

**School Choice and Constructing the Active Citizen:
Representations and Negotiations of
Active, Responsible Parenting**

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Abstract

A key feature of policy reform and political development in Britain since the 1980s has been the idea that public services are more responsive, flexible and better managed when citizens engage with them as discriminating users or consumers. In education, this approach to reform has been criticised for undermining associations and relations that engender citizenship-based commitments to ideas of public welfarism and a democratic citizenry. This thesis explores diverse sources and types of evidence in order to map the field through which parents are invited to deploy meanings and vocabularies that register a consumerist orientation to school choice, and to illustrate the sets of contrasting and sometimes contradictory discourses enacted by parents in their interpretations and understandings of their role as chooser. This leads to a consideration of how far the expectations and demands of governmental discourses and rationalities work to shape or limit the intentions of social actors. Through comparing diverse sources of evidence, the thesis then develops two interrelated lines of argument. First, it argues that choice connects with ethical injunctions around behaviour and therefore is sometimes mobilised in ways that transcend economic rationality. Secondly, it argues that choice is negotiated at the intersection of multiple discourses, revealing the cross-cutting impulses that inform parents' decision-making. Through a consideration of the relationships in practice between these diverse elements, this study questions the analytic value of distinctions between citizen and consumer, community and individual as framings for understanding the motivations and aspirations shaping parents' school choices.

Introduction

In reality, I believe people do want choice, in public services as in other services. But anyway, choice isn't an end in itself. It is one important mechanism to ensure that citizens can indeed secure good schools and health services in their communities. Choice puts the levers in the hands of parents and patients so that they as citizens and consumers can be a driving force for improvement in their public services. (Then British Prime Minister Tony Blair 2004)

As the above quotation indicates, the New Labour government was committed to introducing user choice into public services such as education and health care. A crucial basis for the implementation of user choice in these areas, as well as other public services including social care (DoH 2005) and housing (DCLG 2008), has been the shift away from state-coordinated attempts to manage the distribution of welfare goods and a shift towards market conceptions of deregulation and privatisation as mechanisms for the delivery of public services (Ball 2008; Giddens 1998; Le Grand 2007a). More generally, the assembly of market rationalities and imperatives in the realm of welfare demands citizens who manage and look upon themselves as consumers of public services. Much of the ideological and discursive work of government policy rhetoric in recent years has centred therefore around a commitment to mobilising citizens who actively understand themselves as consumers

of public services or 'citizen-consumers' (Clarke and Newman 2005; Newman and Vidler 2006).

The partnership between parents and schools, for example, changed dramatically during the 1980s' Conservative administration led by Margaret Thatcher when parental rights and responsibilities became a focal point of education policy (DES 1988) – neatly captured through what Brown calls the 'ideology of parentocracy' (1990: 65). During this period the centralised power of the Local Education Authority (LEA) was downsized considerably to make way for competition between schools and to create the conditions necessary for activating the parent as a consumer in a field of choice (Jones 2003; Lowe 2005). As a result, the LEA was no longer responsible for determining where children should go to school in the state education sector. Instead, it became the right and responsibility of the parent to decide where their child attend school, to carry out activities formerly assigned to the role of the LEA, and, on that basis, to inhabit and perform the role of the 'empowered', discriminating and autonomous chooser. Within government texts around user choice in public services (Ministers of State 2004) there has also been an increasing emphasis on the need to reorganise the balance between citizenship rights, obligations and entitlements (Clarke 2005a; Deacon 1994; Dwyer 1998), with the intention of inducing the active enlistment of citizens as self-responsible and self-directing subjects. Consequently the parental right to choose carries a heavy weight of responsibility and obligation with it. But how do parents know how to choose and how are parents expected to know what is the 'right' choice?

This thesis sets out to study how parents engage with education services and how far their behaviour and orientations register a capacity and willingness for enacting the logics and dynamics that spring out of the role of the consumer. I explore how the elaboration of norms around what constitutes 'active' and 'responsible' parenting are assembled around the promotion of particular kinds of vocabularies, meanings and subject positions. I examine in what ways the meaning and practice of choice is the focus of certain injunctions around behaviour and orientations, with the aim of mapping choice as a framing, discourse and function subjects inhabit and perform. But I also seek to illuminate how parents experience themselves as subjects when activated in a field of choice as consumers and thus consider in what ways they engage with the meanings and practices summoned up through dominant governmental discourses around choice.

A central focus of this thesis is to make explicit the ways in which parents are encouraged to inhabit and navigate a field of choice 'successfully' and to explore how far they adopt strategies of economic rationality and instrumental calculation as framings for their school choice. Moreover, I consider how a field of choice is discursively and materially constituted through policy and political texts and school brochures and websites, thereby outlining the different kinds of representational and symbolic work that go into creating the conditions of possibility for imagining and activating the parent as consumer. I also examine how locally produced identifications are managed in these contexts, both by parents and schools. To do this, I utilise a mixture of data consisting in the main of interviews, school brochures and websites, local and national government texts, newspaper articles, and government and non-government websites. Each of these data sources is used to examine how

parents are positioned or position themselves when activated in a field of choice. Through an analysis of government and non-government websites I trace how they are invited to put into practice vocabularies and identifications that register an understanding of dominant conceptions of the 'active' and deserving parent. These data sources make transparent the ideological and political work implicit to the constitution of a field of choice and government attempts to contain the idea of choice through a dominant discourse, with its intransigent focus on the 'sovereign' figure of the consumer and an 'autonomous, empowered and asocial rationality' (David *et al.* 1997: 401). At the same time, these data sources are used to show that choice contains multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory elements which cannot be contained through the lens of a singular consumerist discourse.

The combined application of these multiple data sources allows for a richer and more complicated reading of the parent as agentic, discourse-bound and situated in local contexts. Moreover, through highlighting local contexts and associations, my analysis successfully demonstrate how they enact multiple discursive framings simultaneously and thus move in, between and across subject positions and discourses. Such an approach aims to contribute to existing research around parental choice by re-thinking assumptions around class-based bifurcation, in which parents' voices are often reproduced as stable carriers of particular classifications (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998). Specifically, it details the articulation and combination of different orientations and motivations and the ways these mediate apparently contrasting and conflicting sets of identifications, thus questioning the analytic value of political binaries of citizen and consumer, public and private, individual and collective, self-regarding and community-regarding. In

particular, my analysis problematises the active-passive distinction implicit to dominant governmental discourses around choice through making visible the active, inventive and creative working of subjects.

In reflecting on the ways in which social actors engage with the meanings and discourses made available through dominant policy discourses around choice, I also consider the extent to which these engagements are socially inflected through conceptions of locality, identity and agency. A focal point of this thesis is, then, to make visible the ways in which school choices are understood and made sense of in the context of competing and sometimes contradictory discourses and vocabularies. In particular, there is an emphasis on how understandings and interpretations of choice are translated and actively negotiated through socially circulating discourses. The resignifications and anomalies emerging from my respondents' accounts are then used to show how resistance to a consumerist orientation as a normalizing injunction guarantees the failure of that injunction to fully constitute the subject as a consumer. This leads to a reconsideration of the apparent efficacy of the interpellating demands of governmental discourses and rationalities and their performative capacity to constitute subjects.

At the same time, this research recognises that the role of the consumer carries certain powerful dialogic and ideological usages precisely because it is legitimated and rendered desirable through various government and non-government discourses. The attribution of cultural currency to this position means that there is a restriction placed on what is speakable in the context of choice, where speaking 'properly' or in the 'right' way appears to be an instance of the dialogic exchange that constitutes the

discursive production of the social subject. Hence, I take up a discursive and dialogic approach (Bakhtin 1981; Holland and Lave 2000; Potter and Wetherell 1987) in this study as a conceptual and theoretical resource for thinking through and mapping choice as a framing, function and discourse parents inhabit and perform.

Chapter 1 explores the emergence of choice in British government policy discourse and highlights the forms of parent/citizen subject summoned through it. This is followed, in chapter 2, with an examination of the different ways in which the meaning and practice of choice is mediated and assembled through various government and non-government websites. This chapter also provides an outline of the strategies and rationalities underpinning those constructions and those which are marginalised as counterproductive or without 'purchase'. In turn I point to the ways in which a consumerist orientation is sometimes resisted and reworked to accommodate alternative sets of ethical preferences and valuations, in effect highlighting the importance of a discourse of emotion as a framing of choice and as a site of resistance and subversion. Chapter 3 builds on this discussion through an exploration of the role of the neo-classical economics and public choice perspectives in the sedimentation of the 'sovereign' figure of the consumer in dominant governmental discourses around choice. There is also a critical engagement with those literatures emanating from, though not strictly bound to, a Sociology of Education. These literatures are examined for the way they undermine rational choice assumptions regarding the equal capacity of all social actors to enact the role of the consumer and counters this logic by emphasising the structuring effects of discourses as circumscriptions of choice.

Chapter 4 offers a reflexive account of the research method and methodology shaping this thesis. It identifies many of the problems and discoveries I encountered during the pilot study, provides justifications for my chosen theoretical approach, reasons for situating the study in the borough of Camden in North-West London, reflections on the interview process and its ethical implications and the process through which I identified and recruited interview participants. More broadly, this chapter draws comparisons between my chosen methods and the methods put into practice by other researchers interested in parental choice.

The first of the substantive chapters, chapter 5, outlines the way in which the mothers I interviewed put into service repertoires and references that registered a discourse of emotion. Here, I analyse the way these mothers drew on the vocabulary of emotion as a strategy for coping with the difficulty, anxiety and strain opened up through the discourse of choice, and as a form of counter-logic that preserves an image of the child as beyond the estimation and abstraction of a discourse of choice. Repertoires that register a discourse of emotion are discussed for the potential liberatory or empowering possibilities they contain, namely the capacity to withstand or undermine the calculating framework of choosing as a deficient practice. Chapter 6 captures the importance of community as a framing for some mothers' school choice and explores how meanings of community, race and faith are implicated in the construction of a field of choice. Here the idea of choice as a self-interested act performed by an autonomous agent is problematised and instead choice is located in the social and historical exchanges linking people together, namely the collectivist links thought to be managed through and between the site of the local school, the local people and the imaginary of community.

Drawing on responsibility as a dynamic through which the mothers in my study engage with choice, Chapter 7 explores the combination and articulation of contradictory and contrasting notions of responsibility as a way of thinking through and beyond static and tidy conceptions of 'responsible' and 'active' parenting. By focusing on the different identifications and associations these mothers brought to bear upon their understandings and interpretations of choice, chapter 7 illuminates the intersecting dynamic of apparently contrasting and conflicting discourses. In particular, I move away from a view of the parent as either citizen or consumer, self-regarding or community-regarding, and instead highlight the way these terms slide into one another. Chapter 8 provides a summary of the arguments made and focuses in particular on the dialogic and ideological function of discourses as performances that are entered into and negotiated by subjects, thereby highlighting the transmutability of discourse and the crosscutting impulses and intersecting positions framing the meaning and practice of choice.

Chapter 1

Mapping the Emergence of Choice in British Policy Discourse: Consumerism, Modernisation and Active Citizenship

During the course of the 1980s, the idea of enterprise culture has emerged as a central motif in the political thought and practice of the Conservative government in Britain. Its radical programme of economic and institutional reform has earlier been couched primarily in the rediscovered language of economic liberalism, with its appeals to the efficiency of the markets, the liberty of individuals and the non-interventionist state. But this programme has increasingly also come to be represented in 'cultural' terms, as concerned with the attitudes, values and forms of self understanding embedded in both individual and institutional activities. (Keat and Abercrombie 1991: 1)

The above extract highlights two important interrelated lines of argument that form the basis of the analytical focus of this chapter. The first of these arguments highlights the centrality of the vocabulary of neo-classical economics and individualism in 1980s Conservative government political thought and practice. The second, more important, argument relates to the different subject positions and discourses summoned through these ideas which, in 'cultural' terms, are understood

to inform hegemonic framings of self-hood. This chapter explores both these arguments, interchangeably, as a way of providing the political and policy context for an examination of the main research question in this study: In what ways do some mother engage with the meanings and practices made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice?

This chapter explores how governments between 1980 and 2008 implemented the concept and practice of choice as a basis for debates over welfare state restructuring in the UK. I analyse the emergence of choice as a master narrative in New Labour policy discourse and make visible the different historical and political exchanges and negotiations that have shaped its pivotal role in questions over the reform of public services in the UK. Identifying the different contexts that created the conditions of possibility for deploying choice in British policy rhetoric leads to a consideration of how the different meanings and practices assembled through choice have been used to construct and legitimate a consumerist orientation in policy about public services. To do this, I address the historical and political specificity of these contexts as trends or tendencies working towards the promotion of ideas of consumerism, marketisation, privatisation and deregulation, and the ‘modernisation’ of public services, especially in the realm of education. In particular, there is a focus on how the concept and practice of choice is linked to the dissemination of other devices and dynamics in education more generally that have as their aim the restructuring of public services in the name of an ‘economising’ logic and the creation of a model of ‘effective citizenship’ (Ministers of State 2004: 3.4.3) and liberal modes of governing. Moreover, there is an emphasis on how these devices represent an unmistakable shift

in British policy rhetoric towards producing contexts in which citizens are incited to imagine and manage themselves in the role of consumers of public services.

An analysis of context is an important way of beginning this thesis since my concern is with how parental engagement with school choice is framed by a particular set of policy reforms in the UK, reforms that are themselves shaped by the political projects of the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, the New Labour government from 1997 to 2008, and then Brown's Labour government. The aim of this chapter is to therefore explore the different contexts that created the conditions of possibility for the emergence of choice as a basis for policy reform in the UK and to consider the forms of citizenship being managed and evoked through it. The way in which I have chosen to address these issues is through organising the chapter into three sections, with each section offering a different set of understandings and interpretations of the trajectory of the concept and practice of choice in British political discourse and policy development.

The first section examines choice as a central strand in government texts around education from the 1980s onwards and locates its importance in narratives around 'modernisation' of public services and the distinction between 'old' and 'new' models of public sector organisation, pointing to the dismantling of earlier political settlements. In particular, there is focus on how, as a result of changes to education policy and practice, parents are incited to behave differently in their understandings of and relationships to education services, namely as consumers. The second section looks at how the concept and practice of choice, with its appeal to the autonomous and self-directing subject, has been implemented in other areas of education policy as

a basis for managing and reorganising the relationship between pupils and schools as one in which pupils are 'empowered' to take on the role as co-creators of their own learning. There I focus on the policy of personalised learning, which is characterised by its attempts to constitute pupils as the best judges of their own educational needs. I also look at how interrelated policy strategies of choice and personalised learning can be characterised as elements in the formation of political projects of 'neo-liberalisation' – that is, reflecting the direct expansion of the scope and reach of global market forces in British national policy. The final section explores the extent to which the instantiation of choice in government texts around education can be understood as devices for constructing more 'active' notions of parental agency in the realm of education and citizenship more generally. My concern throughout this chapter, then, is with choice as discourse, and with the forms of citizen/parental subject that are summoned up.

Choice and Markets: 'New' Trajectories in Education Policy

Choice as a governmental mechanism in education can be traced back to the *Black Paper* of 1977 where Stuart Sexton, who later went on to become advisor to the Secretary of State in the Conservative government, laid the foundation for a new system of secondary education. A crucial element in this text was the stipulation that parents should be granted absolute freedom of school choice by application. It was not until the introduction of the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), however, that choice became a central feature of education reform in Britain. The ERA signalled for many a decisive break from post-war social policy (Glennerster, Power, and Travers 1991) in that 'it destroyed the

educational culture which had been developed between 1944 and 1979, and began the work of creating a different one, in which old “social actors” were marginalized and new ones rendered powerful’ (Jones 2003: 131). According to Jones (2003), the figure of parent as a formative local force, for instance, emerged out of, and was institutionalised through, the introduction of the ERA, leading to closer parental involvement in schools. The 1980 Education Act also contributed significantly to greater parental involvement by confirming the statutory right of parents to be elected as school governors. Of particular relevance to changes in education legislation and policy during this time was thus an increased emphasis on parental choice, diversity of provision, further autonomy for schools and the role of the parent in relation to education more generally (Ranson 1993; Walford 2003).

The ‘rolling back’ of welfare state activities was crucial to the implementation and development of these policy strategies in education. The weight of centralised power typically enjoyed by the Local Education Authority (LEA) at the time, for instance, was dramatically downsized, with much of that power being assigned to parents as consumers of education services or schools as independent planners and managers of their own provision. Schools were permitted to ‘opt out’ of the locally controlled system and become grant-maintained, for example – that is, administratively self-governing but at the same time funded in part by the central state. Budgetary responsibility was devolved to the heads and governors of individual schools, with allocated resources secured in part through the number of children schools attracted to their services (Jones 2003). Budget levels were thus linked to student intake and schools were encouraged to raise money from industry or charity, with the aim of ensuring that schools performed in ways that were attentive to market

concepts of supply and demand. The introduction of rate-capping on provision in effect facilitated a climate of competition between schools, which led necessarily to a weakening of the power of the LEAs and the arrival of a marketing and managerial approach in education (Lowe 2005). Indeed, as Crozier makes clear (1997), schools became more conscious of the market and aware of the parents' 'consumer' status within it as a result of these changes in policy. The combination and interaction of these policy trends – decentralisation, deregulation and marketisation – opened up contexts in which schools and parents were located through the exchange and intersection of producers and consumers. As a corollary, parents and schools began to appropriate the vocabulary of economics and choice (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995).

Implicit in these policy strategies was an assumption about the superiority of market mechanisms over state monopolies (Clarke 2005a). For example, the articulation of decentralised power is nominally associated with a preference for a minimalist state and market processes of deregulation and privatisation. This is captured through the downsizing of the LEAs, which represented both a weakening of the centre against the locality (Jones 2003) and a desire to reduce public, non-commercial powers, resources and excessive public spending. Ball observes how much of the rhetoric enshrined in the *Black Papers* 1969-77 helped to forge a 'New Right' political identity, which went on to form the basis for a 'renarration of the public sector in terms of neoliberalism (or neoconservatism)' (2008: 72). All of the policy strategies described above can thus be characterised as neo-liberal in that they involve both the expansion of the scope and reach of market mechanisms in public sector organisation, such as the introduction of local business interests to the composition of governing bodies in schools (Lowe 2005), and the 'economization' of

the relationship between welfare users and welfare providers. Here, then, neo-liberalism can be understood both as ‘a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance’ (Larner 2000: 6). However, I explain later that strategies of neo-liberalisation rather than ‘neo-liberalism’ may be a more useful way of describing these shifts in education policy and practice.

In much the same way that post-1979 Conservative governments sought to reduce, or at least keep to an agreed expenditure on health, ‘by shifting some of the responsibility for health on to citizens’ (Gabe and Calan 2002: 255; and see Sorell 1997), parents were made responsible for those roles and activities formerly carried out by the LEA. In this framing, responsibility for educational decisions was assigned to parents, with a view to transforming parents from so-called passive recipients of welfare provision to active, self-sustaining, autonomous subjects. As Clarke observes, ‘The movement from expansive or welfarist liberalism to advanced or neo-liberalism is characterized by this shift towards the production of self-regulating subjects’ (2005a: 452; and see Rose 1999; Walkerdine 2003). Here, recipients of public services were no longer defined as passive, accepting and trusting of the welfare provision afforded them, but instead were constructed as active, discriminating choosers, and, above all, best placed to make judgements about their own consumption patterns (Appleby 1998; Baldock 1998). But what has been the political-ideological work needed to create and sustain such citizens? In what ways did Blair’s New Labour government continue to shape education policy and practice around this view of parents as consumers?

The shift towards customer satisfaction as a model for improving public services is discernible through *The Parent's Charter* (DES 1991) and *The Citizen's Charter* (1991), where it is stipulated that public services should be delivered in accordance with the rights of citizens as consumers of public services and as the bearers of consumer rights (Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994; Pollitt 1994). The marked continuity of Conservative policy in New Labour policy is evident through the emphasis placed on the use of market forms, the articulation of decentralised power, the use of private companies for the delivery of public services and the role of private sponsorship more generally (Ball 2008). There are distinct shifts and ruptures in New Labour policy around education, but which, according to Ball, can be read as 'distinct reflections of, or developments from, the period of Thatcherism or neoliberalism' (2008: 84). One such rupture included the decision by Blair's New Labour government to champion assumptions around the superiority of the market and the apparent efficacy of using market mechanisms to restructure state welfare institutions. This was managed in part through the articulation of 'old' and 'new' models public sector organisation (Clarke 2004a; Vidler and Clarke 2005), in which the 'old' was typically elided with a monopolistic, uniform model of service delivery while the 'new' was based on choice and responsive, flexible forms of service delivery. However, the representation of the education system through New Labour's distinction between past and present tended to evoke an overly tidy construction of the 'old', which failed to articulate many of the continuities in past and present education policy and practice. This captures New Labour's struggle to gain ascendancy over and render uncomplicated the history of British education and points to a set of blurred, messy and contradictory narratives concerning public sector organisation.

A central strand in New Labour texts around education was the mobilisation of an 'old' system of education, represented in terms of a 'monolithic' structure with a 'focus on a basic and standard product for all' (DfES 2004: Foreword). The 'old' system of education tended to be conceived as an out-dated, standardised, demoralising and monopolistic model of service delivery structured around the necessities of a 'rationing culture':

The rationing culture which survived the war, in treating everyone the same, often overlooked individuals' different needs and aspirations.

Rising living standards, a more diverse society and a steadily stronger consumer culture have...brought expectations of greater choice,

responsiveness, accessibility and flexibility. (Office of Public Services

Reform 2002: 8)

The antagonistic character of the relationship between a 'rationing culture' and 'consumer culture' works to open up rhetorical spaces within which to articulate reform (Ball 2008). In 'treating everyone the same', the 'old' system is represented as uniform and rigid: 'our education system was too often built on a 'one-size-fits-all' model' (DfEE 2001: 15). In contrast, the 'new' system, with its appeals to the expectations of a 'consumer culture', is represented as more equitable and flexible given its emphasis on choice and consumer voice, 'so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system' (DfES 2004: Foreword; and see DfES 2005). Specifically, the 'old' system of education is conflated with the tripartite system of education that followed the Second World War and which was enshrined in the 1944 Education Act.

After the Second World War, state-maintained secondary schools were organised around three categories of schooling: secondary modern, technical and grammar (Jones 2003). Alongside the 11 Plus attainment testing, which was used as a principle for allocating students to different secondary schools, the tripartite system signalled for many the continuing entrenchment of class-bias in the British state education system (Ball 2008). Hence, the tripartite system of education tended to be portrayed in New Labour policy documents as a 'very rigid and unfair system of education' (DfEE 2001: Introduction), 'based on an assumption that ability was confined to a limited group – it was fundamentally elitist' (DfES 2004: Foreword). Moreover, the 'old' system of education was flagged by New Labour as lacking diversity of provision and thus stifling choice itself, in that the 'need to differentiate provision to individual aptitudes and abilities within schools often took second place' (DfEE 2001: Introduction).

In comparison, the 'new' system of education was assumed to be fundamentally anti-elitist in character because it promoted 'individual aptitudes and abilities' and rejected paternalistic notions of authority in favour of preserving an ideal of the rights of citizens as consumers of public services (see *The Citizen's Charter* 1991; *The Parent's Charter*, DES 1991). The rhetorical space opened up through these assumptions works to strengthen claims concerning the apparent equitable status of the 'new' education system, with its emphasis on conceptions of fairness, responsiveness, flexibility and choice for all. For example, as the DfES note: 'The affluent can buy choice either by moving house or by going outside the state system. We want to ensure that choice is more widely available to all and is not restricted to those who can pay for it' (2005: 3.2.). Choice and consumer voice are thus lodged in

narratives concerning the need for reform and located in an account of social change (Vidler and Clarke 2005). The image is one of 'old' public sector organisation as inefficient, monopolistic, uniform, elitist and inequitable, as compared to the 'new' system which is understood to operate as an equality-producing-mechanism in the reform of public services (Clarke 2005a; Clarke and Newman 2006). However, such a static conception of the representation of the organisation of 'past' services meant that many of the continuities in the system tended to be glossed over or simply misremembered in policy documents, reflecting in part the problem of managing contradictory constituencies, discourses and objectives in education policy and practice.

As McCulloch notes, following the introduction of comprehensive education in the 1960s, 'in districts where grammar schools were retained, such comprehensive schools were often simply the old SMSs [Secondary Modern Schools] in a new guise' (2002: 45). The underlying trends of the 'old' tripartite system of education, and of the continuing entrenchment of a class-bias in school selection, were thus still apparent following the education reform in the 1960s (Ball 2008). For example, the comprehensive schools inherited General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary (O) and Advanced (A) level examinations for the academically able, and Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) examinations for those defined as the less able.

According to McCulloch, 'these separate examinations served different courses that echoed the former grammar/secondary modern divide' (2002: 45). The appearance of ruptures or breaks within British government education policy and practice are therefore sometimes simply the old dressed up as the new (Reay 2008). The antecedents of 1980s Conservative administration policy and political thought, for

example, with its emphasis on the autonomous and self-responsible character of the welfare recipient, is clearly identifiable through the range and scope of education policies and practices implemented through Blair's New Labour government.

One such policy includes personalised learning, which, similarly to the policy of parental choice, has at its centre the figure of the autonomous, discriminating and self-directing agent. In much the same way as the policy of parental choice was taken up by Blair's New Labour government as a device for assigning agency to parents as consumers of education services, the policy of personalised learning emerged as one of the core organising principles around which recipients of education services were constituted as self-regulating subjects; that is, not as passive recipients of welfare provision but active, self-determining agents. Choice and personalised learning thus complement each other in that they have at their centre the 'sovereign' figure of the discriminating consumer. Moreover, both these policies point to the discursive and political work of articulation implicit in New Labour texts around education, namely the multiplicity of attempts by government to transform principles, policies, discourses and practices into new configurations and assemblages. Here, I expand on how the policy of personalised learning contributes to our thinking around making visible the contexts through which individuals are invited to behave differently through their understandings of and relationships to education services, and how trends in education policy and practice have been reworked within a neo-liberal framing of conceptions of development and progress.

Education in a Neo-Liberal Framing: Personalised Learning

In 2006, the then UK Schools Standards Minister, David Miliband, argued that excellence and equity in education services demands that:

we need to do more than engage and empower pupils and parents in the selection of a school: their engagement has to be effective in the day-by-day processes of education. It should be at the heart of the way schools create partnerships with professional teachers and support staff to deliver tailor-made services. In other words, we need to embrace individual empowerment within as well as between schools. This leads straight to the promise of personalised learning. It means building the organisation of schooling around the needs, interests and aptitudes of individual pupils. (2006: 23)

This extract demonstrates how the concept and practice of personalised learning shifts according to the context within which it is mobilised. It can be located, for instance, in the relationships between parents and children and the teachers and staff at the school; it can be flagged through the creation of partnerships and collaborations between schools and the sharing of information and resources; and it can be found in the 'organisation of schooling', such as the particularities of the curriculum. In this way personalised learning operates as a term that can condense and contain a variety of relationships – between, not least, parents and children, children and teachers, parents and teachers, teachers and schools, and parents and schools. This list should not be taken as definitive or exhaustive precisely because it is the lack of specificity

and concreteness surrounding the concept of personalised learning that adds to its malleability and flexibility, and its capacity to mobilise and give voice to very different sets of relationships, positions and discourses. Indeed, choice and personalised learning are similar in that they emerge as catch-all terms – generic, open and contingent. Their popularity, if any, is therefore likely to grow out of their ‘abstract multifaceted desirability’ (Clarke, Smith, and Vidler 2006: 7).

Outside the government are think tanks and research institutes – DEMOS and OECD, for example – also contributing to the emerging debate over personalised learning in education. Leadbeater, a Senior Research Associate with DEMOS, promotes personalised learning as a mechanism for displacing producer paternalism through empowering users of education services to ‘create a learning programme more suited to their goals [...] In theory at least, this means that resources can be allocated to reflect consumer demand rather than reflecting what producers decide should be made’ (Leadbeater 2006: 103; and see Leadbeater 2004). However, similarly to the government, there is a tendency among some commentators to articulate static and often exaggerated claims concerning the organisation of past as compared to present public services.

For Hargreaves, the ‘educational imaginary’ of the nineteenth century featured schools ‘with clear and rigid boundaries [...] organised on the basis of the factory model’, where ‘roles are sharply defined and segregated...[and] education is producer-led’ (2004: 19). The emerging twenty-first century ‘educational imaginary’ is, by contrast, understood to be characterised by schools where ‘roles are blurred and overlapping [...] schools and educators are embedded in complex, interconnected

networks...[and] education is user-led' (Hargreaves 2004: 20). The use of binary terms, such as rigid and overlapping, sharply defined and interconnected, factory model and user-led, repeats the same rhetorical strategy employed in government texts around education. These terms work to produce rhetorical spaces within which to articulate reform (Ball 2008). What is omitted tends to be the continuities in the reform of education policy over the last forty years and the pseudo-market trends and tendencies shaping its trajectory. The suggestion by Hargreaves (2004) that these policies and practices are 'emerging' and not simply evolving, mutating or being managed differently, highlights the importance of the discursive and political work of articulation as a necessary resource for creating the conditions of possibility through which reform can be imagined and put into practice (Clarke, Smith, and Vidler 2006).

The shifts and ruptures in education policy and practice, for example, tend to be managed in part by questions around making education value-for-money (Ball 2008). The tendency in New Labour to champion the contract funding of private and voluntary organisations for the delivery of public services can be read both as distinct reflections of previous Conservative government commitments to rolling out practices of deregulation and privatisation in the public sector and developments from a desire to reduce public, non-commercial powers and resources that might drain or impede potential profit-making. This can be captured through New Labour's decision to grant schools new freedoms and flexibilities to enter into partnerships with outside sponsors and acquire 'a self-governing trust similar to those supporting academies' (DfES 2005: Executive Summary). Originally introduced to the British education system in 2002, academies were set up to replace schools that were either in special measures or 'underachieving', or to meet demand for new places. Unlike most state-

maintained schools, academies are publicly funded independent schools responsible for their own admission arrangements, subject to the approval of the Secretary of State. The creation of academies involves the transfer of publicly funded assets to the control of an unaccountable sponsoring body, set up as a company limited guarantee. The intention behind this policy strategy was primarily to 'create a system of independent non-fee paying state schools' in which 'choice is more widely available to all within an increasingly specialist system' (DfES 2005: Executive Summary). In such ways it is the rhetorical space opened up by discursive practices of choice and personalised learning that provides the conditions necessary for the constitution and legitimisation of a pseudo-market education system – that is, a system of education managed within particular assemblages of market rationalities, politics and ethics.

Concepts such as choice and personalised learning are thus elements of a broader shift in policy rhetoric towards displacing welfarist or state-run institutions in favour of an appeal to the superiority of markets and global competitiveness. As Ball makes clear, these trends or tendencies highlight the 'subordination of education to economic imperatives' (2008: 9) as conditions necessary for competitive success in the global market. Narratives around choice and personalised learning therefore mediate a certain strategy of rationalization (Rose 1999) in which government policy itself is being/becoming 're-structured in the name of an economizing logic' (Du Gay 2002: 17) sustained in the main by what New Labour identified as 'the emergence of the new economy' (DfEE 2001: 1.4). This is what might loosely be termed the subordination of social policy to the economy (Clarke 2005a; Marquand 2004) and links with Clarke and Newman's argument that the dominant discourse of choice connects 'UK developments to wider transnational shifts toward neo-liberal or

advanced liberal modes of governing' (2006: 1). Among the many justifications provided by New Labour for the implementation of choice and personalised learning in education, for example, was the 'imperative for public education to prove it can respond to the challenges of the new economy' (DfEE 2001: 1.2). In this way the specificity of the organisational histories, cultures and capacities of education services in Britain can be understood broadly as being constantly negotiated in the context of wider transnational ambitions of the 'new' economy (Clarke and Newman 2006). But how far might the political rationalities and market imperatives inscribed in through liberal framings of governing shape, or limit, the intentions of social actors?

At this point, I want to move away from a post-Foucauldian governmentality perspective which sometimes lends itself to a view of political projects as constituting the governing of individuals from a distance (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1994). The idea of discourse as elaborated by Foucault in *Discipline and Punishment* (1979) seems to insist on the efficacy of its performative capacity to constitute the subject; that it is through the activity of being hailed, addressed and named through discourse, in an Althusserian sense, that subjects come to experience themselves as subjects. Such a view of discourse is problematic in that it often implies that epistemes or regimes of power/knowledge define, or least limit, the motivations or orientations people have (Bevir 2007). As Newman argues:

As such the governmentality perspective does not readily lend itself to an understanding of the social – in particular, how new governmentalities are limited and how people respond to the subject positions that are discursively produced. (2007: 53)

While the necessities and demands of a 'new economy' (DfEE 2001: 1.2) are likely to produce spaces in which citizens are called upon to behave differently, both in their relation to public services and how they understand themselves as recipients of those services (active rather than passive, for example), it is important to insist on the instability and unpredictability of its appropriation. As Clarke observes, human action and reaction are not simply the product or effect of power as a domination/resistance relationship (2004b). The tendency in Foucauldian approaches to power and discourse to represent processes of the reproduction of subjection and subordination as effortless trades on the assumption that subjects are constituted through discourse. Clarke, for example, refutes that 'either systems of subjects function according to the plans of the powerful. Achieving and maintaining subjection, subordination or system reproduction requires work/practice – because control is imperfect and incomplete in the face of contradictory systems, contested positions and contentious subjects' (2004b: 2-3). Recent commentaries on Foucault by Butler (1997), however, seem to suggest that a Foucauldian formulation of power affirms the multiple possibilities of resistance, but that resistance is necessarily performed as an effect of that power. Paradoxically, power can therefore be understood to constitute the possibility of the subject's resistance towards it, as Butler explains:

For Foucault, then, the disciplinary apparatus produces subjects, but as a consequence of that production, it brings into discourse the conditions for subverting that apparatus itself. (1997: 100)

I expand on this idea more fully in chapter 2 and explore how the work/practice needed to guide the parent into performing the role of the consumer is differently mediated and assembled through a variety of government and non-government websites, and how mothers in particular negotiate and rework the positions offered to them. This is an attempt to go beyond the simple axis of the domination/resistance relationship to make visible the multiplicity of exchanges existing outside the dominant framework of choosing.

This also means supplementing the term 'neo-liberalism' with one that better encapsulates the multiplicity of attempts by government to reorganise principles, policies, discourses and practices into new configurations. It is for this reason that I use the term 'neo-liberalisation' to reference the activity or practice through which new relationships between the citizen and state are being currently assembled and negotiated. The term neo-liberalism can register a static conception of the relationship between subjects, discourses and practices, thus sidestepping engagements with questions around the mutability of neo-liberal projects as dominant political-ideological narratives which constantly have to reorganise themselves to meet on-going encounters, engagements and contingencies. It is therefore crucial to highlight the active working of agents, relations and discourses in particular spaces and at particular times (Larner, Le Heron, and Lewis 2007; Ong 2006) as sites of resistance. The mutations, deviations and innovations that characterise the formation of neo-liberal projects reminds us to 'explore the complexity of interacting forces rather than assuming that governmental practice in a plurality of sites flows uniformly from the big transformations produced by neoliberalism' (Newman: 2007: 54). For example, how is the whole (the abstraction we might provisionally term neo-liberalism)

mediated and assembled through the part (the site of the local, for example) (Peck 2004)?

The construction of local 'secondary school markets' (Lucey 2004: 86) is at once both national and local, for instance, in that it mediates government policy discourse, and thus a whole set of dominant political rationalities, market imperatives and ethical imaginaries, and at the same time tends to be negotiated in the context of the particularities and contingencies of the local.¹ Social policy thus involves innovation, experimentation and contestation rather than the rolling out of a stable or coherent programme of reform.

What is invoked through the government texts around education analysed so far is the discursive and political work of articulation, which involves taking existing discourses, practices and imaginaries and reworking them within a framing of neo-liberal conceptions of modernisation, progress and development (Clarke, Smith, and Vidler 2006). A crucial element in the ideological work of articulation noted in these texts is the notion of citizenship, which is now being redefined to accommodate more 'active' and 'responsible' notions of parenting in the realm of education.

¹ The connections and disconnections between the local and national are discussed briefly in chapter 2 and more fully in chapters 5 and 6. There, I highlight the complicated process of choosing a school as mediated by national policy, and therefore reflecting the expansion and scope of market trends in the realm of education, but which is also framed around local history, local culture and local need. The blueprint or outline of what a field of choice should look like, as set out by the government, demands that groups of secondary schools belonging to the same area or borough or 'family' of schools differentiate themselves to fit niches in order that a competitive educational market may be produced and, on that basis, parents may envisage themselves in the role of consumers. However, the forms of distinction that are deployed to differentiate between secondary schools are always subject to the perceived needs, demands and wants of local people. In this way the creation of a field of choice, which has its aim the desire to produce contexts in which parents can be addressed, located and activated as consumers operating in particular circuits of schooling, is constituted nationally through its assimilation of neo-liberal repertoires of competition and privatization and is mutable precisely because of its specific/local assemblage.

Constructing Citizenship: Reworking the Work/Practice of Citizens

In a submission to a Public Administration Select Committee report on the case for user choice in public services, the ministers wrote:

Better-informed customers are more satisfied, and poorly informed ones are dissatisfied. This is where choice becomes an important incentive for users, for it is only when customers have a choice that they have reason to become informed. Without choice, why would they bother? They will get what someone else has decided they will be given, or determined that they will 'need'. Without any choice, they are far more like the passive recipient than the active citizen so often idealised by opponents of choice. Whilst some have suggested that becoming better informed about the range and quality of services available is a 'research cost', it is one that most people could consider a legitimate investment for effective citizenship. (Ministers of State 2004: Paragraph 3.4.3)

Implicit in this document is an argument for choice as an 'incentive' for activating and empowering users of welfare services as 'active citizen[s]'. It marks choice as a 'legitimate investment for effective citizenship' in the realm of welfare and thus represents citizenship both as a status and as a form of rights to information and advice in becoming better 'informed'. Here, effective denotes a form of responsabilized, moralized agency, with a view to transforming users of welfare services from so-called passive recipients to self-regulating, discriminating agents. Parents, for instance, are charged with the responsibility of choosing a secondary

school for their child on the basis of forms of reasonable action and a process of continuing assessment and calculation. What is being developed here is the substitution of a view of parents as trusting and accepting of the welfare afforded them with a far more 'active' and autonomous notion of agency. As a result, the work/practice that has come to define the role of the citizen differs significantly from the status of citizenship conferred upon British people after the Second World War.

The post-Second World War period brought with it a new relation between state and citizen in which rights rather than charity provided the conduit to services. The relation established between state and citizen during this time had the effect of constructing men and women with new subjectivities, identities and practices of belonging (Lewis 2004a). These rights can now be understood to bear the mark of consumerism in that they are configured around a view of citizens as carriers of consumers rights (Pollitt 1994). The dismantling of these former political settlements and their institutionalization opened up a new relation between state and citizen in which the welfare rights of citizens in Britain (and beyond) have become increasingly conditional on individuals inhabiting and enacting a certain idealised model of citizenship: active citizenship. This particular model of citizenship is discernible through the *The Citizen's Charter* (1991) where there is in evidence a dynamic change to the balance between rights and obligations and responsibilities. Here the fulfilment of obligations tends to be defined as a condition for receiving particular rewards, with the intention of inducing the active enlistment of individuals into becoming responsible agents (Dwyer 1998) and tightening the entitlement and the behaviour and moral outlook of the recipients of welfare services (Deacon 1994). Representations of models of active citizenship are complicated and varied, however.

Johansson and Hvinden (2005) delineate three ideal-type understandings of active citizenship – socio-liberal, libertarian and republican. Each one offers a particular dynamic to the balance between rights and obligations and responsibilities. This tripartite model of citizenship is helpful for viewing citizenship differently and for understanding the active-passive dynamic inscribed in through each one. According to Johansson and Hvinden, the principle of socio-liberal citizenship is that ‘citizens should enjoy a minimum level of rights (economic security, care, protection against various risks and so on) and normative obligations vis-à-vis the community’ (2005: 106); a liberal or neo-liberal understanding of citizenship articulates a view of citizens as consumers who demand goods that require public provision and thus limits concepts of the citizen to individuals who exercise choice between a given set of providers; and republican citizens are viewed as people who identify with the community to which they belong and seek to promote its common good by actively participating in decisions that influence it. Such typologies are helpful in pointing to different inflections of active citizenship, and the politics that underpin them.

However, these typologies of citizenship should not be taken as realities – stable and determinate. Instead, it is helpful to explore how different models of active citizenship are deployed in policy discourse, thereby pointing to the indeterminacy of these models of active citizenship. In chapter 7 I examine the way in which apparently different models of active citizenship were combined/aligned – however unevenly – through New Labour policy discourse, and how different conceptions of being/becoming ‘active’ are negotiated by mothers as they engage with what it means, or should mean, to act ‘responsibly’ and ‘reasonably’ when formulating their school choice. Such an approach enables me to move beyond a static model of active

citizenship and take account of the way in which some mothers articulate messy and complicated expressions of active citizenship. A primary focus of chapter 7, then, will be to demonstrate how models of active citizenship are sometimes performed jointly and to illustrate the range of rationalities, valuations and concerns framing some mothers' conceptions of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting, thus unsettling the active-passive distinction implicit to constructions of the active citizen in neo-liberal governance.

The implementation of policies of choice and personalised learning in government texts around education can thus be viewed as devices for reworking understandings of agency – what it means, or should mean, to be an 'active' parent, for example – within a neo-liberal framing of citizenship. These devices also work to reframe the relationship between users and services into a contractual one between consumers and providers, and thus generate an impersonal set of guidelines and rules around how welfare recipients can be expected to engage with services as active citizens. Citizenship cannot thus be viewed as absolute but rather as something which is constituted in a transition or relation – between citizen and state, citizen and citizen, citizen and consumer (Lewis 2004b).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have been studying choice as discourse and outlined the forms of parent/citizen summoned through it, namely the 'sovereign' figure of the consumer or citizen-consumer. Identifying the political and policy context in which choice emerged is important for showing the origins of some of the positions and practices

produced through dominant governmental discourses around choice. The meanings and practices of choice are understood as a composite of performances, and as combinations of behaviours that are implicated in the designation, arrangement and privileging of a particular form of agency that fits with the political rationality of projects of neo-liberalisation, with its emphasis on the superiority of markets and the non-interventionist state (Harvey 2005). Both choice and personalised learning, as predominant trends in education policy, are examined for the way they assign rights and responsibilities to parents (and children) as consumers or ‘co-producers’ (Leadbeater 2006: 3) of education services. As elements in the construction of neo-liberal formulations of citizenship, these policies evoke a contractual relationship through which parents and schools are located in the intersection and exchange of consumers and producers. In this way policies of parental choice and personalised learning connect with and foreground a neo-liberal understanding of citizenship (Johansson and Hvinden 2005), one that assigns agency and responsibility to parents as self-regulating, autonomous agents. Choice and the creation of ‘informed consumers’ tend to be indexed as an ‘investment for effective citizenship’ (Ministers of State 2004: Paragraph 3.4.3).

Many researchers (Crozier 1997; Hughes, Wikeley, and Nash 1994; McClelland *et al.* 1995; Reay 1996a) comment on the extent to which parents reject any construction of themselves as consumers, and as a result consumer agency may be inadequate for describing the motivations and aspirations shaping parents’ school choices. In turn, this study seeks to unravel some of the ways in which representations of active and responsible parenting are negotiated, resisted and reworked as mothers tussle with what it means to act ‘responsibly’ and ‘reasonably’

in the realm of education. The next chapter therefore presents data on mediating practices through an analysis of government and non-government websites set up to assist parents in the choice process. It explores how discourses and representations around parenting in education tend to be mediated and assembled through particular websites and negotiated and resisted through others.

Chapter 2

Constituting the Field of Choice:

Mediations and Negotiations of Frameworks of Choosing

The previous chapter demonstrated how the concept of choice has been implemented and developed through education policy rhetoric and practice. In particular, it pointed to some of the positions and practices offered through the dominant discourse of choice, especially the 'sovereign' figure of the consumer. Choice makes visible the unmistakable shift in terminology in British government policy rhetoric, namely the move away from welfarist or state-centred institutions and a move towards a preference for a minimalist state. In conjunction with this general shift towards the promotion of a political and policy agenda favouring the unfettered operation of markets (Clarke and Newman 2006), there has been a distinctive break from Keynesian conceptions of the social democratic welfare state. The use of private companies and sponsorship for the delivery of public services (Ball 2008), for instance, mark attempts by the government to dissolve the boundaries between public and private and extend the reach of the market in the organisation of welfare state institutions. Such monumental ruptures in public sector organisation, in particular education, are characterised by a focus on customer satisfaction as a stipulation for improving public services (Pollitt 2004). Moreover, these changes in policy rhetoric signal a shift towards the production of a new set of practices in education, namely

practices that summon parents to take on the role as consumers of education services, as self-governing, autonomous and discriminating subjects.

In order to address the main research question framing this study, 'how do some mothers engage with the meanings and practices made available through dominant policy discourses around choice', it is important, first, to show how these positions and practices are mediated and assembled. That is to say, how do certain frameworks of choosing come to be legitimated as dominant and what kinds of behavioural obligations do they presuppose or construct. What types of behaviour are marginalized as unspeakable or counterproductive in these discourses? To what extent can it be claimed that choice is mediated by a set of impersonal rules and commands, making choice less an act of spontaneity and autonomy and more of a re-enactment of and adjustment to social norms? In this chapter I explore various government and non-government websites to consider the different ways in which parents are invited to experience themselves as subjects when activated in a field of choice. These websites are analyzed for the way they articulate and assemble meanings and practices of choice and to show how choice is mobilised through a set of injunctions around 'reasonable' and 'responsible' behaviour which parents are incited to carry out when choosing a secondary school for their child.²

² The websites included in my analysis were chosen because of their popularity and the fact that some are cited by the government through the Department for Children, Schools and Parents (DCSF) as good sources of information and advice on choice and in the preparation and handling of school appeals. In particular, these websites were selected for the way they set themselves up as 'experts' in the field of choice. These include Directgov and Choice Advisors, which are government-run websites, and Parents Online and Schools Appeals Services, which are non-government websites. The website Mumsnet was chosen specifically for the way it inverts this power relationship through assigning agency to mothers as 'experts'. An important aspect of Mumsnet is the way in which it incites mothers to share and discuss ideas relating to parenting and thus challenges, and even displaces, the idea that parents should be addressed as potential subjects who need to be told what it means, or should mean, to be a 'good' and 'responsible' parent.

Towards the end of the chapter I demonstrate how the rationalities underpinning these constructions of behaviour tend to be subject to contrary pushes and pulls that are bound to competing ethical orders and struggles that are emotionally-driven. Here, I explicate some of the moral and ethical dilemmas opened up by the dominant discourse of choice; in particular, how the dilemmatic character of choice tends, in some instances, to produce a compassionate, thoughtful and reasonable self. Emotion is also analysed for the way it acts as a powerful discursive resource and as a strategy for coping with difficulty in these circumstances; in particular, as something which feeds in to and is a product of the field of choice as a site of uncertainty and anxiety. This is important for later discussions around research methods and methodology in chapter 4.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Each section draws on a particular website to explore the different ways in which parents are called upon to adjust their behaviour on the basis of certain rationalities, strategies and techniques, and how these tend to be shaped by certain injunctions around behaviour and orientation. The first section draws on the government website Directgov to explain the process of choosing and the strategies and rationalities framing that process. Here, I explore the myriad ways in which parents are addressed as 'willing' and 'active' subjects with choice. The second section uses the website Parents Online in order to show how parents are addressed and constituted differently as responsabilized subjects in the realm of education. It explores how certain positions and relations come to be marked as signifying responsabilized modes of behaviour and preferred models of active citizenship more generally. In the third section I elaborate on the different ways in which parents are addressed as potentially anxious and distressed subjects. Here, I

focus on comments made by Christopher Woodhead, ex-chief inspector of schools, and the Schools Appeals Service to make visible the ways in which emotion tends to be undervalued and marginalized in these contexts as unspeakable and not congruent with the projection of a confident, deserving, assertive and active subject. The final section analyses the website Mumsnet to make visible the mutability and contestability of meanings and practices of responsible, active parenting. The aim here is to demonstrate how choice is emotionally-driven and inflected through ethical orders, concerns and valuations.

