at the school gate – and we found that parents in different areas did tend to produce distinct area-specific discourses around ethnic mix (more so than around class, as was discussed in Chapter 4).

Certainly, what we heard most frequently in the interviews with respondents whose parents attended the school in Chorlton was a positive response to diversity, but one which also had a broad approach to the notion of difference, often encompassing questions of ‘ethical approach’ (to child-rearing or, for example, vegetarianism) as well as questions of sexuality and cultural difference. This might be considered to in part reflect what Ghassan Hage (1998: 129) refers to as ‘ethnic surplus value’ where ethnic diversity is something to be consumed. At the same time, the embedding of an idea of ethnic diversity with other kinds of difference is something that is under-explored in the literature. Thus, in this context, racialised or religious differences are understood as embedded within a range of different ‘lifestyles’ or ‘cultures’, which we would argue are also classed. Which differences
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matter at a particular moment is therefore also likely to shift according to a range of considerations and the geographic location which is being considered. As we shall see, understanding people’s responses to ‘multiculture’ is hampered when exactly the same language is used by people describing very different situations (Ball et al. 2002, Byrne 2006a).

Fran (a white midwife) had lived in Chorlton for almost twenty years and had moved there as a student. As with many of those interviewed in Chorlton, as we saw in Chapter 2, Fran appreciated Chorlton as a place of diversity where there was an ‘alternative culture’, including people with similar ethics – in Fran’s case vegetarianism was particularly important. In considering which primary school to send her children to, this question of diversity and ethics was extended to a notion of ethnic mix. She explained why she had chosen Longford Primary:

Well, I think because we’re not religious, we didn’t want any sort of Christian school or anything like that. We wanted a school that had a good mix of different kinds of kids, so Longford School is quite a mix of like different cultures. There’s Asian kids, Afro-Caribbean kids, Chinese kids, there’s loads of different kids and there’s quite a lot of gay parents as well, so we wanted the kids to get a really good idea of difference basically.

In this account, diversity is tied to the visible racialised differences, as well as the perhaps less visible issue of sexuality, but not class. This kind of diversity is something positive which Fran says she actively sought. However, there were limits to what would be a desirable diversity. Fran went on to explain that, when they were choosing primary schools for their first child, the question of ethnic mix was very important:

We’d heard that it [a potential alternative school] was predominantly an Asian school so thought it might be quite difficult for a white child to fit into a really predominantly Asian kind of culture. And Longford has like so many different cultures, I just thought it’d be better for the kids if they had a really good mix of children and not just one predominant like White, Asian, whatever in that school. (Fran, white, midwife).

The primary school that Fran’s children went to had just over 50 per cent white children whereas the school she ruled out had just over two-thirds from Pakistani backgrounds. So she was reflecting on a
quantitative difference and, although happy for her child to be in a school which only just had a majority white context, there were limits to how she felt about a non-white context, especially when it was not ‘different’ enough.

This desire for diversity, with an acceptance of limits to the desire, was not only expressed by white respondents. Jas and Tej (British Asian managerial employees) also lived and Chorlton and they together explained how they chose Longford Primary School:

Jas: Tej spoke with other parents and they thought Longford was a good cosmopolitan school.

[...]

Tej: We found it was more of a community school. You know. ... the mix, the parents were quite similar to what we wanted to be involved with, you know. It is quite relaxed, like there is no uniform. Children are from all different backgrounds ... there is a good network, the parents’ ethics are quite good.

Jas and Tej were comparing Longford School with the one (also considered by Fran) that their son initially went to. They characterised the school as ‘90 per cent Asian’, thus overestimating the Asian presence in the school. Jas and Tej were both Sikhs with ancestry from India and the school they were referring to would have had children from predominantly Pakistani Muslim backgrounds, so religion as much as ethnic origin is likely to make up a significant part of the mix that matters for them (as it may have done for Fran). For Jas and Tej, as much as for Fran, the diversity represented by ‘cosmopolitan’ Chorlton is an important part of their elective belonging in the area (Savage et al. 2005). In contrast to the desire expressed by many parents quoted in Chapter 4 for smart uniforms at high school, for Jas and Tej the no-uniform policy of the primary school was symbolic of its relaxed, cosmopolitan approach. This may partially mark a distinction between what is desirable for a primary school as compared to a secondary school.

