White middle class identity work through ‘against the grain’ school choices

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Introduction
Charles Taylor underlined the inescapably social nature of identity when he wrote ‘…we are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions’ (1990, p. 34). In this chapter we examine a particular ‘space of questions’, namely that of families making and living with choices about secondary schooling. The UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded project Identity, Educational Choice and the White Urban Middle Classes (Award reference RES-148-25-0023) sought to understand:

- Why some white middle-class parents chose urban socially diverse comprehensive schools with average or below average examination results for their children, and how this choice sat with their identities;
- The psychological and social implications of these choices that went against the white middle-class norm;
- The impact on children’s identities;
- The effect on social cohesion and the common good.

We were thus concerned with school choice practices and processes in terms of orientations and motivations, and ethnicity and class, and we aimed to investigate how such practices were related to identity and identification in the light of contemporary conceptions of the middle class self.

The study began in mid 2005 and covered a 30-month period. We interviewed 180 parents and 68 children, from 125 white middle-class households in London and two provincial cities in England, ‘Riverton’ in the South-West and ‘Norton’ in the North-East. In each case, families had made a positive choice in favour of a state secondary school that was performing at or below the England average according to conventional examination league-tables. These compare the percentage of pupils gaining 5 or more high-grade passes in the General Certificate of Secondary Education” qualifications. The chosen schools were more ethnically mixed in London than in Riverton or Norton. Interviews took place in the homes of the families. For parents these covered their own biography and educational background, the process of choosing a secondary school, and their experiences of primary and secondary schools. For children, interviews included looking at the part they had played in choices of school, current and past experiences of schooling, and their attitudes to social and ethnic diversity.

The study offers insight with regard to some processes in contemporary identity work. In this chapter we offer a snapshot of three key areas of our
analysis: processes which maintain or disrupt the white middle class habitus; issues of social justice, instrumentality and their relation to civic involvement; social change and the positioning of the ‘other’ in white middle class identity. The chapter concludes with a consideration of identity in relation to the concepts of habitus and field, arguing for the dynamic and relational understanding that these concepts offer.

Maintaining and disrupting white middle class habitus
The measurement and comparison of Secondary school examination results is intended by policy makers to provide the information needed in a market in which people will make informed choices, thereby rewarding the ‘best’ schools and bringing to bear a pressure for improvement on lower-performing schools. In this situation, middle-class parents appear to be the ideal consumers because they are likely to be in a position to make choices that will place their children in the best situation for academic achievement. Many fight hard for places in specific, high-performing schools, and this may involve house purchase and moving home, renting an extra address, paying for private schooling, renewing religious allegiances and so forth. Some are prepared to engage in fraud or deception, such as using a false address so that they appear to live closer to a desired school (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2006; Harvey, 2008).

In contrast, for most of the parents in our sample, crude league-table position had not been regarded a valid indicator of the quality of education on offer in any particular school. Some parents were motivated by a commitment to the welfare state, to state funded education and to egalitarian ideals, and many were dismissive of privileged educational routes on the grounds that they were socially divisive. Most described themselves as ‘left-wing’ or ‘soft left’ or ‘liberal’, though only a very few were currently politically active in any formal sense. It is worth noting that they were themselves very highly qualified: 83% to degree level, with over a quarter holding some form of postgraduate qualification as well. A high proportion (69% overall) were ‘incomers’ to the area in which they now lived, and in 70% of families, one or both parents worked in the public sector.

Family history, and especially parental experiences of schooling, appeared to function as a key point of reference for contemporary and recent choices of school. A majority (59%) of the parents had themselves attended either selective state or private schools (32% and 27% respectively), with many of the latter having been highly focused on academic achievement. A number of the parents spoke in detail about a wish to avoid aspects of their own schooling being repeated in that of their children, essentially on ‘identity’ grounds. Negative experiences of private schooling were frequently cited. John Levy, a London parent, offered one of the more forthright rejections of private schooling and its role in identity-making. He had himself been to a well-known major boys’ independent school. His parents were established upper middle class:

‘My own experience of education has had an enormous effect on me not just in terms of my views about my children’s education but I’d say just about everything, my outlook on life, how I view the world. I think I
could trace it all back to what happened or rather started to happen to me at 7. At 7 I got sent away to a prep boarding school...that was bad enough, the sense of being exiled. I missed my family, my mother in particular, terribly. But you know that was what families like ours did and it was bruising.’