The Process of Choosing

While it is unclear exactly when parents begin thinking about a secondary school for their child, there is an explicit, formal process of choosing that parents are required to enter into as part of their responsibility and obligation as choosers. The process of choosing refers to the official time period in which parents are enlisted to fill in secondary school transfer forms, attend school open days, compare school information, and, where necessary, lodge appeals against the outcome of their application. In a very formal sense, it is a process structured according to a temporal logic marked by a set of phrases, deadlines and closing dates.

- September 2008: Secondary School booklets available
- September/October 2008: parents visit secondary schools on open days arranged by individual schools
- Late October 2008: deadline for secondary transfer form to be returned to the admissions team
- Early March 2009: write to all applicants informing them of the outcome of their applications to schools within the co-ordinated scheme

- Mid March 2009: deadline for accepting/declining school offers
- Late March 2009: closing date for submitting appeals
- Late June/early July 2009: appeal hearings
- September 2009: children start secondary school

In this way the process of choosing is assembled through the arrangement of particular deadlines. It is anticipated that parents will read the secondary school booklets made available to them at the beginning of the school year and, on the basis of that information, have a secondary school transfer form prepared and ready for submission the following month. On the other hand, parents are encouraged to begin 'preparation and planning' well in advance of these deadlines in order that they might make 'a well informed choice'.³ The process of choosing outlined above thus represents only a formal, abstract model of choice, one that is structured through a temporality. It is also important to note the lack of emphasis around the child in this process. This will serve as an important reminder later on in chapters 5, 6 and 7 where the centrality of the roles of the parent and child are discussed more fully.

At that critical juncture when parents are activated in a field of choice as consumers of education services, it is assumed that parents need to be 'informed consumers' of those services (DCSF 2008a: 6). We might therefore want to ask: What kinds of information and advice on school choice are offered to parents? How does it work to shape and support positions and practices thought to be desirable, legitimate or productive in these contexts? To be more precise, how is the parent invited to behave when activated as a chooser in the field of choice?

³

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ChoosingASchool/index.htm>
 Access date: 28.01.2009

Creating Active Citizens: Information and Advice on Choice

Directgov

Public services all in one place

The largest UK website offering information and advice across government departments – from housing and employment to travel and education – is Directgov. According to website traffic figures for the months September to November 2008, Directgov received on average 7 million hits and regular visits from 5.3 million ‘unique’ (regular) users in each of those months. Parents with children entering or who are already attending schools in the public sector, namely schools funded and controlled by the state, can access information on educational matters through the education and learning section of the Directgov website. One of the central claims of the New Labour government led by Tony Blair was that achievement and attainment tables, inspection reports, admission arrangements, school profile information and transport information constitute ‘the key information that parents need to know [when choosing a secondary school for their child] (DfES 2005: 3.8). ‘Armed with information about the schools in their area’, the government insisted, ‘many parents can navigate the system successfully’ (DfES 2005: 3.11). The education and learning section on Directgov plays a crucial role both in disseminating this information to interested parents and, concurrently, naturalising certain frameworks of choosing as legitimate and desirable.

An important part of choosing a secondary school involves being able to distinguish between and compare different types of provision. The education and learning section, for example, offers detailed information on how parents can differentiate between state schools as well as some independent schools. It highlights

four main types of 'mainstream' schooling in the public sector: community, voluntary-aided, foundation and Trust, and voluntary-controlled schools.⁴ These schools are in the main differentiated according to the relationship they share with 'outside' authorities, namely businesses, voluntary groups, sponsors, and the local authority itself. This relationship determines in part how the school is organized internally with regard to its admissions criteria and funding arrangements. For example, Directgov tends to bracket community schools as those that are directly funded and controlled by the local authority and who 'look to develop links with the local community, sometimes offering use of their facilities and providing services such as childcare and adult learning classes'. Community schools are characterized as a service that extends opportunities to adults and the community at large as well as children. In contrast, voluntary-aided schools, although funded in part by the local authority, tend to have their buildings and land 'normally owned by a charitable foundation, often a religious organisation'.⁵ In this way schools tend to be differentiated primarily on the basis of their relationship to multiple outside authorities. Outside authorities therefore play a fundamental role in constructing difference between schools and thus are implicated in the discursive and material constitution of a field of choice, making them one of the conditions of possibility for imagining and managing diversity in the school system.⁶

4

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ChoosingASchool/DG_4016312

5

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ChoosingASchool/DG_4016312

⁶ Here I am using the term 'diversity' in the same way it was deployed by New Labour (DfES 2004), where it was articulated to describe the division and increasing specialisation of schools. It refers to the practice and provision of funding, the expansion of types of provision, the personalisation of the curriculum and creation of specialisms in schools, and the practice of enlisting the help of outside sponsors to influence the leadership ethos of schools (DfES 2001). That is to say, it refers to diversity *between* schools in terms of specialisation ('school diversity') rather than diversity *in* schools, which connects more broadly with the promotion of

On the other hand, mainstream schools in the public sector are also differentiated on the basis of their 'particular characteristics'. For example, 'City Technology Colleges' are identified as 'geared towards science, technology and the world of work'; 'Community and foundation special schools' as schools that 'cater for children with specific special educational needs'; and 'Faith schools' whose particularity is 'reflected in their religious education curriculum, admissions criteria and staffing policies'.⁷ This information is assumed to have an empowering and enabling effect, namely to allow 'parents to exercise choice and to become informed consumers of available services to support them and their children' (DCSF 2008a: 6). We can assume, then, that this information is merely describing what is already out there – a field of choice structured through diverse forms of provision. But what if the information is doing more than this? Discursive analysis, for instance, reminds us that discourses are in part about the mobilization of truth-claims and the strengthening of legitimacy of particular meanings and practices; and involve the constitution, rather than the reflection, of social reality (Fischer 2003; Marston 2004). Arguably, the information and advice presented through Directgov is part of, rather than distinct from, the ideological-political negotiations around which a field of choice is discursively and materially formed. It is in part constitutive of it. That is to say, such information can not be taken as independent of the 'reality' it claims to describe since it is powerfully implicated in its production; an idea I expand on in the next section.

inclusion, equality of opportunity and non-discriminatory practices. Such practices are discernible through the implementation of citizenship education programmes in schools, which promote the celebration of cultural difference (DIES 2007). As Newman observes, the 'diversity' denoted by these texts 'is rather individuating – one requiring services to be tailored to individual wants – that is constructed as an opposition to its social democratic associations of with equality and justice, claims that require services to be evaluated in terms of their contribution towards a more just and fair society' (2007: 61).

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http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ChoosingASchool/DG_4016312

Rather, it emerges as one of the conditions of possibility through which parents can imagine themselves as consumers in a field of choice. The field of choice needs to be built up descriptively in order for it to be sustained as a material and discursive reality.

Directgov is a UK government website and therefore the bulk of its information on public services tends to be far removed the contingencies and particularities of locality. There is, for example, disjuncture in the way information on school distinction is presented at the national and local level. Following the Childcare Act 2006, local authorities have a duty and obligation to ensure ‘that all parents have access to high quality, accurate and timely information’ (DCSF 2008a: 1.8) about the services in their area. The Camden Local Authority booklet on schools, ‘Secondary Schools in Camden’ (SSC 2007), for example, offers information to parents on the types of school provision available in the local area.⁸ It identifies five out the nine secondary schools in the area as having ‘community’ status – schools funded and controlled by the local authority. However, some of these schools hold additional status as a ‘specialist arts college’, ‘business and enterprise college’ and ‘technology college’. Another example includes a voluntary-aided school in Camden which identifies itself as a ‘Catholic Secondary School’ with ‘specialist science status’ (SSC 2007). The way in which these ‘particular characteristics’ overlap and intersect with each other is perplexing, messy and unclear. It suggests that some of the strategies and guidelines around choosing, such as those set out by Directgov at the national

⁸ The Borough of Camden in North-West London is discussed at length in chapter 4 on methodology, where I elaborate on my reasons for choosing Camden as the site for my field research.

level, do not translate directly and uniformly to particular institutions and localities.

We might therefore ask: Why do schools tend to be rendered 'particular' in this way?

Government attempts to delineate schools in this way, as institutions with 'particular characteristics', can be linked to the promotion of choice and personalised learning in education policy and practice and the valorisation of consumerism more generally. It is assumed that personalised learning in education facilitates greater parental choice while simultaneously working to ensure more flexible and responsive types of service delivery (Hargreaves 2004). Viewed in another way, the idea of personalised learning serves as a mechanism for assigning responsibility to parents as discriminating choosers of public services. It serves as a conduit through which new powers and responsibilities are transferred to parents as subjects with choice. It is stated on Directgov, for example, 'Before you apply to a school think about your child's personality and their needs'.⁹ The assembling of schools in this way – as tidy and stable representations of 'technology and business colleges', 'faith schools', 'community and foundational schools', and so on – serves to open up that discursive space in which difference can be imagined and managed. But also, more powerfully, it produces contexts, relations and practices in which parents can imagine themselves in the role of consumers of education services. It is problematic, however, to assume that all parents share the equal capacity and willingness to inhabit and enact the positions and practices made available through these discourses. In some instances, parents may be unable to take on the consumer role, perhaps leaving them at a disadvantage.

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http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ChoosingASchool/DG_4016364

Access date: 28.01.2009

Choice Advisors: Empowering Engagement through Assistance?



In addition to offering parents information on the different types of schooling made available in the public sector, local authorities also have a duty to ‘provide advice and assistance to parents when expressing a preference of school for their child’ and, in particular, ‘targeting those parents most likely to need extra help navigating the admissions system’ (DCSF 2008a: 28). Through the Education and Inspections Bill 2006 the government implemented a plan to offer ‘choice advisors for those parents needing most help’ (DfES 2005: 3.1). The idea here, then, is that parents who are either unable or unwilling to perform the role of the discriminating consumer can do so through the support of a choice advisor. One particular government text, ‘Choice Advice: Guidance for Local Authorities’ (DCSF 2006), gives specific detailed information on how local authorities can be expected to support and facilitate a choice advisory support network for local families. It identifies families who ‘find the system difficult to understand and therefore difficult to operate in the best interests of the child’, or who are simply ‘unable or unwilling to engage with the process’ (DCSF 2006: 2), as potential recipients of the service. It is assumed that these families are typically located ‘in the most deprived communities’ and the ‘most deprived areas’ (DCSF 2006: 2-4). In this way families from ‘poorer’ backgrounds or who are located in the most ‘deprived’ areas are characterised as people who are lacking either the ability or willingness to engage with the process of choosing. The resulting image is one of parents being hailed into adopting a particular relation to education services as ‘willing’ and responsive users. Hence,

there is a cultural imperative attached to appropriating the positions and practices made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice, which tends to be elided with representations of an active subject, someone who is basically engaged, willing and deserving as against someone who is potentially 'unwilling' and therefore undeserving.

It is asserted in the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) report on the case for user choice in public services that while 'becoming better informed about the range and quality of services available is a 'research cost', it is one that most people could consider a legitimate investment for *effective citizenship*' (Ministers of State 2004: Paragraph 3.4.3; emphasis added). The need to produce welfare service users who are 'better informed' is therefore part and parcel of the creation of models of 'effective citizenship'. The process of choosing outlined above can thus be read as elements of a framework of governmental strategies and rationalities geared towards constructing new forms of engagement between service users and service providers. In this view, parents who are 'unwilling' to engage with the process of choosing are invariably positioned as operating outside, and even against, models of effective citizenship. Arguably, then, choice advisors perform the task of supporting 'unable or unwilling' parents in performing the role of the consumer. According to the government, for example, the role of the choice advisor involves being able to 'interpret the data and information independently and in a way that meets a family's needs' (DCSF 2006: 9). The idea that choice advisors should 'interpret' the data is a curious one, however. It assumes, on the one hand, that parents read school data and information in the same way – as logical, clinical subjects. On the other hand, the idea that data should be read 'independently' is also problematic. What are choice

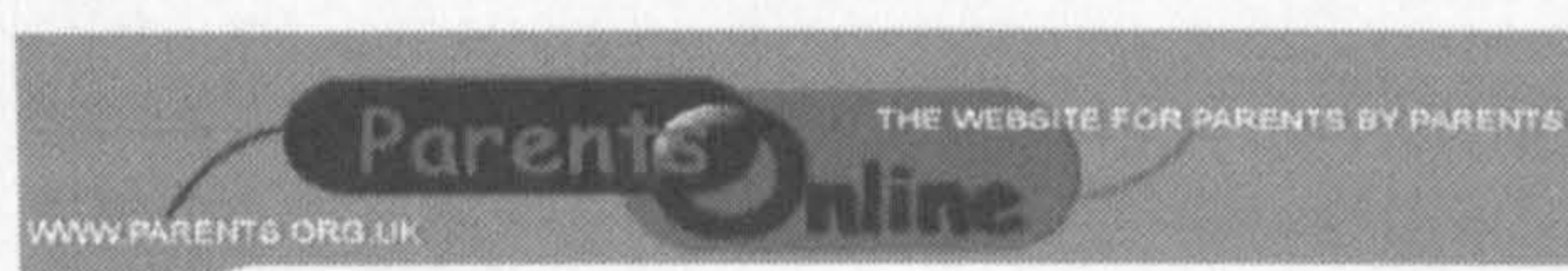
advisors independent from? Is it possible to assess a family's needs 'independently'?

The government does recognise, however, that 'In developing this policy parents have expressed some concerns about ensuring the advice they receive will be independent; i.e. in the best interests of the child' (DCSF 2006: 13).

The real dilemma for choice advisors, as Fiona Millar, journalist for the *Guardian*, views it, is being able to 'support aspiration without raising unrealistic expectations that can't be fulfilled'. She questions whether 'choice advisers [will] be working with estate agents or council housing officers to help lower-income families compete with the tactics used by the better off' (2006). This raises an important point, namely that choice advisors can perform only a limited role in securing any real choice for some parents. That is to say, the kinds of tactics supposedly enacted by some parents, such as submitting fraudulent school applications, a practice which has grown enormously in the last three years (Shepard 2008), is perhaps unlikely to be encouraged by employees working on behalf of the government. Paradoxically, then, it is those parents who are least advantaged by the system of choice, parents who 'find the system difficult to understand' and who are 'unable' to engage with process of choosing (DCSF 2006: 2), who, even with the assistance of a choice advisor, will continue to be penalized for not competing for school places. Only recently David Cameron, leader of the Conservative party, championed the way 'middle-class' parents 'play the system' in order to get ahead. He likened their behaviour to those of 'active citizens' (cited in Webster and Elliot 2008). This raises the possibility of a potential ethical injunction around behaviour, however.

The ethical strand of choice is therefore a powerful one, despite its complete absence in government texts around education and the Directgov website more generally. I will return to this point later in the chapter. For now, I will continue exploring the different ways in which parents are invited to adjust their behaviour on the basis on certain strategies and rationalities; and explicate the different sets of injunctions around behaviour underpinning these constructions.

Parents Online: Scripting and Performing the Role of the Chooser



Launched in 1999, the website Parents Online was set up as a ‘community site’ to give parents the opportunity to share and discuss their experiences of parenting.¹⁰ It is cited on the education and learning section of Directgov as a useful link and has received the maximum 5 star rating for educational usefulness by the organisation Schoolzone – the largest teacher research community in the UK, currently standing as the UK’s most visited educational website. Primarily aimed at parents with young children, Parents Online offers comments and suggestions on topics ranging from education and leisure to health and nutrition. Here I want to focus attention on the different kinds of information and advice offered through the education section on ‘choosing a school’.

It is worth taking some time to highlight why I have chosen to look at a website that addresses, in the main, parents with young children. At the beginning of this

¹⁰ <http://www.parents.org.uk/index.html?parents-welcome.html&2>
Access date: 28.01.2009

chapter I noted how difficult it is to determine when parents begin thinking about a secondary school for their child. The interesting thing to outline here is that Parents Online offers strategies and guidelines to help parents choose a primary school. Moreover, these are strategies that carry a narrow rational, calculating and clinical orientation to choice. This suggests that parents are activated and activate themselves as consumers at different times during the child's life. Unlike Directgov, which addresses primarily parents with children in mainstream, state-controlled schools, Parents Online draw comparisons between types of schooling made available in the public and private sector and highlights their differences in terms of costs, quality, uniform and social interaction:

For some people, part of the point of sending children to an independent school is to provide an environment where they stand the best chance of meeting certain kinds of people – whether this looks like imposing a limitation or providing an enhancement rather depends on one's point of view. Others may welcome the opportunity some state (and, of course, some independent) schools give children to meet the widest possible range of people.¹¹

In this way we might speculate on the kind of parent who is likely to find this advice useful. Certainly it is the figure of the opportunist that emerges quite powerfully in this extract. State schools, for example, are identified as providing opportunities for enhancing social mix while independent schools are singled out as environments in which the possibility of social mix and social mixing tends to be closed down.

However, it is through the collapse of social mix that children are more likely to meet

¹¹ <http://www.parents.org.uk/index.html?parents-welcome.html&2>

individuals like themselves. The extract above demonstrates the extent to which parents are implicated in powerful processes of social inclusion and social exclusion and how the policy of parental choice plays a crucial role in putting into practice voluntary forms of self-segregation and exclusion of others.

Parents Online also conveys the idea that choice is a performance that requires lots of scripting, preparation, planning and subtle improvisation from all participants. There are strategies and guidelines on how to approach teachers and headteachers during a school visit, for example. Parents are encouraged to ask questions relating to 'resources', 'physical education', 'religious education' (if required), 'literacy and numeracy', 'parental involvement', 'behaviour and discipline', 'staffing and class sizes' and even 'questions to ask children'. In addition, parents are instructed to exercise good time-keeping by being punctual upon arrival at the school and to never arrive late, wander around the school unaccompanied or miss an appointment. In this framing, school visits are constituted as performative and behavioural sites for enacting the role of the consumer. They serve as commonsense vehicles for flagging performances of the active, responsabilized and 'informed' parent; as calculated attempts to foreground representations of the autonomous, assertive, discriminating and deserving parent. As part of school visits parents are also advised on how to identify 'signs of a happy school with high morale' as well as the 'bad signs'¹² and are thus encouraged to uncover some 'truth' about a school that is assumed to be concealed from them or simply not made apparent. Such performances can also be traced in the school appeal process, wherein parents have the opportunity to appeal against the decision of the outcome of the school application.

¹² <http://www.parents.org.uk/index.html?parents-welcome.html&2>

The Conditionality of the School Appeal Process: Stick to the Facts!

School Appeals Services

In the event that any parent is not offered a place in one or more of their preferred schools by the local authority or governing body of a school, the rules set out in the Schools Admission Code and the Schools Admission Appeals Code (DCSF 2008b) enable parents to challenge such a decision. Parents are invited to present their case to an independent panel consisting of 'three to five voluntary members of the public' (DCSF 2008b: 15), all of whom have the power to uphold or dismiss an appeal based upon the laws of evidence, the principles of natural justice and various statutory pieces of legislation (Rooney 2007).

Figures produced by the then Department for Education and Skills indicate that in 2002-3 9.6% of all admissions were appealed against, with 33.5% of 69,550 appeals being accepted, compared to 32.2% of 60,454 appeals (10% of admissions overall) in 1999-2000. The most recent figures published for 2004-5 show 62,750 appeals lodged or 9.3% of all admissions. The appeal process thus constitutes a significant part of the general framework of positions, relations and practices underpinning the process of choice. It opens up contexts in which the parent can be viewed as inhabiting and performing idealised models of the active citizen:

if you want to win your appeal, you must prepare for it. You must know the facts of the case, you must have thought about the points you want to make, and you must be aware of the arguments the other side will make. (Rooney 2007: vii)

This extract is taken from a book called *How to Win Your School Appeal: Getting your child into the school of your choice*. Its author, a governing body clerk and school governor, advises parents to ‘use this book to uncover the truth, ask the right questions’ (Rooney 2007: vii). Rooney’s (2007) claim that parents can ‘win’ school places through uncovering some ‘truth’ echoes the advice and information made available through Parents Online. Both the website Parents Online and Rooney (2007) emphasise this idea of the conditionality framing the process of choosing. In this way choice is not entered into freely, spontaneously or impulsively; instead, it is the function of a set of impersonal rules and guidelines around behaviour. It requires the parent to perform certain behavioural obligations and thus adjust their own behaviour around certain injunctions, commands and impositions of character. This feeds in to the parental obsession with choice, with knowing the unknowable; an idea I return later in this section.

It is crucial to note the use of vocabulary here: ‘uncover the truth’, ‘ask the right questions’ and ‘win a place’ (Rooney 2007: vii). Such vocabulary promotes the idea that school places can be won through adopting risk-avoidance strategies and rationalities held together through a principled focus on uncovering some ‘truth’. While it is frequently reported that in the majority of cases parents are denied their first choice of school (Cleland, Paton, and Helm 2008; Easton 2007; Frean 2008), these cases tend to be in the main exemplary of urban areas where many of the most sought-after schools are oversubscribed and as a result competition for places tends to be fierce. In 2008, for example, as many as 85% of parents in Warwickshire and 88% of parents in Wiltshire managed to secure places for their children at their first choice of school (Lipsett 2008).

The Schools Appeals Service, headed by its founder and senior partner Matt Richards¹³, offers its services as a school appeals consultancy. It boasts having a number of reputable and professional consultants, all with extensive experience in the preparation and handling of school admission appeals. On its website, Richards remarks how 'surprising' it is:

that very few parents seek professional help and guidance in the preparation of their appeal. I doubt very much whether you would conduct your own defence in a court of law, or not use a solicitor when buying a property, so why gamble with your child's education.

In the use of the phrase 'so why gamble with your child's education', Richards echoes the idea that school places can be won on the condition that the 'correct' steps are taken to mitigate any potential risk. Moreover, in catapulting themselves to the status of a school appeals consultancy, the employees of this service draw on their experience to position themselves as experts who can advise parents, in effect displacing the parent as the 'sovereign' figure in the process of choosing. This links up with Ball's argument that parenting is:

experienced in response to both policy and economic changes as 'risky' business...Risk, uncertainty and anxiety, in part produced by the market, also themselves market opportunities – spaces to be filled. Parenting itself is increasingly commercialised. (2004: 4)

¹³ <http://www.schoolappeals.com>
Access date: 28.01.2009

The juridification of the appeal process in this way works to heighten parental anxiety and uncertainty, which, as Ball (2004) acknowledges, become commercial opportunities for private companies to exploit. Parental anxiety and uncertainty, in part produced through the discourse of choice, become constituted as profit-making opportunities. Moreover, Richards' comment about gambling builds on the idea that choice is structured through a set of injunctions around 'reasonable' and 'responsible' behaviour. Hence, parenting in the context of choice is increasingly 'risky business' (Ball 2004: 4) – it involves enacting risk-avoidance strategies, asking the 'right' questions, uncovering the 'truth', 'sticking to the facts', and so on.

In the context of appeal hearings, Rooney (2007) suggests that parents resist adopting a legalistic approach to the proceedings for two reasons. First, the independent admissions appeal panel tends to recognise that parents are at a major disadvantage given many of them have no legal training and only an outline of what to expect. Second, it is assumed that parents will invariably be more 'emotionally involved in the proceedings' (2007: 60). Nonetheless, Rooney (2007) encourages parents to 'stick to the facts' and use logical arguments and sound evidence to strengthen their case and back up their claims. There is an expectation of professional or lawful conduct on the part of the parent; and therein lies the conditionality of the school appeal process. Parents are positioned as legal subjects with rights – the right to appeal against the decision of the local authority or governing body of a school, for example, which entitles them to a formal hearing. But these rights carry certain behavioural obligations. Rooney advises against parents using 'emotional attacks' on the allocated school (2007: 38), for instance, and instead guides parents on hedging

their bets around an appeal to a calculated, logical reasoning. In this way emotion is marginalized as unspeakable or counterproductive.

In a similar vein, Christopher Woodhead, ex-chief inspector of schools, advises parents to avoid using 'vague emotional arguments' in formulating an appeal (cited in Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008). The vocabulary of emotion is in effect devalued as inappropriate and nonprofitable speech. Here, then, emotion and logic are positioned as diametrically opposed, as speaking to different sets of identifications and positions. The latter tends to be privileged as congruent with the projection of an active, deserving and rational subject. For example, the suggestion by Woodhead that parents should abandon 'emotional arguments' in favour of adopting a clinical and instrumental approach, such as measuring the distance between their home and chosen school 'inch by inch' (Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008), is exemplary of the valorisation of this position. It is the attempt to do away with emotion as a framing for choice. Similarly, Rooney encourages parents to calibrate their behaviour on the basis of a clinical approach: 'Measuring the distance opens up all manner of issues. The two most common areas used successfully in appeals are how the distance was measured, and what was measured' (2007: 13).

Both Woodhead and Rooney tend to address parents as potentially anxious and distressed subjects. This captures the way in which parents are nominally positioned within the dominant discourse of choice – as emotional subjects. Furthermore, it highlights the extent to which the meaning and practice of choice is emotionally-charged. Emotion emerges as a powerful discursive resource in these framings. What is captured in these three interrelated, yet distinct, discourses is the figure of the

'neurotic citizen' (Isin 2004). Each one appears to address parents as potentially neurotic subjects whose actions will have an effect on that for which they are responsible – their child's education. Isin argues that the 'neurotic citizen is incited to make social and cultural investments to eliminate various dangers by calibrating its conduct on the basis on its anxieties and insecurities rather than rationalities' (2004: 223). Here, however, parents are called upon to displace emotion in favour of logical, rational instrumental responses. Isin (2004) is certainly right when he points to the way in which citizens as addressed as neurotic subjects. This study demonstrates, on the contrary, that even when parents are addressed as distressed and anxious subjects, they are simultaneously encouraged to act against, and even transcend, emotion itself.

Repertoires that register a discourse of emotion therefore tend to be marginalised by some so-called experts as counterproductive to the vocabularies and activities that spring out of the role of the consumer, that is, someone who is basically clinical and who adjusts their behaviour around forms of instrumental calculation. The next section draws on the website Mumsnet to show how a discourse of emotion, with its appeal to the compassionate and thoughtful self, produces an ethical strand in talk and a set of ethical dilemmas which some mothers engage with as part of their negotiation of school choice. The process whereby some parents go beyond the pale to put into practice cheating behaviour which allows them to gain an unfair advantage over other parents means that there is among all parents an obsession with choice and its ethical implications, both in terms of how it affects others' chances of gaining a place at a particular school and how such actions are implicated in the devaluing of the collectivist image of a public service ethos or a civic commitment to the idea of public welfarism. This leads to a consideration of what is meant by 'responsible' and

'reasonable' parenting and illustrates how some mothers engage with attempts to construct meaningful representations of 'good' and 'active' as part of the ethical dilemmas opened up by discourses of choice.

Mumsnet: Mothers Acting Responsibly?



Launched in January 2000 by a sports journalist and TV producer, the website Mumsnet was created as the basis for facilitating 'a much larger circle of parents sharing their know-how on the net.'¹⁴ The website now claims to receive one million visitors each month clocking up thirteen million monthly page impressions or hits, and attracts up to 20,000 posts every day on its discussion boards. It has generated an inordinate amount of positive press from both national and local newspapers, journalists, politicians and TV celebrities, with one comment in 2007 describing how 'They (parents) favoured the Mumsnet model of an independent online information and discussion forum separate from the government' (*Guardian*, Comment is Free, March 2007).¹⁵ This claim is important for two reasons. First, it displaces the idea that public policy dominates discourses around parenting. Mumsnet can be understood as a site that undermines, and even challenges, the supposed direct and/or determining relationship between public policy and personal lives. Second, Mumsnet opens up that space in which mothers enter into dialogic exchanges with others as creators and narrators of their own experiences of parenting; as the 'experts' on parenting. In this way Mumsnet can be analysed for the way it captures the active and

¹⁴ <http://www.mumsnet.com/aboutus.html>
Access date: 28.01.2009

¹⁵ <http://www.mumsnet.com/aboutus.html>

creative working of agents. However, it is important to trace the connections between Mumsnet and some of the dominant public policy discourses already discussed.

Mumsnet is 'separate from the government' insofar as it is independently financed. It is also to some extent a reaction to the formal language of representation in government policy around parenting. There is, however, a dialogic struggle generated within and between these discourses which produces critical moments of dissonance and distance as well as interaction and connection.

Mumsnet offers parents, particularly mothers, the opportunity to share and discuss their experiences of parenting through an online discussion forum. Here, I focus on two threads to make visible the way in which school choice is inflected through ethical concerns and valuations and how models of active, responsible parenting are reworked to suit these alternative vocabularies and positions. The first thread, entitled 'Choosing a secondary school'- advice needed!', shows an exchange between two mothers:

NiceCupofTea:

Need to think about choosing a Big School for DS, so we're off to all the local secondary open evenings. All have a good rep and not much difference between them results-wise. Still, feeling a bit daunted and not sure what I should be looking for/smart questions I should ask in order to make the right decision. Sooooo, any ideas or wise advice?

BellaLasagne:

Discipline - is there any, what's it like; Setting for key subjects - do they do it, and if so for what subjects?; Extra-curricular activities; What's the Head like?; Are the staff interested/motivated - what's staff turnover like?; Transport options to and from school; Exam results (if you're bothered); Where current friends go/will go; Gut feel - is it the right sort of school for your child, will they be

happy, thrive, make friends, have good opportunities, do well?

It's a difficult one - you just have to gather as much information as possible.

Local knowledge is very useful and a school's reputation will last for years.

NiceCupofTea:

Bella - great list, thanks. There's something about teachers that makes me feel about 5 years old, so the more questions I go armed with, the more confident I'll feel!¹⁶

This particular extract shows how some mothers feel anxious about making sure that they appropriate the 'correct' strategies and tactics in order to make the 'right' decision. NiceCupofTea (NCT) recognises the equivalence of some schools in terms of their reputation and achievement and attainment records. However, she is concerned with what else there is to know and put into practice as a framing for her choice. In this way she is as much motivated by what she does not know than by what she does know. This generates anxiety and unease, which is captured through the use of the adjective 'daunting'. This dialogue between NCT and BellaLasagne (BL) is important for showing the extent to which parental concerns with making the 'right' decision in relation to their child's education tends to border on the trivial and unknowable. Despite working up such a descriptive list of things to look out for, BL makes no claims to her list being in anyway definitive or exhaustive. 'It's a difficult

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<http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/secondary/217773-choosing-a-secondary-school-advice-needed>
Access date: 28.01.09

It is common practice for individuals to use pseudonyms to disguise their real names (identity) as a rule when participating in online discussion forums. This serves two important functions. First, it ensures privacy and anonymity. Second, the muting of social difference in this way can be understood to encourage more openness on the part of the speaker as it alleviates any fear around potential discrimination or exclusion. However, pseudonyms can also act as important reminders of class or racial difference, as commonsense vehicles for flagging social difference. The pseudonym 'NiceCupofTea', for example, is not a neutral description in that it evokes powerful images of 'Englishness', even middle-classness. We might therefore ask: who is the demotic voice on Mumsnet? Despite the apparently open and democratic impulse shaping the Mumsnet 'community', these voices are not disembodied and unmediated. Arguably, they are grounded in signifiers of class, race, religion, sexuality and so on.

one', she replies. This echoes Rooney's (2007) earlier claim that practices of 'uncovering the truth' and 'asking the right questions' (p. vii) are vital to the process of choosing. Although here Rooney (2007) is talking specifically about strategies for lodging a successful school appeal, it mediates a common set of parental anxieties around choice, namely knowing how to 'maximize' one's position.

Moreover, NCT's comment about 'the more questions I go armed with, the more confident I'll feel!', emphasises the idea that school visits are organised around a set of impersonal rules and guidelines which parents must follow; that implicated in the construction of this interaction is a set of injunctions around 'reasonable' and 'responsible' behaviour. NCT is anxious about how she might be perceived by teachers. Going 'armed', as she calls it, becomes a condition for mitigating any insecurity she may have about not appearing 'confident'. Here, confidence is ensured through obtaining the 'right' information and advice (you need the right information to perform the role of the parent who seeks the right information). This, of course, mediates government rhetoric around choice: 'Armed with information about schools in their area, many parents can navigate the system successfully' (DfES 2005: 3.11). In this way parenting itself is debated within and against public policy discourses. NCT's desire to project an image of the self as 'confident' links up with a desire to appear active, knowing, engaged, informed and, above all, deserving. It mediates a common desire to be taken seriously as a subject who is self-responsible and self-motivated.

In this framing, we can observe the strong intersections between the positions and practices valorised by some parents on Mumsnet and the positions and practices

bolstered and encouraged through government texts around education. This has consequences for thinking about parenting as something which is necessarily constructed and negotiated. It is framed around a set of abstract rules and guidelines and injunctions around behaviour. The following exchange, taken from a thread entitled 'Secondary school visits - what should I REALLY be asking about?', highlights two mothers discussing the activity or practice of school visits:

Tinker:

Thanks for all suggestions btw, I sound like I'm nit-picking!

Camellia:

You sound nervous (understandably)

Tinker:

I'm not really. It's the local school, good ofsted, walking distance. Just being a bit obsessive.

Camellia:

Being a good mum.

Tinker:

Ha ha. Trying to be.¹⁷

Obsession or the state of becoming obsessive over something can be understood as an illustration of anxiety and nervousness. It registers powerful meanings of preoccupation, fixation and compulsion. The dialogue between Camellia and Tinker captures some of the anxieties resulting from obsessing about school choice. In particular, it shows how easily the behaviour of the parent can be tipped in to obsessing about the more trivial. This obsessing, however, is produced in part by the discourse of choice as a field of anxiety and uncertainty. Nevertheless, such

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<http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/secondary/399567-secondary-school-visits-what-should-i-really-be-asking-about>

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obsessing tends to be conflated with signifiers of 'good' mothering. Camellia elides obsessing about school choice with constructions of the 'good mum', for instance. But this suggests that the representation and embodiment of the 'good mum' is both registered through an obsessing with choice and the forms of parent/citizen subject made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice, which has at its centre the 'informed consumer' (DCSF 2008a: 6). This highlights the way in which public policy and personal lives constitute each other and the extent to which what is taken to be personal – that is, expressive of individualized experiences, feelings and ways of behaving – is constructed relationally (Fink *et al.* 2004).

On the other hand, constructions of the 'good mum' emerge out of the active working of agents themselves. Another response to the discourse of consumerism inscribed in through the policy of parental choice can be traced in the next thread on Mumsnet, entitled 'Rented flat to get a place in a 2ndary in good catchment – would you tell on them?':

SecondhandRose:

A friend of mine is really cross as a friend of hers rented a flat in a good area to use it as an address to get her child into an excellent local 2ndary school. They paid £900 a month plus bills for the flat but didn't live there. Her child has now got a place in this school and mine (sic) friend is even more cross. To top it all her husband has a cash job, claims he earns £12K a year and then claims benefits when in reality he earns much more and is not entitled to the benefits. So the moral dilemma is shall I tell the school for my friend who doesn't feel she can tell the school but is so cross with her friend she feels someone should.

Magicfarawaytree:

This cheating behaviour is exactly the type of behaviour that keeps the [school] system as it is. What really needs to happen is for enough pressure to be put on

the govt to bring up the levels of all schools rather and creating the panic (yes I nearly succumbed to it) to make people concentrate on just getting their children into the school of their choice.

DominiConnor:

I wouldn't tell on the school bit. The system is crap, and I see it as my duty as a parent to reduce the impact of our witless education system on my kids. Why should a kid in a poor area get a worse education than one in a rich one? But this is a very different thing from stealing from the benefits system. I'd tell on that ...As a parent I see "manipulating the system" as my job. When a system is corrupt and harms children, it does not deserve respect or assistance.¹⁸

Cheating in order to gain a place at a preferred school raises an important issue, namely that some parents' school choices tend to be framed by complicated ethical quandaries. The temptation to submit a fraudulent school application, for example, is viewed differently by parents. The majority of mothers who participated in this thread were more inclined to view cheating behaviour as in the main a negative thing. However, other parents feel compelled to compete for school places, even if it means putting into practice manipulative and illegal tactics, and therefore viewed such behaviour as something unavoidable and even necessary (or compulsory). Even Magicfarawaytree, who resists and detests the impulse to cheat, recognises the inclination to and motivation for doing so to be very strong. It is legitimated by DominiConnor as a 'duty' and 'job', for instance. This echoes Cameron's earlier comment that 'middle-class' parents who 'play the system' are 'active citizens' (cited in Webster and Elliot 2008). Strategies of manipulation and deceit are in effect bolstered and encouraged as elements of 'active' parenting. Being or becoming 'active' is conflated with 'cheating'.

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<http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/secondary/205061-rented-flat-to-get-a-place-in-a-2ndary-in>
Access date: 28.01.09

The above extract demonstrates the extent to which constructions of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting in the context of school choice tend to be contingent, shifting and unstable. They are subject to, and negotiated through, different frameworks of ethical valuations, vocabularies and positions. DominiConnor, for example, justifies cheating as a legitimate response on the grounds that she views it as her 'duty as a parent' to manipulate the system. Cheating is conflated with parental 'duty' and responsibility. In contrast, Magicfarawaytree deplores the way in which a choice-based school system creates 'the panic' that lends itself to legitimating such behaviour. Hence, choice can not be contained through the lens of a singular consumerist discourse, with its appeal to an economic rationality. Rather, choice is subject to contrary pushes and pulls resulting from ethical quandaries and moral dilemmas. This neatly captures the idea of the 'unmanageable consumer' articulated by Gabriel and Lang (1995) who use it to 'express this recalcitrance', a refusal on their part to allow 'the idea of the consumer to become domesticated and comfortable within parcelled discourses' (p. 4).

Mumsnet provides parents with resources for opening up dialogic exchanges with other parents and sharing ideas and advice around parenting. These dialogic exchanges are suffused with a vocabulary of uncertainty and self-doubt, revealing how representations and embodiments of 'good' and 'responsible' parenting are not lived and experienced as fixed, stable realities but instead are framings and discourses that are inhabited and performed as well as negotiated and reworked. In particular, the threads analysed in this chapter illustrate how some parents struggle to define what is meant by the terms 'good' and 'responsible', especially in the context of choice where certain unethical behaviours, namely cheating, are legitimated as

'active' constructions of agency. This reveals how the synergies and connections between the voices of these parents and the government rhetoric around choice remain largely unsettled and fragmented. It demonstrates, on the one hand, how the normalizing effects of public policy are effectively resisted, ignored or negotiated through the active working of agents, discourses and relations. On the other hand, it makes the visible the way in which subjects are incited to act according to a certain set of injunctions around 'reasonable' and 'responsible' behaviour, and how choice is structured around a framework of impersonal rules and guidelines.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how parents are addressed as subjects with choice and who have a duty and obligation as parents to exercise their choice 'reasonably' and 'responsibly'. I have also outlined the way in which parents tend to be positioned differently – as active and self-responsible, for example – on the basis of their inclination to 'engage with the process' (DCSF 2006: 2). In paying attention to the way certain positions and practices are assembled and mediated as culturally intelligible in the context of school choice, I have shown how various websites – government and non-governmental – provide systematic attempts to reference models of 'active' or 'responsible' parenting. These websites have been analyzed for the way they presuppose certain behavioural obligations which the parent is expected to carry out as part of their role as the discriminating, assertive, informed, active and, above all, deserving subject. As a result, the field of choice is constructed as a site of anxiety and uncertainty. It requires parents to calibrate or rework their behaviour to fit with certain rationalities based on instrumental calculation which necessarily undermine

the value of a discourse of emotion as a framing for choice. This generates an obsession with what is ultimately unknowable – how to reach a fully ‘maximum’ position and exercise choice in the most ‘responsible’ and ‘expedient’ way.

Towards the end of the chapter I indicated that choice generates an ethical framework through which parents are constituted as moralized subjects. Here, I have shown how some mothers engage with problems around what it means, or should mean, to be a ‘responsible’ and ‘active’ parent; and how parents fulfil certain obligations as compassionate, thoughtful, ethical subjects. This suggests that some parents may engage with the positions and practices offered through dominant governmental discourses around choice as exercises in ethical substantiation, that is, proof that their actions as mothers are ‘good’ and ‘responsible’ and based on a strict ethical code. These engagements with choice therefore emerge as counter-hegemonic undertakings – that is, attempts to displace what is normalised as ‘reasonable’ or ‘responsible’ behaviour within a calculating framework of choosing. The motives and responses of the mothers captured on Mumsnet, for instance, do not lend themselves to a singular axis or process of choosing based on calculation. They are inflected through ethical and moral concerns with how to judge what is responsible and reasonable behaviour.

In this way the positions and practices made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice can not be imposed through any top down, coherent programme or rule, as is sometimes implied by what Barnett *et al.* call ‘functionalist narratives of neo-liberalization’ (2008: 628). Instead, as Barnett *et al.* (2008) insist, it is important to be circumspect about the general applicability of grand

claims about the productive power of governmental rationalities and discourses to constitute subjects. Such a view goes against an idea pervasive in Foucault's explication of discourse in *Discipline and Punishment* (1979) in which he presumes the disciplinary apparatus of the state to operate through the totalizing production of individuals. This idea operates as a central tenet in the neo-Foucauldian literature on governmentality, which has at its centre the idea that sets of practices or political projects facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1994; Rose 1999). However, these theories of advanced liberalism do not presuppose that governmental rationalities automatically determine the subjects whom it addresses (Barnett *et al.* 2008), but rather the focus is on how political rationalities work to shape and facilitate the conduct of individuals (Larner 2000). Although Foucault appears to presuppose disciplinary power as determining docile bodies incapable of resistance (1979), Butler (1997) reminds that us that it is later in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) that Foucault begins to formulate resistance in relation to the disciplinary power of sexuality, thus undermining the apparent determining effects of discourse on the forming of the subject.

There is an uneasy fit between how some parents perceive themselves as subjects when activated in a field of choice and how parents are located as consumers in dominant policy discourses around choice. As a result, it is imperative, as Clarke (2004b) reminds us, to move beyond any view which presumes the link between positions, relations and discourses to be one structured through a direct and/or determining relationship. Parents do not act out the role of the consumer in the same way they are encouraged to do so through government rhetoric, as demonstrated through Mumsnet. To presume that any kind of determining relationship exists

between governmental rationalities and subject formations is to render straightforward and unproblematic the governability of subjects. Such a view runs the risk of oversimplifying or missing entirely those critical moments when positions and practices are contested, negotiated or refused, or are embodied differently through a range of rationalities and alternative vocabularies, valuations and commitments.

This chapter demonstrates how the meaning and practice of choice is characterised as a composite of performances, as combinations of behaviours that are implicated simultaneously in the designation, assembling and privileging of particular values, orientations and subject positions. However, there is also a battle over how such behaviours should be interpreted. In this chapter we have witnessed how parents struggle over the behavioural obligations presupposed by discourses of choice. In the next chapter I will begin to map out how these struggles of behaviour are interpreted by researchers and discuss some of the theoretical and conceptual tools underpinning their definitions of parental agency and choice in the realm of education.

Chapter 3

Researching Parental Choice:

Multiple Framings of Parental Agency and Choice

The previous two chapters explored the political and policy context that has shaped the emergence of narratives around choice in education, and pointed to the forms of active citizen/parental subject summoned through it. A central strand in dominant policy discourses around choice is a conception of parents as consumers of education services (DfES 2005) and bearers of consumer rights (DES 1991), with a view of encouraging parents to 'become informed consumers' of education services (DCSF 2008a: 6). As a consequence, parenting itself is increasingly experienced as 'risky business', according to Ball (2004: 4). Indeed, as demonstrated in chapter 2, many mothers experience and communicate to each other personal feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and self-doubt which they attribute to the activity or practice of choosing a secondary school. Parents are invited to negotiate and manage their choice through behaviour deemed to be 'rational' or self-interested, for example, and are thus encouraged to displace or override emotion as a basis for choosing (Woodhead in Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008; Rooney 2007). As a corollary, repertoires that register a discourse of emotion, such as insecurity and anxiety, tend to be ignored or marginalised in these framings as vague or counterproductive. A discourse of emotion is in effect set up in opposition to the projection of a more self-confident,

reasonable and deserving portrayal of the parent, that is, someone who is competitive, clinical and autonomous. This opens up questions around the role of neo-classical economics and public choice theory in the discourse of choice, which I discuss in this chapter.

Despite attempts by some so-called experts to decentre the utility of emotion as a framing for choice, it is evident from chapter 2 that some mothers draw on a discourse of emotion as a powerful discursive resource for rationalising their decisions over which school to send their child to and as a strategy for coping with difficulty opened up through the policy of parental choice. A discourse of emotion thus feeds in to and is at the same time a product of the field of choice. Consequently some mothers find themselves struggling to appropriate an ethical position in relation to choice, precisely because the dominant discourse of choice tends to undermine the sense of duty and obligation that emotion carries – the need to preserve an image of the self as compassionate and thoughtful, for example. Hence, at the very moment some parents engage with choice, these practices of engagement can, in some instances, quickly turn to struggles over choice and the positions and practices made available through it. For this reason it is interesting to examine how other researchers situate these struggles in their studies of choice and parental agency. This is a theoretical and a practical undertaking, but also a methodological one since it informs my own position in the next chapter, where I discuss issues around methodology.

These struggles can be understood to represent sites of resistance, counter-narratives and expressions of the active working of agents, discourses and relations. It is thus important to consider the way in which these expressions mutate to take on

different orders, motives and trajectories as researchers engage in systematic attempts to frame their importance in different historical and social struggles, and in turn offer different interpretations to the meanings and narratives supposedly contained by these instances of struggle in the realm of education. As I will show, these struggles can be explained using multiple approaches and different theoretical and conceptual tools. Each approach works across the field of choice, but also in part produces it. In other words, these approaches are not purely academic reflections but represent pragmatic, engaged attempts to (re)frame government and popular understandings of agency in the realm of welfare. Indeed, there are battles within the academic and political communities over what should be classified as dominant and what should be considered marginal in debates around parental agency (see Gorad 1999).

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines the pervasive role of neo-classical economics and public choice perspectives in the formation of policies around consumer choice and competition in the realm of education. The influence of public choice perspectives on policy making in Britain is demonstrated through key government texts, such as *The Parent's Charter* (DES 1991) and the *Citizen's Charter* (1991). Considerable attention is also given to exploring the centrality of the figure of the self-interested, self-maximizing subject developed through public choice perspectives of agency (Downs 1957, 1967; Dunleavy 1991; Niskanen 1973). The methodology framing what Bowe, Gewirtz, and Bowe call the 'factor/list approach' (1994: 71) in studies of parental choice is also critically analysed for the way it constructs a field of choice around a formal rational model of decision-making and thus lends itself to a view of parents as utility maximizing agents.

The second section highlights literatures that have been formulated in response to, and which are critical of, these particular approaches (for example, Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994; David *et al.* 1994, 1997; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1993, 1995; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998; West 1992, 1994). By foregrounding agency through a formal rational model, public choice perspectives tend to underestimate the constraint and structuring effects of material and discursive relations. The approaches dealt with in this section share in common a refusal to think through agency without the conceptual framework of structure. I show how these approaches mobilise constructions of gender, class and race as conceptual tools for thinking through the agency-structure dynamic. These approaches can thus be read as responses to other researchers, notably other social scientists interested in educational matters, who sometimes frame individual choice within a narrow rational, utilitarian conception of agency (i.e. Goldthorpe 1996, 1998). In other important ways, these approaches offer critical engagements with government claims over the supposed benign effects of choice as a mechanism for improving equity in the delivery of welfare services. At the same time, these critiques of government policy are simultaneously critiques of public choice methodologies: they represent a powerful refusal to adopt public choice perspectives as explanations for the dynamics of non-market choices in pseudo-market contexts.