Other parents in Chorlton also qualified their approach to a ‘mixed’ school by suggesting there was a point at which their child became too much of a minority, which might be characterised by class, race or religion or a complicated combination of them all:

I supposed that might have influenced me in thinking are there, is she going to have other children who, you know that she’s going to have similar things in common with, lifestyles and backgrounds as well as
other people. So more of a mix, so it’s not about, erm, I just want, I would like her to go where there’s a mix of children. ... I don’t want her to go to school where it’s all white children, but I wouldn’t want her to go to a school where it’s all predominantly Asian children either, just because I think, you know it’s nice for there to be a mix. [...] you want them to have friends and have things in common [...] I just want her to go somewhere where there’s a good choice of people she can be friends with, and that sounds awful if [it] makes me sound like I don’t want her to be friends with Asian people, it’s not that, it’s about [...] you know, if I was black and I was choosing a school where there wasn’t a very big ethnic mix, that’s exactly the same. I think it’s having the mix that’s really nice, and really nice at that school. (Terri, health visitor, white, Chorlton)

Wrapped up in the expressed desire for ‘mix’ may be different concerns and experiences: it is a complex affective terrain, and there are potential risks in the encounter with difference (Wilson 2017). It carries risk that children may not find friends – or perhaps the right kinds of friends who, in Terri’s words ‘have similar things in common with, lifestyles and other backgrounds’. As Ball et al. (2011: 4) argue: ‘[i]n relation to friendships, mix is an arena of social risks as well as a form of social learning in relation to identities of different sorts’. It is clear that describing these desires is difficult for Terri, presenting the possibility that she would be read as prejudiced and racist. Even representing one’s desires and choices presents risks and dilemmas. It seems clear that, for Terri, not enough of the right kind of children would present a social risk for her daughter. However, getting the mix right can present benefits for children. For many of those interviewed, the desire for a multicultural mix was presented pragmatically as gaining ‘real life’ experience for their children. This could be regarded as the same kind of desire for social and cultural capital that Reay et al. (2011) found in their study on white middle-class parents. The parents in Reay’s study who had gone ‘against the grain’ of school choice by selecting inner-city comprehensives for their children frequently felt that their children were gaining an essential attribute for success in modern times which was to be comfortable with people from a whole range of ethnic backgrounds. However, in the context of this research, it is interesting to note that it is a desire shared also by non-white parents. As Serena, a nurse whose parents migrated to Manchester from the Caribbean, and whose children went to the Chorlton primary school, argued:
All in the mix

Children nowadays need to know everybody, before they make up their mind about a certain class of people or a certain ethnicity of people, they need to know everybody, and I think that our children now that are growing up are more, are much more, are much better in communicating with different types of people, than say [we] were or you know people were a couple of years ago or before.

Serena is unusual in explicitly mentioning class as well as ethnicity which, as we saw in Chapter 4, was something many parents avoided, even where it might be implied (this can be seen in the following quotation from Kelly, a white teacher whose child went to Longford Primary in Chorlton: ‘We want our children to grow up knowing there’s lots of different kinds of people around and they’re all ... it’s all good’). Alongside raising questions of class, Serena also reflects a common sentiment in the research: that their children’s generation will need to be much more comfortable with diversity than their parents are. The next section will focus on the experiences of ethnic-minority parents and show how, although they commonly asserted the same positivity around diversity in schools, their school choices were also framed by a need to consider the risks to their children posed by being outnumbered in white schools – or consigned to low-achieving ‘sink’ schools.

The safer choice

For ethnic-minority parents, the desire for diversity of multicultural mix may be focused more on the undesirability of a situation of overwhelming whiteness – rather than the overwhelming otherness which usually is imagined by the white respondents. As Ball et al. (2011) argue: ‘within the processes of school choice, the social mix of particular schools can serve, in parent’s accounts, as a surrogate indicator for other things – white privilege or school policies that are sensitive to diversity, anti-racism or the possibility of racism and perspectives and practices which are conducive or not to minority ethnic achievement’. For Nasreen, a translator who had come to Britain from Bangladesh as a child and lived in Whalley Range, this caution about all-white contexts arose from her own experience of schooling in the UK:

Obviously diversity means a lot because I was – I went to a school where it was all white. And there was a lot of racial abuse so – which
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is something that I do not wish for my daughter. So if there is a school where it’s quite diverse hopefully she won’t get that.

