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# Choosing the local school: middle class parents' values and social and ethnic mix in London and Paris

Maroussia Raveaud and Agnès Van Zanten

This paper analyses a specific kind of choice, choice of the local school, by a specific middle class group, characterized by its high cultural capital, its 'caring' perspective and liberal political orientation, in two cosmopolitan, 'mixed' settings, London and Paris, with a focus on values and how ethical dilemmas raised by confrontation with the social and ethnic mix in schools are solved. It draws upon a small-scale comparative study of urban middle class parents conducted in 2004–2005 at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris in collaboration with the London Institute of Education. Using the same open-ended schedule, 28 interviews were carried out in one London locality and 38 in a similar locality in the Parisian periphery (plus 12 others in a nearby private school). Its main purpose was to use a cross-Channel comparison to test and enrich a comprehensive model of school choice that tries to take into account the complex interaction between policies, strategies, contexts, resources and values.

## Introduction

The educational practices of middle class parents have attracted considerable attention in the past few years (Power *et al.*, 2002; Ball, 2003; Devine, 2004). As analysed by Lareau (1989) 20 years ago, recent studies show that middle class parents manage to develop 'patterned' forms of education for their children even when they send them to public (state) schools offering a 'generic' education for all. To do so they rely not only on initial and continuous transmission at home of a cultural capital that interacts with and enriches what children learn at school, i.e. on privileges associated with their social membership, but more and more on market mechanisms (Brown, 1990). More than private tuition and coaching or learning a second language outside

school, school choice is a key strategy in this respect, but one that is used differently by various middle class groups. This paper analyses a specific kind of choice, choice of the local school by a specific middle class group, characterized by its high cultural capital, its 'caring' perspective and liberal political orientation, in two cosmopolitan settings, London and Paris, with a focus on values and how ethical dilemmas raised by confrontation with the social and ethnic mix in schools are solved. It draws upon a small-scale comparative study of urban middle class parents conducted in 2004–2005 at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris in collaboration with the London Institute of Education. Using the same open-ended schedule, 28 interviews were carried out in one London locality and 38 in a similar locality in the Parisian periphery (plus 12 others in a nearby private school). Its main purpose was to use a cross-Channel comparison to test and enrich a comprehensive model of choice that tries to take into account the complex interaction between policies, strategies, contexts, resources and values.

### **Looking at choice of the local school in a comprehensive and comparative perspective**

There now exists a very large scientific literature on school choice. However, research in this area is segmented into, on the one hand, studies, mostly quantitative, that focus on policies and their effects on segregation and inequality (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Gorard & Fitz, 1998; Mons, 2004) and, on the other, studies, mostly qualitative, that focus on individual choices and local contexts (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Glatter *et al.*, 1997; van Zanten, 2003). Research in this area also suffers from a lack of international comparisons. Comparisons are necessary not only to examine similarities and differences between countries, but also to better understand the complex relationship between all dimensions of choice, from policies to individuals. Comparisons conducted with that purpose in mind cannot, however, focus on descriptive indicators and official definitions of choice only. They must be carried out from a theoretical perspective and try to articulate different dimensions in the analysis of concrete choices. This is what this paper sets out to do by focusing on choice of the local school in two different national contexts, Paris and London, and by considering how values interact with other relevant dimensions.

#### *A comprehensive model of choice: policies, strategies, contexts, resources and values*

A comprehensive model of choice must take into account policies, strategies, contexts, resources and values. Policies exert a powerful effect, both because they provide institutional arrangements that make certain practices possible and others not, and because they contain discourses on values and ideas, what is good and what works, which, although never totally consensual, are difficult to resist (Ball, 1994; van Zanten, 2004). We believe, however, that the power of policy might have been overstated in research on countries where school choice policies have been introduced by legislation, at least if policy is conceived as an institutional, top-down rational process

of planning, formulation and implementation. Analysis of real choices in countries where there has not been official promotion of choice is useful to perceive more clearly that choice is also a bottom-up process and that policy is in fact the result of interactions between the desires, conceptions and technical devices of policy-makers at a given moment and the points of view and practices of local actors which reflect more long-term social and cultural shifts (van Zanten, 2002). In addition to this, it is necessary to take into account the gap between official policy and policy-in-action, which is the consequence, among other factors, of the interpretation of directives and rules by local educational authorities according to their values, interests, knowledge and degree of autonomy.