Neo-Classical Economics, Public Choice Theory and the Factor/List Approach

The emergence of choice as a mechanism in the restructuring of welfare state institutions in Britain is understood to represent a shift towards the creation of

'empowered' users of welfare services – users who are discerning, discriminating and, above all, active and responsible – and a desire to dismantle 'producer paternalism' in the realm of welfare more generally (Clarke 2005a). Central to New Labour rhetoric was the idea that public services tended to be dominated by 'producer interests' rather than 'consumers' and were thus geared towards maximizing the supposed monopoly power of state bureaucrats and professionals as against the individual power of service users. Such a view of 'statist' models of public provision as inefficient, oppressive and monopolistic came to be shaped in part through the perspective of neo-classical economics and public choice theory. For example, John Major's decision to combine managerialism and consumerism as a mechanism for improving quality in the delivery of public services (as exemplified in *The Citizen's Charter* 1991) was configured around a conception of citizens as the bearers of consumer rights (Pollitt 1994). As Clarke observes, a critical feature of New Labour policy was its inheritance from the period of Conservatism of a view of 'the people versus the state, with the people requiring rescue from an over-bearing, intrusive and dominating public power' (2005a: 449).

The dismantling of producer paternalism seemed to demand more active and discriminating users of welfare services and the creation of an 'all-round quality consumption experience' (Finlayson 2003: 34). Consumerism, then, was offered as a conduit through which new powers and freedoms could be transferred to individual citizens as active choosers of welfare services. But such freedoms required that citizens acted responsibly, as it is stated in bold capital letters on the inside front cover of *The Parent's Charter* (DES 1991):

THIS IS YOUR CHARTER. IT WILL GIVE NEW RIGHTS TO YOU AS AN INDIVIDUAL PARENT, AND GIVE YOU PERSONALLY NEW RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHOICES.

Here new rights are promoted alongside new responsibilities, with the aim of subsuming individual choice and freedom within a framework of responsibility. The promotion of parental rights and responsibilities through this text coincided with a general assumption held by the Conservative government at the time, namely that providers of public services should no longer be regarded as best placed to define people's needs with their intractable bureaucracy and excessive interference (Allsop 1995; Le Grand 1997). Instead, the individual was characterised as best placed to make judgements about their consumption patterns (Appleby 1998; Baldock 1998).

This charter will help you to become a more effective partner in your child's education. (DES 1991: 1)

What is being promoted through this government text is a view of parents as consumers of education services; in particular, as rational, responsible users of those services. This view of citizens as consumers, as bearing consumer rights, is also captured through new right public choice theory where individuals tended to be characterised as 'maximizers'. According to Dunleavy, maximizers are defined as people 'who always seek the biggest possible benefits and the least costs in their decisions' and who are 'basically egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental in their behaviour, choosing how to act on the basis of the consequences for their personal welfare' (1991: 3). Public choice theory set out to legitimise competition and choice

as a necessary mechanism for imposing pressures on providers to improve their services by appealing to users as potential consumers. Moreover, it sought to use conceptual tools borrowed from economic theory to explain individual behaviour in a variety of political and institutional contexts, such as voting behaviour and the complex micro-level workings of bureaucracies (Downs 1957, 1967).

A key proposition of public choice theory was that competition is necessary for 'allocative efficiency' (Boyne 1996: 704), which concerns expanding and improving upon responsiveness to user preferences in the realm of welfare. A crucial assumption underpinning this proposition is that providers of public services sometimes act in ways that are selfish rather than other-oriented, making them self-interested 'knaves' rather than altruistic 'knights' (Le Grand 1997, 2007a). Hence, state-employed professionals cannot be trusted to provide the most efficient, flexible and responsive model of service delivery. The general view held by proponents of public choice theory was that, despite working in public and non-commercial organisations, state-employed professionals sometimes seek to maximize self-interest and thus make decisions akin to those of market choice. Niskanen's description of what bureaucrats want, for example, borrows heavily from the neo-classical assumption that the managers and owners of private organisations maximize profit and the size of the agency: 'Among the several variables that may enter the bureaucrat's motives are: salary, perquisites of the office, public reputation, power, patronage [and] output of the bureau' (1973: 22). In this view, bureaucrats are constructed as rational utility maximizers whose motives stem from a self-interested behaviour. As Downs notes: 'Every official acts at least partly in his own self-interest, and some officials are motivated solely by their own self-interest' (1967: 83).

Le Grand, a strong advocate of the choice-and-competition model in public services, echoes the public choice perspective of bureaucratic actions as being private choices made by individuals. Le Grand's (2007a) response to this problem, and one that is central to public choice theory, is the creation of structured incentives. Choice and competition in education, for example, is thought to produce the direct incentives for providers to improve their services and become more responsive and accountable to the users they supposedly serve. Through granting powers and freedoms to parents to exit their local school system, it is expected that schools in turn gain incentives to improve their services through competing with other schools for pupils and government funds (DfEE 2001). In this way, the emergence of the 'sovereign' figure of the consumer in British government policy discourses owes much of its salience to the critique of 'statist' models of public provision expressed through public choice theory (Dunleavy 1991; Finlayson 2003). It locates users and welfare services through the exchange and intersection of consumers and providers, with the intention of inducing accountability and responsibility on both sides.

Finlayson argues: 'The initial principle of public choice theory is quite straightforward: that economic theories of decision-making can be applied to non-market choices' (2003: 29). This is evident in the way public choice accounts prescribe economic models of explanation to the study of individual behaviours and rationalities. What is central to an economic explanation of behaviour is the dominant figure of the 'rational actor' (Dunleavy 1991: 3). The rational actor is understood to organise actions and decisions through optimizing preferences in a consistent and predictable fashion. Behaviour, then, is judged to be rational on the basis of it conforming to certain assumptions public choice perspectives presuppose: that

'people have sets of well-informed preferences which they can perceive, rank and compare easily' (Dunleavy 1991: 3). It is clear from the previous chapter that parents who enter the process of choosing a secondary school are incited to behave in particular ways. The discourse of choice, for example, is structured through a highly scripted and staged performance that sets out a vision of parents as rational utility maximizers. The 'best' or most 'realistic' choice for a parent to make is often conflated with the most rational and calculated of responses. This is evident in the way some government and non-government websites engage in systematic attempts to reference behaviour that registers a 'maximum' or calculated position.

The dominant discourse of choice thus mediates assumptions generated through public choice perspectives, but also assumptions stemming from rational choice (or rational action) perspectives. Indeed, both public choice and rational choice perspectives are mutually complementary in that they both operate with a view of the individual as a rational actor at their centre. Rational choice theory is premised on the assumption that actors have 'perfect knowledge' (Goldthorpe 1998: 170) and share the capacity to maximise the utility of their decisions in a rationally self-interested way. Such a view is strongly reflected in government strategies to create active citizens who are 'better informed consumers' of welfare services (DCFS 2008a: 6). The shift in government rhetoric from a view of service users as passive recipients to empowered choosers (Le Grand 1997) presupposes the equal capacity and desire of actors to behave in logical, calculating and self-interested ways and strive for a 'maximum' position. This is problematic in that some people may 'operate through intransitive preference orderings' not captured through these positions or may behave 'altruistically' (Dunleavy 1991: 249). More problematic is the 'standard of

rationality' (Goldthorpe 1998: 171) that is often presupposed by public choice and rational choice perspectives. While this 'standard of rationality' tends to be formally described in public choice accounts, it is not often explicitly acknowledged and as a result remains largely unspecified (Dunleavy 1991).

Public choice theory thus forecloses any critical engagement with the abstract conjectures through which different rationalisations might be grafted and patched together. It is problematic to assume, as some social scientists often do (Boudon 1974; Goldthorpe 1996, 1998; Hatcher 1998), that rationality or rational behaviour can be read in one way. Goldthorpe, for example, highlights the distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' rationality, where subjective rationality is thought to correlate with a person's beliefs and objective rationality to 'the standard rationality that utility theory would presuppose' (1998: 171). But what about decisions based on ethical reasoning and judgements stemming from other-oriented behaviour? Can we assert that these are 'non-rational' because they are merely 'subjective' or depart from the standard model of rationality presupposed through rational choice accounts of behaviour?

Equally, the 'standard' by which public choice accounts judge actions and decisions to be 'rational' is too often ambiguously specified and, indeed, politically motivated.¹⁹ It is argued that much of public choice theory tends to be characterised

¹⁹ Arguably all research is driven by particular sets of concerns, valuations, vocabularies, perspectives and ethical injunctions that carry certain normative political implications. Fraser (1985), for example, points to the implicit and explicit normative political implications of Habermas' account of the relations between public and private institutions in capitalist society, which he uses a basis for his theory of communicative rationality and action. Habermas' separation of official economy and family, childrearing and paid work, according to Fraser (1985), has the effect of legitimating, in some instances, the rationalization of male dominance and female subordination, making such distinctions potentially ideological.

by value judgements that have their basis in right-wing assumptions concerning the motivations and aspirations of individuals. Dunleavy argues: 'the elements of institutional public choice which have most extensively crossed over to influence mainstream political science have been preponderantly right-wing in their political coloration' (1991: 5). Moreover, public choice theory engenders a certain individualism and self-know-how. This is reflected in *The Parent's Charter* (DES 1991) and *The Citizen's Charter* (1991), where service users are constructed in the role as self-authoring, self-directing consumers. For example, parents are charged with the responsibility of choosing a school for their child through adopting a strategic position that makes use of information and advice available, such as school league tables, Ofsted reports, school visits, choice advisors and so on. Such a view of parents is steeped in public choice perspectives regarding the utility maximizing capabilities and willingness of all social actors. Indeed, the assumption held by public choice perspectives that individuals are rational actors with preferences that are logically consistent and which can thus be listed and ranked accordingly, informs what Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball identify as the 'factor/list approach' to the study of parental choice (1994: 71). This particular approach trades on the assumption that parents' school choices are a reflection of and development from, and can thus be explained through, a formal rational model based on calculated and logical forms of reasoning.

Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball note how the language taken up in these approaches 'draws on the positivistic tradition which promotes a methodology that requires 'responsible' choosers to undertake a rational, logical, criterion/factor-based approach placing factors in a hierarchical relation to each other' (1994: 70). The factor/list

approach thus responds primarily to questions around how parents inhabit a field of choice organised by public choice and rational choice perspectives. Hence, it deals more formally with the criteria underpinning parents' school choices and favours the systematic reduction of individual behaviours and rationalities to elements of predictable and patterned collective forms of behaviour in a formal rational model. A key feature of the factor/list approach is the utilisation of empirical models of investigation, such as sampling strategies, instruments and forms of classification. Gorad highlights the OECD report (1994) as archetypal of this type of investigation:

the OECD (1994) carried out a review of many school choice studies, and decided to categorise the findings into 4 groups of reasons for choosing. There were academic (e.g. results), situational (e.g. travel), ethos (e.g. management), and selection (e.g. single-sex). (1999: 31)

Central to this report was the aim of establishing the main criteria through which parents formulate their school choices. On this analysis, choice is reduced to quantifiable and easy-to-measure models of interpretation. For example, the report makes use of highly reductive and deterministic conceptual tools, with the intention of sorting through and systematically reducing complex processes of decision-making to categories of choosing. Here, interviewee responses are counted, measured and reduced to statistical aggregates in a formal rational model. Other examples of this approach include Hammond and Dennison's (1995) study, which reveals the high numbers of parents choosing schools based on the presence of good quality teaching staff at the school; Woods (1992) on the range of taught subjects and facilities available at the school; Clark and Round (1991) on the style of leadership/

management carried out in schools; Johnson (1987) on the status of the school; Flower-Finn (1994) on the existence of small classes; and Cookson and Persell (1985) on the physical environment and buildings of the school. This list should not be taken as exhaustive and definitive given that parental choice extends to other complicated areas of concern, such as the school ensuring the safety, well-being, discipline, respect, care and happiness of the child (see Coldron and Bolton 1991; Griffiths 1991; West 1992).

Indeed, it is the adoption of such a systematic approach, with its emphasis on quantifiable units of measurement and statistically inflected methods of inquiry, which makes such research policy-friendly. It has as its aim the ‘testing’ of government claims and the efficacy of a market-led system (Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994). In other ways, too, research on parental choice developed through the Sociology of Education (see Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1993, 1995; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998)²⁰ seeks to test the validity and reliability of government claims. However, there are crucial differences here. Researchers working within the Sociology of Education field tend to position themselves as critics of government policy and often pose serious questions to policy

²⁰ A central problem in discussing the research of Ball, Reay and Gewirtz is the tendency to reduce their theoretical and conceptual approaches to manageable and tidy representations of scholarly disciplines. It might be claimed that Ball, for instance, is a structuralist or Marxist: he systematically reduces complicated and disparate voices to moments of class articulation (see Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996). On the other hand, Ball frequently acknowledges the malleability of these positions, their interrelations with other positions, and thus encourages us to think through and beyond any static conceptions of agency. In this way, it might also be claimed that Ball is a post-structuralist. Thought about in another way, much of this work centres on explaining how positions are produced and constituted through practices - practices of governance, for example (Ball 2004). Here, then, it might also be claimed that Ball is a post-post-structuralist: the return to thinking through the production of positions. For this reason I will avoid reducing these literatures to uncomplicated expressions of singular disciplines and instead use the broader term Sociology of Education to encompass the multitude of perspectives contained within these approaches to the study of parental choice.

makers over whether choice can be viewed as an equality-producing-mechanism in the education system. The factor/list approach, on the other hand, is less concerned with criticizing government policy as it is with developing research that makes the policy of choice more digestible to a sceptical public or easily translatable and quantifiable to a policy maker or practitioner.

A cursory glance at the publication dates for studies that use a factor/list approach (between 1985 and 1995) reveal something about the trajectory of research into parental choice. The refusal of some researchers (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1993, 1995; Reay 1998; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998) to adopt a methodology that subsumes parental agency within a formal rational model emerged, in one way, as a response to the factor/list approach in studies of parental choice and the rational choice literature around class (Hatcher 1998; Goldthorpe 1996, 1998). Crucially, researchers such as Ball, Reay and Gewirtz challenged some of the rational choice assumptions permeating these studies by highlighting the unequal capacity, and certainly unwillingness, of some parents to augment themselves successfully in the position of consumers of education services. As Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball (1994) show, a purely factor/list approach is contentious in that it operates from the assumption that parents share a common vocabulary and thus a common set of meanings, values and aspirations. The methodology underpinning it generates what Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball term a 'pre-construction of choice' (1994: 71) precisely because it offers a flat, unidimensional and linear account of choice. In this way the factor/list approach mediates powerfully with rational choice assumptions around the idea that actors work from a position of 'perfect knowledge' (Goldthorpe 1998: 170)

and share the same capacity to utilise their actions and decisions in rationally self-interested ways.

The resulting image is one of parents as either choosers or non-choosers, alert or inert, passive or active (see Adler, Petch, and Tweedie 1989; Willms and Echols 1992). A central criticism levied against the factor/list approach is that it fails to engage with important issues around the different types of positions, relations and practices privileged through the discourse of choice (Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994), and thus foreclosing any critical engagement with questions around the types of exclusion summoned by it. What is absent in this particular approach, then, is an acknowledgement that parents possess different levels of knowledge, power and confidence, which can affect their ability to appropriate and enact the dominant positions and vocabularies offered through dominant governmental discourses around choice. This explains in part why some researchers, particularly those in the Sociology of Education, refuse to adopt economic models of explanation for understanding non-market choices. It is as much a political decision as it is a methodological one, given that public choice perspectives trade on right-wing assumptions concerning the supposed self-authoring, self-determining, self-directing capacity of all actors (Dunleavy 1991). I will now turn to approaches that have been in part formulated as critical responses to government claims over the supposed equal and self-determining capacity of parents to augment themselves in the position of consumers of education services.

Sociology of Education: Structure, Agency and Choice

The scope and scale of literatures in the Sociology of Education that deal with issues around parental choice in education is immense (see Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994; Carroll and Walford 1997; Conway 1997; David *et al.* 1994, 1997; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1993, 1995; Henig 1996; Lucey and Reay 2002; Reay 1998, 2007b; Saportio and Lareau 1999; Vincent 1992; West 1992, 1994). A central tenet in all these literatures is a critical appreciation of the structural contingencies, social conventions and practices thought to circumscribe and thus limit and constrain individual choice. For example, many authors working in the field of Sociology of Education tend to be preoccupied with concerns around linking inequalities in the distribution of power and knowledge to the different positions and relations people enter or are forcibly integrated into. It recognises that while the rhetoric of choice sets out a vision of education as fair and equitable, governmental policy discourse around choice automatically favours the orientations and aspirations of some parents over others (Gewirtz 2001). For example, the right to choose a school is to some extent conditional on the parent inhabiting and performing an idealised model of behaviour, one which is understood to be culturally intelligible, advantageous and profitable.²¹ The resulting image is one of parents engaging in socially circulating discourses and practices in order to become what the government demands and expects of them as parents.

A central strand in *The Parents' Charter* (DES 1991) is the articulation and combination of parent's rights and responsibilities through a language of choice and

²¹ Chapter 2, for example, maps out some of these authorized behaviours and pays particular attention to the consumerist orientation that underwrites them.

the construction of parents as consumers of education services. However, in addressing parents as consumers, argues David *et al.*, government texts around choice fail to pay attention to 'questions of gender, class, race or sexualities; as if all consumers were equal individuals within the market place' (1997: 398). The tendency to view parents as equal players in a competitive education market has the effect of undermining cultural, economic and social factors that might shape and even constrain individual choice. From this position, the policy of parental choice can be explored as a potential inequality-producing mechanism in the delivery of education services. This idea has attracted lots of attention from researchers who are interested in the dialectic relationship between agency and structure; particularly those who are keen on exploring the middle-class bias of education policies in Britain (see for example Ball 1993; Gewirtz 2001; Reay *et al.* 2008). More importantly, such an idea challenges the formal rational explanation of choice offered through public choice and rational choice perspectives, which 'rips choice out of social context or desocialises choice-making and treats it as a kind of individual rational calculus' (Ball and Vincent 1998: 394).

Researchers working within the Sociology of Education tend to avoid using approaches that are reductionist and deterministic in method and, instead, seek to illuminate the interrelationship between discursive practices and the sedimentation of ideologies, positions and relations. For example, in their study of children's experiences and perceptions of the transition from primary to secondary school, Reay and Lucey (2004) show how middle-class projections of 'bog-standard-education' contribute to generating feelings of inferiority in some working-class children, feelings which cut a deep wound in the psyche. Evident in this approach is a concern

with how behaviours are structured through discourses and ‘rhetorical high-wire acts that give otherwise meaningless behaviour sociocultural intelligibility’ (Jackson 2001: 228). Notably, theorists and researchers in the sphere of Sociology of Education also work with notions of social reproduction borrowed from Bourdieu (1990), and later Bourdieu’s (1997) theory of capital (see Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1993; Reay 1996a, 1998).

Where these literatures part from each other is mainly on questions around problematic concepts of identity and agency and their relation to structure. Each literature represents engaged, pragmatic attempts to situate the voices of parents in different ways in order to show how individual choice draws on and is constructed out of various discourses (for example see Reay and Ball (1997, 1998) on the relationship between choice and class; David, West, and Ribbens (1994) on gender; and Bagley (1996), Bernard (2007) and Saportio and Lareau (1999) on race and ethnicity). Ball, Reay and Gewirtz, for example, index parental decisions in education around class inflected understandings of agency to show how choice mediates class differentiated processes (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; and see Carroll and Walford 1997; David, West, and Ribben 1994). Indeed, much of the criticism levied against the policy of parental choice stems from a concern with social class inequalities becoming intensified through the ‘exclusionary practices’ of middle-class parents (Reay and Lucey 2004). Echoing the work of Le Grand (1982), Conway (1997) suggests that the choice instigated by the 1988 Education Reform Act in Britain was just another way of privileging middle-class families and their school preferences. Such a view of choice as the preserve of the well-off and well-informed (Bellamy and Greenway 1995; Cahill 1994; Gabe and Calhan 2000) is pervasive in these literatures.

Reay and Ball (1997), for instance, are critical of the consumerism celebrated in government texts around education, namely because consumer choice is sometimes understood to signify a middle-class obsession (Hattersley 2003) and is thought 'to fit uneasily with the necessities of working-class cultures' (Reay and Ball 1997: 99). Gewirtz echoes this view when she suggests that the promotion of active consumerism in education has as its aim the re-socialization of working-class parents into middle-class parents – the 'reconstructing [of] working-class parents in the image of the ideal-typical middle-class parent' (2001: 373). This has led some commentators to view reforms in education as 'essentially a class strategy' (Ball 1993: 4). The move towards producing parents who adopt a consumerist attitude towards education is thought to reflect the middle-class bias implicit in then New Labour policy discourse (Gewirtz 2001).

This middle-class bias is thought to make working-class parents deficient in two ways. First, they operate from a position lacking resources and opportunities and thus are unable to simulate middle-class choice and voice. Ball and Vincent (1998) show how the meaning and practice of choice tends to privilege those parents who have access to particular kinds of 'grapevine' knowledge generated through local networks of parents. In this way, parents may exercise choice differently depending on how they position themselves or are positioned socially and geographically. Second, it is understood that some of the 'best' or more desirable schools articulate an ethos or identity that connects strongly with values and norms thought to originate in the middle-class home (Bernstein 1975; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). As a result, working-class parents are frequently positioned as 'not engaging properly' or in the 'right way' with education – i.e. 'not engaging in idealised middle-class ways'

(Archer and Francis 2007: 54) and therefore are characterised as subjects who contend with prejudice in an education market where they are represented as 'less valuable assets to schools than their middle-class counterparts' (Reay and Ball 1997: 98). So even when working-class parents do make choices and make them 'effectively', 'good' schools are likely to cream-skim or cherry-pick the good pupils; and since these are understood to come from the middle classes, this cream-skimming often discriminates against the working classes.²²

In other ways, consumer agency in education is understood to mark working-class behaviour as deficient. It is often argued that middle-class parents are more 'active' in pursuing their school preferences compared to their working-class counterparts (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Reay 1996a). Moreover, it is alleged that those children who enjoy a better standard of education tend to come from families who are more 'proficient' in their choice-making (see Adler, Petch, and Tweedie 1989; Lee, Croninger, and Smith 1994; Willms and Echol 1992). Many of these authors were keen to emphasise the middle-class orientation of these families and their consumerist approach to education. Here, then, some orientations are valued and rendered advantageous and profitable in the context of choice, as having more 'purchase'. As a result, parents tend to be positioned differently as active or passive depending on their inclination or willingness to inhabit consumerist (middle-class) models of agency. For Reay and Ball, the emergence of new pathologizations based on criticisms of 'passive parents' or 'bad choosers' represent 'a denial of working-class experience'

²² Le Grand's (2007a) response to this problem is to introduce a 'disadvantage premium' to give schools the necessary incentives for selecting children from poorer families. 'Schools that accepted children from poorer areas would receive an extra amount of funding: a premium' (2007a: 148), Le Grand insists, in effect assuaging any socioeconomic inequities arising from cream-skimming by schools.

(1997: 90). This is because, as the authors remind us, 'good' parental choice is invariably constructed in terms of an implicit middle-class norm.

Hence, choice is understood to function as a 'social device through which social class differences are rendered into educational inequality' (Reay and Ball 1997: 89). Choice as a governmental device is thought to work in favour of the middle class as it is invariably middle-class parents who are more adept at positioning themselves as consumers compared to their working-class counterparts (Reay 1998). However, these claims have been rejected by Le Grand (2007a) who argues that it is the less well-off, the poor and inarticulate who want choice compared to the middle classes who appear to be happier under a no-choice model. Le Grand (2007a) reminds us that under a no-choice model it is the middle classes who dominate. This is because the middle classes, with their 'louder voices', 'better contacts and sharper elbows' (Le Grand 2007a: 33), are more confident and articulate, making it simpler for them to navigate and even manipulate the system. In a similar vein, Spiers argues that the implementation of choice and personal budgets in health services equalizes opportunity of access to working-class people:

As we struggle to make the NHS work properly, it surely makes sense to provide individuals with personal budgets. With the working classes suddenly given control of money, they can be on the same basis as the middle classes who can write cheques or articulate their needs better.

(The Sunday Times, 19.10.08)

Nevertheless, some researchers continue to adopt a view of choice as the preserve of the well-off and the scourge of under-privileged; as another mode for the reproduction and entrenchment of class inequalities. Indeed, much of the criticism levied towards choice in education is in part informed by debates around the denial or displacement of working-class experience and its importance. The denigration of working-class experience resulting from the implementation of choice is an important focal point for much of Ball and Reay's research (see Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Reay 1996a; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998). Broadly speaking, their research is an attempt to give voice to the experiences of those people who are positioned or position themselves in working-class cultures. Their research therefore operates as a powerful vehicle for articulating working-class demands and interests. Effectively, the authors want to politicize these voices in contexts where they might be heard and responded to. In this way the huge emphasis on class difference can be read as an attempt to rescue the language of class from a politics that effectively undermines its salience as a marker of social identity.²³

The general weakening of social class, or working class, as a vocabulary and discourse is usually attributed to the formal language of representation in politics where it is thought that forms of political life and associations that previously represented working-class solidarity have been largely displaced or marginalized through a language of morals and ethics, which itself is understood to speak a certain middle-class view of selfhood.²⁴ A central theme to emerge out of these debates is

²³ Gewirtz, for instance, acknowledges how 'New Labour more generally do not use the language of class' (2001: 366) but evidently secreted in government rhetoric around notions of self-help and self-responsibility is a language that speaks to a certain middle-class view of selfhood.

²⁴ For example, a recent event organised by Soundings at the Tavistock Centre, Belsize Lane, London on 28th July 2008, entitled *Class and Culture*, discussed the disjunction between the apparent language of class used by people in local spaces, in ordinary life, and the formal

what Sayer (2005) terms ‘the moral significance of class’ (also see Kirk 2007). Similar to Reay and Ball in their commentaries on working-class parents’ experiences of choosing, Sayer highlights key experiences that are understood to shape how people locate themselves and others along the axis of social class – experiences linked to deference and shame, dignity and respect. However, there are others (Savage 2000; Skeggs 2004) who argue that class may exist, but only in the form of ‘dis-identification’. As a result, class inequalities are understood to persist, yet clear class identities have failed to materialise in response to such conditions.

What is thought to be lost in the formal language of representation in politics are the forms of recognition that afford pride and respect to working-class positions, relations and practices. This relates in part to Sayer’s (2005) argument that class experiences contain a subjective – moral/ethical – dimension. The richness and perhaps the importance of Reay and Ball’s work on working-class parents is that it looks for those dimensions of experience that inform class feeling, even if those experiences are not articulated in straightforwardly class terms. For example, a central dilemma facing working-class families is the necessity to choose a school which allows the child to feel ‘at home’; a dilemma in which ‘their desires to ‘get on’ in the system are cross-cut by deep anxieties about not ‘fitting in’ and being different’ (Reay and Lucey 2000a: 95; and see Reay 2001). Reay and Ball link this to acute feelings of alarm and uncertainty in working-class families’ experience of choosing a school, ‘feelings that lead to self-exclusion and social closure’ (1997: 94).

language of representation in politics. Many of the participants at this event were clearly dismayed at what they saw as the depoliticization of the language of class, stressing that the language of class has been made messy by the declining role of class politics in the ‘new’ Labour party. However, they were equally dismayed with more populist form of class politics being offered by the British National Party (BNP).

This observation is crucial to discussions around class more generally. It highlights what Sayer (2005) identifies as the subjective dimension of class experience – the place of class thinking and feeling. Here Reay and Ball (1997) demonstrate how an individual's sense of their own social worth helps to produce affective aspects of class – the place of memory, feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority and the distinctions and markings of taste. The generative dynamic between thinking, feeling and practices is something Reay is keen to emphasise. Considerable attention has also been given to exploring how children experience the transition from primary to secondary school and communicate the class inflected anxieties and uncertainties generated through it. In her study of children's experiences of school, Reay adopts a psycho-social approach to explore how children construct class and gender identities around certain practices:

Although children expressed anxieties across class differences, it was not the white middle-class boys panicking about being exposed as no good through the new assessment procedures. Rather, it was the black and white working-class girls agonizing that they would be 'a nothing'... These girls, in the context of schooling, inhabit a psychic economy of class defined by fear, anxiety and unease where failure looms large and success is elusive. (2005: 917)

Nonetheless, there are problems in reducing complex and shifting voices to dimensions of class experience. The decision to frame voices in this way is both a methodological and political decision. It is, as I have already mentioned, an attempt to situate voices in contexts where they might be heard and responded to as political

constructs. However, in doing so, researchers potentially run the risk of skating over the commonalities between groups as well as the elisions and vagaries opened by the intersecting dynamics of class, race and gender relations (see Byrne (2006) on the intersecting dynamics of discourses or race and class).

Another important theme addressed through these literatures on parental choice is the way in which power is played out within the family. Reay and Ball (1998) observe within working-class families the tendency to defer to the judgement of the child when making education decisions. Subsequently, 'working-class decision-making is characterised by less discussion and negotiation', argue Reay and Ball (1998: 436). The role of the child in these decisions is thus understood to shift in relation to the class position of the family (also see Coldron and Bolton 1991; West 1994). In a similar vein, David *et al.* (1997) observe how children in working-class families are frequently permitted to exercise a 'veto' on the choice of school, whereas in predominantly middle-class families there tends to be greater parental influence over the decision-making. Moreover, middle-class parents are understood to guide or manipulate their children to ensure their positive acceptance of the 'best' choice (also see Carroll and Walford 1997; Reay and Lucey 2000a). However, other studies have concluded that the exercise of choice as a process tends to be jointly negotiated by the child and parent/s (Fitz, Halpin, and Power 1993; West *et al.* 1995).

Other studies show how parental choice is inflected through aspects of local geography (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Reay and Ball 1997). Parents often share differing and contingent relationships with the spaces and places in which they live and work. The shifting way in which parents identify

with their surroundings and its peoples is sometimes reflected in their school choice. These identifications morph to produce complex feelings of belonging in the individual as well feelings of distance and social exclusion. Reay and Lucey (2000a) observe the way working-class parents generate strong feelings of attachment to their local area and their local schools. The site of the local school and its relationship to the surrounding area is thought to generate feelings of comfort and familiarity, of security and connection. For working-class families, then, the dilemma of relocating somewhere else – away from the local and familiar – is sometimes too painful emotionally and too high in its social costs. In contrast, middle-class families appear to be less troubled by the prospect of sending their children on lengthy journeys to school and have ‘no need to remain with the local and familiar in order to feel safe’ (Reay and Lucey 2000a: 87).

In a similar vein, Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (1995) show how individuals share ambiguous relationships with the spaces and places they share and live in with others. Moreover, these identifications tend to be shaped by social class positions (also see Savage *et al.* 1992). Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (1995) delineate between two types of parents, which they call ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘local’ parents. The former typically signifies a middle-class parent whose behaviour is marked by an inclination to be more wide ranging in their school choices. These parents are understood to be ‘cosmopolitan’ as their behaviour shows an apparent disregard for the feelings of belonging and connection generated through the local. By contrast, the latter tends to be characterised as a working-class parent who values proximity and nearness as opposed to distance and mobility.

Women (like men) are thought to occupy positions that are historically and socially constructed and which shift across spatial and temporal contexts, making them contingent and unstable.²⁵ Researchers working in the Sociology of Education field are thus also keen to explain the formation of gendered patterns of choice among women as mothers (see David *et al.* 1994, 1997). It is widely recognised that it is mothers rather than fathers who are charged with the responsibility for linking children's needs with agencies of service delivery (Balbo 1987; Fraser 1985; Graham 1984; Ribbens 1994). In education, for instance, it is usually the mothers who negotiate and navigate the field of choice and who decide on how much effort and time should go into this process (David *et al.* 1994, 1997); a process fathers are rarely involved in (Reay 1995).

In other words, we might surmise that in some traditional two-parent families decision-making, including educational decisions, remains sex differentiated and largely a maternal responsibility. It is also the case that many mothers are reluctant to give up or renege on this responsibility. (David, West, and Ribbens 1994: 131)

It is thought that middle-class mothers in particular use powerful strategies of persuasion and indoctrination in order to guide their child into preferring certain educational decisions (Reay and Ball 1998). The decision over who gets to choose –

²⁵ Butler (1990, 1993, 1997) encourages us to think about how material and bodily citations are implicated in the performance of gender, whereby gender and even sexuality can be understood as the effect of performing certain gendered conventions rather than rooted in the expression of actions, gestures or speech. She argues: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990: 33; and see Butler 1993). In this sense, gender can be understood as the consequence of an ongoing series of social and cultural performances in which gender is produced as a ritualized repetition of conventions and social norms rather than as an expression of a prior identity.

the child, the parent/s, or both – is thus negotiated in the context of gender as well as class factors, as responsibility tends to be diluted, shifted and organised around the specific power dynamics of the family. It is paradoxical then, as David *et al.* point out, that there should exist a discordance between the idea of responsibility engendered through the dominant discourse of choice and the ‘‘mothers’ perspectives about their own lives or their children’s upbringing’ (1997: 85). David *et al.* (1997) also emphasise that the dominant discourse of choice, with its insistence on parents adopting a consumerist relation to education, fails to take account of the structural and moral constraints shaping mothers’ lives. For David *et al.*, the policy of parental choice has created a ‘dissonance between public and private responsibilities’ and a conflict of social commitments (1997: 223). The authorised positions and practices opened up by dominant governmental discourses around choice tend to be ‘gender-blind and emotion free’, with its focus on ‘autonomous, empowered and asocial rationality’ (David *et al.* 1997: 401), thus conflicting or appearing at odds with mothers’ private and emotional experiences of bringing up children.

Clearly though, a more complicated reading of gender is needed in these literatures, one which addresses how some mothers engage in attempts to reconcile apparently competing positions on the basis of various ethical and consumerist principles and manage those contradictions. To argue that dominant policy discourses around choice are ‘gender-blind’, for example, is to overlook the myriad ways in which political projects such as these are constructed in and through cultural and identity politics (Duggan 2003). As Fraser observes: ‘Consider, first, the relations between (official) private economy and private family as mediated by the roles of worker and consumer. These roles, I submit, are gendered roles’ (1985: 113), with

the role of the consumer conventionally occupied by the woman rather than the man. The important issue here is to highlight the ongoing disjuncture in discourses of choice between the parents' construction of a desirable position, i.e. one based on emotion, gut feeling or intuition, and the dialogical capacities rendered legitimate and advantageous through dominant governmental discourses around choice.²⁶ Some researchers have also noted how inequalities marked by race tend to be played down through government texts around education (Archer and Francis 2007; Majors 2001; Gillborn 2001), resulting in the discounting of the effects of race and racism as a factor influencing peoples' experiences of education services.

Race has therefore emerged as a powerful framing for pointing to some of the problems of inequality and discrimination inherent in the policy of parental choice, with its emphasis on individual mobility and self-interested behaviour (Bagley 1996; Reay *et al.* 2007, 2008). However, while there is some acknowledgement of the ways in which 'race and ethnicity interrelate with social class' (Reay and Ball 1998: 434; and see Byrne 2006)), social class continues to dominate studies of parental choice in Britain. More recently, though, researchers have begun to look at a 'left leaning, pro-welfare segment of the [white] middle classes' (Reay *et al.* 2008: 238; and see Reay *et al.* 2007) whose commitment to civic values of community responsibility is registered

²⁶ In the previous chapter I demonstrated how parents are addressed as potentially anxious and distressed subjects, and who are encouraged to displace emotion in favour of logical and calculating forms of reasoning as a basis for choosing. This is not to argue that it is mothers who are being primarily addressed here, since fathers are also likely to experience anxiety over which school their child goes to. We should therefore resist any easy categorisation of emotion where it might be equated with a gendered position or rationality particular to women. In this study emotion is treated primarily as a discursive resource that is mobilised as a strategy for coping with difficulty and is highlighted as elements in the formation of a counter-logic that appear at odds with, and even works to undermine, the dialogical capacities central to the figure of the consumer. This is explored more fully in chapter 5.

through their preference for multi-ethnic schooling.²⁷ This important piece of research shows how some White middle-class parents engage with a rhetoric of community responsibility when making decisions about where to send their child to secondary school. This engagement with issues around communal responsibility and civic commitment, which the authors link to a 'valuing of comprehensivisation' (Reay *et al.* 2008: 243), is contrasted with the individualism, competition and self-interested behaviour enshrined in government texts around education. A crucial component in this research is the discussions around whiteness as a racial category and the middle-class tendency to want to appropriate the 'Other'.

In another paper Reay (2007b) looks at the increasing protective tendency among White middle-class parents to choose schools with a majority of 'people like us', which she contrasts with a smaller yet visible fraction of White middle-class parents who instead tend to prioritise difference and diversity. These parents are understood to favour schools with a student intake that is balanced and representative of the cultural diversity of the area. However, Reay is sceptical about the motives framing these decisions. She reminds us that despite the apparent communitarian and altruistic nature of these impulses, there is undercutting this commitment to social justice and tolerance of the 'Other' an emphasis on multi-ethnic schooling as a resource that might bring White middle-class children some advantage later on. In spite of evidence which suggests that some middle-class parents exercise choice in ways that aim to preserve some multi-racial, multi-ethnic ideal (see Byrne 2006; Raveaud and van Zanten 2007), Reay insists that 'social mixing was important to

²⁷ In contrast to this viewpoint, Reay and Lucey (2004) identify broader trends of practices of social exclusion in the school choices of some middle-class parents, such as strategies of exit, self-exclusion and the covert practice of buying second homes in 'desirable' areas. This, they argue, contributes to a 'polarised market where some schools are 'demonized' and others 'idealized' along class lines' (Reay and Lucey 2004: 35).

these parents but this was often contingent on their child remaining academically high achievers' (2007b: 3). The contingency of these decisions suggests that cultural diversity and parental choice can be an uneasy fit.

More generally, though, it is understood that the implementation of the policy of parental choice can be potentially disruptive to commitments around social cohesion (Reay 2007b) as it permits parents of dominant and minority ethnicities the freedom to use exit strategies as a way of avoiding schools that may historically have attracted children from particular racial or ethnic backgrounds, and to put into practice what Gorad calls 'voluntary racial segregation' (1999: 30). Tomlinson paints a bleak picture:

White parents, who before the market reforms were offering covert reasons for school preference, which would not violate the 1976 Race Relations Act, are now overtly able to choose schools with few or no ethnicity minority students. The market does encourage ethnic segregation. (1997: 69)

Across the Atlantic, researchers have arrived at similar conclusions in their studies of parental choice. There, it is suggested that parents who are White and wealthy are more inclined to choose schools with a sizable cohort of pupils who are also White and from wealthy backgrounds (see Glazerman 1998; Henig 1996; Saporito and Lareau 1999). In addition, US research suggests that parents of 'colour' or minority ethnicity tend to choose schools with a mixed and balanced intake (Glazerman 1998; Henig 1996). This is echoed in the work of Reay and Lucey (2004)

who argue that some parents are aware of a hierarchy of schools in terms of desirability and that this desirability is closely connected with respectable 'whiteness'. As a corollary, some parents tend to avoid schools with a sizable cohort of Black and/or White working-class children (Bagley 1996; Vincent 1992).

These approaches in the US do, however, have a tendency to operate nominally through discourses of commonality and binarism and thus contribute to, rather than disrupt or challenge, the instability of positions and discourses of race. Studying parental choice through the lens of one subject position or structure of social division can, from an intersectional perspective, offer only a limited and circumscribed account of the different influences shaping choice. One of the merits, then, of an intersectional approach is that it draws attention to the 'particular identity categories which have emerged over time in specific social formations, the signification systems created, how these intersect with each other and the configurations of power which force just these categories, significations and intersections into visibility' (Wetherell 2005: 3). For example, Black Feminism in Britain draws heavily on intersectional thinking as a way of exploring the intersections of race, gender, class and other axes of 'identity' such as religion, ethnicity, language, sexuality and ability (see Brah 1996; Mirza 1992, 1997). However there are strong criticisms of such an approach, mainly that intersectional thinking begins with 'identity categories rather than practices' (Wetherell 2005: 4), and thus misses out on explaining how identity and agency are produced through social practices. The problem, then, with intersectional thinking is that it may foreclose a view of the self-determining and context creating activity of social actors (Wetherell 2005) and thus the space of resistance and agency itself. In a similar vein, Francis (2001) argues that intersectional approaches can be too divisive,

deterministic and fixed – they entrench binaries and neglect choice and agency (also see Archer 2005 and Ringrose 2007 for further criticisms of the intersectional approach). A purely intersectional approach is thus unable to account for the complex, multiple positionings emerging from these struggles over the dominant policy discourses around choice. Hence, a dialogic and discursive approach to the study of parental choice is desirable. Such an approach enables me to move beyond binary approaches to questions of gender, race and class in order to trace the messiness and contradictoriness of these positions and to explore how the taking-up or dissenting from positions is shaped by the speaker's desire to account for their commitments and valuations within recognisable tropes, evaluations and repertoires (Wetherell 1998).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have highlighted the different conceptual and theoretical tools that have been used to understand the actions and decisions shaping parents' choice of school. These tools offer multiple and often conflicting readings of parental agency. Researchers and theorists working in the field of Sociology of Education, for instance, tend to put questions of class, gender, race and locality into the framing of choice, while those who adopt a factor/list approach sometimes downplay the significance of these issues. However, if we start from a position which posits choice as a concept which is generic, empty and open, and is indeterminate by virtue of the multiplicity shaping it (see Clarke, Smith, and Vidler 2006), then it is important to make explicit the political and methodological assumptions underpinning these approaches. The way in which researchers understand and specify behaviour is always impartial and shaped by different appropriations and attitudes (Harding 1991; Skeggs 2002),

stemming in part from an engaged, pragmatic attempt to shape the field of choice in particular ways.

A central aim of this chapter has been to make visible some of the political and methodological perspectives shaping researchers' interests in parental choice, and to demonstrate the stark divide between the methodological assumptions underpinning the factor/list approach and the perspectives put forward by researchers in the Sociology of Education. The multiplicity framing choice generates its own contradictions, different orders, motives, trajectories and struggles, making it a complicated and dynamic field to engage with. These meanings and discourses elicited by parents can however be understood in often specific ways. On the one hand, choice can be read through a formal rational model where parents are understood to share the capacity to maximize their actions and decisions in a rationally self-interested way. Here, choice is thought to mediate and rely on the strategic assessment of probable costs, benefits and outcomes of success. On the other hand, choice can be understood through positions and relations of class, gender and race, thus undermining an economic explanation of non-market choice.

I have mapped out some of the merits of these approaches as well as some of their possible limitations. The decision over which approach to use tends to be, as I have already shown, both a political and a methodological one. Embedded within these approaches are powerful social and political imaginaries that speak to different people for different reasons. Much of Reay and Ball's research on choice (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998; Reay and Lucey 2004), for example, is an active, pragmatic attempt to politicize some parents' experiences of

choosing through class inflected understandings of agency. These imaginaries of working-class culture and agency tend to be framed in an antagonistic relationship with the valorisation of positions and relations captured through government rhetoric around education: the promotion of consumer agency and voice, individualism, competition and self-interest, for example. Middle-class parents are understood to be more successful at positioning themselves as consumers compared to their working-class counterparts, and, as a result, 'profitably draw on consumerist discourses in order to augment their position in the educational field' (Reay 1998: 202). Such a view seems to rely too heavily on a theory of social reproduction where agency is understood to be constituted rather than freely entered into or negotiated. On the other hand, rational choice theory presupposes that class is the consequence of peoples' rational calculation of costs and benefits (see Hatcher 1998) rather than a condition determining one's actions and decisions. This is also problematic in that it positions human agency as a matter of individual responsabilisation, and attributes disadvantage to a lack of principled self-help, resulting in insufficient recognition of the possible structural circumscription of such choice.

I want to suggest using a different approach, one which observes the social structure through which agents position themselves or are positioned, but which also emphasises the active and creative working of agents, discourses and practices. I am concerned with exploring how parents define and experience themselves as subjects when elicited into performing certain actions, such as the roles and activities that spring out of the figure of the consumer, and am therefore interested in furthering an approach which maintains a view of the subject as potentially unfinished and unsettled. Such a view aims to show how subjects are both structurally located and

actively occupy a number of intersecting positions. It is important to show, on the one hand, that discourses help to produce agents in particular ways and have the potential to shape individualised thinking, feeling and acting in the world. Equally important is the need to show how individuals overcome the apparent constraints of social conditioning and mobilise counter-hegemonic claims to renewed forms of agency and being-in-the-world.

A purely intersectional approach to discourse lends itself to a view of subjects as bearers of discourse rather than active, creative and inventive social actors. The lack of attention to questions around agency in the neo-Foucauldian literature around governmentality means that socially circulating discourses are viewed as 'an object to be governed or as resource to be utilized in the process of governance' (Newman 2007: 50). In a similar vein, intersectional approaches neglect the instability in practices, the realm of choice and agency, and thus appear to close the analytic space in which subjects are found answering back (Archer 2005; Ringrose 2007; Wetherell 2005). A discursive approach offers possibilities for making visible the multiple discourses of choice and for maintaining a view of the subject as standing at the intersection of these discourses. In order to answer the main research question guiding this study, 'in what ways do some mothers engage with the positions and practices offered through dominant policy discourses around choice', a discursive approach is needed, one that is attentive to issues around the active, creative working of agents and the relationship between discourses and subject positions.

The discursive approach offered by Potter and Wetherell (1987) permits such thinking, as does the dialogic approach of Holland and Lave (2000). Using and

combining these two approaches makes it possible to go beyond assumptions of class-based bifurcation, and even the abstract simplicities of a formal rational model, to take account of the dynamic and dialogic ways in which parents improvise, appropriate and rework models of instrumental calculation, and to foreground the discursive practice out of which these 'realities' emerge as cultural repertoires and modes of expression. In identifying the contexts through which parents give meaning to choice, it is important to show how those contexts are marked by multiple framings and thus stand at the intersection of competing orders and motives. Here, then, it is possible locate parents as situated agents engaged in creative negotiations with multiple discourses. In this way discursive and dialogic approaches are important for pointing to the potentially constitutive force of discourses, but also the capacity of individuals to exercise agency in relation to those discourses.

A crucial element in the discursive and dialogic approaches is their attention to the rhetorical demands of different contexts, where the solicitation of performances are understood to continually shape people's voices and their relation to others (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). Hence, there is an emphasis on the dialogic and ideological usages of utterances. Such a view undermines any reductionist view of agency and permits a richer understanding of the elisions, tensions and negotiations shaping parents' school choices. Both the discursive and dialogic approaches are discussed in the next chapter where they are outlined as frameworks for the analysis and selection of interview data.

Chapter 4

Reflections on Research Method and Research Methodology

The previous chapter illustrated how meanings and practices of agency and choice in the realm of education are contestable and problematic. Public choice perspectives, for instance, promote images of parents as rational utility maximizers and consumers of education services (Dunleavy 1991; and see the *Citizens Charter* 1991 and *The Parents' Charter*, DES 1991). The resulting image is one of parents acting out behaviours and rationalities that are thought to be necessarily asocial and acontextual. Such a view has been challenged by researchers and theorists working within the Sociology of Education field, who argue instead for greater attention to be paid to 'the processes of choice-making and thus about the processes that are part and parcel of the reproduction of inequality [in education]' (Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994: 69). These researchers tend to argue against using economic theories of decision-making to make sense of non-market choices, which they feel offer insufficient recognition of the possible structural circumscription of such choices. Hence, some researchers have tended to put questions of social class into the framing of choice (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz. 1995, 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1993, 1995) as a way of linking class factors to the meanings and practices embedded within parents' school choices and to the reproduction and entrenchment of processes of inequality in education more generally.

More recently researchers in this area have begun to look for examples of ambivalence and fragmentation within the middle classes (Ball and Vincent 2007; Reay 2007b; Reay *et al.* 2007, 2008) as a way of uncovering some disjunction in the choice-making among (White) middle-class parents. While these recent studies remain critical of the way 'good' choice tends to be constructed in the form of an implicit middle class norm (Reay *et al.* 2008; and see Ball 1993; Gewirtz 2001), there is in evidence a deeper appreciation of the malleability and contingency of positions, and the 'practices and processes' (Reay *et al.* 2007: 1044) that underpin their trajectory. Nonetheless, these studies do carry a very strong political vocabulary and a set of political commitments which the authors are keen to articulate through their promotion of a class politics or class language, which appears to lend itself to a view of the stability and homogeneity of class positions and relations. Hence, these authors (Ball and Vincent 2007; Reay 2007b; Reay *et al.* 2007, 2008) have tended not to theorise the subject in a discursive framework, for such an approach undermines assumptions of class-based inequalities, or at least the notion of class-based bifurcation.