We gain a sense, in what he went on to say, of the ways in which earlier experiences are internalised, becoming layers of dispositions onto which later layers are melded:

‘I think I took on the ethos, absorbed it to the extent I began to think it was normal and I suppose that isn’t unsurprising because alongside the brutality there was friendship, support, you know, a whole lot of nurture. You bought into the package and to an extent just got on with it. But in retrospect a lot of it was horrific, as I said brutal and brutalising. But there was another aspect I found deeply troubling when I looked back that we all just took for granted at the time, that it was incredibly limited socially, a sort of complacent sameness’

John’s view of private schooling also appeared to be shaped by two other facets. The first was seeing his brother become very ill whilst at (the same) school. He told us ‘(elite, private) school was supposed to make upper middle class men of us but it crushed my brother’. The second was the narrowness of the education as a preparation for life, and he spoke at length about having to confront this later in life in order to become equipped to work successfully in his profession as a criminal lawyer. Such experiences gave him reason to turn his back on generations of family tradition when it came to his own children. He talked of a pivotal moment when he read somewhere:

‘...that Daniel Day Lewis had been to an urban comprehensive. I remember thinking that’s alright then. I don’t know how many qualms his father had but he’s come out creative and fairly sussed so you can choose that for your kids and they can survive. And I do remember thinking when I read it, and the children were very young at the time, this is good’.

In other cases, more convoluted processes of school choice were nevertheless equally telling as regards the importance of family habitus. Annie Denton in Riverton reflected on her own schooling and spoke about how she went to her ‘mother’s old school, which was a boarding school in Ballywater, as a day girl, and absolutely hated it’. She objected to the great stress placed on academic achievement, but also to the isolation of her situation:

‘Well I had no awareness of the outside world at all. Talk about an ivory tower – in an all girls school, you’re completely... well I was completely cocooned...and I think worse so than the Riverton schools, because I think the Riverton schools, even then, had a sort of social overlap you know ... I was in Ballywater, by the sea – you might as well have been on a planet, on the moon really’.

This experience was a key one in the decision by Annie and her husband to reject what she called the ‘natural’ choice of private education being made by
many of their current friends for children now reaching secondary school age. The Denton's first preference was that their children should go to nearby high-performing state schools, but this became more complex when it transpired that Ralph, one of their three children, had special educational needs. Annie told us that this fact had ‘taken her ‘slightly outside the general soup of what parents…our social group, look at’. It had ‘made us rethink a lot of our own attitudes to things…it liberates you from that whole middle class thing actually’. She was advised by a teacher within Mountstevens (a nearby high-performing state secondary school, formerly a Grammar school) not to send Ralph there because the school’s focus on maintaining its high league-table position detracted from the quality of support that would be available. This brought Redwood School, the local comprehensive, into contention:

'I was beginning to think… and I said “Redwood School’s our next option, (but) no child of mine is ever going to go to Redwood, you know, dreadful place”. And all my middle class prejudices came back and we went to see a solicitor…and she said “If you want to put him into Waterford, you’re going to have to prove…that Riverton can’t meet your needs, so you’re going to have to go and have a look at Redwood”. So I thought – it was a complete, you know, dragging myself through the gates with my nose in the air, I’ll be brutally honest. But went in, met the special needs lady and thought “She’s really nice”. Really nice room, nice feel to it, nice atmosphere, you know, gut instinct really. And I just thought wherever he goes, he’s not going to find it easy, but I think the support mechanism is here. So I came out and thought well for better or worse, we haven’t got a lot of choice, we’ll send him here…I spent all the summer holidays trying not to worry about it. He’s gone there, I’m not sure academically he’s doing great things, but he’s incredibly happy for the first time ever’.

Annie was particularly keen that her son should not become ‘cocooned’. She called Redwood a ‘full-on city comprehensive’ where he would either ‘sink or swim’. However, her other two children attended Mountstevens and Hammerton (an above-average performing, out-of-town school) respectively. Emma, the one at Hammerton, went to the induction day at Redwood, and the experience speaks strongly of the family habitus and how, if it is sufficiently adrift of field, the habitus finds itself as a ‘fish out of water’:

‘(We had decided) she was going to go to Redwood…we’d been lulled I think, by Ralph’s experience. It’s not a popular school, it’s not the school of choice for parents around here, Redwood just isn’t. So we didn’t even look at another school for her, she was going to go to Redwood and she was fine about it, but no girl was going from her school. She went to the induction day, I just dropped her off – fine, but how wrong I was. And I think also because of the other two, because sometimes I can take my eye off the ball with her a bit, like my parents did with me, just think “Emma’s probably the age where she’s going to get on with it”. And I picked her up and she was practically hysterical, which is unlike her, she’s very straightforward, and she just looked at me in that way that you think I can’t actually ignore this…She said “Please don’t send me there”…So she went down for a day, absolutely, absolutely hated it.
Interviewer: What did she dislike most or did you not get to the bottom of it?