By promoting specific models and creating specific arrangements, policies render some strategies more desirable and easier than others. In research about school choice frequently only two strategies are considered, i.e. choosing within the public sector or choosing a private school. In our research model, however, we consider two other strategies to obtain a comprehensive view of choice, i.e. residential choice and choice of the local school. All these choices are located within a framework of rules, incentives and sanctions. In some countries choice of the private sector, because it is exclusively privately funded, is only possible for a small minority. In others, because there are various kinds of state funding (funding of teachers, vouchers for parents, etc.), it has a wider purchase. Choice within the public sector is strongly dependant on freedom of choice, but also on variety of provision, and these two factors vary across countries and across local contexts in the same country. Choice of the local school is theoretically a real choice where such policies exist and an obligation and thus a non-choice where they don't. Even residential choice, which of all educational choices is the least constrained by policy, might be affected in some countries by rules concerning moving within social housing (van Zanten, in press).

Choice strategies are oriented and constrained by policy, but they also depend strongly on local contexts. In our model local contexts are conceived as 'lived markets' (Lauder & Hughes, 1999) that exert their influence through two main channels. The first is through the kind of opportunities they provide. These opportunities are related to the residential and educational provision available (its importance, quality, variety, accessibility and cost). The second is through the kind of norms they convey. The presence of these norms is related to the concentration of families belonging to similar or to different class groups. This creates a 'local normative framework' that makes certain choices more frequent and legitimate than others as parents look to other parents as reference groups to decide how to act, to construct their choices and to reassure themselves about their consequences (Butler & Robson, 2003; van Zanten *et al.*, 2005).

The existence of these 'local normative frameworks' is linked to the presence of families sharing similar resources. Following Max Weber's theory of status groups, which sets out distinct social groups according to their social bases (wealth, prestige or power), in our model we use the term 'resources' to point out how different class groups rely on different kinds of inherited or acquired possessions to maintain and improve their position (Erickson & Goldthorpe, 1992). Here we consider the notion

of 'resources' as roughly equivalent to that of 'capital' as used by Bourdieu (1979) and to that of 'asset' as used by Butler and Savage (1995), although this would need to be discussed further (Savage *et al.*, 2005). We pay special attention to cultural resources because, following Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), we consider that the transition from a mode of reproduction based on direct status transmission to a mode of reproduction predominantly based on schooling has given great pre-eminence to the role of culture. However, we also consider economic and social capital, the latter understood both as the set of networks to which an individual parent has access in his or her family and community and as the collective capital of relationships of a group or community (Putnam, 2000).

It is possible to conduct a microanalysis of choice focusing exclusively on the interplay between different types of resources and different choice strategies. The underlying hypothesis, derived from the classic economic model of rational choice theory, is usually that there is a common goal and that families differ mainly in terms of the means at their disposal to attain that goal (Boudon, 1977). Our position here is different. We consider that families pursue different goals and that the values that inform them must be studied *per se*, although they clearly interact with resources because they add a relevant dimension to a comprehensive understanding of school choice. We make an analytic distinction between two kinds of values: values that can be called personal because they are linked to conceptions of duties to oneself; values that can be called impersonal because they are related to perceived duties to others (Lipovetsky, 1983; Nagel, 1991). Personal values include instrumental values—the most commonly referred to, which focus on the exchange value of education (success, credentials and access to the job market)—but also expressive values centred on the intrinsically pleasant aspects of education and school life and reflexive values which link schooling to intellectual development and to critical reflection and action. Impersonal values, related to duties to others, refer to equality and its different conceptions (equality of opportunity, equality of results, equity) and to integration and its different versions (for instance integration into one's own group or favouring inter-connectedness between social groups) (Vincent & Martin, 2002).

#### *A comparative perspective on choice of the local school in Paris and London*

In order to put this model into practice we have chosen to analyse a specific strategy, i.e. choice of the local school, 'local' referring here not only to location but to public status and a high degree of social and ethnic mix. We are interested in middle class parents who leave their children in these schools even though they may not correspond perfectly to their expectations. This topic might seem bizarre or of marginal interest for understanding middle class parents' school choice. Choice of the local school is indeed mostly conceived in the literature as a non-choice or 'under-choice' due to a lack of official possibilities for choosing, to a lack of desire, relevant knowledge or capacity to choose or to unsuccessful attempts to choose. Where it has been analysed it has mostly been associated with working class and immigrant parents who are attached to their local schools for affective and political reasons, who tend to

value nearness as a key means of control of their children's schooling and who are less conscious of differences between schools and less skilled in choosing (Ball *et al.*, 1996; van Zanten, 2001). However, choice is not only a stopgap strategy for middle class parents constrained by legislation, lack of places in other schools or lack of the economic resources to move. It can be a positive, rational decision.