This opens up important questions around the notion of agency and resistance. In particular, it points to the tendency in some of these approaches to reduce complicated and disparate voices to moments of class articulation (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996). In this chapter I offer a different analytical approach to the study of choice, one that is more sympathetic to a dynamic and post-structuralist account of the subject and which moves beyond structuralist arguments concerning the supposed direct and/or determining relationship between subjects, relations and practices. By mapping some of the problems and discoveries I encountered in the research process,

I will show how the theory and method framing this study came to be developed iteratively and thus informed each other in powerful ways. By way of illustrating why a discursive and dialogic approach is appropriate to the study of choice, I map some of these mutations and elisions in the development of my chosen theory and method, and make visible the importance of a discourse of emotion in this process as a device for framing justifications around method.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section addresses the origins of the research and discusses how I arrived at and developed my research questions. Here I focus attention on how I became interested in questions around choice and education. The second section looks at how I went about identifying and recruiting research participants for this study and explores why I chose to situate my study in the borough of Camden in North-West London. The rationale underpinning these decisions is made explicit, alongside a more reflexive account of the presuppositions guiding and shaping that rationale. I then highlight the multiple sources of evidence and data that are used in this study. Here I elaborate on some of the merits of a discursive approach and discuss its implications for thinking through choice as a framing and function subjects inhabit and perform. This leads to a consideration of issues around locality and local political activity as sites through which to understand the politics of choice in locally specific ways.²⁸ The third section looks at interviewing methods, with a focus on some of the merits and distinction of my particular style of interviewing. It draws on experiences in the field by exploring some of the ethical and practical implications of working with an open-ended style of

²⁸ This builds on an earlier argument made in chapter 1, where I suggested that the dominant political rationalities, market imperatives and ethical imaginaries underpinning the dominant discourse of choice need to be understood as policy strategies that are negotiated in the context of the particularities of the local.

interviewing, while also considering how the location for the interview impacts on the kinds of dialogue generated through these exchanges. In particular, it explicates some of the different rhetorical spaces, power differentials and positionings opened up (and closed) by the interview process. I conclude with a broader discussion of my chosen theoretical approach and examine how the selection and analysis of the interview data in chapters 5-7 are informed by perspectives generated through this approach.

The Beginnings of the Study

The relationship between practices of governance and the formation of subject positions emerged as a key interest of mine during my MA at Goldsmiths College, London. I was interested in the act or process through which subjects are hailed or interpellated into submitting to an externally imposed order and thus, in Althusserian terms, adopted a closed view of the subject as constituted through discourse rather than an active or inventive social actor. When I began my PhD at The Open University in 2005 I was introduced to the idea that subjects stand at the intersection of multiple discourses which they sometimes also move between. Such a view encourages a more nuanced understanding of the dialectical relationship between agency and structure and thus complicates the idea that discourses automatically determine the horizon for the formation of the subject. It posits this relationship in relational terms as an unstable formation in which contradictory trends and tendencies collide. With this mind, I set out to explore not only how users of public services struggle to appropriate the dominant meanings and practices offered to them through discourses of choice but also how far citizen and consumer identities may be in

tension rather than forming the basis of a hybridized citizen-consumer (see Newman 2007).

While I was confident that the figure of the citizen-consumer would allow for an interesting PhD project, I was undecided about how to discover this figure. The vocabulary of choice has been implemented in, among others, three key areas of welfare policy: health, education and housing. Each of these welfare policies tends to address a particular model of the citizen: the patient (health), the parent or child (education) and the tenant (housing). These three arenas of policy offered a way into capturing the dynamics of the figure of the citizen-consumer. However, the relationship between parents and schools emerged as a captivating site for my research, not least because the legal requirement placed on 'mainstream' schools to promote strategies of 'community cohesion' (Sellgren 2007) opens up important questions around the role of the institution of the school. Increasingly, the government promotes a stronger link between local families and their local network of secondary schools (DfES 2005) and thus the shifting role of the institution of the school can be thought to be subject to aspirations and desires that are socially and historically constructed at the local level. This view of the relationship between schools and local families as shifting and dynamic went on to complement the main research question guiding this study: in what ways do some mothers engage with the positions and practices summoned up through dominant governmental discourses around choice and in what ways are these engagements socially inflected through conceptions of identity, agency and locality?

My research began therefore with an examination of key government texts around education (DES 1988, 1991; DfE 1994; DfEE 2001; DfES 2004; DfES 2005; DCSF 2006, 2008a, 2008b). Using a combination of different analytic approaches, I explored the discursive and ideological work implicit in the New Labour policy texts: the construction and mobilisation of new roles and responsibilities; the dislocation of 'old' and the construction of 'new' forms of public services; the location of the figure of the consumer in accounts of social change and modernised government; and the antithetical relationships that are invoked through these negotiations. These texts were read as examples of discursive practice – the constitution of particular types of subjects and the desired relationships between them and public services. However, instead of reading these texts simply as exemplifying, embodying or expressing the discourse under investigation, here they were understood to represent the articulation and mobilisation of truth-claims and a strengthening of the legitimacy of particular meanings and practices. From this position, government policies are not understood to constitute subjects in the way that Marxist and neo-Foucauldian readings of discourse might presuppose (Billig 1996). Instead, policies can be read as dynamic and productive spaces in which the fields of possibilities and problems (or ideological dilemmas) are negotiated (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001). Characteristic of this approach is a view of subjection as potentially incomplete, unsettled and unfinished (Clarke 2005b).

At this point I started thinking about which people are addressed through the discourse of choice in education, particularly parents²⁹. The mobilisation of the term

²⁹ In the formal language of representation in government texts around education it is parents who are charged with the responsibility of choosing a primary and, much later, a secondary school for their child (see *The Parent's Charter*, DES 1991). While it is children who are the official users of education services, it is the parents rather than the children who are addressed

'parent' in policy discourse is both neutral and abstract and as a result there is a disjuncture between its formal instantiation in policy and the different ways 'parent' is conceptualised in related analysis around race and gender as a socially and historically contingent category. Despite the effort of recent studies of class (Reay 2007b; Reay *et al.* 2007, 2008), which look at how some White middle-class parents negotiate their racialised position through an appropriation of the 'other', there has been little illumination of the ways in which these positions of race are negotiated and even resisted. The dominance of the category of social class as a framing for discussions around parental choice in education explains in part the marginal position of race in these studies. As I discovered through using the search engine Nexis UK (formerly LexisNexis), there is a lack of coverage typically afforded to debates around choice and race in the British media.

Nexis UK allowed me to perform a detailed search of all UK publications including national and regional newspapers, web-based publications, magazines and journals, and newswires and press releases. In the last ten years, for example, the words race, ethnicity and school choice have appeared in the main title, in the article itself, or in the indexing of 10 publications. Moreover, these words have appeared in only 23 publications in last ten years. The words class and school choice on the other hand have appeared in the main title of 942 publications in the last ten years (see table 1 below).

as bearing consumer rights, with rights to information and advice about education services and becoming 'better informed consumers' of those services (DCSF 2008a: 6). However, in some familial contexts parents often defer to the judgment of the child when choosing. Who gets to choose is thus contingent on the dynamics of familial interaction and even the social class position of the family (Reay & Ball 1998).

Table 1

Words inc. in Search	UK Publications in the Last 10 Yrs	UK Publications in the Last 20 Yrs
School Choice, Race and Ethnicity	10	23
School Choice and Faith	269	303
School Choice and Class	946	1196
School Choice and Social Class	46	51

The meaning of class needs to be read in a context-sensitive fashion, however. In classic Marxist terms, the meaning of social class tends to register socio-economic categories, a hierarchical distinction or stratification particular to society or culture. In the context of education and schooling, however, class is often articulated as the abbreviation for classroom or class size. Due to the volume of publications generated through the search I was unable to determine how many of the 946 publications in the last ten years articulated class to reference meanings of social class or classroom. In order to refine the search I changed the word class to social class, with the intention of ousting meanings that might be connected to classroom or class size. Lexis identified 46 publications in the last 10 years with school choice and social class in its main title – more than 4 times as many publications compared to those with race, ethnicity and school choice in the main title. Another important theme to emerge out these publications was the notion of faith.

The words school choice and faith have emerged in the main title of 269 publications in the last 10 years. Faith, then, tends to occupy a dominant position in debates around school choice and thus demands some critical attention in this study. However, it is difficult to separate out issues of faith and race precisely because the notion of race is often implicated in the construction of meanings around faith and vice versa. The potential interrelations between them are too important to ignore. As a result of this discovery I look at how meanings around race and faith intersect and inform each other through parents' narration of choice.

Who, Where and When...People, Place and Time

In order to get a clearer sense of the kind of people I wanted to speak to I conducted a pilot study in July/August 2006. Through local contacts I was introduced to four mothers living in Camden, all of whom expressed an interest in sharing their views on choice and had children attending primary school. The principle aim of this pilot study was to test-run some of the interview questions I had prepared and to develop my communication and interpersonal skills as a competent and approachable interviewer. To ensure that anonymity and confidentiality is guaranteed, I used pseudonyms to replace the real names of the interviewees who participated in this study as well as the names of any schools mentioned.

Two of the mothers I interviewed had children entering year 5 at primary school. This meant that they were not expected to enter the process of choosing (officially anyway) until the following year (see chapter 2 for an overview of this process). The other two mothers I interviewed had children entering year 6 and therefore at the time

of the interview were activated in the field of choice as choosers. Despite these apparently crucial differences, there was very little distinction in the responses given by these mothers. Regardless of whether the process of choosing a secondary school was immediate or impending, each parent articulated strong feelings of anxiety and discomfort, as the following extract illustrates:

Andrew: So you're in the process of choosing a school at the moment?

Judith: Yeah and I can't sleep at night worrying about it.

However, while general feelings of anxiety were evident in the responses given by each mother, a more heightened sense of unease was registered through the responses of those mothers who had children in year 6 and who at the time were entering the process of choosing, including Becky:

Andrew: So do you think it's almost certain Barbara [daughter] will go to Tottingham? Have you ruled out Dorney?

Becky: Only because...I know it [the school] looks nice now with all new buildings there and everything. Because of what the reputation it's got still. There's all helicopters above everywhere. Ohhhh God, it's like something from a film. There was, there was three helicopters there. And I know other people who like live in the other tower blocks. Their kids go there and they're not very good.

Evident in Becky's emotionally charged narrative are repertoires translating elements of fear, discomfort and anxiety, which are the product of her inability to forget the past (i.e. the school's previous reputation) and to believe that a different (better) school has been developed. Her choice of vocabulary and imagery suggests that the institution of the school tends to shore up multiple fears and fantasies for some

mothers, making school choice an emotionally inflected activity or process. It was also during these exchanges with mothers that I discovered something important about the interview process, namely the way in which researchers are powerfully implicated in the restrictions placed on what is speakable, as the following extract illustrates:

Andrew: If Carmen [daughter] decides she wants to go to Tottingham [school], and at this point you still haven't seen Tottingham, would you send her there?

Miriam: I will go and search to find out if it's o.k.

Andrew: You plan on visiting Tottingham, maybe to attend an open day?

Miriam: Yeah. I will do that.

Andrew: When you arrive at Tottingham, how are you going to know that it's right for Carmen?

Miriam: Well, ah, I need to ask somebody.

This extract demonstrates two important things. First, the interviewer plays a crucial role in framing the boundaries for what is spoken and what is not spoken during the interview, and therefore is in part responsible for some of the representations and modes of expression that are taken-up and dissented from by interviewees (Skeggs 2002). Dominant governmental discourses around choice encourage parents to govern themselves as responsabilized and autonomous subjects, as outlined in chapter 2. Parents are thus guided into carrying out a particular set of roles and functions as part of their responsibility as subjects with choice. What is discernible through my own choice of questioning are the same interpellative demands, which echo and redeem the idea that parents must 'become informed consumers' of education services (DCSF 2008a: 6). Second, some parents are anxious to deflect associations of negative value, such as being passive or inert, and it is this desire to be affirmed and

counted among others as someone who chooses 'responsibly' that encourages some parents to take-up cultural repertoires that register an 'active' subject. While Miriam was never fazed by my attempts at questioning her strategies and rationalities for choosing, it was clear that she was anxious to formulate her answers in the 'right' way. However, some parents do not wish to be counted among others as merely consumers of education services and it is this resistance in the subject that leads to a consideration and reworking of what is meant by the terms 'active' and 'responsible', as outlined in chapter 5.

Pre-Choice and Post-Choice Parents

The pilot study went on to shape both my research questions and my research methodology in distinct ways. I was now interested in speaking to parents who were being addressed as choosers and who were experiencing the kind of anxiety and tension that feeds in to and is a product of the field of choice, namely the emotional dynamics of the process of choosing. As demonstrated in chapter 2, parents are called upon to manage their emotions by reworking their behaviour on the basis of its rationalities rather than its anxieties and insecurities. They are instructed to enact their choice within a standardised rationality, which has at its centre the figure of a discriminating and confident consumer. By way of demonstrating the main research question to this study – how do parents engage with the meanings and practices offered through dominant policy discourses around choice – I felt it necessary to re-capture some of the emotional vocabulary discovered in my pilot study. This is because, while some researchers acknowledge that the discourse of choice tends to be 'free from emotion' (David *et al.* 1997: 401; and see Reay 2001; Reay and Lucey

2000a, 2004), little attention is given to what emotion is 'doing' in these contexts – as a form of investment, for example. Too often emotion is conflated with irrationality (Reay and Lucey 2000a), as existing outside and in contradistinction to the rationality the discourse of choice presupposes. For these reasons, Chapter 5 explores how individual expressions of emotion as a framing for choice point to a disjuncture in the vocabulary used by parents and the dialectical capacities bolstered and encouraged through the discourse of choice. Moreover, it asks in what ways emotion can be characterised as a counter-hegemonic undertaking in these contexts; as a device for shaping new forms of rationalising and calculation; and as a framing for legitimating appeals to alternative vocabularies, discourses and positions.

The most recent figures published by the then Department for Education and Skills reveal that in 2004-5 62,750 appeals were lodged or 9.3% of all admissions. This suggests that the 90.7% parents who did not lodge an appeal were either happy with the outcome of their school application or unwilling to engage with the process any further. Based on these statistics I judged a greater number of research participants could be recruited from the pre-choice than the post-choice camp. In particular, I felt that post-choice parents might be less inclined to speak to me compared to pre-choice parents, either because they are too caught up in the formalities of lodging an appeal or simply want no further involvement. There are, however, advantages to interviewing post-choice parents, just as there are advantages to interviewing pre-choice parents. Both are activated in the field of choice, although they occupy different phases in the process, and are thus engaged in discourses and practices that address them as active citizens and discriminating, confident and mild-mannered choosers. In both cases, parents are invited to displace emotion in favour of

adopting a personalised strategy based a narrow utilitarian understanding of rationality and calculation. Both parents – pre-choice and post-choice – are thus likely to be engaging in similar processes of handling the emotional dynamics of this process.

However, I wanted to address those parents whose experiences of choice reflect the kinds of emotional intensity captured through the blogs posted on the website Mumsnet and which are analysed in chapter 2. Moreover, I felt that post-choice parents might be too far removed from these emotionally charged experiences and perhaps be unable to recall them. There is also the issue of mis-remembering. With the benefit of hindsight, post-choice parents might choose to represent themselves and their experiences differently, and even suppress the emotions that shaped their thoughts and attitudes at the time. Chapter 2 demonstrated the extent to which dominant policy discourses and non-governmental guidelines around choice mediate a structure of impersonal rules and guidelines, and that there is a cultural imperative attached to adopting the vocabularies and positions that spring out of the role of the consumer. Post-choice parents might therefore choose to present their experiences differently as fitting with, rather than departing from, this dominant model of behaviour, in order that they might position themselves successfully in the role of the ‘active citizen’. Equally, though, pre-choice parents might decide to do the same, as they inevitably do (see chapter 5).

On the whole pre-choice parents seemed like a preferable group. I wanted to generate a consistent sample in terms of sample design, for example. This demanded that I speak to parents who occupied a similar position to those I interviewed in the

pilot study: parents with children entering year 6, particularly mothers. Pre-choice parents were also an ideal group in that they were more likely compared to the post-choice parents to be engaging with the emotional difficulties opened up through the policy of parental choice.

A crucial discovery in my pilot study was that it is typically mothers who coordinate the educational needs of children to service agencies. Other researchers (David *et al.* 1997; Reay 1998) also acknowledge that it is mothers rather than fathers who negotiate important decisions around educational choice. I decided, therefore, to focus upon mothers in my research. This strategy offers a way in to studying the dynamics of choice through the particularities and contingencies of a whole a set of positions and discourses that are historically constructed as well as socially specific. What kinds of binary distinctions, if any, are evoked through mothers' negotiations of choice? How do mothers manage these tensions and reconcile apparently competing frameworks of choosing?

The main research question was then adapted to accommodate the mother as a central figure in my study: in what ways do *mothers* engage with the meanings and practices summoned up through governmental policy discourses and rationalities around school choice? In particular, I wanted to capture the negotiations, and therefore the potential struggles, that emerge when mothers resist or rework these meanings and practices. This idea around struggle was developed with the notion of agency and resistance in mind; in particular, the idea that conceptions of subjectivity and identity can be 'best understood as the personal enactment of communal methods of self-accounting, vocabularies of motive, culturally recognizable emotional

performances and available stories for making sense' (Wetherell and Edley 1999: 338). Such a view implies that choice is negotiated through discourses and practices that are shifting and contingent, but always constructed through positions and relations that are embedded through local structures of feeling or 'grapevine knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998). With this in mind, I developed an approach that is capable of uncovering some of the dynamics of choice as experienced by mothers; an approach that is mindful of post-structuralist critiques around the supposed stability and homogeneity of subject positions, and one that captures the way mothers position themselves in a field that is locally constructed, but which is also framed by multiple discourses formed out of different sites existing in, between and across localities.

Multiple Framings, Multiple Approaches

A central claim in this study is that when some mothers engage with the concepts and practices made available through dominant policy discourses around choice, these engagements, in some instances, quickly turn to struggles as mothers appeal to alternative sets of valuations, concerns and vocabularies, and that these struggles are in the main emotionally charged and socially inflected through conceptions of agency, identity and locality. The importance of this claim is twofold. First, it forces me to look at mediations between the local and national. To assume that governmental practice in a plurality of local sites flows uniformly from the big transformations produced by neoliberalism is to undermine the particularity and contingency of local practices and conditions. There is an argument to be made around neoliberal programmes of rule becoming reworked and imagined differently through local sites

(Ball 2008). Second, it is important to show how mothers construct the local in their accounts of choice vis-à-vis the formal language of choice articulated through government texts. What specific trends and tendencies coalesce around these constructions?

This led me to the idea of developing a methodology that would incorporate multiple approaches; one that would enable me to explore the potential elisions and tensions flowing from parents' school choices. This methodology is comprised of multiple methods of data collection and data analysis. The table below illustrates some of the different sources of data I collected and the reasons for their selection.

Table 2

Data Source	Reasons for Selection
Interviews – 10 Parents	To consider how multiple discursive framings are enacted simultaneously.
Interviews – 2 Campaign Organisers 1 NUT representative 1 Choice Advisor 1 School Governor	To capture the antecedents, orientations and struggles through which a field of choice is assembled and mediated.
Wesbites – Directgov Parents Online Mumsnet, and Schools Appeals Service	To highlight the way in which particular behaviours and orientations are rendered desirable by governmental and non-governmental agencies.
2 Secondary School Brochures and 2 School Websites	To explore how discourses of community, race and faith are implicated in the constitution of a field of choice.
3 Committee Meetings	To consider how constructions of the local, and of a local people, are mediated by a politics around provision and choice.
35 Government, Quasi-Government and Related texts (National and Local)	To show how user engagement with public services is framed around certain positions and relations.
24 Local and National Newspaper Articles	To look at how the politics of choice, community, locality and provision are mobilized in the media.

For details on the parents interviewed in this study see appendix.

I will explicate each of these data sources separately (some of which have already been discussed) and focus on their usefulness for addressing questions around choice. For the moment I would like to discuss the importance of the interview method in this study as a basis for a discursive analysis of choice. Discursive analysis is useful for showing how discourses are in part about the mobilisation of truth-claims and strengthening the legitimacy of particular meanings and practices, and therefore involve the constitution, rather than the reflection, of social reality (Fischer 2003; Marston 2004). It offers possibilities for capturing the shifting relation between discourses and subject positions, and the potential tensions and struggles framing this relation. Which vocabularies and practices are legitimated in certain contexts and by whom? Who gets to practise certain culturally recognizable performances? In what ways are these performances organized and practised through the speaker's relational understanding of other positions and the power structures through positions are made meaningful and culturally intelligible? Such an approach to language demanded a research method that would enable me to 'indicate the precise sense in which a concept is being used...[and] to tease out or to deconstruct what it means when a subject refers to 'having identity'. How is the term 'identity' being used? What roles does it play within a given context?.' (Brah 2007: 138-40).

Hence, interviewing as a research method is desirable in the context of this study precisely because it enables me to indicate the shifting relation between discourse and subject positions, and to render problematic the idea that subjects are the constitutive effects of discourse, that parents are consumers of education services by virtue of the fact that through governmental discourses around choice they are hailed or addressed in this way. The interview method therefore complements the main research question

guiding this study – in what ways do mothers engage with the concept and practice of school choice? This is because the interview offers opportunities for making transparent those moments of critical reflection or transition; when subjects actively engage with meanings and vocabularies in culturally sensitive and historically specific ways. The interview, then, enables me to explore how mothers appropriate, rework or resist the kinds of discourses and rationalities made available through school choice, thereby bringing into focus the idea of choice as a framing, function and discourse mothers inhabit and perform.

The interview method therefore allows me to trace the possibility of multiple positions being enacted by the subject and permits a richer understanding of nuances and interpretations of those positions, as discursive framings subject to contrary pushes and pulls sustained by the interactional demands of the immediate context. A broader discussion of the style of interviewing adopted in this study is discussed later. The interview method differs from conventional social survey work, such as questionnaire-based approaches, which generally use statistical aggregates as the basis for claiming representativeness (of opinion, of position, etc.) among sections of a given population (see the discussion around factor/list approach in chapter 3). Such an approach appears to be guided by the assumption that discursive framings of class, gender and race have an existence independent of the language used to describe it. Against this approach, I want to deploy a critical discursive psychology that captures how elements of identity and agency are performatively re-inscribed through, though not exclusively bound to, patterns and rhythms of speech as vehicles for social action (Wetherell 2005).

This leads to a consideration of how mothers' engagements with meanings and practice of choice might be socially inflected through conceptions of agency, identity and locality; framings that mediate a material as well as a discursive reality. Choice can be understood to be sustained and practised through important visual and material repertoires; for example, the articulation and assembling of realities through school brochures and websites. It is for this reason that I supplement the interview with visual methodologies (Fink 2008; Jewitt 1997; Margolis 2000). These are discussed alongside an analysis of school brochures and websites in chapter 6. The merit of combining these two approaches is that it allows for a richer understanding of how material realities are lived, experienced and translated by individuals. Moreover, it points to the interaction between elements of the discursive and material and the potential discordance between them. The insights generated through my examination of school brochures and websites are therefore useful for framing the social structure through which choice is constructed and represented as 'reality'.

Implicit in the imagery mobilised through school brochures and websites are multiple, and often conflicting, constructions of locality and space, of local history and local culture. Indeed, the field of choice in Camden tends to connect with and disconnect from multiple definitions of the local.³⁰ It is for this reason that I shall spend a little time explicating the locality for this study: the borough of Camden in

³⁰ I use the term 'field of choice' loosely to refer to the circuit of schooling linking families to their local area. That is, it refers to the possible choices one can infer from the geographical position of the parent. The boundaries of the local, however, are likely to be different for parents, materially and symbolically. The weight of economic and social mobility enjoyed by some middle-class parents means that they, as compared to their working-class counterparts, have the option to buy or rent a property outside their immediate locality in order to gain access to schools in other areas (Holmes 2002). Moreover, the local produces 'spatial imaginings' (Reay and Lucey 2000b) that are socially and temporally informed and which are thus experienced differently by parents. This is because parents position themselves or are positioned differently as belonging to certain groupings, spaces or communities that are shaped locally (Ball and Vincent 1998).

North-West London. I selected this particular area for two reasons. First, I was born and raised in Camden and as a result my knowledge of the local geography, its schools and people is extensive, albeit highly individualised and personal. Second, it is an area which, like many other parts of London, is culturally diverse, with 'communities' claiming different ethnic and racial histories, cultures and values. It is therefore made up of associations that mediate complex cultural, economic and political identifications spanning different histories and trajectories. It is also an area which ranks high on the poverty deprivation index for local authorities in London:

Camden is a borough of contrasts, with areas of affluence and relative poverty. We now rank as the 15th most deprived local authority area in the country and 7th most deprived in London – statistics that should be a cause for concern for all Councillors. Through our Local Area Agreement, we are working with our partners to target resources (over £9 million this year) at reducing that deprivation, regenerating our most deprived neighbourhoods and working to support the most disadvantaged of Camden's communities. (Marshall 2006: 5.1)

Originally I was drawn to the area of Somers Town in Camden, which is a fascinating place partly because of its long and complicated history of immigration. Many of the people who have settled here have been Irish, French Huguenot refugees, Bengali, and most recently Somali and Kosovan/Albanian.³¹ Somers Town became a potential site for exploring the multiplicity shaping choice and the possible elisions,

³¹ For information on Somers Town and its schools go to London Borough of Camden Council at <http://www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/navigation/leisure/local-history/>
Access date: 28.01.09

struggles and tensions that arise from cultural, racial and religious difference. I wanted to speak to the parents of the children attending schools in this area and immediately started contacting the headteachers, with the aim of opening up a discussion around the possibility of providing some access for the project. This involved writing individual letters to the headteachers, in which I stated the background to the project, the aims of the research and its ethical dimensions³², and how I intended to disseminate research findings. (See appendix 3.1 and 3.2 for copies of the letter and research attachment sheet sent to headteachers.) I indicated that before the interviews could begin, I would need to obtain consent from the headteacher and the parents themselves. It was also made clear in the letter that participants would be permitted to withdraw consent at any time during the interview and that I would withdraw those transcripts from the analysis and the final report. (See appendix 2.1 for a copy of the agreement to participate form sent to parents.) To ensure that my letters were reaching the headteachers, and being considered, I followed up each letter with a phone call 7-10 days afterwards.

Unfortunately the schools I contacted in Somers Town had research projects ongoing at this time. Debbie-Weekes Bernard, a senior researcher and policy analyst for education at the Runnymede Trust, was completing a study commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government (Bernard 2007) with one of the schools. This meant that none of the primary schools were at this time able to offer additional support to other researchers, making it impossible for me to contact and speak to parents with children attending these schools. However, a key focus of my

³² It was around this time that I received ethical approval of my research from The Human Participants and Material Ethics Committee (HPMEC) of the Open University. Ref: HPMEC/07/#268/1

study was to open up discussions around the possible nuances and complexities of discursive and material representations of social class and race as framings that are irreducible to a one-dimensional, geographical conception of belonging and attachment. A broader definition of locality and community was therefore needed, one that captured the ways in which locally produced identifications sometimes mediate complicated understandings of social and political responsibility, reciprocity and solidarity.

At the same time, this study was concerned with rethinking assumptions around class-based bifurcation, in which parents' voices are often represented as ideological reflections of particular classifications (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998), as outlined in chapter 3. Hence, there was no attempt to achieve representativeness in the sample, but rather a focus on ensuring a breadth and depth of analysis that would capture the dynamics of school choice as a concept and practice negotiated at the intersection of apparently competing and conflicting demands and expectations. Nonetheless, I did interview a specific group of mothers – pre-choice mothers – although these mothers weren't representative of parents more generally. Crucially there was a desire to show how these demands and expectations are practised and sustained through locally produced contexts, with the aim of exploring in what ways particular valuations of choosing are negotiated in and through geographical, political and social inflections of space and place. As a result, the area of Camden remained a crucial framing for study.

I initiated contact therefore with headteachers at 10 other primary schools through emails, letters and phone calls. The process of sending letters to headteachers and

then following up these letters with phone calls was repeated throughout the study. Many of the schools I wrote to expressed interest in the research and kindly offered to pass on the information to parents, while other schools simply failed to respond. The most effective means of getting schools involved in this study involved initiating and maintaining direct contact with the headteacher and his or her secretary by phone, but at the same time remaining respectful of their busy schedule. The practice of writing and sending emails, though sometimes effective, felt slightly frustrating, even impersonal at times. Speaking directly to the headteachers, on the other hand, either by phone or in person, enabled me to articulate my experiences of and relationship to the area of Camden. One of the strategies I used for opening up these types of exchanges was through delivering the consent forms and research attachment sheets to the school in person. This created opportunities for gaining further involvement of the school in the study.

The primary schools I wrote to were selected for the reason that they are bounded (geographically at least) by the name of Camden and make claims to being part of the local network of Camden schools.³³ As a result, the 10 parents I interviewed lived in different parts of Camden and had children attending primary schools not immediate to where they live, but still within the boundaries of the borough of Camden. A corollary of this was that all the parents interviewed in this study did not live in close proximity to each other. This forced me to rethink the concept of locality as a

³³ In the local Camden newspaper, *Camden New Journal*, a reporter used the phrase 'Camden's current family of secondary schools' (Osley 2008) to designate what might provisionally be termed the local field of choice in the borough of Camden in North-West London. In a similar vein, Fiona Millar, journalist for the *Guardian*, is quoted in the same article using the phrase 'local family of schools' (Osley 2008). The articulation and combination of the words local, family and school invokes a field of choice that is geographically, socially and temporally imagined, and in turn creates the conditions of possibility for imagining local contexts associations or forms of attachment and belonging.

relational construct, with the aim of moving beyond a geographically limited conception of space and place to capture the dynamics of locality as mediating complicated social and political processes and practices. In chapter 7, for example, I explore how New Labour policy articulate and manage the potential collective linkages between schools, such as partnerships and collaborations, as a basis for 'helping to develop and strengthen their community' (DfES 2004: 5.30).

One of the major advantages of interviewing parents living in Somers Town would have been to look at the connections between proximity, closeness and a sense of community. This would have enabled me to compare how people might imagine the same area differently. However, such a view invokes an explicit geographical conception of the local and thus fails to connect with the ways in which the local is constructed, established and reproduced relationally (Massey 2004; and see Massey 1995). The politics of belonging associated with these constructions (Amin 2004) demands a more shifting and fluid conception of the local, one that looks at how spaces and a sense of belonging might 'be connected up with the question of political responsibility' (Massey 2004: 6). I therefore developed a larger conception of locality, with the aim of extending beyond geographically limited conceptions and focusing instead on how territory is imagined politically – through local political activity, for example – as well as socially.

Developing the Concept of Locality Further: Politics, Provision and Territory

While recognising the overall primacy of the 'state', Troyna suggests that 'it is the arena (or "space") opened up this relative independence of the local education system that the competing ideologies of different groups arise and are resolved, either partially or wholly' (1992: 65). This suggests on the one hand that education policy at the state level does not translate directly and uniformly to particular institutions, localities, communities and spaces – 'the local education system', for example. It also highlights the extent to which struggles over power and recognition are intimately connected to a sense of the local. Locality must therefore be imagined in political, social and geographical terms. On this view, we might read locality as symbolic of negotiations around a problematic and crowded space of representations of people and their relationships to education services. Locality is a spatial as well as a temporal ordering which works to generate groups of insiders and outsiders as well as produce a sense of belonging in the individual.³⁴

Crucial to my study of locality were the political orientations of actors and what might be called the politicized arrangement of school provision. By politicized arrangement I am referring to way school provision is thought to be structured according to the needs, wants and desires of local families. Local authorities have a duty to respond to parents' representations of the types of provision of schools they would like to see and this constitutes a major political exchange between local people

³⁴ The London Borough of Camden replaced the former metropolitan boroughs of Hampstead, Holborn and St. Pancras in 1965. Camden is therefore made up different histories corresponding to specific times and spaces. It is therefore interesting to note how people locate themselves in these histories, histories that are both geographically and socially specific.

and local authorities: 'The best LAs are already strategic leaders of their communities, who work hard at listening to their communities and work with them to articulate their needs' (DCSF 2008a: 11). This became the starting point for my development of a different conception of locality, one that is shaped by the political associations linking local families and to the local council. I immediately began scouring the local newspapers (*Camden New Journal, Ham and High*) in the hope of finding something that captured this dynamic relationship.

In December 2006 Camden Council won a bid to secure £200 million of government money to invest in 'transforming learning and improving every secondary school' (Camden 2007: 2). With this money Camden council proposes to spend £170 million on improving the infrastructure of existing schools and £30 million towards building a new secondary school.³⁵ Secondary schools in Camden have long been heavily oversubscribed, with demand typically outstripping supply, resulting in some local residents being forced to send their children to schools in neighbouring boroughs such as Westminster and Islington. While the government money was clearly welcomed by schools, parents and local residents, there was huge disagreement in the public consultation meetings of May-June 2007 over how the money should be spent. Camden officials make clear that the money offers opportunities for the creation of 'greater diversity, choice and access' as well as opportunities to 'examine the ethos and values of secondary schools in Camden' (Camden 2007: 2). These concepts were literally were up for grabs during the public consultation meetings. In attendance at these meetings were members of CASE (Campaign for State Education), Camden

³⁵ This money was offered to Camden council as part of the government's Building Schools for the Future programme – a national scheme which allows local governmental agencies to bid for extra funding to build new schools.

NUT (National Union of Teachers) and huge numbers of parents, teachers, headteachers, local residents and journalists. These meetings offered a fascinating insight into how the meaning and practice of choice tend to be negotiated through struggles, antecedents and orientations emerging from people's conceptions of local conditions and local history.³⁶

In addition to attending some of the consultation meetings organised by Camden council, I set up interviews with the organisers of two campaigns – a Church Secondary School for Camden (CSSC) and a Holborn and St. Pancras Secondary School – as well as members of the Camden National Union of Teachers (NUT). I conducted these interviews in order to explore how people map need on to different spaces and how different notions of community and community responsibility are invoked through these constructions. In chapter 6, for instance, I show how discourses of race and faith are mapped on to specific areas of Camden as a way of delineating local sites of need. This helps to generate a more complex picture of the limitations and complications of choice and provision, the overlapping clash of interests that reside in it and the ever-shifting field of choice across localities.

³⁶ In other ways, it offered pause for reflection on the role the institution of the school. It is important to address this issue of what schools are for as it is crucial to these debates. While the sole purpose of the school is to educate there are other responsibilities and obligations which the government feels is appropriate to schools, such as the promotion of better relations between individuals and families of different faiths and cultures. This idea tends to trade on the assumption that after the family the school is the main transmitter of values. For example, the government have placed a legal requirement on 'mainstream' schools to promote 'community cohesion' (Sellgren 2007). This community strategy is reflected in recent school reforms in Burnley and Pendle where education officials are using £170 million of government money to replace eight existing secondary schools in the hope of developing a new catchment scheme that will 'end the divisive system of schools having either Asian or White pupils' (Lancashire Evening Telegraph 2004). These strategies should, nonetheless, be located in arguments that emphasise the socially and historically situated nature of struggles in particular spaces.

Interviewing Style: Reflections on the Interview

My participation in the consultation meetings involved observing and listening; in particular, noting how people responded differently to important questions around provision and choice. My approach to interviewing the school campaigners was similar to the approach I used with parents. It involved developing a style of interviewing that permitted the speaker to feel at ease and relaxed and which was amenable to maintaining a more free-flowing, less inhibited style of conversation. My experience of the pilot study taught me that some discourses tend to be muted in some contexts, but are sometimes hinted at in other ways. It is clear that the vocabulary of race, for example, is often treated as something which is unspeakable or too complicated and messy to 'get right'.

In my pilot study I had interviewed a mother and her daughter who were hard pressed to get this vocabulary 'right'. When I asked the mother whether she factored in issues of race or ethnicity in her school choice, she immediately said no and waited for me to move on to the next question. At the end of the interview I followed my usual end-of-interview-routine of turning off my recording device, packing away my notes and slumping back into my chair. It was at this point, when we were both relaxed, that the mother turned to her daughter and whispered in quiet voice 'No you can't go to that school! Too many Blacks!'. Two thoughts occurred to me. First, the formal arrangement that constitutes any interview – the presence of a professional stranger, the constant shuffling of papers, the scribbling of pens and so forth – may sometimes preclude honest engagements with difficult questions around race. Second, the voice of the parent mediates other voices and potential audiences that extend

beyond the immediate conversation, and thus can become constrained by them. This confronts the idea that voice is always constituted through dialogic relations (Bakhtin 1981, 1986), where the other is always present in voice as a permanent, though disembodied and invisible, moral and ethical sanction. In this way talk is always context-sensitive and thus a situated performance in that it assimilates others' discourse. This discovery encouraged me to think about adopting a method of analysis that treats speech as a dialogical recurrence; as something which is performed through the assimilation of scattered discursive resources, where 'it performs here as authoritative discourse, and an internally persuasive discourse' (Bakhtin 1981: 78). This forced me to think about important questions around how discourses of race and gender are mobilised in talk or flagged in particular ways (see Davis 2005).

My approach to the interview method was to adopt a style of interviewing and questioning that was less demanding and more neutral, one that would potentially elicit the most ordinary of speech acts and therefore enable me to capture the messiness around positions and their intersectionality. For example, I would sometimes wait for the speaker to give responses that contained implicit or explicit invocations of meanings of race and then would ask them to expand on their answer. The location for each interview, however, meant that sometimes it was difficult to encourage an exchange that felt less formal and more conversational. An important part of interviewing the mothers in this study was to create a casual exchange in which they felt comfortable and relaxed. Nearly all the mothers who took part in this study requested to be interviewed in their home. The setting of the home meant that the mothers were able to feel relaxed during the interview, as it guaranteed a private

space that felt familiar to them. This may be contrasted with the locations for some of the interviews I conducted with school campaigners and members of the NUT.

These interviews did not take place in the workplace but instead in terribly busy public spaces such as cafés and restaurants, making it increasingly difficult for me to record, listen to and transcribe the conversations later on. Perhaps it was the hustle and bustle of these spaces that was attractive to these respondents; after all, the priority for many café and restaurant owners is to get people in and out as quickly as possible, in order to increase turnover. There were moments, for example, when I felt the interview was being hurried along by the pace and momentum of these spaces. On the other hand, it is precisely because these spaces are removed from the workplace that perhaps made them attractive to these respondents in the same way that the private space of the home was for the mothers. Such busy public spaces are attractive precisely because of their disconnection from the formality of the workplace. In contrast, the location of the home felt uninterrupted and private, and therefore enabled a more free-flowing, uninhibited style of conversation. The location for each interview therefore impacted significantly on the type of conversation permitted during the interview. The style of interviewing I deployed was also implicated in the types of conversation generated through these exchanges.

During the interviews I would introduce questions that encouraged flexible and open-ended responses; questions that simulated casual conversation. I achieved this by mostly using 3 or 4 core questions which were broad enough to encapsulate the scope of the study. In turn I would build on these questions through critical sub-questions or follow-up questions that were largely improvised. My main task during

the interview was to listen carefully to the vocabulary used by the speaker and, where needed, invite them to unpack the meanings they were hinting at. The following extract, for example, demonstrates how assumptions around the relative success of private schools compared to some state schools is too often taken-for-granted and presupposed, and thus thought to require little explanation:

Andrew: So you think if Carmen went to private school she would perform better?

Miriam: Ummm.

Andrew: You do?

Miriam: Definitely!

Andrew: How do you know that?

Miriam: I know.

Andrew: How?

Miriam: [ha, ha] I just, ah...I know.

Andrew: But how do you know?

Miriam: [ha, ha]

The style of interviewing elaborated above enabled me to explore a different set of questions around discourse, namely its ideological and dialectical usage, and provoke thinking around its hidden vocabulary and multiple registers. To the extent that the researcher can be viewed as an active participant in the production of what counts towards knowledge or meaningful responses (Arendell 1997; Skeggs 2002), I settled on a style of interviewing that was casual and easygoing, and at the same remained respectful, attentive and responsive towards the research participant. The interview questions were mainly open-ended and semi-structured, with the intention of eliciting the most ordinary and everyday speech acts and to capture the messiness of language around choice. I would listen attentively to these speech acts and explore how they

were organized around the mobilisation and combination of specific discourses. In my experience of interviewing I found that the best way to provoke unsettled responses (responses that could rarely be contained by one discourse) was by using follow-up questions. This involves paying careful attention to both what the interviewee is saying and how they are saying it.

Here, then, I tended to proceed inductively – waiting to see what would emerge and noting its intersection with other discourses. Whenever a parent articulated a highly generalised assumption, for instance, I would follow this up with a series of other questions that tried to problematise its generalisability and provoke thinking around its messiness and contradictoriness. This required a lot of careful listening and improvisational skills on my part as these were questions not included in the original interview schedule. The responses given by each interviewee were treated as context-sensitive and situated (Mishler 1986); that is, generated, defined and redefined through the interaction of the interviewer and interviewee. From this position, the interview is a reflexive undertaking for both speakers and thus induces performance on both sides. It constitutes a social practice with its own exchange-process and demands each individual bring their own performances to it (Wetherell 2003).

My own subject position and identity as a researcher, for example, became more apparent during the interviews as I often proceeded to conduct myself in a way that registered elements of professional and ethical behaviour, namely someone who is supposedly detached, disinterested and so forth. This approach to the interview often undermined by my own attempts to appear approachable and generate an exchange that felt comfortable and casual for the mothers however. This is because it demands

setting boundaries and generating distance between the interviewer and interviewee. I was therefore wary of how my attempts to appear 'professional' might impact on the speaker's choice of positioning amongst the identity positions available to them. That is, I considered the possibility that my presence as a professional stranger – seemingly dispassionate, factual, objective – might encourage parents to adopt a position that registered their convergence with the authorised role of the consumer; an issue I explore in my discussion of my encounter with Cassy. It therefore became increasingly difficult for me to maintain such a position within each interview, given that I was interested in examining how parents' engagements with choice might be socially inflected through positions that are either devalued or marginalized in dominant discourses around choice. Such a performance was unhelpful in that it supported a view of the parent as a consumer and therefore indirectly assigned a special status to it – as the preferred, normalized and acceptable speaking position.

The constructionist premise of the complex, dynamic and interactive nature of interviews (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) suggests that agency never stands alone in isolation or in a vacuum, but rather tends to be influenced by the presence of others. Agency evolves through a generative dynamic that is constituted through dialogic exchanges. In ethical terms, it is thus important to be wary of how the presence of the self may impact on the performances enacted by others. The following experience should illuminate some of these issues. It explores how my own subject position and identity as researcher was sometimes made aware to me during the interview and forced me to consider the moral implications of my actions.

The Ethical Implications of Research: Lessons Learned in the Field

During my pilot study I had interviewed a single mother from Indonesia, hereafter referred to as Cassy. One week after the interview Cassy contacted me by phone and asked whether I might assist her in looking at some school brochures and possibly explaining some of the information and advice offered to her by the Local Authority. I was reluctant at first and felt ambivalent about the exchange. Would I resume my role as researcher? How might this change the researcher/researched dynamic? Were there ethical implications I needed to consider? I knew from previous experience that Cassy spoke very little English and often relied on her 11 year old daughter (who spoke fluent English) to bridge the language barrier. It occurred to me that Cassy might be wishing to assert herself as a 'chooser' – someone who is knowledgeable, discerning, even discriminating. While Cassy's daughter possessed considerable knowledge of the schools in Camden, it was not enough to convince Cassy of her daughter's capacity to choose. Cassy rarely deferred to the judgment of her daughter and was intent on fulfilling the role assigned to her by the government: the role of the informed, active consumer. It is for this reason that I felt obliged to help Cassy navigate some of the information and advice that was offered to her.

The following week I met with Cassy and we sifted through various school brochures and made some comparisons using the information available. Much of our time was spent reading the procedures for choosing set out by Camden council. One of the most uncomfortable experiences I had to endure was when Cassy asked for my

advice on which schools were the 'best'. My knowledge of Camden schools was limited at the time yet Cassy was convinced I knew more than I let on. I was reluctant to give any direct answers on the grounds that they would be partial and biased. However, even as I was speaking, I was struggling to define these terms. What is impartial advice and how do we arrive at it?

On arriving home, I reflected on the peculiarities of the situation. The conversation had proceeded in a very formal way, without too much emotion and therefore resembled our previous encounter. However, this time I felt I was being addressed differently, as a professional or specialist in education. Or perhaps Cassy had always viewed me in this way and it was only my insecurity as an amateur researcher that had led me to believe I wasn't being taken too seriously. I was suddenly made aware of the power differentials implicit in the research process and the role of the researcher as professional stranger. Rogers (2003), for example, raises some interesting questions around what is an appropriate relationship for a researcher to take towards his or her researcher subjects and offers a reflexive account of the difficulties and advantages that come with avoiding a disimpassioned or disinterested method of interviewing. There are, of course, also ethical implications attached to such an approach, in so far as it blurs conventional understandings of the researcher-researched relationship. For example, any amount of misinformation could have caused Cassy to make the 'wrong' choice. This led me to consider the weight of power afforded to the position of the researcher as something which can never be taken-for-granted or simply go unnoticed. It must be interrogated at every step of the research process.

This encouraged me to think about how my presence as a researcher might impact on the way people position themselves differently; in particular, how positions are shifting, mutable, intersecting, fluid and context-sensitive. Furthermore, it encouraged me to rework my initial interview questions to suit a particular kind of open-ended questioning. For example, during the pilot interviews I tended to ask questions that evoked, and even reproduced, dominant ideas around parenting and school choice, such as: How involved are you in your child's education? When did you start weighing up and comparing information about schools? The problem with these particular questions is that they operate with a view of the parent as a consumer at their centre and therefore fail to open up the possibilities for a discussion around the extent to which parents might wish to comply with or reject these constructions. Hence, I revised my interview questions in a way that left open the possibility for resistance to these positions. Instead of asking parents 'When did you start weighing up and comparing information about schools', I would ask 'What sources of evidence and information did you feel was important to your school choice?'. That is to say, I deployed questions that were more neutral and open-ended, and which didn't reproduce dominant versions of the 'good' parent (Oria *et al.* 2007) – someone who is basically self-maximizing and adept at positioning themselves in the role of the consumer.

Discursive Analysis: Capturing the Messiness of Positions and Relations

The idea that identity and agency do not exist in a vacuum but rather tend to evolve within contexts is a central tenet of the discursive analytical approach offered by Wetherell and Potter (1992; also see Potter and Wetherell 1987) and one that

complements the theoretical reach of the main research question guiding this study, which has as its focus the ways in which some mothers engage with choice. In many ways this study builds on the work developed by Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball who argue that choice-making among parents must be read in all its complexity and inter-relatedness as context-fashioned: 'Thus we remain interested in the spread of parental concerns, but we wish to capture the varied meanings people give to such criteria and the ways in which these "reasons" are embedded in contexts and processes to which people are differently connected' (1994: 75). They add: 'We want to try to situate individual processes of decision-making within the multi-layered context in which such decisions are made' (1994: 75). The previous chapter illustrated that much of the research around parental choice, while still keen to situate individual choices within larger discourses, discourses of class (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996), gender (David *et al.* 1997) and race (Reay *et al.* 2007, 2008), fail to articulate the importance placed on the multi-layered context by Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball (1994).