No, I absolutely got to the bottom of it and I knew the minute she said “Please don’t send me there”. I knew she’s too middle class…she didn’t see anybody there that…she didn’t know anybody which I think is a disadvantage for any child. And I think it does come down to identity really. (I said) ‘well you can’t tell me that everybody in your tutor group was horrible’. She said “they weren’t horrible, but nearly everybody came up to me and said, you’re really posh aren’t you?”

Interviewer: And her friends had gone elsewhere?

All gone elsewhere. There were a lot going to the private sector.

This episode resulted in Emma going instead to Hammerton with her best friend, as Annie described it ‘my sanity and her happiness had to come above all other worthy principles…at the end you have to go against your principles because actually I thought by sticking to them, I’m actually not doing what’s right for her as an individual’.

In other interviews with parents who had been to private schools, the focus was not so much on the narrowness of the curriculum or experiences of discomfort or distress, but on their distaste for the kind of social reproduction that they felt such schools fostered. In Norton, Ella Rosen and her husband both came from families where everyone went to private school, yet she spoke of the worrying tendency for those in power in government and civil service to have been to such schools, in turn making them detached from the lives of everyone else. This was a view we heard frequently. In another Norton family, Libby Greensit did not express any specific or personal disappointment with her own private education, but nevertheless expressed a strong commitment to locality and state education. A GP, she argued that both schools and the health service needed to work for everyone. In these and other examples, personal experiences of private education underpinned a point of principle, and contemporary professional experience had sharpened an awareness of the effects of privileged schooling. Even so, in many families, parents talked as Libby did about ‘going private’ remaining as a last resort if things went wrong with the choices that had been made.

Social justice, instrumentality and civic involvement

Contemporary political concerns about social cohesion often focus on segregation between schools and communities. We were interested to see whether counter-intuitive school choice made a positive contribution to social mixing, and therefore, potentially, to social cohesion. Our research found segregation within schools with white middle-class children clustered in top sets. They were often benefiting from ‘Gifted and Talented’ schemes, which channel extra resources into schools for

‘…those who have one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop those abilities). Gifted describes learners who have the ability to excel academically in one or more subjects such as English, drama, technology; Talented describes learners who have the ability to excel in
practical skills such as sport, leadership, artistic performance, or in an applied skill’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008)
The scheme is controversial, and a significant proportion of primary and secondary schools were avoiding participation in it at the time of our study. The Government’s own figures showed that black students were seriously under-represented on the scheme, and this led one observer to a diagnosis of institutional racism (Gillborn, 2005) and may have prompted a recent revision of the web-based description of the scheme, which now stresses ‘the expectation that there are gifted and talented learners in every year group in every school’, and that because ‘ability is evenly distributed throughout the population, a school’s gifted and talented pupils should be broadly representative of its whole school population’ (ibid).

Despite the often declared hopes of parents that their children would make friends across ethnic groups, on the whole friends were other white middle-class children. The children in our study rarely had working class friends and their few minority ethnic friends were predominantly from middle-class backgrounds and were high achieving. There was much evidence of social mix but far less evidence of social mixing. Both parents’ and children’s attitudes toward classed and ethnic others sometimes displayed a perception of cultural and intellectual superiority that would work against social cohesion and the development of common ground and common understandings. Even in this group of pro-welfare, left-leaning parents there was little declared support for measures to tackle inequalities; few made any protest at the schools’ intent upon further advantaging their own children by allocating them to the Gifted and Talented Scheme, even though they were openly critical of it in a more abstract sense. Furthermore, whilst many of the children also appeared to have an understanding of wider social inequalities, this did not transfer to understanding the consequences of material disadvantage for educational attainment. Rather, achievement and social mobility were usually seen to be matters that reflected the inherent qualities of different individuals.

A surprisingly high proportion of families contained at least one parent who was currently serving or had served as a school governor (57% in London, 43% in Riverton and 22% in Norton families). Across the sample there were 11 chairs of governors. Becoming a school governor appeared rooted in a desire to make a civic contribution, but as with the many other explicit connections with schools (friendships with teachers or the Head, or professional links with education), it also appeared to be a way of managing the risks in sending children to inner city state schooling. In turn, schools seemed especially responsive to the wishes and concerns of white middle-class parents and their children.