What is the impact of policy on choice of the local school? We can logically expect parents in countries where there is a choice policy to be less likely to send their children to the local school than parents who are obliged to do so because they are officially forbidden to choose. However, as we have suggested in the previous section, other factors must be taken into account, especially how local educational authorities interpret and adapt existing policies and numbers of places in schools. These two factors explain the strong similarities in the processes observed in Montreuil and in Hackney despite strong differences in national policies. In the first context, although no official policy of choice exists, parents do choose, either by sending their children to private schools or by moving close to the school they consider best or by using options, contacts with headteachers and false addresses to choose another public school. These tactics are possible because of a lack of effective regulation and of tolerance of some forms of bypassing legal restrictions on the part of local education authorities. In Hackney parents theoretically have more choice but end up choosing the local school because of lack of places in other schools or because they want to avoid the risks and tiredness of commuting outside the area. It is important to note, however, that if differences in policy seem less discriminating in explaining choice than other factors, parents in each country have a different view of its impact. Many of the English parents interviewed presented policy on choice as providing a moral constraining framework without actually facilitating it in practice, while French parents viewed choice as a more personal decision, but one that could be limited by existing rules and policies.

In fact, contextual factors seem more important for understanding choices than policies. The existence of a significant number of middle class parents that choose the local school is related, first, to similarities in the urban and education configuration of the two areas. Both Montreuil and Hackney are socially and ethnically heterogeneous urban spaces with large areas concentrating deprived groups and small, gentrified areas where middle class parents are symbolically, if not numerically, in a dominant position. In both countries the schools located in these gentrified areas are considered by many middle class parents to be 'suitable' if not excellent schools for their children. Indeed, these schools are chosen because they are considered by these parents to have a sufficient number of middle class children to influence the learning context and general atmosphere, but also because the concentration of certain middle class groups sharing similar resources and similar values favours the emergence of a local norm that presents choice of the local school as the normal and good thing to do.

This collective stance is related to the specific resources that these middle class parents possess and can draw upon to supplement or limit the potential deficiencies of the local school. These resources are mostly cultural and social resources. Cultural resources are used in both contexts to supplement perceived deficiencies in the

teaching process that parents link to the social and ethnic mix of the school but, as we will see below, with varying degrees of frankness. Individual social resources, including contacts with teachers, are used in both contexts to keep informed and to anticipate and solve problems. In addition to this, these parents are also unconsciously or consciously involved in building collective social capital, both in a ‘bonding’ perspective, that is for defending their own interests and identity as middle class parents in the local school and in a ‘bridging’ perspective, i.e. for the improvement of the local school as a valuable form of social and ethnic mix (Putnam, 2000).

These parental practices cannot be totally explained without taking into account their values and how they relate to choice of the local school. The parents we are considering here are less concerned with the instrumental side of schooling than other middle class parents, this being partly due to their cultural capital which makes them less anxious about results, at least during secondary schooling. To varying degrees, depending on individual factors and national contexts, these parents value other personal benefits from education and the school experience, mostly the pleasure of participating in local networks of peer groups and intellectual enrichment. These aspects, especially the first, are seen as best provided by the local school, which favours local activities and discourages high level competition. More important still are these parents’ views on equality and integration. As opposed to managers and private employees, who are mostly in favour of equality of opportunity and of integration conceived as integration into one’s own group, the parents interviewed in Montreuil and Hackney tended to emphasize the need to strive for equal results or at least for equal satisfaction for all and a model of integration based on more interconnectedness between social groups.

### **‘The best for one’s child’: parental choice and values**

Parents naturally explain that they want ‘the best’ for their child. The families in this study shared a similar view of what they would wish in an ideal world: a school creating opportunities to be happy, to learn and to achieve, to experience fulfilling social relationships, and paving the way for a meaningful and satisfying career. In other words, the three individual values orientations identified above—expressive well-being, instrumental success and intellectual development—are the key components of ‘the best’ that parents aspire to. In practice, however, few respondents felt that any one school could offer them all three at a time. Instead, the process of choosing a school implied ranking these values and determining priorities.

This ranking reflected not only personal priorities, but was also influenced by the education policy and pedagogical traditions of the country. France and England present a vivid contrast in this respect, as French schooling has traditionally focused on the transmission of knowledge with a view to promoting citizenship, while the dominant English model of the late 20th century emphasized a broad and balanced education aimed at developing a rounded person (Osborn *et al.*, 2003). These traditional values orientations are being reworked to accommodate the rise of instrumental attitudes given global economic pressures relayed to a certain extent by education

policy, in particular through varying forms of integration of market forces in national policy (Ball & van Zanten, 1998).

*Two visions of personal development: the well-being of a 'rounded' person and intellectual emancipation*

Middle class parents are increasingly ridden by anxieties linked to an inability to guarantee intergeneration reproduction of their privileged position. Yet this anxiety is played out in different ways in the English and French education systems, in part because the determinants of professional success, especially initial qualifications, vary. Indeed, the French labour market relies heavily on initial qualifications and recruitment tends to focus on academic achievement, with limited recognition of broader experience or skills. A shared concern regarding children's future career therefore translates into different expectations towards the school. While English parents may value a Duke of Edinburgh award or participation in a community project for the competitive edge it can give their child in future alongside its intrinsic interest, such activities are seen in France as marginal to the essential instrumental goal of academic qualifications.