A multi-layered context points to a more dynamic conception of the subject. A discursive approach is therefore welcomed as it suggests that individuals negotiate positionings *through* contexts that elicit their own social practices and ways of behaving. Such a view is in tandem with many of the discoveries highlighted in this chapter, such as the idea that positions are represented and negotiated in contexts; in the interview, for example. This idea is explored more in the next chapter where I focus on the solicitation of performances invoked by the interview and the discourses of choice more generally. In this way, while individuals are addressed through discourses as subjects, they also engage in important processes of 'answering back' (Clarke 2004b). Some mothers engage with choice as consumers, and therefore

inhabit and perform the meanings and positions made available to them through dominant governmental discourses around choice, but also articulate a set of ethical injunctions around their behaviour and thus engage in complicated attempts to reconcile apparently contrasting motivations and orientations, as outlined in chapter 2. In order to make visible the ways in which speakers negotiate and rework valuations of choosing, I therefore transcribed the interview data verbatim. This enabled me to capture the messiness and contradictoriness of everyday speech acts and the ways in which meanings and vocabularies are locally indexed through understandings and interpretations mediating a complicated social and cultural history. Using a phonological approach, which insists on the usual ungrammatical structure and disorganised elements of ordinary speech, was crucial to conveying the idiosyncrasies and vernacular of particular phrases and words used by the speaker. In this way, I was able to away from conventional orthographic approaches which typically use conventional spelling for words and therefore run the risk of ripping the voice out of its social and historical context. Specifically, I wanted to capture the strain, difficulty and anxiety experienced by mothers as they engaged with school choice, as outlined in chapter 2. The following extract shows Judith, a mother with one child, describing why some parents might choose a school for their child that is notoriously 'bad':

Because they don't care. I know that sounds awful. There is a particular person who is in Ellie's class...she's going to Dorney cause her sister goes there and that's why she's sending her there. They don't care about, you know, and it's like at Greendale Ellie's first year she's not allowed out of school at lunchtime which I quite agree. I think eleven and twelve they're still pretty young. Ellie's not streetwise at all. So...and at this

other school they can stay in. Well they do stay in. They're not allowed out until the third or fourth year. That's something else I worry about: roaming the streets at lunchtime.

A phonological approach to transcribing interview data is useful in the context of this study precisely because it makes visible the disjointed character of speech, but also the active negotiation work being performed by the speaker. Judith's attempts to make herself accountable as a subject who cares is discernible through the way she produces statements and judgments about an imaginary group of parents who are potentially less caring, who apparently 'don't care'. The presentation of speech in this way, as ungrammatical and disjointed, also conveys the sense of strain and difficulty being generated through Judith's account. The long pauses indicate moments of transition or reflection, but also point to the speaker's active take-up of discourses, of familiar tropes, evaluations, arguments and descriptions, as motivations of accountability (Wetherell 1998).

The coding procedure also involved deploying a discursive approach that was sensitive to the speaker's movement in, through and across positions, and the meanings and vocabularies generated through them. The practice of building up common themes across the data as well as uncovering the discordances within those accounts was both systematic and time-consuming. Reading and re-reading transcripts three or four times enabled me to get a feel for the data – its pace, movement, limitations, difficulties – and to uncover themes that may have previously gone unnoticed. Identifying common elements across the data was therefore a crucial strategy of my coding procedure, as was making visible the disjuncture and messiness

around positions and vocabularies invoked through those accounts. In turn my analysis of the interview data was focused around exploring how discourses of emotion, community and responsibility are descriptively built up. The next stage of my analysis moved on to locate the motivations of accountability and action orientations (Wetherell 1998) guiding and shaping these descriptions, keeping in mind the following questions: Why this utterance here? What is the speaker trying to achieve? What subject positions are being taken up, resisted or reworked? How is this negotiation work being achieved?

A discursive approach, then, allows for a much richer view of the subject as a reflexive, acting, discursively constituted and discourse producing subject. It opens up that analytic space (formerly closed by deterministic sociological accounts) in which speakers can be found acting agentically: refusing, displacing, negotiating, and reworking the discursive resources available to them (Holland and Lave 2000). In this way, subjects can be understood as reflexive and relationally constituted. The interview, for example, creates its own barriers, ways of speaking and acting, and thus performances are often limited to the positions made available in these contexts. Code (1995) argues that rhetorical spaces, such as the interview, limit the kinds of utterances that can be voiced as both speaker and hearer carry expectations about how they wish to be heard and understood. As a corollary, interviews tend to operate as a 'highly specific discursive genre' (Wetherell 2003: 25) that creates its own exchange process. From this position, the interview can be viewed as an 'active' process (Arendell 1997; Lee 1997) jointly produced and constituted by the researcher and researched, where the researcher and researched are understood to be mutually implicated in the production of what constitutes knowledge.

This view of the interview as an active, dialogical exchange forces us to consider the possible impact researchers have on the production of knowledge and counts towards knowledge. As Skeggs warns:

To ignore questions of methodology is to assume that knowledge comes from nowhere, allowing knowledge makers to abdicate responsibility for their productions and representations. (2002: 17)

As a professional, young, White male, I also began to consider how my gender and race, in particular my age, might have impacted on the responses given in the interviews. Some researchers (Archer 2002, 2003; Essed 1990; Papadopoulos and Lees 2002) note that there are intrinsic political problems that arise where White researchers undertake research with people of minority ethnicities. These researchers presume that research participants who share the same racial or ethnic background as the researcher will be more inclined to speak openly and confidently to that person about issues they feel only that person can understand and respond to either in a compassionate or sympathetic way. A possible solution to overcoming racialized difference and distance in interviewing is the ethnic matching of the interviewer and interviewee. This is thought to be a good example of ethnic sensitivity. However, Gunaratnam argues that such an approach merely works to 'simplify and codify the complexity and contingency of difference into unambiguous, predictable and apparently manageable processes' (2003: 81).

The ethnic matching of the researcher and researched was neither intrinsically possible nor necessarily desirable in this study. As Harding (1991) notes, the

researcher is always partial and, furthermore, power differentials will always remain even between researchers and participants from similar backgrounds due to the nature of the research process (Oliver 1992; Phoenix 1994). Some of these critical issues were addressed very early on in the research during my pilot study. It was around this time I chose to move away from an approach which emphasized the problem of ethnic sensitivity and ethnic matching in interviews and instead replace it with an approach that worked towards 'uncovering/recognising the difference differences make' (Reay 1996b: 446). This particular approach stresses the importance of engaging with questions around how difference and social relations are animated through research. Moreover, it privileges a view of the researcher and researched as simultaneously occupying positions of empowerment and vulnerability given their involvement in the telling, hearing, interpretation and exchange of each others' responses.

All the parents interviewed for this study were mothers and were typically distressed and anxious subjects, overwhelmingly concerned with the outcome of their school choice application. This leads to a consideration of the potential impact of my age, race and gender on the exchanges that took place during the interview. A key feature of government discourses and rationalities around choice is a focus around a subject who engages in processes and practices that register a consumerist orientation to education services, as outlined in chapter 2. The desire among some mothers to articulate and mobilise a discourse of emotion works to undermine, even transcend, such an orientation, reflecting their engagement with complicated attempts to reconcile apparently conflicting and competing frameworks of choosing. My presence as a young male may therefore have impacted significantly on the motivations guiding these mothers in to taking up such a position, given that values of

caring and compassion are sometimes framed around ‘a psychology and interiority usually ascribed to women’ (Walkerdine 2003: 242). This explains in part why the discourse of emotion as a framing for school choice emerges so powerfully in chapter 5. It is possible that the mothers in this study wanted me to understand the importance of a discourse of emotion as a resource mothers invest in, rather than an ‘irrational’ or illogical position mothers simply perform unreflexively out of anxiety or uncertainty over the choice process. This highlights the importance of discursive and material categories of age and gender as powerful framings that are implicated in the production of what counts towards necessary or desirable speech in the context of the interview. Race, also, appears to constitute the boundaries of what is speakable and what is unspeakable in the context of the interview. The following extract shows Judith, a single mother with one daughter, describing a school visit:

You know, as much as there were White children there was Black children, there was Indian, Chinese people, but now you walk in and you do not see...June [Judith’s niece] is like going into year 10. Even in her classes she’s the only White girl in her class. There’s a few Chinese and a few Black girls. You know, you just peer through the door and you don’t see many White faces and it all seems for like there lessons Anna [Judith’s daughter] can take for Bengali. I’m not being funny, why do I want her to learn [Bengali].

Explicit in this statement is a racialized interpretation of the merits and distinction of the school under consideration. We might reflect on the possible impact my race, as a White person, may have had on this exchange. The phrase ‘you don’t see many

White faces' suggests that Judith equates skin colour to determinate and homogenized realities of identity. Here, White is unproblematized as a familiar and stable category of identity – it registers a sense of belonging and attachment as well as a rejection of the Other. The exchange above may have evolved differently however, or have been muted entirely, if I was not White. For example, there may have been more discretion around Judith's rejection of the Bengali language, precisely because there is implicit in Judith's voice a fear of being labelled racist, captured through the phrase 'I'm not being funny'. In this way, my age, race and gender might have shaped the research evidence generated through the interviews as a whole. Consequently, the impressions and representations generated through my analysis of the data need to be understood as context-specific and structured through the availability of vehicles of discursive and material categories of class, race and gender.

Selection and Analysis of Interview Material: Uncovering Disjuncture and Troubled Moments

The discursive and dialogical approach outlined in chapter 3 therefore emerged in relation to some of the discoveries outlined in this chapter, mainly the idea that the discursive practices through which hearers and speakers are constituted are also the resources through which listeners and speakers negotiate complex positionings. The analytical and conceptual tools which I use to read the interview data in chapters 5-8 were largely inspired by this discovery: that utterances can be understood as a particular kinds of speech acts and social acts through which speakers make use of particular symbolic orders and signifying practices in order to make themselves recognisable to others and 'accountable' (Wetherell 2005). The dominant discourse

of choice indexes parental behaviour in particular ways, as outlined in chapter 2, with the intention of strengthening the legitimacy of some positions (i.e. an active, autonomous, calculating subject) as against others (i.e. a distressed, anxious, emotional subject). Cassy, for example, enacts behaviour that registers an active, and therefore 'deserving', conception of the subject (Clarke *et al.* 2007). This behaviour tends to be indexed in powerful ways as corresponding to a preferred model of user engagement with education services. It thus carries certain dialogic, anticipatory and ideological usages (Billig 1996; Maybin 2001), but also attendant 'rights, obligations and expectations' (Davies and Harré 1990: 52).

Wetherell's (2005) explication of troubled and untroubled positions offers a unique vantage point from which to view the ways in which mothers struggle over the dominant meanings and practices opened up through discourses of choice. 'Trouble' is characterised by 'moments of repair, hesitation, conflict, disjuncture, unease, misunderstanding and self-correction' (Wetherell 2005: 7); those moments that reveal the internal contradictions and confusion of the apparent stability and homogeneity of subject positions. The interview with Cassy reveals none of this however. Instead, it signifies what Wetherell calls 'untroubled interaction' (Wetherell 2005: 7). What makes this interaction in part 'untroubled' is the lack of emotion, which, if articulated, would have invariably made troubled work out of a seemingly untroubled position (i.e. the parent as logical, calculating, instrumental, etc.). In chapters 5-8 I draw on Wetherell's conceptualisation of troubled and untroubled positions to explain some of the discordance emerging between the voices of mothers and the authorised vocabularies and positions championed through the dominant discourse of choice.

More broadly, though, I mobilise a discursive approach in my reading of the data; an approach that uses variants of discursive psychology which work across both conversation analysis and post-structuralist discourse theories (see Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell 1998; Wetherell and Edley 1999). In contrast to a purely conversation analytic approach, with its emphasis on exploring how people achieve certain things in talk (i.e. manage accusations, justifications and evaluations), a discursive approach sets out to explain how speakers are part of, and continuing, the ideological history of the discursive themes which they are using (Billig 1996). In a similar vein, the dialogic approach of Holland and Lave (2000) emphasizes that cultural forms mediate a structured social existence or local structure of feeling. Here subjects are understood to participate in the production of ongoing struggles that are historically and socially produced. Both approaches are useful for explaining how mothers, when formulating their school choices, stand at the intersection of multiple sets of competing and sometimes contradictory discourses which they actively engage with and negotiate. Discussing how mothers move between discourses and negotiate the counter-positionings generated through this ongoing movement, then becomes an important focus of this study, as it emphasises agency and resistance.

In analysing the interview data I therefore tend to identify extracts that capture the messiness and contradictoriness of choice; in particular, those moments that register troubled and untroubled work (Wetherell 2005). How people appropriate and resist multiple framings is a critical feature of my selection of extracts. A central task in my analytical approach to the data is to look for common elements or points of confluence that occur across different interviews. Emotion, community and responsibility, for instance, emerge as powerful discursive resources through which

mothers negotiate choice. In highlighting these discourses, I also explore some of the contrasting, and often conflicting, positions evoked through their articulation and map out some of the multiplicity and disjuncture generated through the take-up and negotiation of these positions. In particular, I show the multiplicity of meaning generated through mothers' identifications with these positions and framings and examine the struggles over meaning resulting from these appropriations, reworkings and refusals. How these discourses are taken-up, resisted and reworked is a central focus of my analysis of the data. But also, in highlighting the troubled work underpinning these trajectories, I make visible the untroubled moments (Wetherell 2005): those moments that register a model of a preferred, regularised, authorised subject. Who gets to perform untroubled positions, for example? What might be suppressed or unsupported as a result of this positioning? How is the balance between troubled and untroubled positions negotiated or reconciled?

Conclusion

In this chapter I have elaborated on the way the theory and method shaping this study has tended to develop iteratively. A major discovery in the early stages of my research was the context-sensitive nature of talk and, in particular, the powerful way voices tend to mediate other voices and how the rhetorical demands of the interview mean that voices are always performed and constrained in complex ways. Parents sometimes improvise, appropriate and adapt to the dialogical capacities summoned through dominant policy discourses around choice, for instance, precisely because of the ideological usage it carries (Billig *et al.* 1988). The take-up of this position suggests that identity is inconsistent and variable, as it tends to be located in and

shaped by the discursive and material demands of competing ideological claims. Such a view makes space for agency, albeit agency constrained by the solicitation of performances in varied contexts and the cultural repertoires or resources to which people have access. In order to highlight the struggles over meaning and practice generated through parents engagement with questions around choice, it is important to address the subject through a more discursive and dialogic reading of agency, one that moves beyond the homogenization of voices through class, gender and race discourses, and instead makes visible the articulation, combination and negotiation of those discourses as relationally constituted elements in the formation of choice and agency.

The absence of discursive methodologies in studies of parental choice therefore warrants such an approach. The turn to discursive and dialogic methods should allow for a fuller, richer and more complex appreciation of the nuances and negotiations framing parents' school choices. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, my approach to interviewing, analysis and research methods has as its aim the need to explore the way some mothers successfully manage to couple different identifications (of the parent and consumer, for example) to create hybrid forms of identity (the citizen-consumer), and the way other mothers struggle to manage the tensions in these identifications. The next chapter uses a discursive approach to show how some mothers struggle to appropriate the meanings and practices made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice, and the positions summoned through it. It looks at the strategies used by some mothers to cope with the difficulties and dilemmas opened by choice and points to the kinds of negotiations that take place

when mothers try to reconcile apparently competing rationalities or try to manage contradictions.

Chapter 5

Mothers Performing and Rationalising their School Choices:

Emotion and the Ethical Strand in Talk

The discursive approach developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987) (also see Wetherell and Potter 1992), with its emphasis on how the take-up or refusal of positions is shaped by motivations of accountability (Wetherell 1998) and the 'action orientation' of peoples' talk (Wetherell and Edley 1999: 338), offers opportunities for tracing the various possibilities for positioning in everyday interaction. Such an approach is useful in the context of this study in that I am interested in exploring choice as a discourse, framing and function parents inhabit and perform. In this view choice as discourse produces knowledge, forms of expertise and truth (Hall 1997) which mothers must engage with as subjects with choice, as outlined in chapter 2. It is therefore important to examine how these engagements are played out and rehearsed by some mothers and to make visible the interpretative repertoires (Wetherell 1998) some mothers bring to bear upon their understandings and experiences of these engagements. In this way I am keen to explore the dialogic significance of utterance (Bakhtin 1981, 1986); the idea that voice is constructed in and through the assimilation of others' discourses, making voice a situated performance framed around an 'authoritative discourse' (Bakhtin 1981: 78) that carries certain dialogical and ideological usages (Billig *et al.* 1988).

The aim of this chapter, then, is to examine the ways in which some mothers draw on particular sets of meanings and values as strategies for accounting for their school choice and to highlight the extent to which these frameworks of choosing fit with or depart from the vocabulary of economic rationality inscribed in through dominant policy discourses around choice, as outlined in chapters 1 and 3. Identifying the cultural repertoires or discourses through which some mothers make sense of their school choice leads to a consideration of what is excluded in these accounts; in particular, how mothers manage the contradictions and tensions resulting from the take-up of certain positions over others. In this framing, a discursive approach is desirable given its attention to the creative and inventive workings of agency.

The chapter is organised into three sections. The first section points to some of the different positions and vocabularies legitimated and encouraged through the dominant governmental discourses around choice. The chapter builds, therefore, on my discussion in chapter 1 about the tendency in British policy and political discourse to assign agency and responsibility to parents as consumers of education services. By mapping the way parents are invited to construct themselves in the role of the 'active citizen' (Ministers of State 2004: Paragraph 3.4.3), I demonstrate the consumerist attitudes and orientations that parents are guided into adopting as a basis for their understandings of and relations to education services. The second section looks at the different strategies of rationalisation undertaken by mothers in these contexts. I explore, on the one hand, the extent to which some mothers appropriate the positions and vocabularies that are made available to them in these contexts. On the other hand, I make visible the way some mothers resist and refuse these positions and

vocabularies, reconcile apparently contradictory positions, or hold onto alternative sets of values, preferences and moral orders. The third section considers what implications these inconsistencies and contradictions in positioning have for thinking through and beyond the concept and practice of 'responsible' and 'active' parenting.

The 'sovereign' figure of the consumer in education policy and practice is reflected in the way government and non-government websites assemble meanings and values around what it means, or should mean, to act 'responsibly' and 'reasonably' in the realm of education, as outlined in chapter 2. This suggests that there is an explicit cultural imperative attached to performing the role of the consumer, since it mediates assumptions around parenting itself. This chapter therefore makes transparent the extent to which mothers' engagements with the discourse of choice are animated by particular ideological tensions (Billig *et al.* 1988), and how these engagements can be understood as struggles over the meanings and practices of choice.

Enacting the Role of the Consumer: Rationality and Calculation?

Chapters 1 and 2 illustrated how the dominant discourse of choice tends to be structured around a conception of the parent as a consumer of education services, with a view of the parent as a self-sustaining, discerning and discriminating user. Parents are charged with the responsibility for navigating and negotiating a field of choice 'successfully' (DfES 2005: 3.11) and enacting a form of agency that conforms to an 'active' or 'effective' model of citizenship (Ministers of State 2004: 3.4.3). This has brought with it a new dynamic to the relationship between users and service

providers, to the relationship between state and citizens (Clarke 2005a), and to the construction of a model of citizenship based on responsibilities and duties as well as rights (Dwyer 1998). It also has important implications for thinking through models of citizenship as transient, relational and dynamic constructions, as outlined in chapter 1. In this context, parents are solicited into being responsible for activities formerly carried out by government agencies. Local Education Authorities (LEAs), for instance, have been stripped of their power in choosing where children should go to school and instead it is parents who are responsible for making that decision as active choosers of welfare, and forced to enact the behavioural obligations that underpin those constructions of agency in the realm of welfare.

Chapter 2 mapped out some of the behavioural obligations summoned through the dominant governmental discourses around choice, with a strong emphasis on the exchanges and dialogues that normally occur in and around the time when parents are expected to enter the process of choosing. School visits and school appeals processes, for example, are highlighted as important sites for capturing the dynamics of these exchanges; in particular, for illuminating the way mothers are invited to inhabit and perform certain forms of agency assumed to be advantageous or profitable in the realm of education. One of the defining features of such an active citizen is someone who refuses emotional arguments in favour of rational ones (Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008) and who enacts strategies of risk-avoidance by asking the 'right' questions (Rooney 2007). The clinical and instrumental basis for this approach means that emotion and logic are located in an antagonistic relationship, as signifying contrasting and competing forms of behaviour. Logic tends to be privileged as corresponding to a preferred model of agency while emotion is denigrated as counterproductive or

worthless. In this framing, the discourse of emotion can be closely approximated to what Bauman would call the 'plight of the flawed consumer' (1998: 1). Here the need to present oneself as having some agency, power and control is often elided with representations of the active citizen as someone who is basically calculating and logical. As a corollary, behaviour which is assumed to be emotional in character tends to be ignored or marginalised in these contexts as vague and trivial. It is constructed as not congruent with the projection of an active, autonomous self. As a result, parents are frequently called upon to manage their emotions by adjusting their behaviour to fit with certain standardised rationalities rather than its anxieties and insecurities (see Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008; Rooney 2007).

Chapter 2 identified some of the strategic flows of power and discourse through which new subject positions and practices are implicated in the realm of education. It showed how different government and non-government websites construct and legitimate as dominant ideas around what it means, or should mean, to be an active citizen in the context of local 'secondary school markets' (Lucey 2004: 86). A defining feature of the School Appeals Services, for instance, is the way in which it mobilises and communicates ideas of risk, uncertainty and anxiety. It addresses parents as potentially anxious and distressed subjects whose actions will have an effect on those for whom they are responsible, thereby in part colonising the space of passions, desires, insecurities and fears relating to parenting itself. As Ball observes, 'Parenting is also increasingly experienced in response to both policy and economic changes as 'risky' business...Parenting itself is increasingly commercialised (2004: 4). The promotion of strategies of risk-avoidance, such as 'preparation and planning early' (Directgov), asking the 'right' questions (Parents Online), 'stick[ing] to the

facts' (Rooney 2007) and abandoning 'emotional arguments' in favour of logical ones (Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008), contribute towards indexing parental behaviour through consumer inflected understandings of agency – logical, calculating, discriminating and so forth. As such these strategies stand for, encapsulate or represent the potential worth, quality or value of different approaches to choice.

With the dominance of the idea of the consumer as a crucial vector of New Labour policy around education (DfEE 2001; DfES 2001; DfES 2004; DfES 2005; DCSF 2008a), parents may be positioned differently, as active or passive, depending on their inclination to and capacity for choice (Clarke *et al.* 2007). The resulting image is one of an uncomfortable distinction between active consumers and passive citizens (mapped as the independent and dependent, the inert and alert, the deserving and undeserving). This chapter shows how the active-passive dynamic shaping the dominant discourse of choice is problematic. It explores the extent to which choice can be considered the focus of 'struggles of meaning' (Newman 2007) as some mothers attempt to make sense of it, to reconcile potentially contradictory trends and tendencies, or hold on to alternative frameworks of meaning and practice that work to subordinate the consumerist logics shaping it. At the same time, the emergence of multiple discourses of choice demonstrates how the voice of the parent is part of an ongoing, unfolding relationship between government and non-government representations of 'reasonable' and 'responsible' parenting and the everyday representations mothers create and negotiate for themselves.

Resisting and Reworking the Calculating Framework of Choosing

The website Parents Online offers information, advice and support to parents on issues relating to schooling, as well as general issues such as nutrition for young children.³⁷ A defining feature of this website is the articulation of a framework of 'do's and don'ts' which parents are invited to reflect on, take-up and possibly rehearse through their exchanges with teachers and children in the context of schools visits, making these exchanges performative and behavioural sites for the re-enactment of the role of the consumer. Parents Online stipulates that parents should avoid appearing 'overly antagonistic or timid when asking questions' through their interactions with other parents and teachers and therefore what is invoked here is a view of the parent as self-confident, mild-mannered, discriminating, discerning, and autonomous. Such a view works to construct parental behaviour in particular ways. First, it brackets school visits as potential sites for uncovering some 'truth' relating to the standard or values of the school. This demands a discerning consumer with discriminating taste – someone who is able to identify 'signs' that register a 'happy school' or a 'good standard of work at the school'. Second, it encourages parents to conduct themselves in ways that register a 'reasonable', self-assured and therefore deserving subject. The following extract, taken from an interview with Caroline (C), a single mother with two young boys, demonstrates the instrumentalising impulse underpinning such an approach, and the importance it carries for some mothers:

³⁷ <http://www.parents.org.uk/index.html?parents-welcome.html&2>
Access date: 28.01.2009

Extract 5:1

A: Could you tell me a little about faith schools? You've mentioned the ethos and vision of the school, and the religious focus it has. How important is this to a child's education?

C: Well for us that was very important. Well it was an equal balance if you like between being quite cold and clinical and looking at the Ofsted reports, that was the research end of it, and there was the values end of it and actually how the children behaved, how they valued each other, the sort of values that they were given and whether there was a spiritual dimension to their teaching and their learning, which wasn't trying to drill some kind of faith into them necessarily, but it wasn't just being very PC about let's have everyone's completely faith with no particular emphasis. So it was an element.

For Caroline, choosing a secondary school for her youngest son involved moving between two alternative sets of values and preferences; one based on a form of instrumental calculation geared towards acquiring and putting in to service a consumerist orientation, and the other stemming from a desire to match the values and beliefs of the individual to the school. These two interconnected yet contrasting approaches open up conflicting sets of positions and vocabularies. The former approach can be closely approximated to a marketized or consumerist impulse given it registers meanings and activities that spring out of the role of the consumer. It mediates a calculating framework of choosing. The New Labour government, for instance, defined school information relating to achievement and attainment tables, inspection reports, admission arrangements and so forth as constituting 'the key information that parents need to know [when choosing a secondary school for their child]' (DfES 2005: 3.8) – what Ball and Vincent refer to as 'cold knowledge' (1998: 380). Such an approach is echoed and redeemed through the voice of Caroline who elides it with a more calculating and instrumental form of user engagement with education services. In contrast to this approach, Caroline articulates an alternative

framework of choosing based on seeking out schools that promote values that are analogous to her own. This approach is captured in the website Parents Online, outlined in chapter 2, which displays instructions on how parents can be expected to read the 'signs' that convey the 'truth' about a school – its 'morale', for example.

Chapter 2 demonstrated the extent to which this framework of choosing tends to register strong feelings of obsession and fixation among many mothers, mainly because it encourages parents to formulate their choice independent of the advice and information offered by the government (through inspection reports and league tables, for example) and the schools themselves. Wetherell's (2005) explication of troubled and untroubled positions offers a way into opening up discussions around the possible discordances between the voices of mothers and the formal language of choice articulated through government texts around education. The figure of the consumer, arguably, registers an untroubled position for some mothers. Rather than undermine the 'cold and clinical' framework of choosing, Caroline instead appropriates it alongside the 'values end of it' and talks of creating a balanced approach which incorporates both. This produces untroubled work (Wetherell 2005) for Caroline in the sense that her voice connects with powerful messages around what it means to be an active citizen in the realm of education. Her voice registers a model of a preferred, regularised, authorised subject. On the other hand, it is a model of agency that tends to be appropriated by some mothers as much as it is resisted or refused. It is appropriated precisely because it is assumed to offer parents some form of competitive advantage over others, as outlined in chapter 2. Moreover, it carries powerful ideological and dialogical usages (Billig *et al.* 1988), which enable the speaker to lend their voice to hegemonic framings of the self and thus feel validated

or taken seriously as someone who is capable of inhabiting and enacting such a role. There are moments, however, when hegemonic framings of the self are resisted as well as appropriated. The following extract, taken from an interview with Pauline (P), a mother of three children, shows the negotiation work that is needed when the calculating framework of choice is resisted:

Extract 5:2

A: How did you go about assessing the different secondary schools, the different types of education provision available to you? Did you look at Ofsted reports, league tables?

P: I looked at league tables.

A: Did you find them useful at all?

P: No. I find them useful as in you could figure out the top sort of 10 per cent the next...My husband's a mathematician. Statistically the significance of one kid having a cold on one day in the top 100 schools can knock you ten places. It gave me an idea of where they sit in the world but it didn't really do much. I wouldn't change my child for five places or anything.

A: What didn't the brochures, websites, league tables tell you? Was there anything missing from this information in your opinion?

P: The nature of the school, the ethos, what kind of children go there cause what we figured out was the older two schools seemed to recruit the kind of children and put personalities and certain personalities fit in best and I was actually looking for a match that would suit my son's work personality. A school that has a lot of very aggressive children wouldn't work. A school that had a lot of children who were conformist wouldn't work because he's a bit quirky. But a school that pushed him too hard or yelled, or where it's acceptable to be loud, we didn't like that, that kind of thing.

Compared to Caroline, Pauline is far more disparaging of the perfunctory and superficial way parents are expected to draw on formal information as strategies for framing their choice. Instead, Pauline highlights aspects of the ethos of the school and the kind of children it attracts as the main criteria to her decision-making. Her

vocabulary, which registers a fondness for idealising the apparent uniqueness of children as individuals, works to displace and undermine, rather than affirm, the impassive and formal tendencies underpinning the calculating framework of choosing. She provides a truculent account of the statistical and systematic character of this process, but in refusing this calculating position, Pauline also articulates understandings and interpretations that work to achieve some kind of orderliness through the construction of talk. Through the reference to her husband as a mathematician, Pauline demonstrates how conversant she is with the dialogical capacities that spring out of the role of the consumer; someone who is basically clinical and whose reasoning is marked with an instrumental logic. This works to displace any view that her judgments might stem from some form of inertia, passivity or indifference. Moreover, it demonstrates the powerful social (illocutionary) force aligned to speaking and acting in particular ways (Davies and Harré 1990) and the integral connections between everyday practice and representation.

Pauline's voice thus registers a troubled position precisely because she resists and refuses the calculating framework of choosing and the dialogical capacities summoned through it. This gives rise to binary oppositions – the production of comparative models, of contrary arguments and counter positions, of conflicting ways of talking and acting. However, to the extent that the figure of the active citizen is lodged in narratives around the parent as 'informed consumer' (DCSF 2008a: 6), there is a cultural imperative attached to this performance. This means that tensions and ambivalences need to be remedied, transcended or resolved (Davies and Harré 1990) if the speaker is to 'successfully' lend their voice to the position of the consumer. Pauline does not do this, however. Instead, she produces descriptions and

evaluations that register elements of a counter-logic or counter-narrative, with its emphasis on the child. Pauline also attempts to manage rather than resolve or defuse some of the contradictions and tensions flowing from her refusal of the calculating framework of choosing. Paradoxically, Pauline articulates both her capacity to exercise this practice, the process or activity of instrumental calculation, and her lack of desire for it. In this way Pauline can be understood to be enacting a multiplicity of positions and discourses or voices (Maybin 2001; Wertsch 2005), revealing a reflexive and dialogic internal world.

As Wetherell argues, trouble is characterised by ‘moments of repair, hesitation, conflict [and] disjuncture’ (2005: 7) which usually require some form of accounting. Pauline, for instance, demonstrates the cultural imperative in these contexts to be seen to be intelligible and ‘rational’ and to be able to convey one’s choice in the form of judgments, reasons and evaluations as the outcome of some kind of instrumental calculation, and the necessity to convey one’s choice and account for it in a way that ‘makes sense’ to others. Indeed, the calculating position tends to register a type of order and stability in the interaction, held together through powerful discourses that precede the interaction but also help to shape it and make it manageable for speakers to engage with and position themselves within. By refusing and discounting the vocabulary of economic rationality as deficient, Pauline produces troubled work in her talk (Wetherell 2005). Such a refusal runs the risk of Pauline being positioned or positioning herself outside the comfortable, predictable, stable narrative – of the parent as consumer – offered through the dominant discourse of choice. Hence, Pauline registers her association with this position, even while she is clearly disparaging of its dialogical capacities. She knowingly and reflexively enters into this

dialogical relationship in order to be heard, counted and listened to. In this framing, Pauline's voice registers a movement of interactive play between, and struggle over, the meanings and positions made available through dominant policy discourses around choice.

In this way positions are often constructed in anticipation of how they might be read and qualified by others, as fitting with or departing from the rhetorical demands of the immediate context and the privileged (dominant/normative) discourses and positions elicited by these contexts. This highlights both the constitutive element of discourse, and of particular discursive practices, and the idea that speakers are capable of exercising agency in relation to these practices. Moreover, it points to the dialogic character of the voice of the mother (Bakhtin 1986), and the continuous dialogic struggle that takes place within and between discourses. The voice of the mother can thus be understood as a response to other previous or anticipated utterances. That is, speech can be understood as the outcome of the speaker's negotiation of a multiplicity of voices which pre-exist any particular occasion of talk and into which preferred meanings and subject positions are rendered appropriate, untroubled, stable, authorised (Wetherell 1998).

One of the main strategies used by some mothers to displace or undermine instrumental calculation as the main criteria for their choice is through appealing to the figure of the child as central to this process. The following extract, taken from an interview with Kate (K), a mother with one son, illustrates the tendency among some mothers to resist putting into practice a purely economic rationality as a basis for their decision-making, with its emphasis on an instrumental rational calculus. The extract

shows Kate describing bullying among children as a potential problem all schools must confront:

Extract 5:3

K: I mean it happens everywhere but if they can deal with it then that will be the important thing to deal with and have it dealt with. I'm not really that fussed about league tables because I don't think they actually tell you what it's like for a child. So, for example, Sandsdown [her son's primary school], which is always way down the league tables, but actually he is doing really well there. So it is more about him than it is about the school. But it does need to have a good academic, you know. I wouldn't consider Finchley if it was just all about sport. It's got to have the academic side, has to be strong as well.

Kate undermines the importance of league tables as criteria for her school choice. For Kate, league tables fail to capture how the school is lived and experienced by the child; but more crucially, how the same school might be experienced differently by children with particular wants, desires or needs. Kate articulates how her son's primary school appears low on the league tables, yet her son flourishes there. Such reasoning, which is typical among many of the mothers interviewed in this study, leads Kate to conclude that it is the child who is central to the process of choosing. Kate's account illustrates how league tables and the school itself are sometimes peripheral to what is a crucial element in the decision-making process, namely the centrality of the figure of the child and his or her wants and needs. What emerges from Kate's account, then, is an appeal to the child as individuated and unique; a common view which is also discernible through the speech of Caroline and Pauline.

While Caroline and Pauline clearly share divergent and conflicting views on the suitability of using economic forms of calculation in these contexts, with Caroline

signalling a more accepting attitude towards it, both mothers articulate a strong view of the child as distinctive. Pauline, for instance, challenges the calculating framework of choosing, with its emphasis on statistically inflected modes of calculation and evaluation, as inappropriate and even deficient on the grounds that it occludes an image of the child as unique or special. Pauline frequently uses highly individuating terms to describe her son, thereby producing a distinctive and inimitable subject. She remarks on his quirkiness, for instance. In a similar vein, Caroline draws on a vocabulary that (aims to) individualise and personalise the child – ‘very free thinker’, ‘really intelligent child’, ‘razor sharp mentality’, ‘very lateral’ and ‘bright but not in the right kind of way’. These repertoires work to produce an incomparable and inimitable subject born of distinction both authentic and discrete.

Across the interviews there was a tendency among the mothers to deploy a vocabulary that worked to individualise their child as a distinctive subject. For Pauline and Caroline, both of whom have children with difficulties in learning, using such vocabulary works as a powerful mechanism in transforming the calculating framework of choosing into something which appears devoid of feeling or sensation. It brackets the child as beyond calculation, estimation or quantification, as highly particular and incomparable subjects, and strengthens a view of the activity or process of economic rationality as imitable, impersonal, detached and replicable. The following extract, however, demonstrates the seduction of the calculating framework of choosing for some mothers and the way it reflects back on them in positive ways:

Extract 5:4

A: May I ask who you spoke to: friends, family?

C: Well my family wouldn't know anything about this because they were dead keen that they should go to a Catholic comprehensive school, not because they wish to drum Catholicism in, but because my father particularly had done a bit of research on this school in Kensington and he knew that it was a red hot school. If you could get your child in there they were in a good school. You had done really well provided that the school suited them.

Here, Caroline demonstrates the extent to which some mothers respond positively to the construction of the parent as an 'active citizen' (Ministers of State 2004: Paragraph 3.4.3) and 'informed consumer' (DCSF 2008a: 6) of education services, where 'active citizen' is framed by a definition of a parent who is participative in the meanings and practices that constitute the role of the consumer, as outlined in chapters 1 and 2. Similar to Pauline, Caroline has a son with learning difficulties who thus is unable to 'fit' potentially into any school. As a result, Caroline is unable to 'maximize' her position in a way that allows her to exercise dominant and privileged forms of agency in the realm of education. Caroline is aware of the construction of local 'secondary school markets' (Lucey 2004: 86), for example, and the preferred role of the parent as consumer within that context. In the use of the phrase 'You had done really well provided the school suited them', Caroline makes explicit the different symbolic and material rewards attached to this form of engagement with education services. However, despite Caroline's strong inclination to and capacity for this type of engagement with choice, it is evident that her motivations might be constrained by her son's educational needs. This explains in part why Caroline, like Pauline, moves between different frameworks of choosing, and the different sets of discourses and positions invoked through them.

In this way there is a disjuncture between the meanings and positions bolstered and encouraged through the dominant discourse of choice and the limited dialogical capacities of some mothers. Caroline, for instance, cannot engage with choice in the way she would ideally like to. This suggests that even for those mothers who express a willingness to engage with choice in idealised middle-class ways, where such behaviour can be read as advantageous and profitable given the implicit middle-class norm around which the discourse of choice is framed (Gewirtz 2001), the capacity to do so must be read in the context of the needs of the child. What is invoked here is a child-centred discourse, with the needs of the child at the centre of the process of choosing. The inclination and capacity for choice must therefore always be read in relative terms as bound to the needs of the child. It is not simply that some parents possess a stronger inclination for and capacity towards choice compared to others (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995), but that sometimes choice is negotiated primarily with the child at its centre. Both Caroline and Pauline, for instance, demonstrate a strong capacity for exercising their choice in ways that might be deemed 'proper' or 'correct' – that is, fitting with the consumerism celebrated in government texts around education. However, this capacity, though strong, is negotiated alongside the needs of the child. Here, it is the child rather than the parent who emerges as central to discourses of choice.

The location of the child in these narratives around choice can also be understood to foreground an important discourse that features regularly as part of some mothers negotiation of the meanings and practices summoned through the dominant discourse of choice, namely the discourse of emotion. Both Pauline and Caroline account for their sons' learning difficulties in a way that emphasizes their uniqueness as

individuals rather than their disadvantages as learners. Pauline's son experiences speech difficulties, which present him with challenges inside the classroom where many of the children 'are louder than he is and more aggressive because they speak better'. Pauline, however, resists using any vocabulary that might normalise, and therefore pathologise or stigmatise, her son within a special educational needs (SEN) discourse. She achieves this by drawing on the adjective 'conformist' – a person who conforms to social convention and distinction, accepted behaviour or established practice – to specify the type of person her son is not. Crucially, she sets up an image of her son as a unique and incomparable subject; as someone who does not fit easily into a system of equivalence or sameness. This explains in part why Pauline resists channelling her decision-making through the prism of instrumental calculation and refuses to enact the usual construction of the conventional, authorised speaking position: of the parent as a consumer. The formulation of the parent as consumer fails to capture, for instance, the delicate matching process assumed to be needed to sustain the happiness and personality of the child. Crucially, Pauline's practice of matching the 'ethos' of the school to the 'personality' of the child is set against the practice of mobilising instrumental calculation as a basis for choosing. In this framing, the former practice is inflected through a powerful emotional discourse as it privileges a more personalised approach to the meaning and practice of choice. Emotion, then, emerges as a counter-hegemonic undertaking in these contexts in that it works to transcend, and position the speaker against, the lofty abstraction particular to some discourses of choice.

Edwards (1999) notes how emotion is sometimes imagined as an honest expression, as something genuine, sincere and incontrovertibly subjective. Kate,

Pauline and Caroline invoke these kinds of ideas and perspectives. Caroline's comment about placing a child who doesn't fit, Pauline's determination to find a school that would suit her son's personality and Kate's emphasis on the child over the school invoke a child-centred discourse. In all these accounts there is an appeal to the idea that the child is only knowable through the mother, rather than the abstractions and divisions posited through a calculated framework of choosing. It registers a notion of the child as unique and original, with a 'personality' the school must adapt to rather than the other way round. Caroline's distinction between a 'cold and clinical' approach and the 'values end of it' invoke a discourse of emotion and feeling, making her motivations and reasons for choosing intangible, unspecified and distinctively subjective. This approach is therefore favoured by some mothers on the grounds that it constructs the child as an inimitable and highly individualised subject, and indexes the child as experiencing emotions, ways of behaving and predilections unique to them. Hence, the 'clinical and cold' approach is understood relationally to be superficial and detached as it fails to capture the 'personal' in the child.

In other ways, too, it might be argued that the discourse of emotion, with its emphasis on the child, is inflected through powerful gendered rationalities. As Pauline makes clear:

My husband is very much on the academic. That's the job. I am more on the are they [the children] happy, are they are healthy, are they growing up to be reasonable people. I think if they can do that then the academics come anyway. That's my philosophy.

Here, Pauline draws on gender as a discursive framing for constructing and delineating the respective roles of mothers and fathers in the decision-making process. Pauline's role, as she perceives it, involves caring for and nurturing the child's well-being. This is contrasted with the role she assigns to her husband who is positioned outside and against the relations and capacities elicited through this caring and compassionate role. The repertoires 'happy', 'healthy' and 'reasonable', for example, work to project an image of Pauline as an ethical, thoughtful and caring subject. However, I do not wish to make essentialist claims to emotion as elements of a dialogical capacity that is particular to mothers and not fathers, nor do I want to deny the possibility that a discourse of emotion might be a gendered position and rationality taken up primarily by mothers over fathers.³⁸ Since I only interviewed mothers in this study, no comparative analysis can be made of the importance of emotion in male and female responses to the choice process. What is clear is that a discourse of emotion was evident in the speech of every mother interviewed in this study and that it was invoked as a strategy for coping with the difficulty, strain and anxiety generated through the policy of parental choice. For this reason, I now move on to discuss the significance of emotion in these contexts as a strategy for managing issues of accountability. In particular, I address the importance of emotion as a discursive resource taken-up by some mothers to legitimate claims to alternative sets of concerns and valuations based on the ethical strand of talk.

³⁸ Walkerdine, for example, claims that the feminine subject is the 'subject of the neo-liberal choice' (2003: 241) as it is the qualities ascribed to femininity – through narratives around upward mobility, flexibility and respectability (Skeggs 2002), for example – which give incitement to women to govern themselves as subjects in a neo-liberal framing. She highlights neo-liberal values to include those of 'emotionality, caring and introspection – the values of a psychology and interiority usually ascribed to women' (2003: 242). Here, then, emotion is assumed to be particular to women precisely because it is indissociable from the historical and social formation of processes of feminisation and the construction of the feminine subject more generally. Walkerdine, however, notes something distinctive about this particular hegemonic framing of the feminine subject in neo-liberalisation, namely that it speaks to, and affirms, a certain middle-class norm of selfhood.

Emotion as Counter-Discourse

Edwards (1999) points to tendencies both in professional and lay psychology to define emotions as distinct from, and in contrast to, cognition and rational thought. Here emotion tends to be viewed as 'natural bodily experiences and expressions, older than language, irrational and subjective, unconscious rather than deliberate, genuine rather than artificial, feelings rather than thoughts' (1999: 273). In this way emotion is characterised as ephemeral and unstable to the extent that it skews or bypasses the 'reasoning process' resulting in irrational action. When activated in the field of choice as responsabilized users of education services, parents are regularly encouraged to formulate their choices around rationalities that engender instrumental forms of calculation rather than emotions, as outlined in chapter 2. This type of reasoning echoes and redeems a set of economic theories around decision-making and thus mediates the standardised rationality presupposed by public choice perspectives (Downs 1967; Dunleavy 1991; Finalyson 2003; Le Grand 1997a; Niskanen 1973). It is therefore interesting to explore how the discourse of emotion is played out and rehearsed as part of mothers' decision-making around choice, and to consider what emotion is doing in these contexts.

In a similar vein to Edwards, who is interested in analysing emotion as a 'way of talking' (1999: 278), as a discourse in use and as a device for managing issues of accountability, I am keen to explore the ways in which the articulation of emotion can be understood as a form of 'social action' (Wetherell 2003) and as discursive resource that (aims to) give socio-cultural intelligibility to individual decisions and actions. Here, I will show how some mothers draw on emotion as a means for negotiating the

vocabularies and positions offered through the discourse of choice, and for accounting for a different model of rationalisation and calculation.

A growing body of sociological and psychological research recognises the gendered character of emotion work in personal relationships (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Warton and Erickson 1995). Reay (2000), for example, operationalises Bourdieu's concept of capital (1986) in order to make sense of the emotion work mothers invest in their children's experiences of education. Drawing on the notion of 'emotional capital' developed by Nowotny, who characterises emotional capital as being produced in part through 'affective ties' (1981: 148; cited in Reay 2000), Reay shows how mothers mobilise emotional resources as a way of improving the educational experiences of their child – through spending more time on homework, out-of-school activities, and so forth. Here, however, emotion is treated in terms of its effects – 'the emotions that mothers felt and communicated to children in the course of supporting their education could have both positive and negative efficacy' (Reay 2000: 573) – rather than analysed as the outcome of mothers' engagement with social and material practices (Moir 2005). Reay's (2000) observation that the successful deployment of emotional capital is constituted in part through the stock of economic and cultural capital already possessed by mothers, has the effect of reducing emotion to a purely psychological process, as something mothers bring to interactions as reactions to matters that represent some 'inner state'.

Emotion can be understood differently through a discursive analytic approach. As Edwards argues, 'Rather than focusing on standardized scenarios and their cognitive representations, discourse analysis focuses on how specific stories are

constructed on and for their occasions, including the ways in which links between emotions and scenarios can be discursively worked up and made relevant' (1999: 278). Edward's (1999) understanding of emotion as a conceptual resource speakers draw on as part of their repertoire is useful for showing the social function and pragmatics of a discourse of emotion in the context of school choice. The idea that a discourse of emotion may be deployed by speakers as part of their negotiation of or accounting for their position complements the main focus of my study, which aims to show how choice can be understood as a framing, discourse and function parents inhabit and perform. Moreover, it illustrates how emotion feeds in to and is a product of the field of choice, making it both simulated and naturalistic. References or actions that register a discourse of emotion automatically generate a set of identifications and positions that are devalued or despised as cultural currency in the field of choice, as outlined in chapter 2. This has implications for how we might view emotion as a form of socio-cultural intelligibility and ask what is being accomplished when speakers mobilise repertoires that index their behaviour through a discourse of emotion. How does it feature as part of some mothers' negotiation of the positions and practices summoned through dominant governmental discourses around choice?

In their study of school choice, Reay and Lucey observe how 'rational accounts' among some children and parents were often outweighed by the 'level of emotion and irrationality in choice-making processes' (2004: 38). Similar to the way emotion is characterised both in professional and lay psychology as running counter to, or undermining, rational thought (Edwards 1999), here emotion is conflated with 'irrationality' as against more 'rational accounts'. Indeed, there is a tendency both in research and media stories around parental choice to define emotion as departing from,

or diametrically opposed to, rational accounts of thought and action. Speaking about school choice, Fiona Millar, journalist for the *Guardian*, argues: 'In the real world, individual choices aren't always rational, but governed by complex emotions, expectations, fears and beliefs around parenting, class and even personal security' (2007). The resulting creation is of a relationship in which emotions are assumed to operate in contradistinction to the rational. Emotion, however, can be viewed differently in these contexts as not simply irrational, and therefore lacking serious thought or consideration, but something that is descriptively built up and worked on through talk as a rhetorical device. Pauline, for instance, uses emotion both as device for undermining strategies of instrumental calculation as criteria for choosing and as a strategy for transcending and reworking it. At the same time, she shows how conversant she is with the calculating framework of choosing, thereby affirming her suitability in the role of the consumer. She also resists a model of economic rationalisation in favour of one based on the ethical strand of talk, with its appeals to the particularity and uniqueness of the child, and thus shows how different rationalisations can be grafted and patched together, where one is judged to be just as important and vital as the other.