Thus diversity offers a sense of protection from racism and avoiding the vulnerability of being the only non-white pupil in a class. Alongside this desire for security, Nasreen does express the more general desire for a cosmopolitan outlook for her daughter, as suggested by many white parents: ‘all you wish for your child [is] to grow up aware of other cultures and religions. And not just cultures and religions, different experiences of lifestyle.’ Similarly, Stan, a Chinese migrant living in Cheadle Hulme, mentioned that the primary school was ‘not mature’ in its approach to ethnic difference, and he was attracted to Poplar High School because of its multicultural mix.

Samer, a migrant from Iraq, had relocated to Whalley Range from another area in Manchester because of his (and more particularly his wife’s) experiences of racism. So he was also attentive to the racial make-up of the school his son would go to. This included trying to avoid schools which were either too white or too black as well as finding it difficult to navigate a mostly Pakistani local community. He repeatedly told his son that he would need twice the level of qualifications to achieve alongside white candidates in the job market – and then quickly apologised for suggesting that Britain was racist: ‘I’m sorry, you don’t mind me saying that, no?’ Bethan Harries (2014) discusses the silencing of discussions of race in an imagined multicultural and post-race society. We can see the hesitation in naming, describing and resisting racism in regard to schooling and education from some of the interviewees for this research, which is perhaps not surprising given the dominance of discourses around diversity, multiculturalism and education. Whilst celebrations of diversity are clearly important, they can also make the description of less positive experiences difficult to express. Concern about racism and the potential for diversity to offer more ‘safety’ was explained by Sabah, a British Pakistani nursery worker:

even though I’m not racist or anything [like] that, you think about your child if he’s going to be the only Asian in the whole school, how is he going to, how are other children going to react to him? And then you think about that, I sometimes, ... It might be fine you just, it’s your worries at the back of your mind I think. I think yeah you do opt for the safer choice. I think as parents we do go for the safer choice. So where
we see that ... you know the way it is diverse and it’s got a lot of mixture of children.

Weekes-Bernard (2007) and Rollock et al. (2015) have explored how concerns about racism are a significant consideration for many ethnic-minority parents. This perhaps goes beyond what Archer (2010: 453), discussing the experiences of minority-ethnic parents, describes as ‘niggling insecurity’ and a ‘background hum of discomfort when discussing their children’s education’. Serena, cited above, who felt it was good for her children to be educated in a diverse context, was nonetheless concerned to ensure that her daughter studied in a class where there would be enough black girls to build her self-esteem: ‘you have to be proud to be black’. We would argue that this is a different sentiment from the white parents concerned that their children might not be in a white-majority context as the other parents were considering questions of feeling comfortable, rather than the necessary context for building self-esteem in a society where racist stereotypes about black women persist.

The ethnic-minority parents in both Chorlton and Whalley Range were generally (like the white parents) pleased with the primary schools that their children were in. Fauzia, a Bangladeshi full-time parent who had been in Britain since she was fifteen, described how she particularly valued the approach of her children’s primary school:

[The school] is multicultural and is very friendly atmosphere and lots of different kinds of things happen there [...] And we have lots of different cultural things there, picnics and wood fair [craft event]. And lots of other activities for parents to get involved with.

Here we have a sense also of how schools can create a sense of community that includes not only the children but also their parents. Having had this experience at the primary level, when Fauzia explained why she preferred one grammar school over another (despite the fact that it was generally less well regarded), the lack of ethnic diversity was a key issue:

When I went to West Street Grammar for open day, I felt like less – more like white based, most people are white. And when I go to Blessingham Grammar, there’s lots of mixed children there, lots of Asian, Arabs and lots of blacks and all kinds there. That’s why I feel the same feeling as St Catherine’s [current primary school] as at Blessingham Grammar.
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For Fauzia, whiteness is something that needs to be diluted in order for her to feel a sense of security for her children, and this desire for diversity is distinct from those white parents who are seeking exposure to difference for their children. Rachel, who lived in Cheadle Hulme, was white with mixed-race children. She said that she was specifically choosing the less ‘white’ high school for her daughter. This was because her daughter had faced problems of racism at the primary school. What we can see here is that the nature of the ‘mix’ matters to these parents because of the effect it will have on their children’s experience. It is a desire for ‘people like us’ – but of a very different kind from the desire considered by most of the literature on school choice. In addition, it is important to note how talking about ‘mix’ includes consideration of religious difference as well as racialised differences. This is particularly important in the current context where Muslim experience of racism is increasing in general and often peaks in times where there have been terrorist attacks.  