A second contrast between the families in the two countries was the extent to which respondents were prepared to endorse instrumental aims. This attitude is more frequent among private sector parents, who are more likely than the respondents in this study to choose selective schools and to emphasize academic achievement (Power *et al.*, 2002). However, the international comparison revealed that the national variable is as important as the social class one: English parents were less willing to seek achievement at the expense of well-being than the French interviewees. Public sector workers in education and other 'caring' professions in England tended to present their limited endorsement of academic aims as the result of social pressure and constraint: 'I suppose, even though I find the whole exam thing abhorrent, as society is quite fixated on exams I do think they must give children the best possible chance of getting through an important exam' (Ms Knight, graduate teacher trainee, Stoke Newington). This group of parents emphasized personal development, even apparently accepting lower results in the name of happiness, even though this may be a temporary concession to adolescence:

Actually it's more important that he is happy in his teenage years than get your exams ... being happy leads to that kind of personal development ... they can experiment and they can do all those things that are so important at that stage. I mean obviously if he comes out with a few GCSEs then that's good! I don't think ... at the moment I don't think it's the be all and end all actually, because they can take them again at any stage but I might feel quite differently in 3 years (laughter) if he takes them and gets none. (Mrs Thomas, choreographer, Stoke Newington)

In parental discourse the Hackney schoolchild is regarded as a child or teenager, rather than as a pupil, and the school's main responsibility, according to these parents, is to ensure that the child is enjoying a fulfilling school life. In fact, this prioritizing of expressive values should be qualified by the ability of most interviewees to



draw upon various resources in the family, in particular cultural capital, which partly alleviates the pressure on schools. Some French parents share this priority, but a greater proportion accept the pursuit of academic results as a fact of life that must take precedence over other considerations. Despite the fact that a proportion of the French respondents shared the English views on personal development, they were less likely to act on expressive than on instrumental values in their choice of a school. When they did, they felt the need to justify their choice, thus suggesting that the basic French assumption and social norm was that parents would view their child's schooling as a quest for the highest attainment.

The emphasis on learning in the French education system is thus partly related to an instrumental orientation. However, it also corresponds to another value orientation: the Republican conception of intellectual emancipation and social integration through knowledge (Schnapper, 1991). Indeed, compulsory schooling was developed as a precondition for democracy, echoing the ideals of liberty and equality underpinning the French revolutionary ideals. Some parents endorse these ideals and describe knowledge as a tool for emancipating the individual and fostering citizenship based on an informed and critical analysis of the world:

The qualities schools should develop are curiosity and the ability to view things with critical distance. To be able to analyse events. Ideally you would want the child in front of the TV to be able to understand if he is being manipulated, or to comment what has been said. That's it, to develop critical reasoning. Given that to get there you need a solid grounding in general knowledge, it's essential. (M. Roussillon, teacher, Paul Eluard)

In the name of this ideal some French parents distinguish 'education' and 'instruction', reserving the first for the family and the second for school: 'Secondary school is not a place for education, it's a place for instruction, you go there for knowledge' (M. Ribière, salesman, Berthelot).

The choice of a secondary school is thus based on views of personal development which are themselves multifaceted, partly contradictory and granted varying degrees of priority. The second dimension of parental choice rests on social values, adding a new set of potential dilemmas and tensions.

### *Social integration: promoting equality and celebrating diversity*

Beyond the aim of personal development, the collective dimension of schooling is put forward as an essential part of the school experience and of the process of social integration. However, parents in England and France tend to lay the emphasis on different aspects of social integration, the French quest for equality contrasting with the English celebration of diversity. These contrasting social values shape parents' expectations regarding social relations inside the school, in particular those with children from different social and ethnic groups. They also influence fields which may at first appear to be more individual in scope and pedagogical in focus. For instance, preferences for dealing with diversity in attainment vary widely (Raveaud, 2005). English parents consider it necessary to adapt teaching to the needs of the child, even though they differ as to whether the best means are within-class grouping, streaming

or setting. Meanwhile, many of their French counterparts are influenced by the traditional view that equality rests on putting all children through a common curriculum at the same pace. Few actually feel that this is either feasible, realistic or even desirable in practice and several voice concerns for their child's development: 'Berthelot and all the other schools, not only Berthelot—they are all meant for one type of child and when a child doesn't fit the mould he's had it' (Mme Cantet, legal editor, Berthelot). Yet the norm tends to remain that of a uniform centralized education system, with the state guaranteeing equality through access to the same teaching for all. This view can be found even among parents who have left the state sector of education for private confessional schools: 'The aim of the state should be that there only exists one type of schooling, the same for everyone—secular, republican, compulsory and free—sure (laughs). There's still a long way to go' (Mme Allanic, psychotherapist, Collège Notre Dame de la Providence).