Beyond governorship there was little civic and other local engagement that might indicate explicit contributions to social cohesion. Amongst participants, the most politically active parents were in the London sample (22%), where there were three Labour party activists, a chair of the local neighbourhood society, a couple who were campaigning against a local Academy (a new school to be built in partnership with private capital and control), and two members of a pressure group, the Campaign for State Education. However,
for the most part political activism and civic engagement lay in our parents’ past histories, and many talked about their disillusionment with politics, and in particular, New Labour, following the Iraq invasion. Almost all talked about their commitment to the welfare state. The communitarian ideals that were once actively pursued by many of the parents had mostly given way to pragmatism and pessimism about the possibilities of political action and community involvement. However, this is not to posit some kind of loss of moral bearings. Most of the parents worked as public sector professionals, and they sometimes cited beliefs about their work in a general support for public sector institutions. But rather than expressing recognisably political positions in relation to public sector provision, support for state education tended to be voiced in terms of individual morality and what was ethically desirable, and in terms of what sorts of people their children would become (see Crozier et al, 2008, p265). As Audrey (a GP, in Norton) put it: ‘I don’t want my children to think you know, that everybody’s got a holiday house in Sardinia, and everyone’s daddy drives a four by four and you know and everyone you know can go to tennis club and squash club and blah, blah, blah, have holidays skiing and this that and the other. You know, they’ve got to realise that you know not everyone does that, we're not all the same…and I just think, God, if everybody would just go to state schools it would be so much better, but a lot of people don’t’.

**Social change and the positioning of the ‘other’**

Parental accounts of these school choices often made reference to broad ideas about ‘how the world has changed’, and how such changes had to be prepared for when it came to their children. There were strong perceptions that society had fundamentally shifted in nature since these parents themselves went to school. Though often expressed in vague terms, we can sum up these perceptions by saying that for these parents, society had become more cosmopolitan and multicultural, more globally connected, and more uncertain in terms of the routes and trajectories it appeared to offer their children. It is worth noting that these perceptions have considerable overlap with analyses offered by some influential sociologists (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Elias, 1991; and see De Jong, 2001). There is a specific resonance with Giddens, and with the connection between his notion of the reflexive, self-mastering person and the ideology of liberal individualism (see Elliott, 2001).

Echoing the views of independent schools mentioned earlier, some State schools that were characterised by high examination pass-rates were regarded by the parents as too narrow in their social composition and focus – as not providing the sort of socialisation that would best equip a young person for the way the world had become. In contrast, the social and ethnic diversity of many of the chosen comprehensive schools was seen as inclusive and as providing conditions for generating multicultural harmony. It produced children who were ‘socially fluent and adaptable’, more ‘worldly’ and ‘more resilient’. Some parents explicitly referred to their children’s exposure to instances of racist abuse and language, or to certain social problems they associated with race or ethnicity, as important opportunities to learn. Many appeared to regard social and ethnic diversity as a cultural resource for the
‘production of the ethical self’ (c.f. Skeggs, 2005, p. 973) and as the basis for an education that would leave their children able to deal with a more complicated and globalised world (see Crozier et al, 2008). Comprehensive schooling was thus explicitly valued as an opportunity to put democratic, civic values into practice as well as for the related identity-work it could perform. Avril Smart, a journalist in the London sample put it like this:

‘There is definitely something about producing a different kind of middle-class child. This is a speculation but I think there is definitely something about not being arrogant or not appearing arrogant. There is some kind of modesty that some people might see as them not being confident. You are not being educated to be a woman of the world; you are being educated to take your part, a place. And I think there is an understanding of others you can only have if you are sort of with them all the time. It is something to learn of other cultures, but to actually learn with other cultures, of other cultures, it is a completely different thing’.

Our data also led us to look closely at ‘whiteness’, and our analysis suggested that some of the white middle class parents saw themselves as ‘a darker shade of pale’, that is, as occupying a white ethnic identity that was distinguished by its cosmopolitan acceptance and tolerance of ethnic diversity and even its anti-racism. However, this notion of whiteness was also constructed in opposition to that of both the white working classes and those white middle-classes who made more conventional middle-class school choices (see Reay et al, 2007). There were many negative references to white working class young people, some of which suggested fear or contempt. Terms like ‘white trash’, ‘chav’ or ‘charver’ were quite common. In these and other ways, counter-intuitive school choice exposes rifts and tensions that are normally held apart by more conventional patterns of school choice (see Crozier et al, 2008).