Nonetheless, concerns about mix from some non-white parents could also include prejudice and stereotyping. Samer, as mentioned above, explained that, in the case of primary school, he had rejected one which he worried had ‘too many black’ children, particularly as his son was ‘soft’. This demonstrates how stereotypes and prejudices may be shared across racial lines. In fact, Samer had felt isolated by other Muslims in Whalley Range through language differences and his son had experienced problems with ‘other Asians’. In addition, finding a school with ‘enough’ mixture was not always a strong preference. Helen, a teaching assistant of African-Caribbean origin, said she was not worried about the local schools because they were a good mix, but at the same time she argued that:

If I was living in a very white area, where there are mainly white families, mainly white children, I would still be choosing the best schools for that area. So I wouldn’t look for the school that had more black people than white people.

For some parents from ethnic-minority backgrounds, there was also a sense that other (white or Christian) children would benefit from ‘mixing’ with their children. Halima sent her first child to an Islamic school but her other children have gone to Longford Primary School in Chorlton: ‘I must admit I’ve changed my views since then’. She likes the way all faiths are introduced to the children: ‘These are my children, they practise their religion but they don’t practise how
you’ve been – how the TV portrays Muslims, extreme Muslims.’ This was therefore, for Halima, a distinct contribution to society that she was making in showing white British children that the portrayal of Muslims in the media was not accurate. However, the politics of being Muslim in Britain may also have other pressures, and the respondents point to the importance of not seeing Muslims in Britain, or even Pakistani Muslims in Britain, as an undifferentiated group. There are many differences in experiences and perspectives which are shaped by class, education and generation. Runa explained that, because she is a ‘liberal’ Muslim, she likes her daughter going to school in an area with fewer Muslims, so that she will not be judged by other Muslims for her practices. She also wanted her daughter to have a wide variety of friends rather than just Asian Muslims. This was a view shared by Saira, a migrant from Pakistan living in Cheadle Hulme, who felt distanced from other Pakistanis by class and by different practices of religious observance (such as dress and diet):

A lot of Asians I notice sometimes they don’t mix with other people [...] here there’s a good mixture of people and the majority of my children’s friends are – are English people. [...] I didn’t want to be in a place where there was not a good mixture of people. [...] If I wanted to stick to all Asians then I should – might as well stayed in Pakistan [laughing] and the thing is for my kids to have more mixed sort of upbringing and be aware of other cultures, religions and to respect each other and work in a very multicultural society. I think it should be a good mixture.

Here Saira shows an engagement with the multicultural discourses common in British education, and in some ways there appear to be more commonalities between Saira and the white middle-class parents of Reay’s study where cosmopolitan knowledge is something to be acquired. But for Saira, this also involves a process of negotiation with the ‘community’ to which she is assumed (by others) to belong. She marks the distance between herself and those other ‘Asians’ through a discourse of an appreciation of ‘mixing’:

A lot of Asians that moved here many years ago, they came from small towns and some of them might not have been educated. Although their kids got educated and stuff, but they didn’t let their kids mix with other people. They didn’t want to lose their identity, their culture, religion and all that ... [they are] living in a time capsule.

Similarly, Noreen, originally from Pakistan (where she had been a teacher) but who had arrived from Belgium only three months before
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the interview, explained that she had avoided one primary school because it was too Asian. In contrast, the school her children went to had:

Some Iraqi people, some Arabic. Some was Africans, some Chinese and then it’s most of multicultural that’s good. I prefer that. Because then my children also, they know other cultures, other religion also they have to know because they live here. And for that I think it will better ... the multicultural.