To reduce emotion to a kind of subjective or ephemeral sense-making is to undermine the interactional business that emotion can perform in certain contexts (Edwards 1999). Such a view of emotion as performative, as something which is built up descriptively in interaction as a response to social and material practices (Moir 2005), has implications for how emotion is viewed in the context of school choice. In this framing, the articulation of emotion can be understood to emerge as a counter-narrative which is set against the dominant narrative that shapes the discourse of

choice. The dominant narrative can be characterised as shaped by public choice perspectives regarding the self-interested behaviour of individuals, as outlined in chapter 3. It is a narrative that strengthens the legitimacy of certain understandings and interpretations of the relations between users and services in the realm of welfare, where parents and schools are located in the intersection and exchange of consumers and providers. Here, the parent is located in the 'sovereign' position of the consumer as central to the process of choosing. Emotion, however, generates an alternative framework of vocabularies and positions, held together through a set of ethical concerns and valuations framed by an interest in the child. In this way emotion is a counter-hegemonic undertaking. On the one hand, it is mobilised as a means of reworking and undermining the role of the parent as 'sovereign' and instead emphasizes the centrality of the child. On the other hand, it works to disrupt and displace the model of economic rationality as superficial, impassive and detached. As Edwards remarks succinctly, 'Emotional reactions, particularly when offered as reactive and immediate, provide for a narrative and rhetoric of honest expression, contrasted either to cognitive calculation or to a fake, insincere acting-out' (1999: 238).

The interview constitutes a performance that privileges a particular way of accounting for the self – as an ethical, compassionate and thoughtful subject. This is captured through the way some mothers draw on a discourse of emotion, with its appeals to the 'sovereign' character of the child. However, there is also the desire to be taken seriously, a desire which is both natural and simulated given that it is experienced in relation to social and material practices. The desire to be listened to and counted among others as 'active citizens' means that mothers must assimilate

others' discourse and therefore experience themselves in relation to some audiences (Baldwin and Holmes 1987). Both Caroline and Pauline, for instance, show how some mothers, even when refusing to fully adopt a narrow rational, utilitarian view of themselves as consumers, will engage in the negotiation work of trying to reconcile apparently competing rationalities in order to construct some orderliness through talk and to manage contradictions. A central strand in dominant policy discourses around choice, as outlined in chapter 2, is the idea that instrumental calculation implies stability in how parents conduct themselves while unchecked emotion is seen as threatening/destabilizing in terms of its association with a lack of order. Pauline, however, draws on emotion as a means of accomplishing order and strengthening the legitimacy of her position as an impassioned, thoughtful and ethical subject. A discourse of emotion therefore emerges as an expression of refusal and resistance and a deliberate and powerful counter-hegemonic undertaking. These moments capture the struggle that sometimes takes place when some mothers engage with the meanings and practices made available through the dominant discourse of choice.

Choice and the Ethical Subject: Moments of Appropriation and Resistance

Evident in the interview data provided is the appearance of contradiction between positions, possible identities, identifications and the shaky move between them. In particular, the mothers interviewed in this study show the difficulty in holding on to something as stable, enduring and fixed within opposing narratives and discourses. Both Pauline and Caroline tended to actively build on the discourse of emotion, with its emphasis on the child and the substance of feelings as genuine, real and personal.

The appeal of emotion in these contexts is that it offers a counter-logic to the meanings and practices made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice. Moreover, it works to undermine the calculating framework of choosing as devoid of sensation, immediate reaction, gut feeling or instinctual behaviour, making it impassive and superficial. The movement of interactive play between these conflicting sets of vocabularies and positions meant that both mothers were unable to settle on one discourse and instead tended to move between them. The continuous dialogic struggle within and between these apparently competing discourses undermines the idea of choice as a unitary discourse and instead highlights the 'multiplicity of discourses' framing the context of practice (Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994). In particular, it renders assumptions around class-based bifurcation problematic in that all utterances can be viewed as multivoiced and dialogical at the same time (Skinner, Valsiner, and Holland 2001). The voices of the mothers in this study contain one or more implicit or hidden audiences, for example (Markovà 2006; Salgado and Hermans 2005).

Pauline, Caroline and Kate recognise the physiognomy of the consumer as being separate from the realm of the authentic, the real and the personal. What is evoked through an emphasis on the child over the school are feelings which are in part sustained through the relationship the mother shares with the child as an inimitable and original subject. In some extreme cases, the calculating framework of choosing gives rise to suspicion, mistrust and unease, as Camilla (C) illustrates:

Extract 5:5

A: And how do you think a school sustains its reputation?

C: From all that I've seen, for example, the league tables. I don't really follow those.

A: Do you think those are indicative of a school's reputation?

C: No, I don't. I really don't. And I think even the higher the more suspicious I am. The higher the results and the better the results is, the more suspicious I am because even to the secondary school, open days that I went to...Aske and of course I met a really good person and she said, you know, 'this school is about maintaining it's reputation', and yes they may help children who perhaps have some difficulty learning, but that's not their emphasis. So that was quite truthful of her to say that and it made me think twice because it's all well and good getting your son into the best school, but if it's not meeting his needs.

Camilla's 'suspicious' attitude towards league tables relates in part to how she positions schools differently, as either geared towards the needs of the child or centred on containing aspects of reputation. Like Caroline, Pauline and Kate, Camilla is dubious about the usefulness of league tables as criteria for matching the child to the school, namely because it addresses a different set of concerns and valuations. She deplores the way some schools prize reputation above meeting children's needs, for example. For Camilla, information relating to the reputation of the school or its ranking in the league tables precludes any engagement with questions around whether the school is actually fit to meet the child's needs or wants. In contrast, league tables, Ofsted inspection reports and school profile information featured prominently in New Labour texts around education as the 'key information that parents need to know' (DfES 2005: 3.8) if they wish to 'navigate the system successfully' (DfES 2005: 3.11).

The mothers in this study make clear distinctions between the lofty abstraction and division that characterises this information and the more important issue of children's needs. What is invoked here is a child-centred discourse, with a strong

emphasis on the child over the school. The policy and political narratives that shaped the emergence of choice in the realm of education centred on championing the rights and responsibilities of parents as consumers of education services, as outlined in chapter 1. Here, it is the parent rather than the child who is positioned as sovereign in the process of choosing. What emerges from the voices of the mothers I interviewed is the centrality of child in this process. These mothers wish to reclaim the child as central to the framing of their choice. This explains why repertoires that register a discourse of emotion feature so predominantly in the way mothers narrate their experiences of choice. These mothers judge the cold and clinical approach to be far removed from the realm of sensation and feeling, of the personal and the needs of the child. Hence, emotion performs a double role: it produces an index of strain and is one of the ways of being ethical in these contexts. In this way emotion is not a simple 'expression' but instead emerges as a powerful discursive resource put to service in 'the situated rhetoric of description and counter-description, narrative and counter-narrative' (Edwards 1999: 271). In other words, emotion is something which is deliberately constructed in talk, socially constituted and culturally fashioned through a particular set of concerns, valuations and preferences.

In their study of lone mother's negotiation of paid work, Duncan and Edwards discuss how, in contrast to a model of individualistic economic rationalising, 'lone mothers' agency in deciding whether or not to take up paid work is essentially concerned with what is best and morally right for themselves as mothers and for their children' (1999: 109). They further argue: 'What these pictures of economic rationality gloss over is the fact that lone mothers are indeed *mothers*, who socially negotiate particular understandings about what constitutes 'good' motherhood within

particular cultural and neighbourhood settings' (1999: 118). The crux of their argument is that mothers tussle with representations and negotiations of what it means to be a 'good' mother, which impacts on their decisions over whether or not to enter paid work in the labour market. These decisions can therefore not be understood purely through an economic picture of lone mothers' behaviour but instead needs to be explored as the outcome of complex 'socially negotiated rationalities' (Duncan and Edwards 1999: 117).

In turn this chapter demonstrates how mothers' school choices are shaped by practices and processes framed around 'socially negotiated rationalities' (Duncan and Edwards 1999: 117), with a discourse of emotion forming the basis for some of these negotiations over choice and agency. Nonetheless, a significant issue for many mothers is the threat of being positioned outside the dominant discourse of choice as passive, unresponsive or undeserving. As Clarke *et al.* (2007) maintain, the articulation of citizens as responsabilized, moralized consumers has resulted in citizens being mapped differently as either passive or active users of welfare services. There is, then, a cultural imperative attached to performing the role of the consumer, as Caroline makes clear:

Extract 5:6

C: Well I felt that was part of losing naivety about this because when your child is in primary school you trust that school is good but you actually become a lot more aware that it is about being a consumer and then you have to decide well if I am the consumer I'm going to get what I want. You have to be like this if you have it within you to be like that.

What is invoked here is a projection of the self as autonomous and self-determining; a form of agency which can be closely approximated to the figure of the consumer in New Labour policy texts around education, which was outlined in chapter 1. In signing up to this idea of the parent as consumer, Caroline mobilises or gives voice to binary oppositions of the active consumer and passive citizen previously identified. She works to articulate and contain differences between parents as active or passive. Importantly, she indicates the extent to which this form of agency is conditional and contingent: 'You have to be like this if you have it within you to be like that'. The cultural imperative to be seen as 'intelligible' in these contexts, to be able to deliberate choice through forms of judgement, reasons and evaluations in a way that 'makes sense' to others, tends to complicate the mother's desire to resist the calculating framework of choosing. As Pauline demonstrates, despite being vehemently opposed to framing her choice around a model of economic rationality, she articulates her capacity for being able to adjust her decision-making on the basis of a calculating framework of choosing. She thereby makes her accounts appear plausible or reasonable, part of the exchange process created by the interview, and manages expectations about how she might be heard and listened to. In a similar vein, Kate articulates the idea that schools are differently experienced by children and therefore a clinical gaze that makes use of league tables only is unlikely to result in the parent finding the 'right' school for their child. At the same time, she ascribes importance to the idea of schools having a strong 'academic side'. In this way Kate moves between positions and discourses, between an emphasis on the child and an emphasis on the school.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the extent to which some mothers struggle over the meanings and practices made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice and highlighted the repertoires and registers taken-up by some mothers as strategies for managing some of the tensions and contradictions resulting from these struggles. I demonstrated, on the one hand, that some mothers resist or refuse the calculating position of the consumer on the basis that it is devoid of emotion, feeling or sensation. On the other hand, I have shown that the mothers' desire to appropriate this position is also strong, given that it is closely approximated to legitimated forms of 'responsible' and 'reasonable' parenting in the realm of education. This emphasises the relational and dialogic character of choice, namely that utterances can be understood to be formulated as responses to other utterances (Bakhtin 1981, 1986).

Since the introduction of the Education Reform Act 1988 (ERA) in Britain there has been, within Conservative and Labour governments, a major shift towards constructing parents in the role of 'active citizens', where 'active' has come to stand in for, and represent the worth and value of, consumerist approaches to education. Parents are thus invited to adjust their understandings and interpretations of their relation to education services around consumerist notions of agency. The take-up of this position is rarely straightforward however, as some mothers tend to emphasise the importance of the child's needs which itself reworks and at the same time undermines strategies of instrumental calculation, with its appeals to a calculating framework of choosing.

The dynamics of choice are thus inflected through the mothers' desire to maintain some image of the self as compassionate, ethical and reasonable. This is reflected in the way some of the mothers interviewed in this study engaged in systematic attempts to delineate between alternative sets of vocabularies and positions, such as the cold and clinical approach versus the child-centred approach. The tendency among some mothers to communicate their desires, aspirations and motivations through the vocabulary of emotion reveals a preference for the latter approach. This is because emotion tends to register thoughts and feelings that are assumed to be distinctively subjective and original to the individual. In this way the repertoire of emotion creates the conditions of possibility necessary for imagining a child who is inimitable and special. Emotion is taken-up as a powerful discursive resource in these contexts precisely because it undermines the clinical gaze of the consumer. Here the calculating framework of choosing is constructed as unfeeling, artificial and detached in that it occludes an image of the child as unique and instead systematically reduces him or her to the identity of a 'pupil' in a system of equivalence and abstraction.

This chapter has demonstrated that emotion constitutes a powerful discourse that some mothers take up and actively build on descriptively as a means of communicating aspirations and fears relating to choice. From this position, emotion has a double role: it works to undermine the unfeeling, detached and impassive character of the calculating framework of choice and operates as a device for strengthening the articulation of alternative sets of ethical concerns and valuations, as well as unconventional constructions of rationalisation. Emotion, then, is characterised as an expression of active resistance and refusal in these contexts. This neatly captures the idea that consumers are 'unmanageable' (Gabriel and Lang 1995)

and continually act in recalcitrant, unpredictable and contradictory ways, making it increasingly difficult to interpret and theorise the aspirations and intentions of social actors through the framework of an economic rationality. In the next chapter I build on Gabriel and Lang's argument by showing how some mothers negotiate choice through discourses of community and locality, and explicate the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions resulting from these negotiations.

Chapter 6

Choice and Urban Definitions of the Local:

Mapping Social Difference and Community

This chapter builds on the idea that some mothers tend to resist and rework the meanings and practices made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice, namely the tendency to subsume choice within a prism of instrumental calculation that was identified and critiqued in chapters 2 and 5. Such acts of resistance and subversion are taken to be moments in the strengthening of the legitimacy of vocabularies based on ethical principles and values. The previous chapter illustrated how some mothers do not simply perform a means-end model of calculation when choosing a secondary school for their child, but instead negotiate their school choice through the take-up of repertoires that register a discourse of emotion. This negotiation of choice is simultaneously one of subverting existing claims to what it means, or should mean, to be a 'responsible' or 'active' mother, and can be understood to emerge in part as a response to the 'gender-blind and emotion free' character of the dominant discourse of choice, with its intractable focus on 'autonomous, empowered and asocial rationality' (David *et al.* 1997: 401). In contrast to a model of individualistic economic rationality, with its appeals to the parent as a 'maximiser', someone who is 'basically egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental in their behaviour' (Dunleavy 1991: 3), the discourse of emotion points

to a different set of concerns, valuations and preferences based on the interests and needs of the child. The child is often constructed as special, unique and highly individuated, making it increasingly difficult for mothers to frame their school choice around a calculating framework of choosing consisting in the main of abstraction and division. This chapter explores how this negotiation work by mothers is typically handled in the context of localised practices, histories and cultures, with the aim of making visible the importance of community as a framing for some mothers' school choice.

My focus is on how some mothers negotiate their school choice in the context of their understandings and interpretations of notions of community, locality and the local school. It expands on the idea that some parents manage their school choices in the context of local geography (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Reay and Ball 1997), where parents' shifting and conflicting identifications with their surroundings, their local area or community are understood to shape their decision-making in complex ways. Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (1995), for instance, point to the significance of community and locality as powerful framings within which some parents negotiate their school choice and construct their relationships to imaginary classed others. In addressing some of these issues, I move beyond a purely geographical conception of space and place to take account of how a sense of belonging and identification might be 'connected up with the question of political responsibility' (Massey 2004: 6), with local history and culture, and with the 'space' opened up by localized images of 'secondary school markets' (Lucey 2004: 86). My interest is with the forms of identification and non-identification generated

through these accounts and how choice is contested and negotiated through framings of locality and community.

Like chapter 5, I use a discursive approach (Wetherell 1998; Wetherell and Potter 1992) to foreground socially circulating discourses as a pervasive and constitutive element in all social and material practices. As Wetherell and Edley observe, 'When people speak, their talk reflects not only the local pragmatics of that particular conversational context, but also much broader or more global patterns in collective sense-making and understanding' (1999: 338). This chapter explores how some mothers engage with these intersecting vocabularies, of the local and the global, as framings for their choice. It therefore builds on my discussion in chapter 1 around choice mediating government policy discourse and thus a whole set of political rationalities and market imperatives. However, Ball remarks how policy strategies and devices set out of the government tend to be 'messy, contradictory, confused and unclear' (2008: 7) and as a result do not translate directly and uniformly to particular localities and communities. This chapter illustrates the disjuncture between the national and local by showing how on the one hand the field of choice is assembled around policies and practices that are constructed at the national level, but which are primarily negotiated in the context of locally produced forms of identification.

I also explore the ways in which group membership and a sense of belonging among mothers and school campaigners (also mothers) living in Camden is indexed locally and assembled through discursive representations of community, race and faith. This adds a new understanding to the ways in which some mothers engage with the positions and practices opened up through dominant governmental discourses

around choice. It examines how these engagements can be understood as located in and defined through the construction of locally produced meanings and vocabularies.

In order to address these topics, I have organised the chapter into five sections. The first section uses visual resources to analyse how constructions of community, race and faith are mediated and assembled through the websites and school brochures of two Camden secondary schools. The aim here is to show how the field of choice in Camden – what Millar refers to as the ‘local family of schools’ (Millar cited in Osley 2008) – is constituted around the mobilisation of socially circulating discourses. The second section uses extracts taken from interviews with local school campaigners in Camden to explore how ideas around community, race and faith are mapped on to specific areas as devices for structuring and delineating local sites of need. In the third section I discuss the ways in which New Labour policy rhetoric draws on community as a device for soliciting individuals into taking on some of the responsibility for managing local spaces (as sites of community development, community safety and so on). The focus of these sections is on highlighting how community is constructed and imagined locally in Camden and constituted through policy discourse.

The fourth section moves on to a discussion of how community is debated in the context of the policy of parental choice and makes visible the different sets of identifications and positions evoked through these discourses. Finally, I examine the attitudes and orientations of some mothers towards the meanings and practices offered through dominant policy discourses around choice, as outlined in chapters 1 and 2, and reflect on the extent to which these understandings and interpretations are

inflected through the vocabularies and positions identified in sections 1-4. For example, I explore how some mothers manage and negotiate their choice in and through constructions of community and the site of the local school. In identifying the contexts through which these constructions are assembled and imagined, it is possible to show how mothers' engagements with the meanings of choice are socially inflected through notions of locality, identity and agency. Moreover, it enables a richer and complex understanding of the limitations and complications of choice, its strong interrelationship with discourses of community and locality, and the intersecting dynamics of vocabularies and positions framing mothers' school choices.

Constituting the Field of Choice: Community, Race and Faith

A central trend in British education policy and practice since the Conservative governments of the 1980s has been the idea that competition between local providers must be encouraged and facilitated if services are to be responsive and flexible, as outlined in chapters 1 and 3. Moreover, it is assumed that competition produces direct incentives for schools to improve on their services as it incites them to perform in ways that are attentive to market concepts of supply and demand (Le Grand 2007a). This, in turn, creates the conditions of possibility necessary for assigning agency and responsibility to parents as consumers of education services. The assemblage of local fields of choice, then, reflects the political and ideological work of locating schools and parents in and through the intersection and exchange of providers and consumers. In this way the construction of local fields of choice can be understood to reflect the process or activity whereby market principles and practices are articulated through the relationships parents and schools share with each other. This process is discernible

through the way schools actively work to ‘differentiate themselves according to their individual ethos, special character and areas of specialist expertise’³⁹, which is implicated in the construction of what Lucey identifies as ‘secondary school markets’ (2004: 86). Schools also have a duty to offer provision that matches ‘local need’ (DfES 2004: 4.13) and therefore the field of choice mediates the local – local history, local culture, local demographics, and so forth – in powerful ways.

One of the most visible devices used by schools to advertise or promote their services to potential users is through schools brochures and websites. School brochures and websites form an important part of the government’s strategy to produce parents who are ‘better informed consumers’ of education services (DCSF 2008a: 6), making them ‘active citizens’ (Ministers of State 2004: 3.4.3). On the other hand, some mothers are sceptical of the usefulness and transparency of these materials, approximating them to ‘staged’ performances lacking spontaneity and reality. However, as one mother, Kate, commented, ‘I wonder if people would do [choose a school] based on a brochure. It might be enough to get you in the door’. It is therefore important to show how a field of choice is discursively and materially managed. To do this, I focus on describing and comparing the way two secondary schools in Camden construct themselves in the role of providers. Specifically, I explore how meanings of community, faith and race are implicated in the spatial configuration of visual and textual elements being managed through these materials.

I have chosen to focus my analysis on two particular secondary schools in Camden, using pseudonyms to replace their real names: Greendale and Burnham.

³⁹ http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/schooldiversity/what_is_school_diversity/?version=1
Access date: 28.01.09

These schools are markedly different, and interesting to compare, in that they are structured differently according to the government rules of admission and funding for 'mainstream' (non-private) schools. Greendale is classified as a community school, which means it is directly controlled and funded by the local authority. In contrast, Burnham is a voluntary-aided school, with funding arrangements extending beyond the remit of the local authority to include outside authorities, such as businesses, voluntary groups and sponsors. Burnham shares ownership of its buildings and land with a charitable foundation and religious organisation and thus is responsible for setting its own admissions criteria. It is an all-girls' Catholic school with an admissions criteria that is shaped in part by the ethos and principles of the Catholic Church. Priority for admittance is given to baptised Roman Catholic girls and therefore faith is a quintessential part of the child's successful entry into the school. Greendale, by virtue of its position as a community school, has its admission criteria directly managed and controlled by the local authority, with children usually admitted to the school on the principle of distance.

These crucial differences in the organisation of admissions criteria and funding agreements highlight all sorts of issues; namely what is a fair admissions policy, who are included and excluded in these arrangements, and to which communities is the school answerable? However, these issues, though important, are not directly addressed here because they demand complicated engagements with literatures and government policies that extend beyond the reach and focus of this study.⁴⁰ Moreover, I am less interested in who claims to belong to which community than I am in the question of how community as discourse is managed and constituted. For example, a

⁴⁰ For a discussion of some these issues see West (2005) and West and Hind (2006).

cursory glance at the Secondary Schools in Camden (SSC) (2007) brochure reveals the important role community plays in enabling schools to flag themselves as different. Greendale is identified as a 'Specialist Arts College', 'which provides young people with an excellent education in a supportive multi-cultural environment in which all can exceed and flourish' (2007: 42). The term 'multi-cultural environment' registers a particular kind of educational setting and mobilises or gives voice to discourses of social cohesion and inclusion. The brochure then goes on to claim that 'Specialist Arts Status has enabled [Greendale's] students and members of our wider community to benefit from funding' (2007: 42). This sentence highlights the extent to which schools construct themselves as inclusive and exclusive spaces. Moreover, the collectivist linkages Greendale claims to share with the 'wider community' points to the shifting role of the institution of the school. Greendale is constructed as an inclusive school, with provision that extends beyond students to include 'members of our wider community'. At the same time, the possessive pronoun 'our' hints at processes of exclusion and raises questions about who are the 'members' of this community.

Burnham, on the other hand, offers a more exclusive account of the shared experiences of its students: a 'Christian environment in which each individual is encouraged to appreciate their own faith while respecting that of others' (2007: 36). Compared to Greendale, with its appeals to a multi-cultural environment, Burnham offers a closed and clannish account of the positions and relationships 'encouraged' through the school – positions of faith and relationships based on tolerance ('respecting') of others. Interestingly, Greendale makes claims to offering a multi-cultural environment to its students and members of the wider community, but not a

'multi-faith' environment. In Britain, since 1997, Labour administrations have been active in their support of faith schools (Labour 1997, 2001), with a strong view of Britain as a multi-faith as against a multi-cultural society (Wynne-Jones 2006). As a result, the notion of faith, though slippery, has emerged as a key concept in government policy for evoking, addressing and counting 'communities' and for approaching issues around social cohesion. In this framing, social cohesion issues are closely associated with policy narratives around faith and education, as the government presses for more 'integrative and cohesive communities' (DCFS 2007b: 20) to be created through the community-building capacity of schools. However, such school-based initiatives are centred on a discourse of intra-faith experience based on 'tolerance' of others, rather than the promotion of an inter-faith politics.

On its website, Burnham promotes itself as a Catholic faith-based learning community, even though it claims to offer surplus places to children of non-Catholic faith. This highlights the dominant position of faith in education and the idea that community is assembled through and mediates interrelated discourses of faith, race and culture. Evident in both the Greendale and Burnham websites, for instance, is a strong emphasis on community. Burnham traces its teaching methods and ethos to a past order of relationships originating in the 19th century: 'Since Marie Madeleine D'Houet, Foundress of the order of The Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) established our school in 1830, we have continued to flourish as a Catholic faith-based learning community'. The connection between past and present is used effectively to give validity to the school and its community. Continuity evokes stability and order precisely because it is rooted in a nostalgia for the past. The emphasis on continuity and an unchanging tradition of religious teaching performs the

discursive work of indexing a community which is apparently stable, predictable and secure. In comparison, Greendale tends to rely more on its success as a 'new' school and through its constitution of an alternative conception of community. Here, then, we have two distinct impressions of community: one based on a discourse of faith and the other on a discourse of 'multi-cultural[ism]'. In this way community as a concept tends to be shifting, unstable and fluid precisely because it can be appropriated and reworked to suit alternative sets of meanings and practices that have their origins in diverse social histories and local cultures.

Both Greendale and Burnham also use carefully selected images to convey a sense of community. These images can be understood as attempts to support a construction of reality (Fink 2008) and to create, rather than reflect, a preferred vision of what community looks like. Here, I expand on the visual methodologies used by Margolis (2000) in his study of photographs taken of American public school classes between 1880s and the 1940s, where he focuses on describing those forms of socialization not written into the formal curriculum of the school, but which are visible through the spatial arrangement of bodies in school photographs. Using a similar approach, I explore how meaning is bracketed through the structure of images, in the form of representation and in the representation of people, objects and landscape (Fink 2008; Jewitt 1997).

The image below is taken from the Burnham website. The building is in the style of Georgian or Baroque architecture, with elegant sliding slash windows generally running from floor to ceiling. The brick-fronted building, with its handsome square-fronted symmetrically planned windows, picturesque clump of trees and hedgerow,

generates a strong image of upper-class grandeur, solidity and affluence, despite the iron-and-glass structure of the town greenhouse or conservatory positioned to the right of the image, which sets up a failed production of an idyllic setting. That is to say, conservatories are commonly used for the domestic management and cultivation of plants in artificial situations, making them fanciful interpretations of an idyllic setting. Moreover, as Longstaffe-Gowan remarks, the practice of staging gardening indoors worked to 'dutifully enhanced the status of the performers and audience' (2001: 173).

Image 1

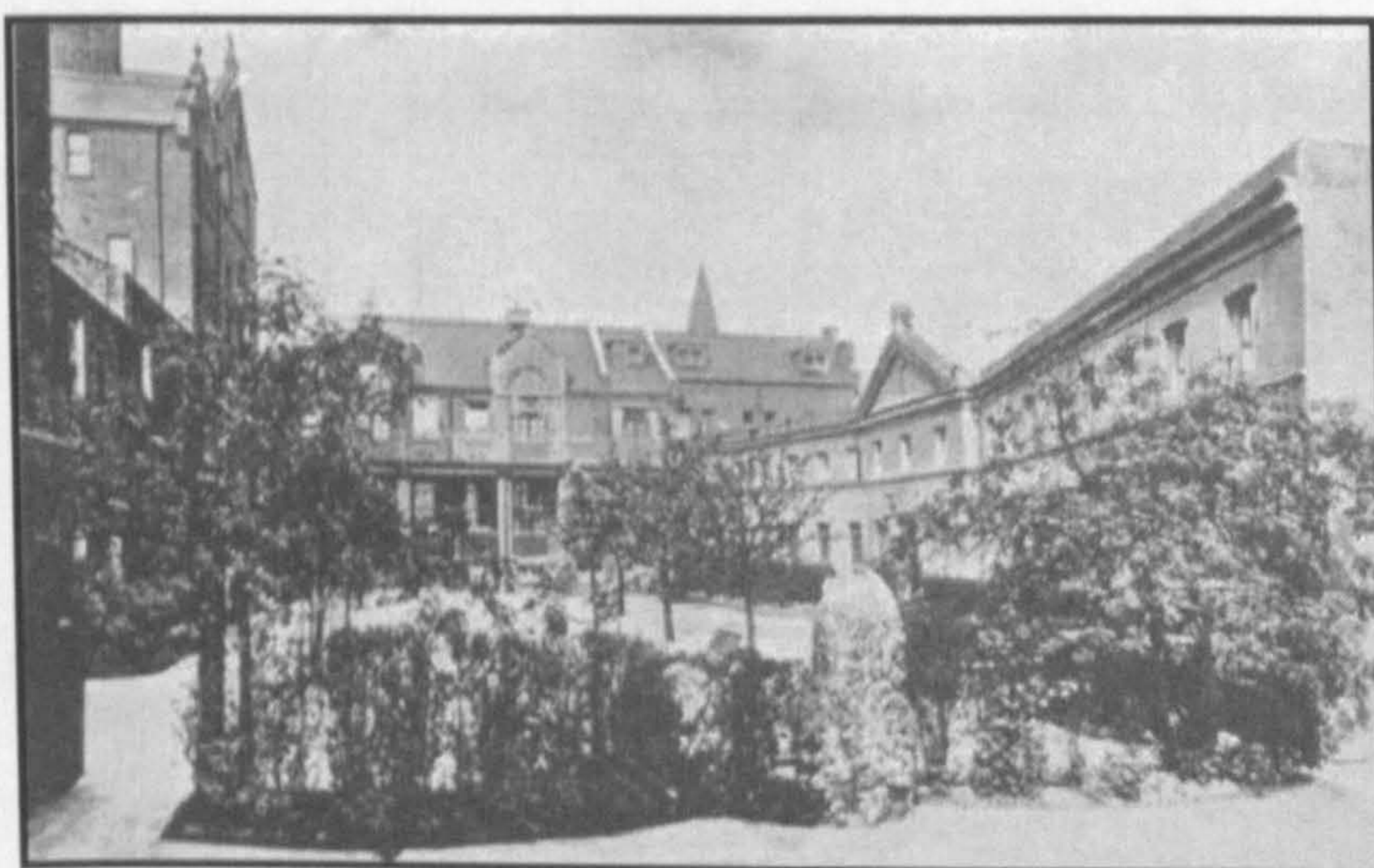


The combination of a calm luminous sky and wide open green space and unspoiled surroundings complements the (failed) staging of an Arcadian setting through communicating a dominant impression of tranquillity, regularity and order. In particular, when compared with images produced by Greendale, it projects a desire for a past order of social relationships. In other ways, the rigidly stratified floors, typical of most Georgian architecture, gives an impression of social prestige. Indeed, a

projecting string course highlights the separation of the floors, conveying a strong image of hierarchy and order. Both the entrance door and ground-floor windows are flanked by pilasters, adding to the elegance of the building and to its enduring history as an 'old' building.

The only other image to appear on the Burnham website is a black and white photo of the school dating back over 70 years. Both images 1 and 2 convey a strong impression of a past order of social relationships based on a way of life that is felt to be more predictable, stable and protected.

Image 2

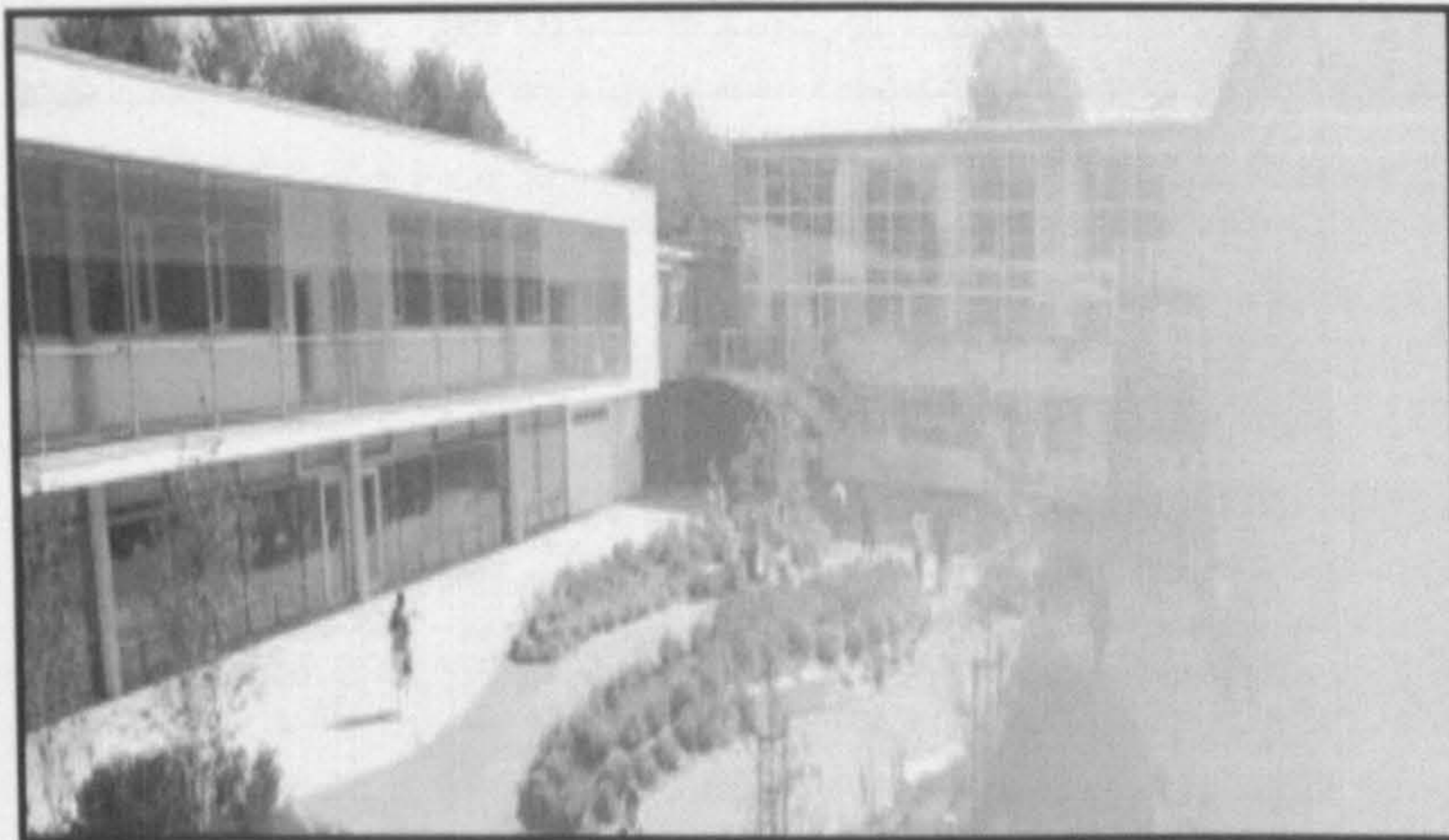


Similar to image 1, image 2 combines shrubs and small trees (positioned in the foreground of the image) with a clear sky conveying an impression of a calm, peaceful, tranquil environment. The building is imposing by the way it is presented as an enclave overseeing the space of the courtyard. It conveys the idea of surveillance and security as well as an exclusive space. In particular, the trees and shrubs in the foreground have the powerful effect of making the viewer feel like an outsider

looking in. The black and white image thus works to connect the school to some imagined past, projecting an image of community based on a fixed, unchanging and enduring order of social relationships. In this way it is a notion of community based on a nostalgia for the past.

On the other hand, Greendale posits an image of a school more connected to the 'present'. The image below is taken from the Greendale website and shows a building more 'postmodern' in design.

Image 3



Postmodernist architectural design generally can be understood as a reaction against the functional aesthetic prescribing the form of modernist architectural design. Unlike modernist architectural design, with its rejection of ornament and emphasis on the utility of design and simplification of form, postmodernist architectural design is primarily concerned with communication (Conway and Roenisch 1994) and reintroducing ornament and decoration for its own sake. Consequently, modernist architectural design has often been accused of obscuring 'local, regional and ethnic

differences' (Ghirardo 1996: 7) and therefore failing to 'respond to particular cultures or to particular environments' (Conway and Roenisch 1994: 26). The bold and richly chromatic decorative design of Greendale's building (see image 3), along with the concrete paving, articulates ideas of urbanity, as against the projected rusticity of Burnham. However, both Burnham and Greendale are similar in that their buildings look onto each other, fashioned as a kind of courtyard, serving to heighten a sense of inclusion, surveillance, security and community.

In contrast to Burnham, with its emphasis on the structure, history and grandeur of its buildings, Greendale uses a number of images showing children at the school. In particular, it is the way in which these children are shown standing and talking outside the formal arrangement of the classroom that makes these images significant.

Image 4



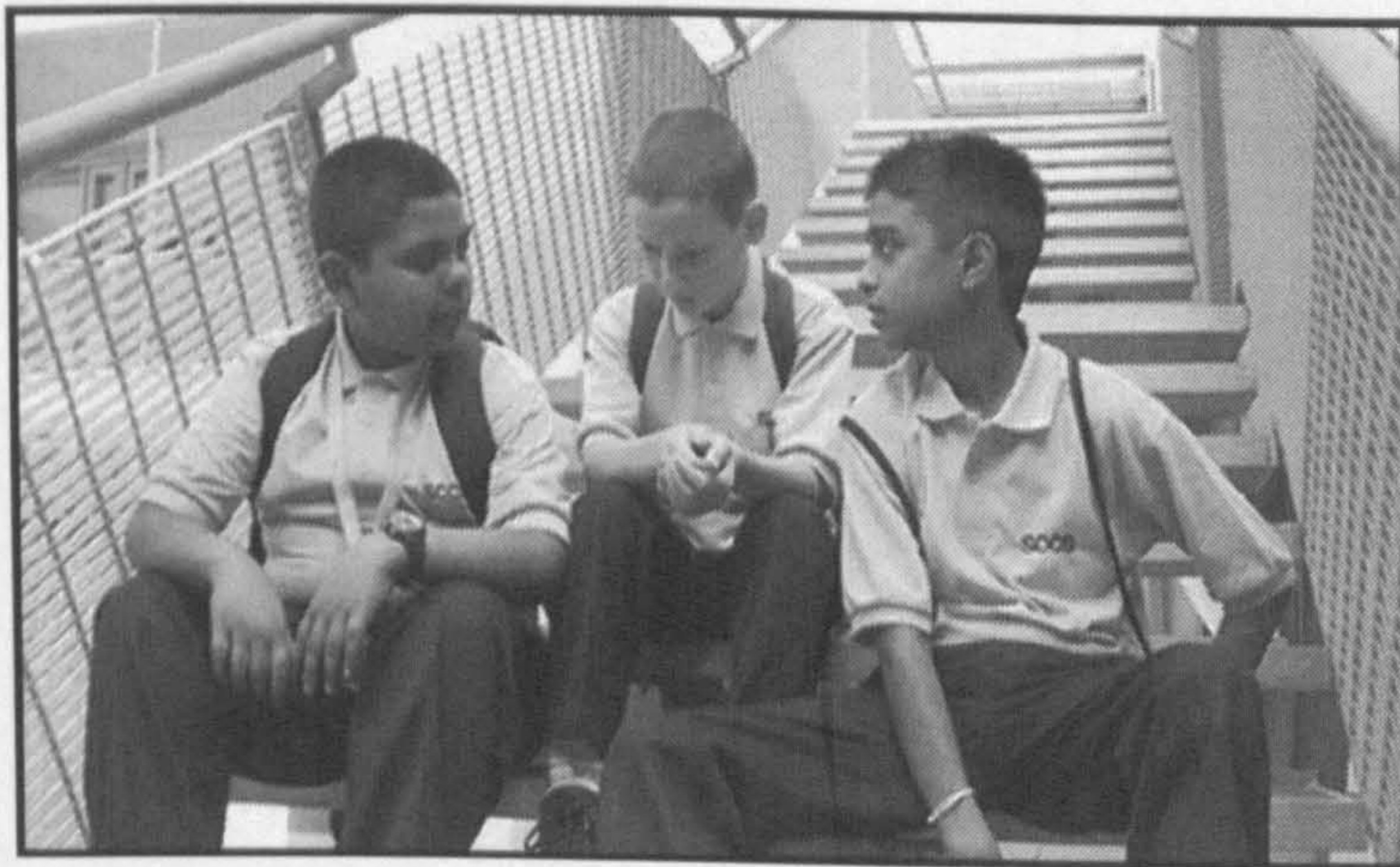
The image above shows two girls talking and laughing. The juxtaposition of the veil and school uniform communicates the school's policies on student dress code.

Typically school uniforms work to submerge individuality, with the intention of constructing commonality across difference. Here, however, the school uniform is

articulated alongside the veil. It therefore projects signs of cultural and religious tolerance and inclusion.

The final image I want to highlight (see below) shows three boys in conversation with each other. It shows a White child positioned in between two Asian children. Their body language conveys a message of inter-racial friendship: their arms and legs practically interlocking and their gaze fixed on each other. Moreover, they are portrayed as relaxed, untroubled and comfortable in their environment. Both images are attempts to communicate ideas around how children interact and communicate with other outside the formal settings of the classroom and they thus mobilise a child-centred view of education.

Image 5



As with the children in image 4, the children in image 5 are captured in apparently informal conversation. This can be contrasted with images 1 and 2, where instead of centring on the child there is more emphasis on the school and architectural institutionalization of authority. In particular, images 4 and 5 communicate popular desires for community and the promotion of a 'multi-cultural environment' (SSC

2007: 42). Here, community is translated through signs of social integration, social cohesion and friendship. In images 1 and 2 community is promoted differently as it is bound up with the projected history and social prestige of the institution of the school itself. I now draw on interviews with local school campaigners in Camden and explicate the different ways in which meanings and practices of community are animated through discussions around the role of the local school.

The Politics of Community: Locality and Social Difference

In 2006 the borough of Camden secured a bid from the government for £200 million under the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme, with the intention of investing the money in ‘transforming learning and improving every secondary school’ (Camden 2007: 2) and building a new secondary school. In the ensuing 18 months consultation meetings were held between Camden officials and local residents to debate what type of school would be built, where it would be located and which community it would serve. Two key school campaigns emerged in response to these questions: one was for a Holborn and St. Pancras Secondary School (HSSS) and the other for a Church Secondary School for Camden (CSSC). Claiming ‘We do not have a secondary school in this area’,⁴¹ the HSSS protestors demanded that a new community school be built to serve the ‘needs’ of families living in the south of Camden. Speaking on behalf of families living in south Camden, one local resident remarked:

This site has been in educational use since before the war. We believe it should

⁴¹ <http://www.wheremyschool.org.uk/index.php?categoryid=8>
Access date: 28.01.09

remain in educational use and be used to build the secondary school we so urgently need, which would share the site with the reorganised Westminster Kingsway college. This is not simply an issue of choice of shopping for the best schools for our children, it's an issue of need. (Ms Jones cited in Osley 2005)

Another school campaign, CSSS, proposed building a school that would 'serve the whole community'⁴², but with a focus on faith as an organising principle of the school's ethos.

I now explore how the coordinators of these campaigns – Janet and Claire – tended to draw heavily on meanings of community as a way of strengthening their case for a new school. The aim here is to show the intersecting vocabularies that frame discussions around choice in education and to highlight the politics around provision shaping the field of choice in an particular area of London.

HSSS articulates a view of the local school as a productive site for containing or sustaining the imaginary of community and social cohesion:

Our hugely popular primary schools reflect and strengthen our diverse and socially deprived community. But without a local secondary school, this community divides along social and ethnic lines.⁴³

⁴² <http://cssc.squarespace.com/about-our-campaign/>
Access date: 01.06.08

⁴³ <http://www.whereismyschool.org.uk/index.php?categoryid=8>

The space of interaction and cross-cultural dialogue supposedly contained by the notion of community is understood to be in part held together and strengthened through the site of the local school, as the following comment by Janet (J) illustrates:

Extract 6:1

J: You know that the community, the wider community is helped by that because it's the one place where parents, where adults really meet, you know adults from different backgrounds, is primary school...So then what happens is that the secondary transfer sends those people in very different directions because there isn't a central place for them to go and divides people quite, quite dramatically actually.

Janet argues that a secondary school holds the potential for facilitating communication across the whole community. In this framing, the local school is constituted both as a place of learning for children and as a space for the transcendence or suspension of difference – the construction of a common identification in the face of 'other' differences. As she says: 'without a local secondary school, this community divides along social and ethnic lines'. Here, then, the local school is assumed to be powerfully implicated in the construction of the imaginary of community and in overcoming difference. This demonstrates the mutability of community and its capacity to move between different sets of registers and references. Janet demonstrates how community can be used to flag difference or index a moment in the suspension of difference. From this position, community is a deeply contested concept in that it has the potential to condense highly unstable sets of social contradictions and potential antagonisms while at the same time obscuring internal divisions and distinctions. The terms local area and local school are also shifting in that they are sometimes used interchangeably as framings for articulating

popular desires for a sense of continuity, security, communal or shared experience and commitment.

Community as solidarity involves being able to imagine commonality across difference, where ‘people like us’ have to be imagined and constructed (Clarke 2009). In appealing to Camden officials over the lack of education provision in south Camden, HSSS bracket the families living in this area as part of a ‘diverse and socially deprived community’. Community is assembled through the construction of particular ‘others’ – the ethnically diverse and socially deprived. The next extract, taken from an interview with Claire (C), assistant coordinator and delegate for CSSC, anchors community in multiple intersecting framings:

Extract 6:2

C: I’d say first of all we are representing the parents and the community. I can’t give you an official party line, you know, you would have to ask the Church of England what their proposal would be but the director of, Tom Perrier, who’s the director of the Church of England in this area, is on record as saying that he believes that a new school would serve two communities. It would serve the Christians in Camden, who in the last census made up 47% of the population, and it would serve the local community, whether or not they were Christian.

For Claire, the establishment of a Church of England school in Camden would benefit two communities. The local community is used to flag the non-Christian ‘other’ – people of different faiths, ethnicities or the faithless, for example. Instead of pointing to the alternative sets of positions, identifications and associations arising from this multifaceted ‘other’, Claire conveniently bundles them together under the umbrella of community. More importantly, the ‘other’ is known only through their geographical

location: the local community. They are resigned to an uncomplicated, empty space by virtue of their non-Christian status, in effect rendering them invisible. In contrast, the Christians in Camden who make up '47% of the population' are constituted as a highly visible and identifiable group.

Local Camden MP, Frank Dobson, arguing against introducing a C of E school to Camden, claimed: 'In this diverse area, I think it would be divisive. We should be trying to bring people together, not separate them out' (Dobson cited in Osley 2007). Indeed, the vocabulary used by Claire hints at processes and practices of division and exclusion in two ways. First, she marks Christians as dominant through reference to their numbers. Second, the interpellation of the 'other' (non-Christians) into the local community has the effect of condensing complicated intersections of difference. These claims to community have, as I will show, significant implications for thinking through the intersections of concepts of choice and community in New Labour policy discourse.

Re-imagining Community through Social Policy

The implementation of the concept and practice of choice in education, with its appeals to parents as consumers of education services, works to subsume choice within a general framework of responsibility (DES 1991), with the intention of soliciting parents into taking on 'new rights' as active, moralised agents of welfare services (Clarke 2005b; Dwyer 1998). In this way the policy of parental choice constitutes a set of discourses and practices that incite parents to self-govern and to create for themselves a model of agency that fits with the market imperatives and

political rationalities of neo-liberalism (Larner 2000). Similarly, the notion of community has emerged as a central focus of governance for New Labour governments (Newman 2001) and has become the conduit through which new powers and freedoms are assigned to individuals as active, self-regulating citizens. The articulation of community in New Labour policy rhetoric, for instance, seeks to 'empower' individuals and groups to take on the role of directing and developing themselves, with the aim of producing spaces of localised co-governance or self-governance (Kearns 2003). New Labour pledged to 'give power to local people to improve their own areas, with greater influence over decisions about where money should be spent and the priorities for their own community' (ODPM 2005: 1.13). Here, then, community can be understood as a policy device that works to hail or interpellate individuals to enter into relations with other agents and agencies as self-responsible and self-determining 'communities'.

For Rose (1999, 2000), the renewed interest in community as a locus of governance represents a shift from expansive or welfarist liberalism to advanced liberal or neo-liberal governmentality. The seduction of community lies in its multifaceted desirability, making it

the ideal territory for the administration of individual and collective existence, the plane or surface upon which micro-moral relations amongst persons are conceptualized and administered. (Rose 1999: 136).