Identity and habitus

We were struck by the frequency with which some parents expressed anxieties about their choice of school, and the associated close monitoring of progress and experience which we have elsewhere termed ‘parental managerialism’ (James and Beedell, forthcoming). To the extent that we can generalise, there was considerable concern about these children doing well, and slightly more anxiety amongst ‘first generation’ middle class parents than those from more established middle class backgrounds. The asset of social diversity also brought dangers, because young people might come to identify with ‘the other’. At the same time, the parents in our study seemed more certain in their choices than the middle class parents making more conventional middle class choices in Ball’s study (Ball, 2003).

We suggest that whilst the difficulties and anxieties expressed were genuine, they need to be understood against the backdrop of resources that appeared to generate confidence. Firstly, there was the acknowledged capacity, in many families, to change tack and change schools – sometimes to ‘go private’ - should the need arise. Secondly, there seemed to be a general ‘sociological’ appreciation that, other things being equal, white middle class
children can be expected to do well in education. We have evidence that this last point is an important source of cultural capital, because there were instances where both parents and schools acted in explicit acknowledgement of it. Parents spoke a great deal in terms of their children being ‘bright’, ‘floating to the top’, ‘rising to their natural place’ or being able to stand out in a way that would be more difficult in a higher-achieving school. Schools, for their part, went to great lengths to attract, and then hold on to, middle class students. This suggests that there is more at stake than the serving of mutual interests: There is also a process akin to Giddens’ double hermeneutic (Elliott, 2001) where both parents and schools operate in the light of well-established knowledge derived from the social sciences, particularly explanations about the relationship between social class and education. In other words, this knowledge has become part and parcel of the actions it was derived to explain (see James et al., forthcoming).

The following quote, from a Riverton family, is telling in this respect. We had been talking about whether, in retrospect, the choice of school was a good one:

*Father:* ....I feel vindicated...
*Mother:* Yes, I do (too).
*Father:* ... in that because our feeling is that we’re not interested in results, we’re not interested in percentages of A-Cs, what we’re interested in is what our own children are going to achieve. So it could be that a year group do appallingly, but if the teachers have given our children the opportunity to rise to their natural place and get the qualifications that they’re capable of, a good teacher will work with children and if they have one bright child in that class they should be able to take them where they need to go (Tom Foster & Trudy Henderson) (emphases added).

The Hendersons here expressed a recurring theme in our data, where many parents seemed to recognise, without articulating it directly, that the social background of their own children offered forms of capital that were readily converted into academic success. In Bourdieusian terms, this is a form of misrecognition, and is fundamental to the role of education in structures of social inequality.

There are many different definitions and ways of understanding ‘identity’. Our data highlighted for us the utility of Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field in making sense of some of the identity-work that is attempted and achieved through school choice and schooling. There are several useful commentaries on the strengths, promise and limitations of these concepts (see for example Reay, 2004; Grenfell and James, 1998, 2004; Nash, 1999; Sayer 2005). Here we will confine ourselves to one well-used example of Bourdieu’s own attempts to describe the purpose and reach of the terms:

‘The notion of habitus…is relational in that it designates a mediation between objective structures and practices. First and foremost, habitus has the function of overcoming the alternative between conscious and unconscious…Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside agents. And when
habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself ‘as a fish in water’, it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted’. (Bourdieu in interview with Wacquant, in Bourdieu, 1989, p. 43)

Educational processes have a particularly important place in the development of habitus:

‘The habitus acquired in the family underlines the structuring of school experiences…and the habitus transformed by schooling, itself diversified, in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences (e.g. the reception and assimilation of the message of the culture industry or work experiences) and so on, from restructuring to restructuring’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 87)

Here, Bourdieu helps us see the high stakes of school choice in the formation of identities. Schooling is ‘itself diversified’, and choosing a school may appear as the only significant opportunity that parents have to influence, beyond the home setting, the further development of the established habitus of their child. It is important to underline that habitus does not only refer to a process of cognitive acquisition, and that it is a much less individualised notion than ‘personality’ (See Burkitt, 1991; Grenfell and James, 1998). It refers to the embodiment of social relationships and positions, so that they become dispositions. These add up to a sense of reality, of limits and possibilities, and are mostly about difference and diversity and a knowledge of where one sits in a particular field. Habitus sets a frame for what individuals do, without narrowly determining their agency.