The English parents who shared this concern with equality presented equality as a long-term goal, not a means that should guide pedagogy in schools. Instead, differentiation was put forward:

Well, all children have different needs, don't they? And from—to enable children to succeed some need—will require more resources than others. And, you know, if we're to be an equal and fair society I think that that will happen, that some children will need more help. And that will cost more money than others. But at the end of it everybody will benefit. (Mrs Eustace, special education needs advisor, Stoke Newington)

The emphasis on recognizing pupils' individual differences and needs was unanimous among the English parents, although many do not link it with egalitarian concerns. Valuing and recognizing individual characters and differences is an essential and autonomous value, strongly related to that of the personal development of a 'rounded' individual:

I think it's very important for people to be happy in their environment and to feel at ease, not to feel anxious all the time, not to feel that they're not doing well, not to feel they're never going to do as well as they ought to or somebody wants them to. I do think children should feel that school is a place where interesting things happen and where they're safe and where they have some friends and associates they can get on with and feel comfortable with and where ... where they're valued, where they're considered to be important and where their opinions and views will matter. (Mrs Flint, education administrator, Stoke Newington)

Equality and diversity are not to be conceived of as polar opposites, rather as a continuum along which respondents are located, especially when considering the welfare of their own child. However, when it comes to discussing the integration of minority ethnic children, the polarization increases, as if parents were constrained by official rhetoric and the socially acceptable values of their country and social environment. For other children even more than for one's own, the French dominant discourse is centred on equality through learning ensured by the state: 'Yes, normally [the state] must integrate everyone! Because that's its role. Because that's giving equal opportunities to all children, that's its number one role' (Mme Guérin, infant schoolteacher, Fabien).

Very few parents openly go against this ideal, even when they have chosen the private education system, largely to avoid a social and ethnic mix. But their justifications tend to focus on the unrealistic and idealistic character of equality, rather than on the formulation of an alternative ideal based on diversity, and the principle of equality is so deeply entrenched in ‘politically correct’ discourse that parents find it difficult to admit they do not endorse it before an interviewer:

I’m not too keen, when I hear ‘egalitarian principles’—I’m not really in favour, I find it enriching that everyone is different. ... But I’m not against the principle of everybody being at the same level, the same qualifications, the same equality ... . (Mme Smidt, housewife, Collège Notre Dame de la Providence)

A similar reworking of politically correct policy aims appears in the English interviews, with celebration of diversity this time as the watchword. France is used as a foil and counter-example:

I definitely don’t agree that everyone should not wear headscarves in France and everyone’s the same. So I think equal opportunities is a bit—is a bit more complicated than that; that it’s recognising that people are different and valuing differences really, and having that as part of the school culture. ... I think you should be learning about other people and why they’re different, but that we’re all—we should all be equal within our differences. (Ms Martin, secondary schoolteacher, Mossbourne Academy)

A group of parents working in the education sector and attending the local Stoke Newington school was particularly active in promoting the values of multiculturalism and endorsing school initiatives such as a Turkish tile project or a black history week. Embedding the diversity of the school population into the curriculum ‘so it’s not just a white middle class curriculum’ is something Mrs Kirk welcomed and thought was ‘brilliant’. These parents used a double set of justifications, focusing first on the welfare and achievement of minority ethnic pupils, arguing that such projects will make them feel more valued and give them confidence. They also highlighted the benefits for their own children, talking of an ‘added dimension’ to their experience and of the ‘rich cultural diversity’ they encountered.

In Paris and London it was among specific groups of the middle class that a socially and ethnically diverse environment was favoured, other gentrified areas being much less tolerant of such diversity (Bagley, 1996; Butler & Robson, 2003). What is significant, however, was that attending the local school and accepting its diversity rested on partly different values. In the French case it was justified by the duty of the citizen to avoid social segregation and inequalities. In the English case the diversity of cosmopolitan, multiethnic and socially mixed Hackney was promoted in the name of multiculturalism.

### **Choice, values and social mix in local schools: when social and ethnic diversity is viewed as an obstacle**

Nevertheless, being loyal to the local school is not only based on different interpretations of duties to others. It also depends on the extent to which families can draw

upon resources to protect themselves from the ‘undesirable’ effects of social mix on their personal goals. The middle class families who have accepted or indeed sought out this social and ethnic mix offer very articulate justifications which they appear to have rehearsed many times before in the face of the assumption that a social mix may disadvantage their child. Indeed, beyond the arguments in favour of diversity, interviewees demonstrated varying degrees of tension, doubts and dilemmas when individual concerns were hard to reconcile with wider social ideals.