The government requirement that schools should aim to 'develop and strengthen their local community' (DfES 2004: 5.30) and tailor provision to the 'the needs of each

locality' (DfES 2004: 5.27) points to a set of policy discourses and practices aimed at working on, working through and producing communities. Community references the process or activity through which the 'governing of individuals from a distance' (Larner 2000: 6) is ordered and articulated. With repeated warnings that Britain's education system is sleepwalking towards 'US-style segregation of schools along racial lines' (Watt 2007), community has also been crucial for government plans to strengthen good practice on race equality in schools, through encouraging schools to improve 'links with minority groups in order to strengthen the local community's involvement with education' (Ofsted 2005: Executive Summary). Participation of the local community in educational matters is anchored in government strategies to make schools more flexible and accountable to the 'particular needs in the local community' (Ofsted 2005: comment 60) and thus more responsive to 'inequalities and gaps in performance between groups of pupils' (Ofsted 2005: comment 2). As Rose observes, 'Community constitutes a new spatialization of government: the territory for political programme, both at the micro-level and the macro-level, for government through community' (1999: 136).

In this way community as a set of discourses and practices in government texts around education is used to generate greater interdependency, partnership and collaboration between local schools, LEAs and local families, and to construct a 'greater sense of the community's obligations towards the school' (Ofsted 2005: Executive Summary). Community works to index the relationship between local families and local schools as one characterised by obligations and responsibilities. Both the school and the family are simultaneously implicated in the role of taking on 'collective responsibility for the education of young people in their area' (DfES 2004:

5.27). Individuals are encouraged to take on the responsibility for producing 'sustainable communities' (ODPM 2005: 1.2) in other ways too. Political initiatives which include 'Devolving budgets and giving communities the power to manage particular services directly' and 'Giving communities ownership of local assets like playgrounds and community centres, and the chance to manage themselves' (ODPM 2005: 3.23) involve the active enlistment of individuals and groups as self-governing and self-responsible agents. Policies of community development and community safety, for example, involve the participation and willingness of individuals and groups to oversee, govern and taken 'ownership' of localised spaces (ODPM 2005).

Parental choice and community thus emerge as two interrelated yet separate sets of policy narratives in New Labour texts around education, both of which share a common concern with producing citizens who are self-directing and self-governing. This has implications for thinking about the relationship between choice and community and the different sets of associations and responsibilities they give rise to.

'People don't want choice, they want a good local service'⁴⁴

One of the major criticisms to be levied against the implementation of choice in education is that it produces a deregulated space in which people of different cultures, faiths and social classes are permitted to put into practice forms of voluntary segregation and to use strategies of exit and self-exclusion as covert mechanisms for choosing particular schools where there is a majority of people 'like us' (Reay 2007b). As Tomlinson observes, 'The market [in education] does encourage ethnic

⁴⁴ Taken from Le Grand (2007a: 46-7)

segregation' (1997: 69), in effect intensifying experiences of social and community polarisation and entrenching social and racial divisions, resulting in people of different backgrounds often living out separate or parallel lives (Easton 2006; Johnson, 2002, 2007). As a result, there is assumed to be a 'conflict between parental choice and social cohesion' (ODPM 2004: 5.59) in that choice is sometimes understood to undermine or displace efforts that are principally aimed at building and sustaining communication and relationships between people of different cultures and faiths. As the ODPM noted in 2004:

There are many schools whose students do not reflect the range of cultural groups in their locality and so do not help to promote social cohesion. This is a result of parental choice, the quality of some schools and the growth of faith schools. (ODPM 2004 5: 49).

In other ways, it is the breakdown of the relationship between local families and local schools, sustained in part by the decisions of some parents to exit their local network of secondary schools, which is thought to contribute to the foundering of community. Just as 'parental choice' and 'social cohesion' are sometimes anchored in an antagonistic relationship (ODPM 2004: 5.59), with the former often assumed to be diametrically opposed to the latter, parental choice and 'good local schools' are similarly positioned in dichotomous terms. Arguing against the merits of a choice-based education system, Fiona Millar, education journalist for the *Guardian*, argues 'the concept that the local school can be a place where children from all backgrounds can happily mix and expect a high-quality education has all but vanished from the

political narrative' (2007). In a similar vein, the centre-left think tank, the Fabian Society, asks:

how many parents would prefer to send their children to the local school, with no choice in the matter, knowing that the education on offer met a national standard on high quality, rather than plunge into the positional competition known as parental choice which so often means parental fate for those unable to move their children in reach of 'good schools. (Levett *et al.* 2003: 55)

For Le Grand, nonetheless, the dichotomizing of quality and choice in this way is erroneous given that 'a quality service is not an alternative to choice; rather, choice is one of the possible means of obtaining a quality service' (2007a: 48). He further argues:

contrasting people wanting choice with people wanting a good local service is a false dichotomy; that in fact people do want choice; that choice may be the way to get a good local service; that, far from being a middle class obsession, the less well off want choice more than the middle classes. (Le Grand 2007a: 61-2).

I now explore how these multiple discourses of social cohesion and integration, of community and locality, are played out and rehearsed in the context of some mothers' interpretations and understandings of choice. This is important for showing in what ways, other than through the discourse of emotion, as illustrated in chapter 5, some mothers' engage with the positions and practices made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice.

Reflections on the Space of Community and Locality

The following extract is taken from an interview with Mary (M). Mary is a lone mother and has lived in the borough of Camden for 22 years. She works part-time at the local community centre helping young children with difficulties in maths.

Extract 6:3

M: Well again I cannot emphasize enough how absurd this whole idea of choice is that people really just want to have a good school. Most people just want to have a good school for their kids to go to, that they can walk to, and they can walk to with their friends and that is actually part of the community. I think in a way the choice thing kind of divorces, particularly secondary schools, kind of divorces the school from the surrounding community because they're coming from all different places and they're not, you know the parents aren't necessarily near enough to the school to ever get involved with it.

Mary shows how community can be imagined geographically and socially. Moreover, she points to the way community is implicated in the construction of the role of certain institutions, namely the school. In this way community can be understood as a refracting and distorting medium precisely because it works to naturalise forms of collective identification and association that are shifting and unstable. The seduction of community, then, stems from its dialogical capacity, with its emphasis on a sense of belonging and attachment, and its ability to mobilise disparate and disjointed voices around shared principles of position, place and experience. For Mary, choice and community stand in opposition to each other. Choice invites outsiders in and encourages insiders out. In the use of the phrase '[choice] kind of divorces the school from the surrounding community', Mary echoes and redeems some of the comments

made by the ODPM (2004). She provides a truculent account of choice and approximates it to a process that contributes to disruption, unsettlement and discordance around community, in turn pointing to the potential estranging effect it is felt to have on the relationship linking local families to local schools.

These kinds of sentiments about the role of community in decisions around school choice are largely absent in government policy texts around education. Nonetheless, there is evidence in such texts of a call to strengthen the relationship between local families and local schools through making local schools and local authorities more accountable to local families and vice versa (DfES 2004, 2005; Ofsted 2005). A duty on local authorities to 'work hard at listening to their communities and work with them to articulate their needs' (DCSF 2008a: 11) acts as a potential lever for communication between local people and local providers, but also as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion to the extent that it requires the construction of a collective identification. Such a policy strategy matches the core principles of the Campaign for State Education (CASE), a strong advocate of 'comprehensive' education, which believes a 'good local school' should be 'an integral part the local community, fostering constantly evolving shared cultural values and aspirations' (CASE Briefing: A Good Local School).

To argue that a 'good local service' is preferable to choice, as Millar (2007) and Levett *et al.* (2003) invariably do, would be to ignore some of the complicated policy work that is being articulated here. There is no one means or 'model' of service delivery that, on the surface, dominates in the realm of education; rather, it appears to extend to complicated spaces of joined-up policy processes where there exists a

combination of different policy structures and practices. Le Grand's (2007a) argument that education services are constructed around collaborative models, such as choice-and-competition and voice mechanisms, highlights the intersecting dynamics of policy strategies at work in the reform of education services. Against this, though, it is important to show that some mothers resist, and even reject, any construction of themselves as consumers and thus challenge the suitability of choice mechanisms in education, as Mary (M) illustrates:

Extract 6:4

A: And when did you start thinking about a secondary school for your son?

M: Well I don't know. Parents talk about it, you know, 3 or 4 years before they go up there really and...I don't know. Well it wasn't...I don't know, yeah. I've seen a lot of kids grow up on this estate and, uh, how to say, I think it really, I'm kind of sceptical about this whole school choice thing anyway. I just think that, you know if the kid had just the right support at they tend to o.k. really unless there's some kind of horrible bullying going on or whatever at school so I find I refuse those conversations, you know. I didn't just really...

A: Which conversations?

M: Well it's all these conversations, particularly by middle-class parents, about what, you know where to send their child to school. The fact that there was no school in the area. Because, you know, there isn't much of a school left, there's not much in the way of secondary schools left in central London here. And to me there wasn't going to be much choice anyway so I didn't really see what the point was in obsessing about it. I mean except for I supported the campaign to get a new school here but it's not really going to affect my school by the time it gets built so, you know, it's more for the future really. And also we're affected on this estate actually by the fact that kids do go quite far to go to school and so then we get problems when they bring their friends in and stuff like that.

The tendency to locate choice and 'good local service' in an antagonistic relationship is in evidence through the way Mary identifies her scepticism. Arguing against the

idea that choice is the possession of the middle-class (Ball 1993; Gewirtz 2001; Hattersley 2003; Reay *et al.* 2008), Le Grand proposes 'it is the poor, the dispossessed and disadvantaged who want choice *more* than the allegedly rabidly pro-choice middle classes' (2007a: 54). Mary's 'refusal', however, can be read in classed terms as a rejection of the extended codes of middle-class orientation, aspiration and fantasy implied by the speaking position of the parent as chooser; and, conversely, as a situated social action seeking to legitimise a cultural repertoire which is despised and/or devalued as cultural currency (i.e. the valuation of and preference for community and locality). As Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (1995) show, it is typically working-class parents who voice a preference for the feelings of comfort and familiarity, of security and connection, generated through the local as against their middle-class counterparts who are more inclined to be more wide ranging in their school choices.

The ongoing dynamic between families and their local school, expressed most succinctly in the work of Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (1995, 1996), Reay and Ball (1997), and Reay and Lucey (2000b, 2004), has become the victim of some misplaced criticism over the last several years. On a BBC Radio 4 programme entitled 'School Choice and Lottery Postcode System', aired 6 March 2007, Le Grand claimed 'it is wrong to chain some families to their local schools'. The articulation of the verb 'chain' conveys an image of parents being ensnared or trapped by the stranglehold of the local school and its apparent relations of dependency. This links up with, and complements, Waslander and Thrupp's (1997) argument that the implementation of choice has resulted in poorer families being released from the 'iron cage' of rigid catchment areas. Le Grand's (2007b) argument is problematic though in that it

constructs the site of the local school as one characterised by relations of dependency and obligation that are necessarily inhibitive to the 'freedom' and 'happiness' of the individual. In a similar vein, a fervent pro-choice campaign, the Campaign for Real Education (CRE), says the following about school choice:

Naturally, parents want the best for their child and, quite simply, there are not enough good schools. On the other hand, many politicians and bureaucrats hate genuine diversity. For ideological and administrative reasons, most civil servants running national and local government prefer to deny parental choice and force all young people into the nearest 'common' school. Or alternatively, to compel every school to take a 'balanced' or 'banded' intake comprising equal proportions of each ability-range – in the mistaken belief that equal intakes will ensure equal outcomes. As bureaucrats have increasingly become the public's masters instead of its servants, the system has become increasingly uniform. (Seaton 2004)

Similar to the way Le Grand uses the verb 'chain' to signify the relationship between local families and their local school, CRE deploys the verb 'force'. Force implies something that is external to and beyond the remit of the individual. In this way it is the denial of choice, according to CRE, that leads to the circumscription of individual freedom. Moreover, a lack of choice is assumed to produce an increasingly standardised and 'common' service lacking diversity. Both Le Grand and CRE thus make similar judgments about the necessity of a choice-and-competition model in education, namely that choice enables families to liberate themselves from the relations of dependency and obligation that characterise the local school.

The next extract, taken from an interview with Camilla (C), a lone mother with one child, makes visible the enabling and empowering effect local schools can have on some families.

Extract 6:5

C: I think where we live there's an estate, you know there's three separate flats and there's other houses around which are all part of the estate, you know, where we live. So I think all the kids go to the small schools. Nobody is, from what I can tell, really pulled their child away. A lot of the kids go to my primary school. They're all there. You tend to find a lot of the kids stick to the local primary schools. So to see them at secondary schools in the local area is that sort of continuation of community commitment as far as I am concerned. And again I nearly fell into the trap of wanting to take him out of that.

As Reay and Lucey observe, choice is sometimes inflected through the need to extend 'community-building practices of attending the local school' (2004: 40). Camilla's understandings and interpretations of community, for instance, is one rooted in conceptions of the local school and local area. The desire to send her son to the local secondary school tends to be inflected through a principled focus on the 'continuation of community commitment'. In contrast to Le Grand (2007b), who marks the relationship between local families and local schools as one linked by 'chain[s]', implying a set of oppressive and dependent relations, Camilla offers a positive acceptance of the identifications and associations connecting people to their local school. For Camilla, the local school enables dialogue to be facilitated across and maintained through the generations. Such dialogue is indexed locally as defined by the geographical and social space shared by people in the area. Moreover, the survival or imaginary of community is held to be contingent on the enduring presence of the local school as a site of renewal and regeneration.

Similarly, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) argues against the efficacy of a choice-based system, favouring instead one that ‘has the capacity to contribute not only to the concept of a good local school for every community but also to the regeneration of communities’ (2005: 9). The following extract is taken from an interview with Andrew Baisley (AB), secretary for Camden NUT, who stands opposed to the creation of a C of E school or Academy in Camden:

Extract 6:6

A: So one of the main roles of the NUT has been to facilitate the opening of a bidding war competition between all these different interest groups and sponsors?

AB: We would like to see that. We only want to see that because we want a community school to win to be absolutely honest with you because we want that model of a school that’s open to the community, responsible to the community, answerable to the community.

Camilla does not convey an image of someone who feels disenfranchised; who feels locked into a system of coercion or domination; or who feels ‘chain[ed]’ to the local school. Her voice connects with the general view of community schools held by Camden NUT members, namely that community schools are desirable in that they are responsive to the needs and wants to local people and engender forms of identification and attachment that some parents value. It is important to remember, then, that people hold different sets of valuations and preferences concerning the role of the local school and choice more generally (Boyd and Lugg 1997). For Camilla, the local school performs a vital role in anchoring shared or communal ways of living and being-in-the-world and thus engenders forms of social reproduction and the imaginary of community. In this framing, as Touraine reminds us:

in education and elsewhere, the vital thing is to regard individuals and groups as potential actors and not simply as victims who are either in chains or being manipulated. (2001: 33)

Implicit to the voices of Mary and Camilla is a view of community as something which is spatially, temporally and socially ordered and which is typically managed through invocations of localness, co-operation, proximity, closeness and solidarity, where it is approximated to a sense of communal or shared experience. Both mothers draw on the discourse of community as a framing for their school choice and thus engage with choice through reciting repertoires that register a powerful and positive acceptance of community as crucial to their decision-making process. Moreover, community tends to be imagined in and through the institution of the school, as Caroline (C), a lone mother with two children, illustrates:

Extract 6:7

C: I think partly because community suggests one entity or one body of people but I think the fact is that we all belong to, in answer to your question, belong to more than one community and that there is the community which is very solid, which is one where your child goes to school, and if it so happens that where your child goes to school is on your doorstep than that coincides with your immediate neighbours...I've done work to raise funds for the primary school and so I belong to that community, but I also very much, having lived in this house for nearly 11 years, belong very much to my neighbourhood. And that in a way is two parts because a lot of people in this area are Catholics so I know them because of the children who went to the school and because we go to the Church.

Caroline deploys the discourse of community to signify both the local school, with parents also implicated strongly in that relationship, and the local neighbourhood. But she complicates the notion of community as neighbourhood by pointing to the

institution of the Catholic Church as pivotal to her conception of community. In this way geographical conceptions of community based on neighbourhood are to some extent socially inflected through discourses of faith (and race and class). Faith elicits a sense of belonging and attachment which Caroline imagines geographically as specific to her area, as assembled and mediated through the Church and thus institutionally-bound, and socially constituted through the relationships she and her children share with others. It is the registers and references that constitute the signifying practice of community that enable some mothers to imagine the connections and disconnections between certain schools and peoples – people of faith, for example. The following extract, taken from my interview with Camilla (C), demonstrates the role of the local school in facilitating communal relations between families sharing the same residential space:

Extract 6:8

C: Looking back at Brandon's schooling, he's always been in a community where I've not really associated myself and I've just pulled him out come five o'clock and taken him back the following day. Nothing really sort of sharing going on. So I thought this was definitely something that he needed and that would help him in his development because he tended to be sort of be in schools away from our local community and I didn't think that was perhaps was best for him in secondary school.

Like Mary, Camilla expresses a strong desire to bring the local and school community into alignment. Camilla, however, is less disparaging of the concept of choice compared to Mary who is vehemently anti-choice and who links choice to processes that 'divorces the school from the surrounding community'. Nonetheless, both Camilla and Mary deploy the notion of community to signify spaces of communal or shared experience. Their conceptions of community mediate ideas around the 'good

local school' (NUT 2005), with its emphasis on the community-building capacity of schools and the role of the school in generating dialogue across generations and peoples of varying ethnicities, faiths and cultures. Camilla's desire to be part of her son's school, and therefore a school which shares strong links with the local community, means that she ascribes value to the idea of locality. To be more precise, she values the associations and connections that typify her relationship to the local community. Camilla's positive valuing of the school community is equally pertinent. Her use of the verb 'pulling' suggests that the school generates its own set of connections and categories of belonging. This makes visible the ways in which some mothers engage with choice. Community emerges as a framing mothers draw on in order to negotiate the possibilities and opportunities made available through choice.

The articulation of community can also be used to racialize others and thus condenses complicated signifiers of race and ethnicity, as Judith (J), a lone mother with two daughters, illustrates:

Extract 6:9

J: I went there, Andrew. It was my secondary school. Mike [husband] actually lives across the road from Homestead. When I went there it was a cross-community, you know. It really sounds racist but that's not what I am saying. You know, as much as there were White children there was Black children, there was Indian, Chinese people, but now you walk in and you do not see...June [niece] is like going into year 10. Even in her classes she's the only White girl in her class. There's a few Chinese and a few Black girls. You know, you just peer through the door and you don't see many White faces and Anna [daughter] can take Bengali. I'm not being funny, why do I want her to learn that.

Judith demonstrates how the vocabulary of race is invariably messy and uncomfortable, and is often treated as something which is unspeakable or too complicated to 'get right'. As other researchers have discovered, parents sometimes negotiate choice in the context of racism and discrimination (Bagley 1996; David 1997). Judith is clearly anxious about her daughter entering a school where there aren't 'many White faces'. The invocation of community here is powerful precisely because it works in two ways: both as a rhetorical device for producing and constituting difference and as a way of flagging a real or imagined past order of social relationships. The term 'cross-community', for instance, invokes an idea of the school as once being more ethnically balanced and culturally plural than it is now. In this framing, the concept of community offers multiple possibilities for positioning others, through the lens of race (class and faith) for example, and thus operates as a signifier of difference. It is simultaneously used to mark racialized others and afford the speaker a sense of racialized belonging, connection and solidarity.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how discourses of community, faith and race are implicated in the construction of 'secondary school markets' (Lucey 2004: 86) and how they enter into important political decisions at the local level where such discourses are used to delineate sites of need and advance claims over the preference for some forms of provision over others. In particular, I focused on the ways in which some mothers draw on these registers and references as framings for engaging with the positions and practices summoned through dominant policy discourses around choice. The complexity of these discourses is that they mobilise or give voice to very

different sets of aspirations, motivations and desires, which are assembled and mediated through the schools themselves. Community can be imagined in more than one way. Each of the secondary schools analysed at the beginning of the chapter tends to mobilise different conceptions of community, which are attempts to project and contain the fantasies and desires of some parents. Hence, choice is both a discursive and material act precisely because it mediates projections of community which are both imagined and materially constituted.

In highlighting the adversarial relationship between parental choice and community (Easton 2006; Johnson 2002, 2007; Millar 2007; NUT 2005; ODPM 2004), I demonstrated some of the apparently conflicting forms of association and responsibility elicited by these terms. Some of the mothers in this study, however, have shown that these terms are not mutually exclusive of each other but tend to be deployed differently and sometimes jointly to capture different fantasies and aspirations. Camilla, for example, chooses her local school because of the relationships it sustains with the local community. Nearly all of the mothers in this study expressed a strong appreciation for community and its capacity to build on and strengthen connections across the generations of adults and children. Community emerges as a site of renewal and regeneration, of belonging and attachment in this context. For instance, many of the mothers articulated an interest in choosing a school that brought together the local and school community, with the intention of making themselves more involved in educational decisions affecting their children and more responsible for their child's education. This has implications for thinking about what is responsible, active parenting and how it is negotiated by mothers in the context of choice – an issue I explore in the next chapter.

Evident too in New Labour policy rhetoric was a focus on community and a desire to create citizens who take on some of the responsibility for managing and sustaining the space of community (ODPM 2005). Through this discourse citizens are activated as responsabilized, moralised subjects, just as parents are invited to inhabit and enact preferred models of responsible, active parenting in the realm of education, as outlined in chapter 2. This chapter demonstrates how some mothers engage with choice through the framing of community and points to the usefulness and desirability of community in these contexts as a device for marking others – as racialized or classed subjects, for example – and for strengthening the legitimacy of claims over the role of the local school. The emphasis on community, then, opens up important questions around responsibility, namely what is responsible, active parenting. In the next chapter I reflect on this question by looking at how mothers engage with choice through their understandings and interpretations of responsibility, both political and social. This adds another dynamic to the ways in which mothers can be understood to engage with choice. By focusing on the way mothers tussle with and combine alternative conceptions of what it means, or should mean, to be active and responsible when choosing, the next chapter illuminates some of the strategies and mechanisms underpinning mothers' engagements with the positions and practices summoned through dominant governmental discourses around choice.

Chapter 7

Citizens and/or Consumers:

Struggles Over Meanings and Practices of Responsible Parenting

In the previous chapter I demonstrated how some mothers engaged with choice through deploying repertoires and references relating to discourses of community, and communicated aspirations and fantasies around a desire for the associations and relations made available through community. Many of the mothers in this study were shown to voice a positive appreciation for the ideas of sharing, security, reciprocity, closeness and social cohesion engendered through discourses of community. In particular, the space of the local school emerged as the reference point or condition of possibility for imagining and realising such ideas. Moreover, the repertoires that constitute discourses of community enabled the mothers to perform the symbolic and representational work of invoking feelings of compassion, benevolence and altruism, in effect de-centring the market prerogative underpinning the role of the parent as consumer; someone who is basically self-regarding, self-seeking and self-interested. Hence, for some mothers, the imaginary of community tended to be fragmented and weakened by the meaning and practice of choice, with its emphasis on self-interested and autonomous behaviour. Choice potentially encourages parents to exit their local network of secondary schools and thus undermines the collectivist linkages between local families and local schools.

At the same time, commentators frequently position choice and community or 'social cohesion' as consisting of sets of vocabularies and positions that are diametrically opposed (Millar 2007; NUT 2005; ODPM 2004), thus adding to parents' fears that a community-regarding impulse is undermined through the policy of parental choice. This dichotomy of choice vs. community, however, tends to obscure the way some mothers assemble and combine different notions of responsibility – to the child and to the community, for example – in effect foreclosing some of the tensions and ambiguities in their choice-making.

This opens up another set of questions around how mothers engage with the positions and practices offered through dominant governmental discourse around choice. How is responsibility understood and acted on by mothers when they are choosing a secondary school for their child? In what ways does the preferred image of the parent as consumer become disrupted through the way some mothers appropriate and mobilise apparently conflicting notions of responsibility? To what extent do mothers' interpretations and understandings of responsibility mediate dominant representations of models of citizen and consumer agency? In what ways might these conceptualisations of responsibility complicate the active-passive dynamic implicit to the way parents are invariably positioned as either passive or active recipients of welfare provision (citizens or consumers)? What implications does this have for thinking through and beyond static and tidy conceptions of active citizenship?

In this chapter I examine therefore how mothers assemble and combine contradictory notions of responsibility in their choice-making and point to the

different sets of relationships and identifications elicited by them. I show how some mothers engage with choice through reworking the notion of responsibility to coincide with different sets of preferences and valuations, and focus on how mothers tussle with and rework multiple discourses as framing their choice. The aim is to add a new dynamic to understanding the ways in which mothers engage with the positions and practices opened up through choice and to explore how these engagements render problematic the active-passive distinction.

This chapter is therefore organised into three sections. The first unpacks some of the different associations and positions nominally ascribed to the figures of the citizen and consumer and attempts to distinguish between what is meant by these terms. I then examine the different registers invoked through mothers' interpretations and understandings of responsibility and make visible the intersecting vocabularies and positions managed through them. The second section looks at the implications of this for thinking about discourses of mothering. It explores how mothering is constructed differently through tensions and conflicts around conceptions of responsibility and at the same time how responsibility is made meaningful through particular types of actions and decisions that are gendered and racialized in powerful ways. The third section looks at how mothers simultaneously enact different understandings of 'active' in their choice-making. Here, I complicate Johansson and Hvinden's (2005) tripartite view of active citizenship to show how choice is performed jointly and in contradictory ways, producing complicated realities of choice-making among mothers.

Mutations in the Construction of Responsible Choosing

Chapters 1 and 3 demonstrated the extent to which parents are now conceived as active as opposed to passive recipients of education provision; as autonomous, self-directing individuals who embrace choice in their public services (Le Grand 2007a) and, when suitably informed about those services, are best placed to make judgements about their own consumption patterns (Allsop 1995; Appleby 1998; Baldock 1998; Le Grand 1997). The solicitation of an 'active' performance, however, is understood to be conditional on parents having choice over where to send their child to school: 'Without any choice, they [parents] are far more like the passive recipient than the active citizen' (Ministers of State: 3.4.3). In this way, the term 'active' – what it means, or should mean, to be active – is configured around a conception of a discriminating and empowered subject. The vocabularies and positions made available through choice, as outlined in chapters 1 and 2, provide the reference point and the discursive resource for producing parents who are active citizens. But what types of behaviour typify the role of the consumer and how do they differ from those forms of behaviour we readily associate with the role of the citizen?

According to Clarke, the role of the consumer is marked by the practice of consumption and thus the defining feature of the consumer is 'the act of purchase: commodified goods, services or experiences are the means to consummating needs, wants or desires' (2004a: 2). The physiognomy of the consumer, then, is characterised by the act of acquisition or 'choosing' (Hauptmann 1996). For Needham (2003), the moment of choice is essentially self-interested, even if the

content of those interests is inflected through socially circulating discourses or shaped by 'irrationality' (Reay and Lucey 2004: 38).

In economics, consumers are assumed to act rationally, assimilating and processing all the relevant data, ranking their preferences and acting upon them, but we can relax the assumption of rationality and still accept that as a consumer choices are made to promote personal (or family) welfare. (Needham 2003: 13).⁴⁵

It is this imagery of choice, as exercised by an empowered consumer in pursuit of individual wants, that was dominant in New Labour's construction of the parent as chooser. Indeed, the articulation of the parent as consumer (DES 1991) owes much of its salience to public choice theory, where individuals are nominally conceived as private individuals who are essentially 'maximizers': people 'who always seek the biggest possible benefits and the least costs in their decisions' and who are 'basically egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental in their behaviour, choosing how to act on the basis of the consequences for their personal welfare' (Dunleavy 1991: 3). In this

⁴⁵ Neo-classical economists and sociologists tend to be divided on the definitions of consumer behaviour and the concept of rationality itself. The economic concept of rationality privileges utility maximization and thus characterises rationality as the property of individual decision-making, action and instrumental choice, as illustrated in chapter 3. In contrast, the sociological concept of rationality, with its emphasis on culture, norms and practices as circumscriptions of individual behaviour, links rational thinking to the appropriation of distinct social norms. For Bevir and Trentmann (2007), these explanations of rationality are inadequate for explicating the plurality of rationalities that emerge from practices of local reasoning. This is because, they argue, an economic concept of rationality neglects culture and a sociological one neglects agency. 'An emphasis on culture and agency undermines monochromatic analyses of consumption and consumerism as selfish and acquisitive patterns of behaviour that endanger civic life. It leads us, instead, to highlight the diverse cultures or rationalities embodied in practices in consumption, and to explore the contingent, contested, and complex trajectories of these practices' (2007: 186). This issue has already been taken up in part through chapter 5 where I argued that emotion emerges as a counter-discourse in the context of choice, marking it as a form of reasoning based on claims to alternative sets of vocabularies and valuations.

view, the consumer is seen to embody the market as well as identifications and practices based on commodification.

In contrast, the citizen is sometimes understood to symbolise an alternative set of identifications mediated by the ‘public realm’ – the state, for example. As Clarke observes, ‘In this public realm, people as citizens fulfil their obligations to one another; engage in mutual deliberation; and collectively pursue the “public interest”’ (2007: 98). In this framing the citizen designates membership of a political community, usually the nation. The shared sense of status and solidarity which underpins this membership is often captured as symbolising the ‘decommodification’ of the individual’s relationship with the community (Esping-Anderson 1990). The citizen and consumer can thus be understood to embody fundamentally different relationships and identifications based on the principals of the market and state as divergent and opposing forms of social coordination. These distinctions, however, tend to condense very complicated meanings and practices, in effect obscuring the articulation of other figures and modes of relationship (Clarke 2007). For this reason, I now examine how mothers assign and combine different forms of agency to their actions as choosers, with the aim of exploring the intersecting dynamics in these variants of agency.

The following extract is taken from an interview with Pauline (P) whose son, Simon, is expected to begin secondary school at Sutton House, a local private school which specialises in offering education to children with learning difficulties.

Extract 7:1

A: So you have opted out of the state system?

P: Yeah I did but I'm not happy about the fact that I had to. As a person it's my job to try and do the right thing politically as part of the larger society, just like it's the school's job to try and do the best for the whole school. As a parent, I can only worry about my own child at the end of the day. I'm not happy that I can't do both but my political beliefs and my personal beliefs should not be shoved down their throat anymore than...I don't have any problem with that...If I was running for the Labour party I think I would have some problems with it but I'd probably be fine because after all what's more important your job or your children.

The use of the noun 'job' registers elements of duty or obligation and thus contains echoes of the idea of a shared sense of responsibility based on membership to a community of citizens. On the one hand, it can be viewed as a counter-discourse in that it connects with a valuing of 'political beliefs' and makes claims to particular sets of citizenship, i.e. a discourse that registers a citizenship-based definition of responsibility based on membership of a political or imagined community. In this way, the phrase 'it's my job' is less about parental rights – the right to choose – and more about the valuing of a commitment to 'society' and the practices and orientations of citizenship itself. It points to the associational dimensions of citizenship (Lewis 2004a) in terms of membership and a form of belonging based on 'political beliefs' as distinct from 'personal beliefs'. On the other hand, the act of doing 'the right thing politically' is compromised by a responsibility and duty towards the child: 'As as a parent, I can only worry about my own child at the end of the day'. On its website, Directgov, the government maintains that 'Choosing a school is one of

the most important decisions you will make for your child'⁴⁶ (see also DES 1991). In the articulation of the phrase 'I can only worry about my own child at the end of the day', Pauline's voice mediates this dominant discourse in which the right to choose is shaped by anxieties and fears around parenting itself and is marked by new compulsory responsibilities and obligations. In this framing, 'doing the right thing politically' is problematized through its disassociation from the child: 'what's more important your job or your children'.

Recently, Reay *et al.* have written about the inclinations of some White, middle-class parents to exercise choice in a way that undercuts the preferred model of the 'self-interested and self-sufficient individual' (2008: 239). Implicit to 'contemporary cultures', they argue, is a strong valorisation of 'individualisation and privatisation', resulting in the erosion of 'commitments and investments in the public sphere' (Reay *et al.* 2008: 239). Pointing to the way some White, middle-class parents draw on communitarian principles as framings for their school choices, Reay *et al.* observe 'whilst supportive of comprehensive schooling, [these parents] remain grounded in securing and maintaining advantage. For these parents commitment to comprehensives is conditional on ensuring their children's educational success' (2008: 241). Such an argument is important in the way it refuses the dichotomy of self-interest and valuing the community. As the previous chapter illustrated, anti-choice commentators frequently base their arguments on this simplified dichotomy (Millar 2007; NUT 2005; ODPM 2004), with the aim of framing choice and community within conflicting and opposing frameworks of orientations and positions:

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<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ChoosingASchool/index.htm>
Access date: 28.01.200

<u>Choice</u>	<u>Community</u>
Individual	Collective
Self-Regarding	Community-Regarding
Consumer	Citizen
Commercial	Political
Monocultural	Multicultural
Social Selection	Social Mixing

Reay *et al.* (2008) go beyond such binary distinctions to show the messiness and ambivalence of these terms; in particular, the powerful interrelationship of the two. What Reay *et al.* (2007) refer to as ‘self-interested altruism’ is used to capture the intersecting dynamics of the terms self-regarding and community-regarding. It captures those moments when ‘cultural validation is entwined with acquisitive valuing’ (2007: 1054), revealing the cross-cutting dynamic of individual and collective impulses. As Reay *et al.* succinctly remark, ‘for a majority of the parents, commitment to comprehensive schooling is both complicated and more messy than the straightforward enactment of communitarian principles because they also anticipate gains in terms of their children’s cultural knowledge and social skills’ (2008: 243). For Pauline, however, the valuing of a commitment to a ‘larger society’, which links up with discourses of social mixing and a communitarian impulse, is constrained by her son’s educational needs. Arguably, then, any commitment to a discourse of citizenship obligation based on membership of a ‘community’ is conditional on the child being educationally malleable in the first place – that is, able to fit potentially into any school. Moreover, it suggests that a ‘calculating’ or ‘maximizing’ position is only achievable where the child is workable into a subject that ‘fits’: educationally and not just socially.

The following extract is taken from an interview with Caroline (C) who is a single parent with two children. Her eldest son, Owen, attends an independent secondary school in Camden having received a public bursary. Sam, her youngest son, is expected to attend a specialist secondary school in Kings Langley, Hertfordshire that offers a learning programme suited to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Caroline recognises that Sam's difficulty in learning affects his ability to 'fit into the classroom' of any school. This has a powerful bearing on Caroline's choice, as she explains: 'So we thought it would be very harsh on him if we could get a secondary school to place this child who doesn't fit'. Hence, Caroline registers a strong concern over the lack of suitability of some schools:

Extract 7:2

C: I wasn't prepared for my child to be experimented on by sending him to a school... because this is another way you can approach it, just saying they are trying and they're getting better each year, but I wasn't prepared for him to be experimented on. Some children do well in those situations because there are some children you can send anywhere. But I decided I wasn't going to send him anywhere and I would do whatever I had to do to send him where I thought he should go, not where the education authority thought to place them.

Caroline's rejection of the role of the education authority stems in part from a belief in the (now) inalienable right of parents to choose for their children. It is an appeal to the parental right to choose, to the individual voice of the parent as against the abstract, oppressive and 'experimental' decision-making of the local authority, expressed, for instance, through the repetition of 'I' in the last sentence. This works to index the voice of the speaker in relations of power and authority. Ironically, then, the policy of parental choice, while seemingly best serving those parents with children

who are able to 'fit' educationally into any school, actually has a strong appeal to parents who are comparatively less advantaged by the policy itself. As Chapter 5 demonstrated, some parents, in particular those with children who suffer from learning difficulties, frequently describe their children using highly individuating terms, such as special, unique and quirky. The government website Directgov enables parents to sustain such a choice of vocabulary in that it encourages them to think of their children as original subjects with particular needs: 'Before you apply to a school think about your child's personality and their needs'.⁴⁷

Read in another way, Caroline reproduces certain 'middle class narratives of secondary school choice' where there is an 'implicit, and sometimes explicit, sense of their own child's specialness; of being too clever and able to go to local state schools' (Reay and Lucey 2004: 44). While Caroline makes no explicit claims to her child being clever, she does use a vocabulary that registers similar, though shifting, understandings of cleverness: 'razor sharp mentality', 'fantastic vocabulary' and 'very lateral'. What is also striking about Pauline and Caroline, highlighted in chapter 5, is the way they relativise meanings and practices of cleverness. This performs the powerful double role of undermining the idea that their children are in any way 'lacking' and, concurrently, works to legitimize their reluctance to use local school services.

In the use of the phrase 'I wasn't prepared for my son to be experimented on', Caroline makes explicit the idea of the (local) school as a site for trialling government

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http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ChoosingASchool/DG_4016364

projects, with children emerging as test subjects in these experiments. The idea of experimentation is a powerful metaphor, as is 'educational factory', another term Caroline uses to describe the local secondary school in her area. Both these can be read and interpreted in a number of ways, depending on the viewpoint of the analyst. Arguably, here, they are used to reference the practice of social engineering in education which has as its aim the promotion of equal opportunities based on a socially equal admissions system and the organisation of education around meritocratic principles more generally. Caroline, however, is derisive of this approach to education, approximating it to a form of experimentation and an infringement of individual choice and freedom.⁴⁸ In particular, she adamantly rejects the role of the local authority in making decisions over where children should go to school. As a result, she is passionately receptive towards the idea of choice and the positions and practices it makes available. The way in which Caroline inhabits and performs the role of the chooser, however, is managed through two differently inflected understandings of responsibility. First, she views it as her responsibility to send her son to a school of her choice, and not one 'where the education authority thought to place them'. Second, in rejecting the way some schools are organised around meritocratic principles of social engineering, Caroline marks the decision not to send her son to a school in which children are 'experimented' on as containing elements of responsible choosing.

In contrast, Pauline deploys alternative conceptions of responsibility and thus inhabits the field of choice differently to Caroline. Pauline delineates two types of

⁴⁸ See Eysenck (1973) and Herrnstein and Murray (1994) for a discussion around some of these issues. In a similar vein to Caroline, these authors offer a biting criticism of the merits of practices of social engineering in schools. One of the central claims made by these authors is that social engineering is counter-productive given it is a vain pursuit likely to contribute to a decline of standards in education.

responsibility – ‘personal’ and ‘political’. While the former emerges as the dominant framing for her school choice, she acknowledges the latter for its importance in a ‘larger society’. Here, then, the notion of responsibility is subject to sets of contrasting identifications and associations, of the personal and political, and thus stands at the intersection of multiple vocabularies and meanings. Caroline, for example, emphasizes the parental right to choose, with its appeals to the autonomous and empowered subject. Her voice therefore echoes and redeems certain public choice perspectives on the willingness and capacity of individuals to be self-maximizing and self-interested subjects (Downs 1957, 1967; Dunleavy 1991; Le Grand 1997). Pauline, however, articulates a conception of responsibility geared towards society and communal or shared associations, and thus mobilises or gives voice to meanings and practices framed by other-oriented behaviour.

Both Pauline and Caroline engage with choice through deploying a conception of responsibility that is geared towards the child, thereby fulfilling their obligation as responsabilized individuals who act on and for the needs of the child (DES 1991). Pauline, however, resists enacting the preferred or normalized speaking role of the consumer and instead points to competing forms of responsibility based on personal and political beliefs. Pauline’s attempts to reconcile and combine these approaches to choice, and thus negotiate competing frameworks of choosing, generate tensions in her talk. While Caroline is less inclined to frame her choice around a citizenship obligation based on a commitment to a ‘larger society’, to practices of social cohesion or the merits in a local nonselective comprehensive education, she is no more a consumer than Pauline. Marquand (2004) and Needham (2003) argue that the identifications and practices of consumerism are intrinsically antithetical to the

collectivist principle and practices of citizenship, of the Marshallian paradigm of citizenship (see Marshall 1963). In this view, Pauline is more like the citizen than the consumer in that she points to the collectivist impulse in her decision-making, making her actions appear congruent with citizenship obligation. However, her inclinations fail to materialise into actions, making it mere rhetorical speech. Moreover, Pauline's strong inclination towards her son and his needs is not based on self-interest and an unrelenting individualism, but rather is more convoluted and shifting. This links up with Gabriel and Lang's (1995) view of the 'unmanageable consumer' – the idea it is increasingly difficult to naturalise people's actions within comfortable consumer discourses.

Oria *et al.* (2007) argue that the promotion of parental choice generates an ethical framework that facilitates and legitimates self-interest in the pursuit of competitive familial advantage. On the one hand, Caroline is more like the consumer compared to Pauline in that she appropriates choice as a device for securing self-interest. Towards the end of the interview, Caroline remarks:

I felt that was part of losing naivety about this because when your child is in primary school you trust that school is good but you actually become a lot more aware that it is about being a consumer and then you have to decide well if I am the consumer I'm going to get what I want. You have to be like this if you have it within you to be like that.

On the other hand, Caroline's acting out of the consumer can be viewed as a form of individualised responsabilisation. The use of the phrase 'you actually become a lot

more aware' suggests that some mothers are conscious of the demands and pressures placed on them as responsabilized citizens.

For David *et al.*, the promotion of parental choice has facilitated a 'dissonance between public and private responsibilities' (1997: 223), resulting in some mothers having to negotiate their choice in the context of competing forms of responsibility. Their distinction between public and private responsibility, though fascinating, is an uncomplicated and unsatisfactory one, however. David *et al.* are interested in the structural and moral constraints that apparently constitute mothers' private responsibilities, childcare, paid work, etc., and how these responsibilities are at odds with the 'new individualism' pervasive in the 'public sphere, [where] the notion of individual choice is linked to notions of consumerism' (1997: 399). This understanding of the 'public sphere' rests on a dichotomous distinction between the public and private. 'Much debated', Clarke argues, 'this distinction tends to cohere around the poles of private-as-individual/familial/domestic, and public-as-market/state/politics/bureaucracy' (2004c: 28). David *et al.*'s separation of private and public responsibility and 'public and private discourses of choice' (1997: 397) is helpful in that it illuminates the way mothering, perceived as a necessarily 'private' affair, is negotiated in the context of 'public' valuations of new responsibilities and obligations in the realm of welfare. Yet, in bracketing types of responsibility as markers of public or private discourses, David *et al.* (1997) fail to capture the unevenness and amorphous character of the public-private distinction (see Clarke 2004c) and the way mothers sometimes articulate and combine public and private conceptions of responsibility when engaged with the positions and practices offered through dominant governmental discourses around choice. In the next section I build

on this argument through exploring the mutability of responsibility and its ability to move between alternative sets of preferences and valuations, in effect producing complicated and messy understandings of mothering.

Choosing Community: Community as Responsibility

The implementation of choice in education services increasingly affects women as mothers – as they become mothers and as they carry out meanings and practices of mothering (David *et al.* 1997). The relationship between families and schools, argues David (1984), tends to be sustained primarily through relations between mothers and institutions. In this framing, it is mothers rather than fathers who assume/take on responsibility for ensuring the educational success of the child (Reay 1998). All the parents interviewed in this study were mothers, many of them single and sometimes with more than one child. It is therefore important to move beyond the abstract, gender-neutral vocabulary instantiated through dominant policy discourses around choice, as outlined in chapter 2, which addresses ‘parents’ more broadly, and ask: how is mothering and responsibility negotiated in these contexts?

Through government websites such as Directgov and government approved websites such as Parents Online and the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE)⁴⁹ the meaning and practice of choice is framed around ‘reasonable’ and ‘responsible’ forms of behaviour, making choice something which is necessarily imposed and ordered, rather than something that is enacted spontaneously. The injunction to choose tends

⁴⁹ See for example *Applying for a School* (ACE 2008)
<http://www.ace-cd.org.uk/pdf/FreeBooklets/Applying-school-2008.pdf>
Access Date: 28.09.2009

to be presented to mothers as both natural and desirable, but also inescapable as a dominant and legitimate form of 'good' parenting. Representations of what counts as responsible parenting tends to be constructed and negotiated differently among mothers, however. The following extract is taken from an interview with Camilla (C) who was born and educated in Kingston, Jamaica. Camilla's experience of school in Jamaica is one characterised by the authoritative leadership of teachers and intractable forms of discipline and control. 'You dare not raise your voice above the teachers or backchat her or him whereas here [in Britain] there's none of that', she remarks. The strong emphasis on discipline and authority connects with Camilla's positive valuation of community:

Extract 7:3

A: You said take him out of the community and send him...

C: And send him to a school probably on the borders of Bromley or, you know, and I thought I don't want to do that because I'd never know who his friends are. I'd not know any background to them, you know. And it is him being again pulled out of the community, you know rather than be sort of trying to be satisfied with the provisions there and maybe growing up to be a man who fights for the community that he's living on rather than sort of getting something that's already provided.

Camilla demonstrates how community can be imagined spatially through her invocation of Bromley's borders and socially in her concerns with her son's friends. Indeed, Camilla shows how the imaginary of community mediates popular desires for 'sociality' and 'solidarity' (Clarke 2009), making it a cultural and material resource people draw on and invest in. More powerfully, though, it is a representation of community dressed up in the vocabulary of responsibility. This has implications for thinking through models of active citizenship and what it means to active, which I

touch on in a moment. It also shows how community is deployed by some mothers as a mode of surveillance and control; as a device for overseeing and even manipulating the potential relationships built up between people. In this way Camilla evokes two separate yet interrelated conceptions of responsibility. First, there is a responsibility towards knowing who her son's friends are. Second, there is a responsibility towards safeguarding the notion of community and the associations and identifications it makes available. The powerful interrelation of these two competing definitions of responsibility is demonstrated through the way Camilla articulates the latter as creating the conditions of possibility for sustaining the former.

For Camilla, community generates circuits of belonging and attachment, but more importantly, works to insulate people from a potentially threatening and unpredictable outside. Not just schools but imaginary spaces, such as the borders of Bromley, emerge as the repositories of all kinds of fears, anxieties and uncertainties. Community, in this context, works to isolate, detach and cut off individuals from an imaginary and uncertain outside. At the same time, community is constituted as something which needs recovering, protecting and defending. Camilla's desire to produce a child that in the future 'fights for the community' makes visible the interconnection between ideas of belonging and responsibility. In this way belonging can be understood to sometimes sit alongside active processes of exclusion (Creed 2006), as Massey observes:

And in that process the boundaries of the place, and the imagination and building of its 'character', are part and parcel of the definition of who is an insider and who is not; of who is a 'local', and what that term should be mean, and who is to

be excluded. It is a space of bounded identities; a geography of rejection.

(1995: 194)

Exclusion is thus not just a crucial strategy of the 'fearful' middle classes (Ball and Vincent 2001) but extends across class and ethnic boundaries to different individuals and groups. Moreover, it opens up questions around the extent to which it is only middle-class parents who think in terms of the 'future' as a framing for their school choice. Reay and Ball argue that there is little evidence of working-class parents 'attempting to predict or channel the futures of their children' (1998: 433). Instead, they argue, working-class parents think in limited terms of the here and now, of the local, familiar and communal, as against their middle-class counterparts who are constructed as being more likely to work with a conceptualisation of 'future happiness' (1998: 439) unbounded by temporal or spatial limitations. Camilla, however, shows how community is an important discursive resource for imagining, projecting and protecting future selves and for containing such projections. In particular, community communicates ideas around responsibility, both parental and broader definitions based on communal or shared membership to a group.

Camilla's commitment to community is simultaneously a commitment to her son and thus links with parental framings of responsibility. It is evident from the interview that Camilla construes educational success to be differently constituted for male and female children, especially 'black boys who in particular have an affinity towards certain areas of life'. Race and gender emerge therefore as intersecting discourses that slide into and inform each other. Moreover, they are bridged as a powerful framing for Camilla's school choice. She comments on how 'realising the

difficulties young men face' should be an important part of the school's attitude to teaching and 'knowing that black kids have a different way of learning'. Camilla also expresses concern over how her son's 'playful aggression' and 'bolshiness in the playground' might be interpreted and acted on by the school: 'I think in terms of their needs there is that understanding that they get frustrated whereas the teachers can now handle that in a single sex setting much better'. Gillborn has identified a similar problem in his study of institutional racism in the school, where he argues that teachers' interpretations of and responses to the behaviour of African-Caribbean boys help to sustain a 'myth of Afro-Caribbean challenge to authority' (1990: 19; and see Mac an Ghail 1988). In this way Camilla can be understood to envisage community as a space for containing some of these projected fears and anxieties. Camilla's desire to see her son succeed in school is crosscut by uncertainties relating to 'pulling him out of the community'. Camilla's decision to send her son to the local school is therefore a calculated and instrumental one in that it connects with an idea of the boy's future. Moreover, it combines responsibility in community with responsibility in choosing – that is, responsibility in community is made congruent with responsibility towards the child and his or her present/future welfare.