Conclusion

‘Relational aspects of schooling choice reverberate within and down the generations; and whether family hierarchies and traditions are followed, broken or adjusted; they comprise measures against which current choice is made, shaping the way schooling is consumed and identity formed’ (Allatt 1996; 170)

We were able to say with some confidence that the outcomes of the ‘against the grain’ school choices was a confirmation of the white middle class identity of the young people, albeit one that was forged quite differently to most parental identities. The spread across a range of ages enabled us to see that all those who were old enough to have completed GCSEs did well, and that the vast majority of those who were old enough to go to University did so (with a very high proportion [15%] of these going to England’s two most prestigious universities). However, for present purposes we concentrate on how the study offers insights into processes of identity formation, and how the concept of habitus, together with field, helps us capture something of the inherently relational and dynamic nature of this identity-work. The parents and children in our study were, as far as we could tell, acting in good faith and doing their best to cope with a rapidly-changing, marketised system. They were coping with anxiety-producing situations which, at many junctures, challenged or compromised their values. At the same time, they acted in ways that would
advantage their children and which could, possibly, disadvantage other children. As a research team we felt much empathy: the participants were ‘people like us’ (most members of the research team were white and middle class and some had children who attended ordinary state comprehensive schools - see Reay et al 2007).

The general point we wish to underline here may seem an obvious one to those who have followed the history and location of changing conceptions and practices of the self (what Rose called the ‘genealogy of subjectification’ [1998, p.23]). At its simplest, it is that a focus on ‘the individual’, whilst important, is only one, rather narrow perspective on questions of identity. What our analysis shows is that whatever else it is, identity is always necessarily a product and enactment of social relations. There are two senses in which this appears to happen. Firstly, for all their uniqueness and creativity in making lives that are ‘liveable’, most people cannot realistically avoid the ‘steer’ that their habitus gives them (Bourdieu, in describing the problematic social location of the petite bourgeoisie, described a particularly impotent view of the world as ‘a dream of social flying, a desperate attempt to defy the gravity of the social field’ - 1984, p.370). The conditions for identity formation via education are of course shifted by the aggressive promulgation of policies to put in place a more diverse and marketised system of school choices and the accompanying inherent concept of the individualised, enterprising self-as-consumer (Rose, 1998). Yet these shifts do not magically or completely recast all the players in a new image or erase other long-standing modes of engagement between individuals and institutions. Habitus remains key, and what our study suggests is that a relative abundance of capital in white middle class families does not just yield advantages to those making ‘good’, conventional choices in the educational market: it also favours those making what some would term ‘bad’ choices (James et al, forthcoming).

Secondly, when people engage in social spaces such as opportunities for educational choice and in schools themselves, they are not mere recipients of a set of services of a particular ‘quality’: They develop, confirm or disconfirm aspects of their own social identities and at the same time those of other people (see Brantlinger, 2003). In considering identity, then, concepts like habitus and field offer us a shift in insight parallel to the one that Einstein’s physics represents over its Newtonian forerunner. This is a shift away from the illusion that identities in a social world are to be understood primarily via individuals who happen to interact, towards seeing that people’s positioning in current and previous fields, and the relationships between them, are just as important.

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“Riverton” and “Norton” are pseudonyms. We also used pseudonyms for all individuals and schools in the study.
General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations are normally taken by 14-16 year olds, and constitute the main qualifications at the end of compulsory secondary schooling. The proportion of students gaining 5 passes at higher grades is widely used as a performance indicator, especially at school and local authority level. See for example http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/QualificationsExplained/DG_10039024 (Accessed June 2008)

The system in England combines both choice and entitlement. Every child is offered a place in a state secondary school by their Local Authority, but parents may seek a place in any other school, and many do this—often taking into account the percentage of high examination passes. If a school has more applications than places, it will use a combination of factors set out in a formula by the Local Authority (factors like distance of home from school, whether there are already older siblings in the school). There is also a system of Appeals for parents who are not happy with any place they have been offered. Any parent can opt out of the State system, if they have the money, and pay for private secondary schooling. For a summary of the current situation, see for example http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/educationandlearning/choosingaschool/schoolchoiceyourrights/ (Accessed June 2008)

‘Critical mass’ was a regular theme in interviews with parents (i.e. so that the white middle class child would not be alone, or not completely alone). In one of our discussions with a head teacher, he spoke of trying to forestall this fear by meeting middle class parents whilst their children were still in Primary school to ‘persuade them all to jump at once’ (and to his disappointment, on the particular occasion only one or two of them actually ‘jumped’ in his direction).