*English responses: understatement in discourse and compensatory practices at home*

None of the English families, with the exception of a Pakistani couple, explicitly mentioned the diverse ethnic origins at the school as a ‘problem’. Yet certain families had clearly decided to avoid the local school, particularly those Hackney parents who had not gained access to the Stoke Newington school. These families found themselves faced with the option of attending a local school without the reassuring presence of other white middle class children, and most resorted to other types of school (out-of-borough specialist schools, the partly selective new community academy, grammar or independent schools). Their justifications suggested the strength of the multicultural ideal: none presented the multiethnic make-up of their local school as an element of rejection, quite the contrary. Instead they expressed regrets at ‘losing out’ on the local diversity and insisted on the diversity inside their chosen schools:

The teaching has a good international dimension, it is good on diversity and opening to other cultures and places.

Interviewer: What do you mean by good on diversity?

Well actually it’s not nearly as diverse as here. It has a 70% international intake, with lots of French, Germans and Italians. I thought that the diverse element would outweigh the local Essex element, which is rather posh, monied. But actually there are less black, less Afro-Caribbean children than at the primary school. It’s a bit sad really to have lost that diversity. (Mrs Smith, museum development officer, specialist Anglo-European language school, Essex)

Similarly, Mrs Baker, whose children attend single-sex independent schools in central London, stated: ‘I don’t like them not mixing with a full spectrum of social mix. But they’ll get that later on at work’. These two mothers appeared defensive, as though seeking to defuse criticism of acting in a socially exclusive manner, and insisted that the de facto socially homogeneous composition of the peer group was the result of constraint rather than choice.

It is highly significant to contrast these discourses on ethnic diversity with those on social mix. Indeed, while it appears unacceptable to attribute negative educational effects to the presence of minority ethnic children, there is no such constraint on criticism directed towards other social classes. Pupils from lower social classes are occasionally presented as ‘anti-social’, ‘nasty’, ‘the horrible ones’ likely to induce anti-school peer pressure:

The local peer group would have squashed out the academic side in him. [It was] my anxiety, our anxiety that he would sort of, succumb to peer pressure and decide that he wasn't going to attempt to learn at all. (Mrs Smith, museum development officer, specialist Anglo-European language school, Essex)

Criticism can also be targeted upwards, or towards other white middle class groups ('trendy middle class parents who smoke dope', 'odious', 'elitist', 'individualist', 'selfish' parents who resort to independent or selective schools) often as a strategy to reverse stereotypes:

I think that people have this misguided conception about Stoke Newington, that it's the ethnic minority children who are creating the most problems for the school. And I think it is very misguided, I think that there are enough problems with the white middle class children, particularly the boys. I think they have attitude problems that are huge. (Ms Little, performing arts teacher, Stoke Newington)

The contrast in language used about other social groups emphasizes the uniformity in the celebration of diversity to be found in our sample. Whereas it is legitimate for socially aware, 'liberal' parents to criticize other social classes and to deride oneself for being white middle class, ethnicity is only discussed in a positive, celebratory light.

Parental prioritizing of expressive and multicultural values in Hackney is related to a feeling that risks are contained within reasonable limits. 'Choice' of the local school in practise tended to be limited to families who had obtained a place at Stoke Newington school—which achieved the best results in the borough, above the national average—whereas those who had only been offered a less sought after Hackney school went elsewhere. Stoke Newington's academic credentials were not the only aspect that made the school acceptable to parents. Alongside valuing community links and the experience of social and ethnic diversity, the Stoke Newington middle class parents may also have 'risked' the local school because of their ability to compensate for its potential deficiencies. Indeed, these parents were characterized by high cultural capital and often by insider knowledge of the education system. While several explained that they gave priority to the social and emotional welfare of their child over academic qualifications, they also had the means to supplement the work of the school if need be (Devine, 2004):

I think if you come from a quite academic family where there are a lot of books and a lot of discussion going on, it's quite easy to see school as almost filling in around the edges, but not even as their main academic provider. Certainly at primary school, and even quite a lot at the beginning of secondary school. I think A gets a lot of his education from home. Not in a kind of deliberate—let's sit down and educate you—way. But in the things we talk about or watch on television, or plays we take him to, and art galleries. Not that we do that all the time, but an awful lot of education goes on at home. (Ms Knight, graduate teacher trainee, Stoke Newington)

In their eyes the specificity of schooling shifted from an academic function to a social role:

And I also think it's really important to be able to do things collectively. So, like, you know, drama, dance, the kind of collective aspect of the school. I mean, I would never home-

school my kids because I think the whole point of going to school ... (Mrs Somerville, researcher in education, Stoke Newington)

Parents from this group within the middle class could offset their academic expectations of the school against family resources, such as time and the cultural and economic capital to support their children's achievement through personal help or tutoring. While such strategies tended to be concealed by French middle class parents, some of whom felt guilty of distorting equal opportunities, they were much more openly admitted by the English respondents:

I am supplementing, as a middle class parent, with extra tutoring in certain areas. So I'm aware that my children have more equality of opportunity than other students in the school. So I'm negotiating it, as it were. ... I'm supplementing not because of the quality of teaching but because some of the behaviour issues in the school. And that's not actually the school's fault. It's just that the type of catchment that the school has. ... But the reason that they get tutoring is so that they can realise their full potential [inaudible] qualifications.