At the same time, she was also concerned that the high school her daughter went to should not be too white as she was worried about racism from both fellow students and potentially the teachers. Thus a mix represented potential enrichment for her daughter’s education (she already spoke four languages and with this proficiency she managed to pass a specialised language test for a local academy). In addition, a sufficient mix was also read as a signal that there was less likely to be racism within the school.

This section has demonstrated how the many ethnic minorities share an affective register with their white counterparts in Chorlton and Whalley Range where diversity and multicultural mix are deemed to be a positive part of schooling. However, for some, the espousal of mix is also shaped by a fear that, in more white contexts, their children may suffer racism and exclusion. Thus the mix provides more than cosmopolitan exposure but also provides a refuge from prejudice. The following section will explore the accounts of some of the white parents of children in Cheadle Hulme who, whilst they shared a discourse of viewing ‘mix’ and diversity positively, at the same time produced fearful accounts of whiteness being lost or supplanted.

Questioning multiculture

An interesting issue which arises out of this research is that we lack a highly developed vocabulary for describing diversity. Thus, in all three areas, which are quite distinct from each other in terms of both the residential population and the make-up of the schools, very similar phrases are used. So Cheadle Hulme, Chorlton and Whalley Range are all described as areas with ‘a good mix’, ‘very diverse’ and ‘very multicultural’ by different respondents, as are the different schools which their children attended. But what ‘diverse’ or ‘mixed’ means will vary in each case. It is often difficult to read off
from people’s description of the ‘mix’ what that actually means in demographic terms. Thus terms such as ‘very diverse’ and ‘good mix’ were used to describe schools in which there were 76 per cent white pupils (in Cheadle Hulme); 51 per cent white pupils (in Chorlton); and 11 per cent white pupils (in Whalley Range). However, whilst the parents from the Cheadle school, which was notably whiter in terms of residence and school intake than Chorlton or Whalley Range, did express a desire for ‘mix’, there were also more explicit expressions of fear and a risk of something lost. This outlines perhaps what might be seen by these parents as the limits to the ‘tolerance’ or the risk of the embrace of difference. Much of the fear expressed is framed around religious as much as ethnic difference, although it is clear that the two are mutually constituted. We would argue that there is a different discursive and affective conceptualisation of difference in operation among the white parents of the school in Cheadle Hulme. Thus, where Sara, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, suggested that there are things that are almost unsayable in Chorlton, they were expressed more freely by parents in the Cheadle Hulme school. What appears to be under threat is a sense of Christian culture. However, it would be mistaken to see this as a straightforward replacement of ethnicity or race by religion. Often, the desire for Christianity (or conversely the fear of or concern about the Muslim) is coupled with ethnic or racialised descriptors. For instance, Natalie, a white office worker, explains why she likes Ashover Primary School in Cheadle Hulme (she is one of the few white interviewees from Cheadle Hulme to bring up questions of racialised difference without prompting):

because of its ethics. ... It was quite a Christian background actually, although there were children from other denominations that came to the school, it was a predominantly white Christian background that the children came from which I actually quite liked. I’m not an overly religious person.

Although a desire for a ‘predominantly white Christian background’ appears to be sayable in the Cheadle Hulme context in a way that it might not be in Chorlton, there remain other restrictions on what is acceptable to say, at least without care. So, as Natalie goes on to explain how the demographic nature of Cheadle Hulme has changed since the building in the area of a mosque about which she and her husband ‘weren’t overly happy’, she says, ‘I have to be careful what I say here’. Natalie also explains some of the limits to easy mixing

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which she has experienced: ‘And you – to a certain extent you’re still segregated ’cause we don’t know and you do tend to put up barriers. You do become defensive with what you don’t know.’ This segregation also translates into concerns about schooling:

The only thing that concerns me over ethnic backgrounds that go into secondary school is – and you do get it – is to a certain extent gang culture because again, because there is still a barrier and there’s always going to be a barrier [...] a lot of the time you’ll get the Asian children sticking together and the white children sticking together. It causes tension.

Natalie expresses some discomfort in talking about ethnic and religious difference and worries about her own ignorance. Sharon, a white civil servant also from Cheadle Hulme, had a positive discourse about ‘Asian’ families investing in their children’s education. However, she appeared confused in her terminology:

I think a lot of Asian families tend to invest more in their children than well you know, they might be white Asian family, I don’t – you know I don’t know what, but ... I – I just know an Asian person from the colour of their, you know from they look like it’s, but I – I – I – I don’t know whether they are white Asian or whether they’re not, but I just feel as a culture, I feel that they invest more in their children.