Interviewer: So is there a sense that as a middle class parent who can offer that support you can, in a sense, get the best of both worlds?

I think so. (Mrs Kirk, lecturer, Stoke Newington)

An essential specificity of liberal, 'caring' families was the attempt to combine active commitment in favour of social and ethnic diversity with transmission of social and cultural capital: loyalty to the local school legitimized drawing upon the family's resources in order to ensure that middle class children retained or developed a competitive advantage when reaching higher education or the job market, and potential drawbacks were strategically turned into strengths:

I think that what they're getting from being in such a diverse environment is really adding to their communication skills and their ability to deal with a variety of situations with a maturity beyond their years. ... And I think what they will have when they get to interview stage at sixth form and university is an ability to communicate to a wide range of people effectively that students from a public school won't have. (Mrs Kirk, lecturer, Stoke Newington)

This 'negotiation' allowed parents from intellectual, artistic and 'caring' professions to reach an acceptable, albeit always fragile, compromise between the personal and impersonal standpoints, between the potentially contradictory demands of being a 'good parent' and a 'good citizen'.

#### *French responses: a political discourse and intervention in schools*

French parents tended to talk about immigrant children almost exclusively as part of the lower class. As in the dominant French political and social discourse, they subordinate ethnicity to social class and the recognition of difference to the need for equality. At an abstract level this stance has negative and positive consequences. On the one hand, cultural diversity is not acknowledged and valued in public spaces such as schools, which can lead to invisible but powerful forms of discrimination, but,

conversely, cultural differences are not used, as is sometimes the case in England, to justify inequalities. This social conception is particularly well represented among the intellectual, 'caring', liberal groups of the middle classes that we interviewed in Montreuil. It led these parents to develop a highly critical discourse concerning the school failure of immigrant children, pointing to the responsibility of the state and to the need for various forms of positive discrimination:

I am not against educational priority areas, quite the contrary. I think you can't ignore the fact that there are people who have material and social difficulties and that you need more money there to compensate. ... Nowadays, usually, it's teachers who are only just qualified who get sent there and they're told: 'Go on my fellow, get on with it', when on the contrary what you would need are people who are rather experienced, rather competent, who can deal with that kind of situation. And it would not shock me to pay for that, to say that in the most disadvantaged areas you're going to put more money, pay the staff better, etc. (M. Bonneau, engineer, Berthelot)

Because they perceived the ethnic and social concentration of pupils in some schools to be an obstacle to their academic success and thus to educational and social equality in general, some of them also favoured desegregation policies, implying changes in catchment areas or even some kind of 'bussing' policy:

Interviewer: Should there be more means given to schools with a high proportion of pupils with special needs?

Yes, but I would rather be in favour of dispersing those pupils precisely. But that means calling the whole problem of catchment areas into question, the problem of the schools built in inner cities, and we know full well that inner cities create ghettos and the schools themselves become ghettos. Allocating more means doesn't solve the problem. The issue should be the very notion of catchment areas. So maybe you need to open up those schools and take their pupils somewhere else, to get a mix. (Mme Gérard, teacher, Fabien)

These abstract, highly articulate political discourses do not, however, translate easily into concrete terms in everyday school life. It is difficult even for the most egalitarian parents to reconcile equality for all with the success of their children. The temptation is thus strong, when reflecting on the functioning of the local school, to move from a discourse that denounces structural social inequality to one that pities teachers and blames pupils and parents:

I think that the difficult thing is to have classes where you actually have children from all sorts of social backgrounds, where some children get a lot of support from their parents while others have parents who don't speak French. It's hard to teach to everyone at the same level, and then there are, like everywhere [hesitation] backgrounds where even if the parents don't speak French they really want their children to succeed so it's going to be okay. And then there are families, like African families—well it's a bit like being back in the home country, and so you get many children raising themselves as best they can, and when 15 or 16 of them are living in a council flat it's true that you don't do your homework the same way. (Mme Robin, graphic designer, Fabien)

From there it is easy to move one step further and consider that although these pupils deserve equal treatment in theory, in real classrooms they are a threat to other pupils' intellectual progress and academic achievement because teachers have to adapt

programmes, methods and evaluation to their 'level' and because they must pay special attention to them. It must be underlined here that this perception is much stronger in France than in England, not only because of the priority given by parents to academic results but also because parents take over teachers' discourse on the extreme difficulty of teaching heterogeneous classrooms, which is the consequence of a long pedagogical tradition of frontal teaching and limited differentiation in French classrooms (Raveaud, 2006).

In order to limit these negative effects of social and ethnic mix, French parents who cannot or do not want to leave the local school develop strategies, by activating their cultural and social resources, to remodel or to control the school. These strategies include, at the most elitist extreme, requesting their children be tracked in classes with other middle class children with good results, this being easier in schools that offer 'music classes' or other cultural options. This choice was seen as an acceptable compromise by many of the middle class parents interviewed because it was, from a personal perspective, a way of protecting their children from contact with others that can be justified on the basis of cultural preferences and, from an impersonal perspective, a way to contribute to the common social good because social and ethnic mix is maintained at the level of the school. However, most parents were keenly aware of culture being used at least partly as a pretence and of the 'bonding' character of these classes:

The children who attend the musical classes in Montreuil are from the stylish trendy liberal-left families, and there are also several parents who would have sent their children to private schools if they hadn't got accepted in the music class. Well, that's roughly the problem you're faced with but there are also primary school teachers from the state sector who send their kids off to independent secondaries. So anyway it's a tricky issue. Still, it's got to be said on the positive side that it gives the school a good reputation and that it creates a social mix. (Mme Robin, graphic designer, Fabien)

The least elitist of these strategies involves the construction of a collective social capital of a 'bridging' type in the local school. This strategy implies both attracting enough middle class children and improving the results of the lower class and immigrant children who form the majority. In order to do so, the parents at Paul Eluard, the school with the greatest number of parents involved in this strategy, had created strong links with voluntary groups in the neighbourhood and maintained a continuous dialogue with the headteacher and with teachers at the school. The more personally and politically involved in 'bridging' also participated in Saturday morning activities such as tuition and homework support for children with learning needs. Because of this, the school climate and results had improved over the past 10 years and this was communicated to newcomers with the purpose of convincing them that Paul Eluard is a 'viable' if not perfect option:

When we got to Montreuil people were saying: 'Don't ever put your children there, it's a dangerous sink school!' Well, our eldest was three years old so we thought we would wait and see [laughs], and then we decided to play the game and we were really pleased not to have given in [the father approves]. Since then, we've been working at informing other people: trying to show the frightened parents—and there's less and less of them, it's true—



that the level is getting better, because this work is going on in several neighbourhoods.  
(M. and Mme Marchant, joiner and infant teacher, Eluard)

By these collective actions, which they conceive to be good for their own children and also good for the community as a whole, these parents thought that they could be both good parents and good citizens and set an example for others:

Then when my eldest was finishing primary school, several of us parents could have been tempted to avoid the local school. It's easy here, we have Paris, Vincennes and St Mandé, and the private sector at Montreuil and at Bagnolet. We're spoilt for choice if we want it. But our thinking was: we chose to live here because it was cheap. Fair enough, but then as individuals shouldn't we also accept the population? I consider that, as an individual, I am equal to any human being on earth. So people facing social difficulties are not inferior to me, and I need to pass that on to my children. Because if I want our society to be a bit more peaceful and life a bit more gentle, it is out of the question that my children should not understand this and not know what world they are living in. They live in a world where quite a chunk of the population experiences hardships. (Mme Colin, secretary, Eluard)

This does not mean, however, that these parents do not have qualms and doubts about the quality of instruction, which they try to reduce in various ways: by avoiding comparisons with other schools with better reputations, by active participation in meetings and parents' associations to control the activity of the school and react in case there is any problem with their child, and by compensating at home and through extracurricular activities as English parents do, but in a less overt way.

## **Conclusion**

The comparison of choice of the local school in London and Paris shows that although policy is different and differently perceived on the two sides of the Channel, its influence on the educational strategies of middle class parents is less important than that of values and the way values interact with contexts and resources. These intellectual, liberal, 'caring' parents broadly share a very similar view of what constitutes a good education, which involves intellectual development, academic results and a happy school experience at the individual level, as well as a concern for equality and integration at the collective level. They differ, however, in the importance given to each of these factors. In both places there are tensions and dilemmas between being a good citizen, which implies in these parents' perspective sending them to the socially and ethnically mixed local school, and being a good parent, which for them implies that they should provide their children with the best education for individual development and success. In order to solve these dilemmas the middle class parents considered here used their cultural and social resources in ways that allowed them to limit the anticipated negative effects of local schools and to retain their advantages over lower class and immigrant parents. They do so, however, by drawing upon a reservoir of usual practices and legitimate justifications that are shaped by contrasting educational ideals which reflect different national ideologies and social and economic structures.

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