Sharon appears here to be confusing Asian with Muslim (or alternatively a British Asian person has been rendered white) which again suggests that ‘diversity’ talk is something she is a bit uncomfortable with, or unused to. This confusion also points to the intertwining of religion and ethnicity in her perspective. Sharon also overvisualises the non-white presences in her children’s primary school, stating that it is now ‘majority’ Asian (although it is 76 per cent white and South Asians make up only a small proportion of the minority group). Sharon draws on familiar discourse which is anti-multiculturalism or the trope of ‘political correctness’:

There’s been a lot of ill-feeling in the past few years ... with parents that celebrate a lot of the Asian holidays and stuff but we’re not allowed to celebrate any of ours because it’s classed as racist. We’re not allowed to celebrate St George’s Day and ... they stopped two children sending Christmas cards out and there’s been a lot of stuff like that. [...] There are a lot of subjects that white British children are not allowed to learn about because the other pupils’ parents say it goes against their religion for them to learn about it and so they suffer in that respect.
This narrative was shared by Melanie, a white beauty therapist also from Cheadle Hulme. Again, however, Melanie feels she has to choose her words carefully: we don’t know what word she wants to say, but it appears to be unsayable:

*Carla:* How would you characterise the ethnic make-up of the school?

*Melanie:* I don’t think it’s that, it sounds, it’s a shocking word to say. … Right. This is the honest truth, I think there are quite a few Pakistanis at the school, which is fine, which is great you know. I’m not a racist in the slightest, I don’t really care as long as it doesn’t affect me, if they’re a nice person and it doesn’t really matter does it what colour your skin is, […] what country they’re from I don’t care. What we do care about is things like the school, like everything, the whole world has gone politically correct and I think our school is quite a, like we have a racist [incident] book for example, so if a white child does anything to a Pakistani child then us as a parent and the child sign the racist book. Now in my eyes it should work both ways, but it doesn’t so, I think things like that annoy you. Things like, oh we’re going to stop the Christmas nativity because of that, well hang on a minute we’re in England, you know, things like oh the kids have to go off and visit the mosque, they have to take their shoes and socks off and they have to like do reading from the Quran and they have to respect it.

Melanie builds up quite a head of steam in her account against ‘political correctness’ which she feels is responsible for both unequal treatment and significant changes in the school culture. The school administrator confirmed that neither Christmas nor nativity plays had been stopped in the school and said, ‘Although we’re a multiracial school, Christmas is quite a big deal here’. What this illustrates is the power of media scares around the ‘banning of Christmas’ in the face of religious-minority sensibilities, as well as the existence of mistrust around religious differences. Here we see a discourse of tolerance which suggests it is at least provisional, and Melanie would seem to have quite a high level of discomfort around discussing religious difference, which remains entangled with race.

In the interviews of parents from Cheadle Hulme, as well as evidence of discomfort about what was seen as a changing racial make-up of the area, there was also some discussion of white flight. Annabel had moved from Burnage, an area with a more South Asian population, to Cheadle Hulme. The reason that she gave for this move was wanting to avoid single-sex secondary schools which had been ‘a big discussion with the white parents’ (although she also
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acknowledged that some Asian parents did not want single-sex education). Annabel said: ‘It’s not a problem for me, I mean, the way schools teach religions and how to accept other children of different nationalities.’ Nonetheless she was happier in the school in Cheadle Hulme where the majority of the children were ‘white British’ and more middle-class:

I think it’s good. I think because the children will be among children that are like themselves. And although it’s good for them to mix with children from other classes and other ethnic backgrounds, you just gravitate towards people that are similar to you, don’t you? And they’re obviously going to have more chance of making good friends among children that have a similar background ... It’s nice for them to be among more white children.

This is a response to diversity and multiculture clearly different from the general view expressed by those interviewed in Chorlton and Whalley Range. The ‘naturalness’ of ‘gravitating towards your own’ wins out against any embrace of difference. Difference also brings with it inconvenience. Annabel explains how she felt that in Burnage her children’s social networks and capital were limited. She used the example of afternoon tea invitations which were not reciprocated by her children’s friends, because ‘children from big Asian families, who obviously live a different life, it’s difficult, coming home for tea, it’s difficult because these children cannot’ and how vegetarian food had to be provided ‘because of halal meats’.

Conclusion

Richard Hacker has argued that multiculturalism as a concept is ‘given only a taken-for-granted common sense meaning, impoverished both theoretically and in terms of concrete lived experience. It is a concept innocent of class’ (quoted in May 2002: 129). The material of this chapter would suggest that multiculturalism and responses to multiculturalism do need to be understood as both classed and located in place. In addition, multiculture in terms of racialised or cultural difference is best understood within the context of a whole range of differences that people encounter in the everyday, including differences of class, religion and what some respondents in this study characterised as ‘ethical’ differences in approaches to child-rearing and consumption. Despite policy-level declarations of the end of
multiculturalism, in the everyday, individuals and communities, such as those created by a school, continue to negotiate cultural difference in a variety of ways. The everyday context of schools is also shaped by the emphasis on parental choice in schools. As Alexander (2007: iii) notes, there is a potential contradiction between the idea that schools can both be the site of multicultural citizenship and the exercise of choice. It raises questions of who should ‘shoulder the burden of integration’ and who is granted ‘the privilege of individual choice’.

This chapter has explored how attitudes towards and experiences of multiculture can both impact on choice and produce different ways of talking about it. So, for some parents, the perceived ethnic, religious and social make-up of school populations will impact on how they view different schools. Parents make school choices in particular contexts, reflecting both the choices available and the experience of primary schools and local areas which also shapes how parents become used to talking about difference. The sense of ease with, and embrace of, multiculture varies among different groups of parents. So, for those in Whalley Range and Chorlton schools, who are already used to high levels of ethnic diversity in primary schooling, there is a sense that convivial mixing can be achieved and is desirable. However, this ease of mixing is tempered by concerns about class difference. In interviews with parents living in Cheadle Hulme, there is more of a tendency to view ethnic difference as naturalised and presenting an unbridgeable distance. At least part of this difference in responses comes from a different class habitus. Thus for the more professional middle classes in Chorlton, many of them working in the public sector, a ‘liberal’ and convivial attitude is part of their class habitus (Bourdieu 1991). What is interesting is how this language is also shared by some ethnic minorities and migrants from a variety of class positions. For the white working-class and middle-class parents living in Cheadle Hulme, there is more hesitation in both talking about and perhaps living with difference. These differences point to the need to study everyday multiculture in its context, where it is lived, and to be alive to the other differences that matter. It also suggests the need to understand the limits of language in describing experience. The chapter has shown how there is a marked paucity of language with which to express these negotiations with diversity. The same terms might be used by different people to describe very different situations. Social agreement is clearly lacking on what constitutes a ‘mix’ or ‘diversity’. This poses the risk that parents, schools and policy-makers may well
be failing to communicate well with each other about difference and schooling. It is also important to track how cultural difference can contain ideas of both racialised or ethnic difference and religious difference which are mutually constructed and sometimes difficult to unpack. Whilst ethnic-minority interviewees often shared an affective relationship to difference as a positive and important resource for the next generation, the benefit of a ‘good mix’ was also one of protection from racism and stereotype. Finding schools which were sufficiently mixed represented for them the hope that their children could easily fit in and be part of that mix, rather than isolated and vulnerable in a sea of whiteness.

Notes

1. See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the areas and schools.
5. In Britain, the term ‘Asian’ generally refers to those who come (or whose ancestors came) from the South Asian subcontinent.
6. It should also be acknowledged that the fact that both the researchers on this project were white may have also had a silencing effect on some of the interviewees.
8. In Chorlton, too, some respondents expressed concern about gang culture, some of which was associated with racialised groups, but others explicitly said that the ‘gangs’ went across racialised groups. This fear of gangs also has a gendered element, in that it was more likely to be brought up of boys rather than girls. It links into the debates around ‘boys in crisis’ which are also ethnicised in particular ways: Archer(2003).
9. See Byrne (2006b) for discussion of white over-visualisation of racialised groups.
10. Telephone conversation.
11. See Gillborn (2009) for a discussion of the creation of white victimhood in the media, with specific reference to education.