This has important implications for thinking through the public-private distinction as a stable separation of the domestic and intimate sphere on the one hand and the state and market sectors on the other. By viewing the way mothers articulate and combine different registers of responsibility, we can begin to see how the public and private impact upon on each other, making the public-private dichotomy a shifting and fluid construct subject to negotiations over time and space. Lister (1997), for

instance, shows the myriad ways in which the public and private interact and inform each other (also see Collins 1991).

The next extract is taken from an interview with Mary (M) who is a single mother with one son. Here, Mary is describing some of the differences between schools in terms of their admissions policy and, more broadly, the effects of this on the racial composition of some schools.

Extract 7:4

M: It shows in, well God, in Lambeth which is next to Peckham and stuff it seems like they're kind of picking their kids. They've got their own entrance exam and you have to know naval history and so, you know, they were really kind of selecting, you know kids who have that and kids who have that tend to be White. It's not about saying they were doing it in a racial way necessarily but that's how it panned out. I don't know, I just...the main advantage of living in central London is the diversity and, you know, I just thought it'd be good for him to go to a school that handled that well rather than people who just try to kind of ignore it, stuff around it.

Race emerges as a powerful framing for Mary's choice; in particular, the principle and practice of social mix or ethnic diversity in schools. Other researchers (Reay *et al.* 2007, 2008) link this valuing of ethnic diversity to broader trends of communal responsibility and civic engagement with the polity. However, these researchers also point to the way these patterns of rhetorical speech around community and multiculturalism, especially among some White, middle-class parents, are deeply embedded in mechanistic, acquisitive acts of appropriation, where the ethnic 'Other' emerges as a valuable asset for the children's 'cultural knowledge and social skills' (Reay *et al.* 2008: 243). Reay *et al.* argue that it is this 'instrumentalizing impulse' (2008: 244) that brings into question parents' commitment to creating and sustaining

political projects of community-building and multiculturalism. They observe in the White, middle-class parents whom they interviewed 'more self-interest than altruism and a superficial endorsement of social mix rather than any actual commitment to social mixing' (2008: 252). However, Mary's apparent commitment to 'diversity' registers *both* a communitarian, altruistic impulse and a calculating, acquisitive one. As she remarks later in the interview:

Extract 7:5

M: I would have preferred him to go there because then he would have learned Urdu and he would have an extra language under his belt, which he doesn't have. I don't know it's just we live in a world...yes, obviously this is England and there's White people but we live in a world which is mainly Black and Asian, you know is not White. And so if he travels or anything then he might as well get used to it now, you know.

This has important repercussions for thinking through and beyond simple dichotomous distinctions between individual and community, self-interested and other-oriented behaviour, and philosophical doctrines of liberalism and communitarianism more broadly. The social philosophy of communitarianism promulgated by prominent theorists such as Bell (1993), Etzioni (1997) and Selznick (2002) stresses 'responsibilities people have for their families, kin, communities, and societies' as against 'the universal rights all individuals command, the focus of liberalism' (Etzioni 2006: 82). This formulation of communitarianism places it in direct contrast to liberalism, with its emphasis on individual rights and possessive individualism.⁵⁰ Hence, advocates of the communitarian position hold that

⁵⁰ I am troubled by the communitarian argument that 'commitments to moral values tend to deteriorate, unless these are continuously reinforced' (Etzioni 2006: 83). The doctrine of communitarianism is suffused with an uncomfortable, heavy-handed, value-laden, priggish, morally prescriptive vocabulary, held together through an unwavering support for the

conceptions of the good (values) should be ‘formed, transmitted, justified and enforced’ through social institutions such as the family, school and voluntary associations, which are ‘parts of communities’ (Etzioni 2003: 224). Mary echoes the dominant argument that community and choice are diametrically opposed in practice: ‘I think in a way choice kind of divorces the school from the surrounding community’. Mary can therefore be positioned as someone who values community over individual rights – the right to choose, for example. However, in extracts 4 and 5, Mary illuminates the individual-community distinction to be a fluid, shifting construct.

Mary identifies the ‘main advantage’ of living in ‘London’ to be its ‘diversity’ and favours a school that embraces difference rather than occludes it. From this position, Mary evokes a strong communitarian impulse in the way she accounts for her choice. On the other hand, her talk registers an acquisitive and calculating attitude towards choice. In the use of the phrase ‘he would have learned Urdu and he would have an extra language under his belt’, Mary ascribes a kind of cost-benefit framework to her choice. The value placed on the opportunity to learn Urdu, for instance, tends to position ‘diversity’ as a potential resource, something to possess and profit from. The individual-community, liberalism-communitarianism distinctions (Bell 1993; Bellah *et al.* 1985; Etzioni 1997; Selznick 2002) thus fail to capture the way communitarian impulses tend to be shaded with self-regarding impulses and vice versa. It is imperative to mark the interpenetration of these discourses in order to

absolutism and virtuousness of some values – i.e. those with ‘high moral standing because they are compatible with the good society’ (Etzioni 2006: 83). It is posited as a corrective to the excesses of liberalism, to the cult of individualism supposedly eroding the moral inclination to collective action (see Campell 1995 for a critique of communitarianism). As Rose (1998) makes clear, far from dissolving the ‘moral’ imperative to act, the development of individual rights in education – the right to choose, for example – can have the potential to produce new moralised subjects.

show how the 'moral voice' ascribed to the imaginary of community (Etzioni 2003) is cross-cut by acquisitive, instrumentalizing orientations and thus stands at the intersection of conflicting definitions of responsibility. I now examine the implications of this for thinking through 'active' or 'effective' models of citizenship in the realm of education (Ministers of State 2004: 3.4.3) and the notion of responsibility more generally, showing the way some mothers straddle and tussle with different conceptions of what it means to be responsible, reasonable and active when formulating important decisions around school choice.

Across the Active-Passive Divide: Reframing Models of Active, Responsible Parenting

The interviews with Pauline, Caroline, Camilla and Mary open up questions around the extent to which some mothers can be regarded as consumers and/or citizens in relation to education services. This is captured through the ways in which these mothers assemble and combine contradictory understandings of responsibility and thus move between and negotiate conflicting sets of positions and associations. These understandings and interpretations of responsibility are shifting and unstable precisely because they connect simultaneously with discourses around citizenship obligation based on a so-called 'decommodified' relationship to an imaginary or political community (Esping-Anderson 1990) and discourses around consumerism in which attitudes and orientations are assumed to be shaped by instrumental, self-interested, acquisitive impulses (Hauptmann 1996; Needham 2003). This demonstrates, on the one hand, how some mothers negotiate the meaning and practice of responsibility as a framing for their school choice. On the other hand, it

complicates the conventional citizen-consumer bifurcation, in which it is sometimes assumed people 'are consumers only in the market place', while 'in the public domain they are citizens' (Marquand 2004: 135). The intersecting impulses and tendencies that underpin some mothers' school choices reveal the nuances of these discourses and practices and their interpenetration. The mothers interviewed in this study, for example, articulate and combine motivations and orientations that register their identification with individual and self-regarding as well as collective and community-regarding impulses.

In identifying the myriad ways in which some mothers tussle with representations of what it means to be responsible and active, I have shown how the active-passive divide that characterises dominant governmental discourses around choice (Clarke *et al.* 2007) and the active citizenship model more generally (Johansson and Hvinden 2005) is inadequate for capturing the dynamics of the positions some mothers inhabit and enact when formulating their school choices. Moreover, the negotiation work that typifies the way some mothers engage with the positions and practices made available through choice forces us to re-think some of the assumptions of class-based bifurcation often found in the work of Reay and Ball (Reay and Ball 1997, 1998). I want to extend this analysis to include a more complicated reading of the active-passive dynamic and, in doing so, show how some mothers rework and manage accounts of active agency.

In chapters 1 and 2 I discussed how the shift in government rhetoric towards choice as a device for reworking new forms of contact or contract between parents and schools has resulted in the solicitation of certain behavioural obligations. Active

parenting, for instance, is nominally constructed around a set of injunctions focused on reasonable choice and responsible behaviour, in which parents are invited to perform the role of the consumer and thus enter into a set of relations and practices assembled in and through market principles and an economic rationality. The transformation of parents from so-called passive recipients of education services into active citizens or informed consumers was viewed by the New Labour government as a 'legitimate investment for effective citizenship' (Ministers of State 2004: Paragraph 3.4.3). The discourse of choice in education, then, performs a central role in inducing the active enlistment of parents into being/becoming responsible citizens. As a corollary, parents are constructed as active or passive depending on their inclination to and capacity for choice (Clarke *et al.* 2007).

Here, however, active parenting is flagged around a programmatic and scripted performance, which relies on parents following certain rules and guidelines, such as comparing information gathered through school league tables and Ofsted inspection reports, as outlined in chapters 1 and 2. Definitions of active parenting are therefore limited to a calculating position based on the activity or practice of gathering information. The government notes: 'Armed with information about the schools in their area, many parents can navigate the system successfully' (DfES 2005: 3.11). But in the process of navigating the school system, mothers both negotiate the choices available to them and the meaning and practice of choice itself. Pauline's delineation of personal and political beliefs in extract 1, for example, points to a complicated set of positions and associations not captured through dominant governmental discourses around choice. The ways in which some mothers negotiate their choice through framings of private and public responsibility illuminates a different set of concerns,

valuations and identifications. In particular, such negotiations transcend and rework conventional understandings of active parenting in government texts around education, where active is elided with a narrow rational, utilitarian definition of the parent as consumer.

Camilla's take-up of community, for example, points to a set of valuations and preferences that register alternative conceptions of active parenting. For Camilla, community engenders meanings and practices that, in some instances, help to sustain relations of belonging and a sense of attachment. Moreover, the insider/outsider relations worked up through these definitions of community enable Camilla to imagine a space that insulates her son from a potentially menacing outside, and thus points to the intersecting dynamics of community- and self-regarding impulses. In a similar vein, Mary's valorisation of diversity, both as an stimulus for greater community cohesion and as a resource of value to profit from, highlights a different conceptualisation of active parenting, one that is based on combining an other-oriented with a cost-benefit approach. In this way acquisitive, instrumental impulses are not separate from, but instead are intimately interwoven with, other-directed impulses. Representations of active, responsible parenting are therefore shifting and mutable as mothers appropriate, rework and combine the different discursive resources available to them. As a result, the active-passive distinction that characterises constructions of active citizenship can be accused of overlooking the negotiation work involved in mothers' formulations of accounts of active parenting.

In chapter 1 I examined Johansson and Hvinden's (2005) tripartite model of citizenship, which includes three ideal-type understandings of the notion of active

citizenship: socio-liberal, neo-liberal and republican. The socio-liberal definition is based on a Marshallian ideal of citizenship; the neo-liberal framing of citizenship is represented through the contractual relationship between the citizen and state in which the citizen exercises choice between a given set of providers; and the republican variant is premised on the idea that citizens participate in the polity, i.e. through involvement in decisions that affect the community to which they belong or identify with. Some of the mothers in this study appear to be straddling different representations of active citizenship – socio-liberal, neo-liberal and republican. Pauline and Mary, for instance, articulate an understanding of responsibility that gives voice to very different sets of attachments and identifications. Pauline's identification with a 'larger society' evokes a citizenship obligation based on responsibility to some communal or shared association. At the same time, Pauline performs the material and representational work of the 'good' consumer – strategic, discriminating and discerning – in effect combining neo-liberal and republican definitions of active citizenship. Mary on the other hand seeks refuge in the imaginary of community as the object, site and desired outcome of choice. Her behaviour registers 'active' elements of choosing and a strong responsibility towards the future welfare and protection of her child. Here, community is championed as a correction to the feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity and unease Mary associates with the outside. Mary, then, is decisive and strategic in her decision-making.

In this view, the active-passive dynamic is problematic in that it systematically reduces behaviour to elements in a consumer/non-consumer binary. Behaviour that does not register a calculating position based on a formal rational model of decision-making is often elided with a non-consumer and therefore non-profitable and counter-

productive approach to choice, as illustrated in chapter 2. What is at stake, then, is the marginalisation or devaluing of those cultural repertoires and vocabularies that, for some mothers, register active and responsible constructions of parenting. The active-passive divide has also been appropriated by some researchers as a device for explaining class differences in the way some parents choose a secondary school for their child. For Waslander and Thrupp (1997), choice is positive in that it releases poorer families from the 'iron cage' of parochial catchment areas and their dependency on the local school. Here, the local school is assumed to generate relations of dependency and obligation, with choice acting as the stimulus for setting families free from these relations. The suggestion that it is working-class families who place a higher value on localism (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995; Reay and Ball 1997), and therefore tend to be happier when their children are attending the local school, has led Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz to argue that

The working-class families are also engaged in a process of social reproduction, but their 'use' of the school system is driven by a different set of purposes, values and objectives. Their utilization of the specific powers of the education system is accommodative rather than strategic. (1996: 175)

The use of the adjective 'accommodative' appears to position 'working-class' families as passive agents of social change and 'social reproduction', as against their middle-class counterparts who are assumed to be more 'strategic' and therefore active in their choice-making. It therefore lends itself to a reformulation of the passive-active distinction. Such a view, however, seems to rely too heavily on a theory of social reproduction where agency is understood to be constituted rather than freely entered

into or negotiated. Mary's valuation of the collectivist linkages between community and the local school, for example, is both active and strategic. Arguably, then, it is an orientation that carries active elements that transcends an accommodative engagement with education services. To argue it is accommodative only is to undermine the active framing of Mary's decision-making and her negotiation of choice through powerful gendered and racialized concerns. It is important also to go beyond a view of local schools as fostering relations of dependency (Le Grand 2007b) to one that emphasises individuals and groups as active, creative and inventive social actors and not simply as bearers of discourses or ideological dupes who are susceptible to manipulation (Touraine 2001).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have used the concept of responsibility as a way into unpacking some of the ways in which mothers engage with the positions and practices made available through dominant policy discourses around choice. I have shown how choice is not entered into spontaneously and freely, but is constituted by a set of injunctions around behaviour and orientations. There is, for instance, a cultural imperative attached to performing the role of the consumer, as outlined in chapter 5, and thus choice is subsumed within a framework of responsibility and obligation. The active enlistment of parents as consumers of education services involves hailing or interpellating parents into formulating their decisions around narrow, rational, utilitarian characterisations of choosing. However, in identifying the ways in which some mothers articulate and combine apparently conflicting understandings and interpretations of responsibility – what it means or should mean to a responsible

mother – I have provided a more nuanced reading of the cross-cutting impulses that shape mothers' school choices.

This chapter thus makes visible the ways in which some mothers assemble contradictory notions of responsibility that mediate multiple discourses and practices. It illuminates the way they struggle to define meanings and practices of responsible and active parenting, and points to some of the tensions and ambivalences resulting from these struggles. This has significant implications for thinking through simple dichotomies of rational-irrational, public-private, collective-individual, political-commercial, and so forth. The mothers in this study tended to occupy a number of intersecting positions and relations that worked across, as well as within, these dichotomies. Needham (2003) criticizes the way New Labour sought to de-collectivise the public and its relationship to public services, through treating citizens as individuated agents who pursue self-interest and thus undermining their relationship to public services and the sense of civic responsibility and duty it carries. My interviews show how some mothers straddle different ideas of what it means or should mean to be self-interested, responsible and reasonable, thus complicating the idea that a public ethos ethic is necessarily destroyed through the so-called commodification of relations between users and providers of public services (Needham 2003; Marquand 2004). Rather, my interviews demonstrate how some mothers, through the process of negotiating ideas around responsible and active parenting, are simultaneously undoing, reworking and reordering the boundaries framing the public-private, collective-individual, citizen-consumer distinctions.

Consequently the active-passive formulation that characterises dominant governmental discourses around choice and the model of active citizenship more generally is deeply problematic. The mothers interviewed in this study tended to draw on cultural repertoires that in the main are despised and/or devalued as cultural currency through dominant policy discourses around choice, namely community. This is because community evokes relationships between local families and the local school which in turn are characterised by some (Waslander and Thrupp 1997; Le Grand 2007b; Seaton 2004) as constituted through relations of dependency and obligation. Community registers identifications and positions that stretch beyond the remit of the individual; that connect with communal or shared associations; and which generate affective relationships based on solidarity and reciprocity. It therefore extends beyond, and stands in opposition to, a formal rational model of calculation based on a cost-benefit analysis in which parents apparently act alone and autonomously. There are different elements of active and responsible parenting being rehearsed here. The interviews with Camilla and Mary, for example, show how some mothers negotiate responsibility (responsibility to the community, child or school, for example) against dominant representations which conflate responsible parenting with getting the 'best' school.

This chapter points to the ways in which mothers resist and rework conceptions of what it means to be an active recipient of welfare provision; that self-responsibility is managed, acted on and deployed in a number of active and strategic practices. Johansson and Hvinden's (2005) typology of active citizenship is helpful in that it alerts us to different inflections of active citizenship, and the politics that underpin them. The mothers in this study, however, force us to rethink the assumption that a

single dominant model of active citizenship can be attributed to neo-liberal governance. This is demonstrated through the ways in which they actively engage with negotiations around what it means to act 'responsibly' and 'reasonably' and formulate their choices around powerful framings of gender, race, citizenship obligation and the needs of the child. Choice tends to stand at the intersection of these multiple discourses which means that discourses are often articulated and combined in unpredictable and complicated ways. The unevenness and messiness of the interrelations between these discourses tends to produce complicated frameworks for parents to engage with as part of their decision-making around school choice. In the next chapter I move on to offer a broader theoretical engagement with some of the issues raised in chapters 5, 6 and 7 and comment on some the ways in which mothers can be understood to engage with choice as a discourse, framing and function.

Chapter 8

The Multiplicity of Choice:

Blurred Boundaries, Crosscutting Impulses and Intersecting Positions

This chapter pulls together some of the arguments presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Each of those chapters addressed the main research question to this study – in what ways do mothers engage with the meanings and positions made available through dominant governmental discourses around choice – through the lens of three separate yet interrelated framings: emotion, community and responsibility. Chapter 5, for instance, explored how some mothers engaged with choice through deploying repertoires that registered a discourse of emotion, while chapters 6 and 7 mapped out how similar engagements were inflected through the mothers' shifting understandings and interpretations of community and responsibility.

By adopting a discursive approach (Potter and Wetherell 1987), with its emphasis on the ways in which subjects negotiate complex positionings through discourses, I was able to identify the importance of emotion, community and responsibility as socially circulating discourses, and highlight their dialogic, anticipatory and ideological usages (Bakhtin 1981; Billig 1996; Maybin 2001) in the context of choice. Each of these discourses therefore offered a different dynamic to understanding the ways in which some mothers engage with choice. Such an approach enabled me to

move beyond assumptions of class-based bifurcation (Reay and Ball 1997, 1998) and the abstraction of a formal, economic rational model to take account of the dialogic ways (Holland and Lave 2000) mothers move between and negotiate multiple framings for their school choice.

The multitude of contradictory and intersecting positions that emerge from mothers' negotiations of school choice means that assumptions around class-based bifurcation need re-thinking in order to capture the messiness and complexity of choice as a framing, discourse and function social actors inhabit and perform. The tendency among some researchers to condense complicated and disparate voices to moments of class articulation appears to reduce school choice to expressions of class identification (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998). This undermines the dialogical character of speech (Bakhtin 1981), namely that the vocabulary of class is one among many discursive themes that mothers assimilate into their speech and rehearse as part of their negotiation of school choice. In this way, and as I highlighted in chapter 7, it is also important to be critical of the analytic utility of classical concepts of political sociology, of simple dichotomous distinctions of public and private, of individual and collective, of political and commercial, and of self-regarding and community-regarding. In this study these distinctions are critiqued for the way they foreclose the interrelations between discourses and thus fail to illuminate the way people move between them. As chapter 7 illustrated, some mothers put into use vocabularies that speak to competing sets of impulses, impulses that move across and within distinctions of political and commercial, individual and collective, and so forth.

Hence, this chapter highlights the indeterminacy and contingency of discourses and clarifies how multiple positions and practices articulate with each other. It looks at how discourses are deployed differently by mothers, where they are sometimes articulated alongside and combined with other discourses, making them shifting and unstable. To do this, I have divided the chapter into four sections. The first looks at the discourse of emotion and the ethical strand of talk, and the subject positions summoned through it. The second section explores the significance of community as a discursive strategy enacted by some mothers in their negotiations of school choice. The third section points to the mutability of the concept and practice of responsibility and its implications for thinking through and beyond static concepts of agency. In the last section I show how these discourses are important for showing the intersecting dynamics of positions and practices; the process or activity through which mothers graft and patch together different rationalisations for their school choice; and the different kinds of ethical quandaries some mothers engage with as part of their decision-making around choice.

Emotion and the Ethical Character of Talk

Dominant policy discourses around choice, as outlined in chapters 1 and 2, invite parents to adjust their behaviour on the basis of understandings around an economic rationality and an acquisitive, instrumental approach to choosing. As a result, the field of choice is dominated by images of the 'sovereign' figure of the consumer, of the rational utility maximizer and autonomous subject. Indeed, at that critical juncture when parents are activated in the field of choice as choosers, wherein they are authorized and 'empowered' to carry out of the role of consumers of education

services, they do not act spontaneously, that is, impulsively, impetuously or on a whim. It is rather that they act in accordance with a set of injunctions around 'responsible' and 'reasonable' behaviour and therefore engage with economic assumptions around behaviour which judges individuals to be agents sharing the capacity and willingness to maximise the utility of their decisions in calculating and self-interested ways, as outlined in chapter 3. Choice therefore is something that is imposed on and commanded of subjects. As subjects with choice, parents are hailed or interpellated into regulating their behaviour on the basis of a narrowly calculating and utilitarian impulse. The need to search out and compare school information through the utility of Ofsted reports, achievement and attainment tables, admission arrangements, and so forth, constitutes 'the key information that parents need to know [when choosing a secondary school for their child]', according to the government (DfES 2005: 3.8). In this way the activity or practice of choice demands a lot of scripting and acting, as well as a strong inclination to and capacity for enacting such performances, as illustrated by Caroline (C):

Extract 8:1

C: She [the headteacher] spoke well of Bray but I made other inquiries and I found out that, apart from the fact that it was huge, that it was very close to a number of estates and that the intake was reflective on who lives on the doorstep of the school so that once they got reasonable ok results at O-Level, which were lauded as being fantastic, the fact was and they got all these value added stuff, that their intake was from children who were not doing very well because they actually weren't in very good primary schools and that they got a lot of input up to the point of O-Level and then so therefore the results went up and everyone said 'hey, this is a really fantastic school'. So that was what I knew about that school and also, this sounds funny, but they disregarded the school rule that they would do anything about smoking. And the children always looked unruly in the street as I drive down.

Caroline, a single mother with two children, displays all the characteristics of a discerning, discriminating and autonomous chooser. This is captured through the way she puts into practice forms of counter-expertise as a necessary correction to the advice and information given to her by the headteacher at her son's primary school. Such an approach affirms Caroline's status as a consumer of education services, but also her willingness and capacity for enacting such a position. The way in which Caroline makes use of concepts such 'intake', 'results', 'value added stuff' and 'input' works to locate her actions and decisions within a narrowly calculating framework of choosing. As she later remarks: 'when your child is in primary school you trust that school is good but you actually become a lot more aware that it is about being a consumer and then you have to decide well if I am the consumer I'm going to get what I want'. At the same time, Caroline goes beyond the calculating gaze of the consumer to take into account other important factors influencing her choice. The size of the school, for example, seems to have a strong impact on how Caroline calculates her choice, as well as the issue over whether the school is close to 'estates'. The term estate, meaning council estate, is often used symbolically to reference 'unruly places' (Reay 2007: 1195) and delineate geographical sites along the axis of social class and race (Reay and Lucey 2000a, 2000b). The kinds of imaginary spaces and social histories that are evoked through the repertoire of estate are discussed later on. The way in which Caroline makes use of this cultural repertoire is useful for showing how some mothers articulate and combine different frameworks of choosing, and therefore weigh up their decisions in, through and against the prism of instrumental calculation.

As chapter 2 illustrated, school visits are powerful spaces for the rehearsal of the kinds of positions and practice legitimated through dominant governmental discourses around choice. The website Parents Online⁵¹, for example, instructs parents on what to look out for when visiting a school for the first time and advises on how to ask the ‘right’ questions. Such performances work to index parents in particular ways – as mild-mannered, confident, discriminating and, above all else, deserving – and thus mediate and affirm constructions of the parent as consumer of education services (DCSF 2008a). The cultural imperative to present oneself as having the ability to formulate judgments, reasons and evaluations around a narrowly calculating framework of choosing, as Caroline illustrates, shows how parents do not enter into the process of choosing as free and spontaneous individuals, but instead are incited to adjust their behaviour on the basis of strict behavioural obligations. As Holland and Lave point out, ‘Just as we author ourselves by repeating the words of others, we are frequently in the process of enacting ourselves through the culturally identified activities of others’ (2000: 15). In such ways parents must learn how to choose and frame their choice around certain injunctions.

With the dominance of the idea of the self-maximizing, self-determining, autonomous chooser as a central figure in the dominant policy discourses around choice, it is interesting to explore the extent to which parents appropriate or resist such injunctions around behaviour. Moreover, how parents account for such refusals is important for elucidating the ways in which parents engage with the positions and practices made available through choice. The ‘sovereign’ figure of the consumer tends to register a subject who is ‘active’ as opposed to ‘passive’ (Clarke *et al.* 2007),

⁵¹ <http://www.parents.org.uk/index.html?parents-welcome.html&2>
Access date: 28.01.09

and hence someone who is deserving and responsible. The discursive terms active and passive engender meanings around action/inaction, with the concept of passive carrying with it a baggage of inaction. To refuse the position of the consumer therefore naturally incurs troubled moments for the speaker, as s/he works to legitimate alternative claims to what it means, or should mean, to be responsible. For Wetherell, troubled moments such as these reveal the 'level of disjuncture and contradiction in identity positions' (2005: 8) and the active work people do in discourse. In contrast, untroubled moments are registered through the confluence of positions, where the positions speakers actively take-up are mirrored by those positions that are legitimated and made acceptable through socially circulating discourses. In this way discourses can be understood both as reservoirs of cultural meanings that make available the subject positions we inhabit and reference points or discursive resources against which new subject positions can be imagined and constructed.

As Wetherell explains, untroubled moments contain normative answers which 'don't usually come with extensive accounts – nothing needs to be explained' (2005: 11). Troubled moments on the other hand are characterised by 'repair, hesitation, conflict, disjuncture, unease, misunderstanding and self-correction' (2005: 7). Wetherell's distinction of troubled and untroubled moments can therefore be used to explain the ways in which mothers engage with choice, precisely because of its emphasis on the idea that discourses carry certain anticipatory and ideological usages (Billig 1996; Maybin 2001) that can be put to use in constructing images of the self and others. In this perspective, all utterances can be understood to be dialogic (Bakhtin 1981, 1986) in that they are formulated in response to other utterances. How,

then, do some mothers refuse, rework or appropriate, and therefore engage with, the meanings and practices presupposed by certain discourses, namely the dominant discourse of choice?

As outlined in chapter 5, parents are nominally addressed through the discourse of choice as potentially anxious, emotional and distressed subjects (Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008; Rooney 2007), and as a result are invited to formulate their choice on the basis of certain rationalities, namely an economic rationality. As a corollary, emotion and logic are constructed as containing elements that speak to different and contrasting sets of identifications and associations, with the latter emerging as a central strand in dominant governmental discourses around choice. Woodhead's suggestion that parents should abandon 'vague emotional arguments [which] will get you nowhere' (Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008) has the effect of denigrating the value of emotion and feeling as a framing for choice. Emotion is displaced from the centre to the margins. Instead, parents are called upon to displace emotional behaviour in favour of more suitable, preferred and effective responses, namely responses that register the dialogical capacities of the consumer.

Indeed, there are non-governmental agencies, such as the Schools Appeals Service,⁵² which build on this idea that there are symbolic as well as material and punitive penalties incurred through non-compliance, as outlined in chapter 2. The Schools Appeals Service both legitimates and implicitly exploits the responsibility and obligation that is assigned to parents as choosers. However, it is responsibilization through calculation and risk-avoidance: parents are solicited into

⁵² <http://www.schoolappeals.com>
Access date: 28.01.09

framing their choice around tempered logical arguments and the advice of professionals. Moreover, it individualises responsibility and incites parents to make sense of their child's education in terms of personal failings.

In this way parenting becomes increasingly 'risky business' (Ball 2004: 4) as the dominant discourse of choice opens up new spaces of anxiety and uncertainty around parenting itself. This is also illustrated in chapter 2 where I used extracts taken from the website Mumsnet to show how parents, mainly mothers, engage with and respond to complicated and messy narratives over what constitutes 'responsible' and 'reasonable' parenting in the realm of education. These narratives tend to be morally and rationally ambiguous precisely because they stand at the intersection of competing ethical orders. For example, a growing trend among some parents, particularly those in urban areas where school places tend to be scarce, is to submit fraudulent applications in order to get their child into the 'right' school (Millar 2006; Reay and Lucey 2004). Instances of parents attempting to defraud schools have grown exponentially in the last three years (Shepard 2008), resulting in one council using the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) to investigate a suspected fraudulent school application (Schlesinger 2008). Even more problematic is the way in which parental attempts to defraud schools are legitimated by some as a necessary response and even elided with practices of 'active' citizenship: Conservative leader, David Cameron, has championed 'middle-class' parents who 'play the system', likening their behaviour to those of 'active citizens' (Webster and Elliot 2008).

These messages around what it means to be 'active' and 'responsible' have even been taken up in popular culture, where, again, there is in evidence a conflation of playing the system with being 'active':

I'd always dismissed the rumours flying around – people moving house or shifting their front gate a foot to one side to fall within the good catchment areas; parents lying about their postcodes, selling body parts to pay for private school, tutoring their children into nervous breakdowns – all that seemed so over the top, belonging to the realm of those over-perfect, over-zealous parents who have a ten-year plan for their five-year-olds. I always thought Mike and I were more hands on than that, wanting the best for our son, but just trying to play it straight...But apparently I need to be a bit more active, play the game a bit more the way everyone else does. (Tucker 2007: 16)

This extract, taken from a novel called *The Battle for Big School*, shows the connections between everyday representation and popular culture. It demonstrates on the one hand how choice as a site of anxiety and uncertainty has pervaded popular culture. On the other hand, it ironically reveals the public and cultural imperative underpinning the performance of the 'active' parent, where active comes to stand for, or stand in for, the deserving parent.

Hence, choice is subject to contrary pushes and pulls which are sometimes framed by ethical injunctions and orientations. The desire among some parents to play it straight, for instance, is complicated through its disassociation from more 'active' constructions of agency. In the above extract, the term active is used to

denote orientations and motivations that reference a self-interested subject; in particular, a subject who engages with the field of choice in ways that are perhaps unethical. As outlined in chapter 2, some mothers agonise over these decisions, but typically favour an approach that is fair and equitable for everyone. Against the utilitarian, self-interested character of playing the game, some mothers invoke the ethical strand of talk and thus lend their voices to the dialogical capacities of a thoughtful, compassionate and reasonable self. As a result, a discourse of emotion is sometimes deployed by some mothers, as illustrated in chapter 5, which works to undermine the narrowly calculating framework of choosing. In this way a discourse of emotion works to set up a site of anxiety and uncertainty, which feeds into and is a product of the field of choice. The utility and power of a discourse of emotion in this context is precisely its appeal to the ethical character of talk.

For Isin (2004), the dimension of affect and emotion is integral to the way subjects are governed and govern themselves through responses to anxieties and uncertainties. It is through governing practices, argues Isin, that subjects are incited to eliminate potential future risks by calibrating their conduct on the basis of its anxieties and insecurities rather than rationalities – what Isin refers to as ‘governing through neurosis’ (2004: 225). Isin in effect challenges the centrality of the ‘sovereign’ figure of the rational subject in risk society theories and governmentality literatures. Here, subjects are assumed to be hailed into adjusting their conduct through practising and sustaining their autonomy and self-sufficiency as rational, calculating subjects; subjects who, without emotion or feeling, are able to responsabilize themselves through calculation. Instead, Isin highlights the way ‘neurotic subjects have been increasingly incited to conduct themselves as neurotic

citizens' (2004: 226). Parents tend to be addressed as neurotic citizens through dominant discourses of choice, as illustrated in chapter 2, as if it is an appropriate role/behaviour. In the formal proceedings of an admissions appeal, for instance, parents are assumed to be at a major disadvantage due to lack of legal training and with 'only an outline of what to expect, and being far more *emotionally involved* in the proceedings' (Rooney 2007: 60, emphasis added). Consequently, parents are encouraged to do away with 'vague emotional arguments' (Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008) in favour of 'rational' ones; to suppress or subvert any inclination which may result in emotion and feeling mobilised as a basis for action and reasoning.

Isin's (2004) explication of the 'neurotic citizen' is thus important for showing how citizens are addressed as neurotic and distressed subjects. My study shows, however, that parents, while being addressed as potentially anxious subjects, are invited to displace emotion and feeling as a requisite for securing competitive familial advantage. Here, action based on instrumental calculation rather than emotion tends to be flagged as advantageous or profitable in these circumstances. Yet some of the mothers in this study refused to channel their choice through the prism of an economic rationality, choosing instead to undermine the calculating framework of choosing as an impassive, unfeeling and hardened discourse. There was a general acceptance among these mothers that a narrowly calculating approach is a deficient practice in that it occludes an image of the child as unique (extracts 5:1, 5:2, 5:3). Hence, some of the mothers deployed a vocabulary that worked to individuate the child and position her/him against and outside the lofty abstraction of the calculating framework of choosing. At the same time, however, these mothers recognised it to be

a legitimated form of choosing, given its instantiation in dominant governmental discourses around choice.

Arguably, it is the legitimacy of this practice, of using a calculating framework of choosing, that creates comfortable, predictable and stable positions for parents to inhabit and perform when activated in the field of choice (Wetherell 2005). This explains why at the moment Pauline resists, and even rejects, the calculating position inscribed in dominant discourses around choice, she also registers her capacity for enacting such a position, despite her obvious lack of desire for it (extract 5:2). In pointing to how conversant she is with such a position, Pauline demonstrates how some mothers experience a slight fear of being positioned as passive as against active, and therefore as unresponsive or undeserving subjects.

In this way the discourse of emotion serves a number of important and subversive purposes. First, it offers mothers a way of subverting existing claims to what it means or should mean to be 'responsible' and 'reasonable' and thus performs the role of resisting a hegemonic framing of the self as a calculating agent. Moreover, it works to subordinate consumerist logics to an ethical strand of talk and thus rescues emotion from the margins and reinscribes back in the centre. By putting into service repertoires that register a discourse of emotion, the mothers in this study were able to appeal to the uniqueness of the child, in effect undermining the dominant discourse of choice as unfeeling, detached and impassive. A central concern for many of the mothers in this study, for example, was choosing a secondary school that encouraged

the development of their child's well-being, confidence, character and sense of self-worth.⁵³

The discourse of emotion therefore works to strengthen a set of alternative concerns and valuations, and thus emerges as a powerful discursive resource in the symbolic and representation work of articulating counter-positions and counter-narratives. It is imperative, however, not to reduce the rational and emotional to elements in the formation of contrasting approaches to choice, as some researchers and journalists sometimes do (Millar 2007; Reay and Lucey 2004). This study demonstrates how a discourse of emotion is built up descriptively in interactions as a counter-hegemonic undertaking and as a means of handling accountability (Edwards 1999; Moir 2005), thereby confirming the mother to be an agentic, active and rationalizing subject.

Moreover, I have highlighted the extent to which parents do not simply reject any construction of themselves as consumers (Crozier 1997; Hughes, Wikeley, and Nash 1994; McClelland *et al.* 1995; Reay 1996) but rather tend to negotiate the boundaries of this position and articulate it with other positions – the mother, the citizen, and so

⁵³ The Labour government children's minister, Baroness Delyth Morgan, has proposed that all schools should be judged on the role they play in contributing to the well-being of pupils – a proposal set out in the government consultation paper *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures* (DCSF 2007a). It includes using 'well-being indicators' to give greater recognition to the contribution made by schools to the 'wider development of young people' (John Dunford, general secretary of Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), quoted in Lipsett 2008). It is anticipated that Ofsted would use these indicators, alongside conventional pupil attainment and progress indicators, to evaluate the 'success' of each school. Despite some opposition from teachers' unions that 'pupil well-being cannot be quantified' (Mary Bousted, general secretary of Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), quoted in Lipsett 2008) and that schools should not be held accountable for matters beyond their control, we might speculate on its impact on parents' school choices. This study indicates that some mothers are concerned just as much with the emotional development as they are with the educational development of their child. 'Well-being indicators' might, in some instances, help to ameliorate some of these concerns.

forth. This gives rise to irresolvable tensions as some mothers attempt to reconcile apparently competing sets of identifications and practices, such as affect and emotion on the one hand and 'rational' calculations on the other. The negotiation work involved in combining these discourses, as outlined in chapters 5, 6 and 7, highlights the way in which some mothers engage with the intersecting, multiple possibilities and opportunities made available through contradictory discourses. These tensions can be explored differently through the discourse of community, which, alongside emotion, emerges as a powerful framing for some mothers' school choices.

Community versus Choice?

In chapter 6 I explored the idea of community from two key perspectives. First, I examined the ways in which community has been implicated in governmental practices of sustaining individuals and groups as members of communities (Kearns 2003; Newman 2001; Rose 1999, 2000). The mobilisation of the concept of community in New Labour education texts is a curious one. As a governmental strategy, it serves a number of distinct and interrelated functions. First, the concept and practice of community is thought to enable local schools and local families to develop and strengthen their links with each other, with the aim of creating more flexible and responsive types of provision (DfEE 2001; DfES 2004; DfES 2005; Ofsted 2005). Second, the government's emphasis on community, with its appeals to the 'collective responsibility' of citizens (DfES 2004: 5.27), works to foster local people's 'obligation towards the school' (Ofsted 2005: Executive Summary). Third, the imaginary of community is assumed to enable schools to improve on educational gaps in the performance of some minority groups by facilitating participation of local

families in educational matters (Ofsted 2005). A central strand running through each of these government initiatives is the desire to work on, work through and produce 'sustainable communities' (ODPM 2005: 1.2) which people can manage themselves.

Similarly to the policy of parental choice, with its appeals to the parent as a self-sufficient, autonomous, empowered subject, the promotion of community relies on individuals fulfilling the responsibilities and obligations assigned to them as self-governing subjects. It is concerned with extending rights to individuals and groups as members of communities just as it is concerned with inculcating a sense of responsibility in peoples' attitude towards actively sustaining/participating in the communities to which they belong or identify with – as sites of self-governance or co-governance. Second, I examined some of the affective components of community – what Creed (2006) terms the powerful 'emotive resonance' in community' – to explore the multitude of popular desires elicited through its mobilisation. It is evident in the way some mothers describe and explain their choice that community is a powerful framing for negotiating different possibilities and opportunities, with its recognisable tropes, metaphors and repertoires.

One of the seductions of community stems from its capacity to invoke relations of solidarity, association, shared experience, familiarity, closeness, security, co-operation and connection. The imaginary of community is the reference point or discursive resource for projecting, framing and imagining powerful group-based associations, identifications and forms of belonging. The mothers interviewed in this study, for instance, mobilised community as a device for overcoming, transcending, or even bracketing difference (extract 6:1) and constructing individuals as part of

different groupings (extract 6:2). There is also some similarity in the way community is put into service in government texts around education and how it is taken up by some mothers as a discursive resource. In both cases, community emerges as one of the conditions of possibility for imagining collectivist linkages between local families and local schools (extract 6:5) and as a discursive resource for imagining and constructing political projects of social cohesion (extract 7:1). Hence, some mothers envisage community and choice as containing or speaking to different ethical orders – to the collective and individual, for example.

The following extract, taken from an interview with Mary (M), a single mother with one child, shows how community is used to flag group-based associations:

Extract 8:2

A: And what about the community or communities in or around Dorney?

M: I don't know. I have no idea. I mean, you know, the houses are fairly expensive up there. I know there are a lot of estates up there as well and I think Dorney has to deal with the kids who come from the estates. It's the people with the houses who go somewhere else. It's probably more divided than it is here just simply because...

A: Divided in terms of?

M: Well around here there's a very old white working-class community. There's a lot quite a big refugee community now. That's sort of developed in the last twenty years and there's not...I mean the people, the rich people who moved in buy quite young and so they tend not to have kids or the ones who do have kids tend to, you know, around Dorney tend to send their kids to private schools so you know.

Mary understands and interprets community through categories of social class and ethnicity. The White working-class and refugee come to represent and embody the boundaries of particular communities. The repertoire of community, then, enables

speakers to construct and imagine social difference. Mary also understands community to be constituted materially as well as discursively. Her distinction between 'houses' and 'estates', for example, works to foreground community separation and group belonging. The term estate, as I've already discussed, is a powerful framing for locating people symbolically and materially in social groupings. In a similar vein to Caroline, Mary draws on estate as a reference point for designating potentially 'unruly spaces' (Reay 2007a). More importantly, though, Mary articulates estate as a way of constructing and containing alliances between certain people, namely the White working-class and refugee community. In this way the repertoire of estate is to designate an integrated and intimate set of relationships and associations. Moreover, it is put into service as a way of bracketing 'the rich' as outsiders and beyond and against community, and who share a different set of relationships that are atomised and anonymous. The combination of community and estate also works to locate particular people, notably the White working-class, as part of an enduring and stable social history.

For Mary, the implementation of the policy of parental choice is damaging to the relations and associations that help to sustain the imaginary of community. Indeed, one of the most pertinent and popular critiques of the policy of parental choice trades on the assumption that the right to choose opens up an ethical framework through which self-interest is legitimated and naturalized (Oria *et al.* 2007). As a corollary, parents are permitted to put into practice forms of voluntary self-segregation in the pursuit of competitive familial advantage, which can lead to, among other things, increasing trends of ethnic and class polarisation in schools and communities (Bagley 1996; Tomlinson 1997). Indeed, just as the government observes a potential 'conflict

between parental choice and social cohesion' (ODPM 2004: 5.59), mothers too appear frustrated with the implications of choice for community. For some mothers, choice undermines community-based framings of identification and association (extract 6:3), especially the collectivist linkages between local schools and local families. Choice, then, signals a lack of security, forced uprooting and an uncertain future. Hence, the right to choose, with its emphasis on individual rights, is assumed, in some instances, to undermine or displace welfarist, social democratic conceptions of universalism of provision, equality and quality for all. For example, Millar's (2007) argument that every child should be the recipient of a high-quality education, with every local school offering an equal standard of education, is the opposite of what a choice-based system seems to imply. However, Le Grand rejects the dichotomising of choice and quality in this way, arguing instead 'choice is one of the possible means of obtaining a good service' (2007a: 48).

This opens up important questions around what is, or what is meant by, responsible parenting/choosing. Some of the mothers interviewed in this study, like Pauline and Mary, placed a high value on local provision, social mix and community, while others, namely Camilla, championed local provision and community as elements in the construction of responsible parenting (extract 6:8). In contrast, Caroline provided one of the most alarming and arresting accounts of the local school, in which she elided the site of the local school to an 'educational factory' and a space in which children are 'experimented on' (extract 7:2). Caroline's decision not to send her son to the local school is thus inflected through her own particular understanding and interpretation of what constitutes responsible parenting. What is meant by responsible parenting is thus likely to shift and mutate in the context of peoples'

identifications with certain discourses and practices. Responsibility, then, makes explicit some of the nuances, complexities and heterogeneity of choice. By highlighting the kinds of positions and associations mothers invoke in their conceptions of responsible parenting/choosing, it is possible to make visible the ways in which mothers engage with the meanings and practices offered through governmental discourses around choice.

Responsibility: Collapsed Distinctions and Intersecting Positions

In chapter 7 I focused on illuminating the way some mothers assemble and combine contradictory notions of responsibility in their choice-making. This enabled me to show how the boundaries framing dichotomous distinctions, such as private versus public, consumer versus citizen, individual versus collective, self-regarding versus community-regarding, tend to slide into one another, making them blurred and unstable constructions. For some anti-choice commentators, the separation of self-regarding and community-regarding impulses is important for differentiating between the class orientations and motivations of different social actors. For Reay and Ball, the celebrated consumerism in government texts around education tends to 'fit uneasily with the necessities of working-class cultures' (1997: 99) in that it valorises and legitimates the attitudes and orientations of middle-class people, with their sharp elbows, loud voices and capacity to and willingness for simulating consumer-based inflections of agency.

The defining feature of the consumer is the act of purchase (Clarke 2004a) or 'choosing' (Hauptmann 1996), which, according to Needham (2003), is essentially

motivated by self-interest. As a corollary, working-class parents are assumed to be at a disadvantage when activated as choosers in a competitive educational field. This is because the working-class desire to invest in collective or communal associations of locality (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Reay and Ball 1997; Reay and Lucey 2000a) goes against the grain of self-interest implicit to the act of consumption. In this way dichotomies of self-regarding versus community-regarding, individual versus collective, are useful for foregrounding choice in competing models of agency. There is, however, a dual activity shaping parents' school choices.

In chapter 7 I explored how some mothers inhabit and perform different positions in their talk and combine meanings and practices that speak to and work across dichotomous distinctions. Parents are charged with the duty and obligation of navigating and negotiating a field of choice 'successfully' (DfES 2005: 3.11) as well as 'responsibly' and 'reasonably'. The right to choose is thus subsumed within a framework of responsibility and marked by a set of injunctions around 'reasonable' choice. Some mothers struggle with this notion of responsibility and choose instead to articulate alternative vocabularies, meanings and practices around which they posit ambiguous and shifting conceptions of active, responsible parenting. This renders the active-passive dynamic framing models of active citizenship in advanced liberal welfare states problematic; an issue I address shortly. However, the cultural imperative to act out a version of the self that is congruent with the projection of an 'active' subject – someone who is basically instrumental, self-regarding and discriminating in their behaviour – meant that multiple positions were being inhabited and performed simultaneously.

The constant shifting between voices and positions reveals the intersecting dynamics of these positions as well as the dialogic exchange through which they are negotiated/mediated. This mirrors Malpass *et al.*'s (2007) argument, which moves beyond a narrow conception of the individual as an atomistic, instrumentalizing, utilitarian subject by recasting the responsibilities of individuals as consumers in collective rather than individualising terms, and points to the ethical imperatives that mark consumer behaviour. These authors argue: 'If consumerism is indeed an important contemporary rationality, then it works not through the promotion of unfettered hedonism and self-interest, but by making problematic the exercise of consumer choice in terms of various, ever proliferating responsibilities and ethical imperatives' (2007: 236). In this way choice can be understood to be negotiated at the intersection of competing ethical orders, making choice a powerful vehicle for 'making up ethical selves' (Malpass *et al.* 2007: 233). By showing how various positions and vocabularies slide into and incorporate each other, as this study does, we can begin to capture the dynamics of choice as discourse and social practice; as something which is negotiated through representations or cultural resources of class, race and gender as historically and locally situated contentions, rather than something that can be read in reductive terms as necessarily determined by these identifications. The dialectical or dialogic character of this relation between subjects and social practices emphasizes the idea that 'sentient beings – along or in groups – are always in a state of active existence; they are always in a state of being "addressed" and in the process of "answering"' (Holland and Lave 2001: 10).

More recent research on parental choice has shown how communitarian impulses are often shaded by acquisitive, instrumentalizing ones (Reay *et al.* 2007, 2008); that

among some White middle-class parents, for instance, the valuing of local nonselective comprehensive schooling is not usually matched a genuine commitment to 'giving back and a concern with civic renewal' (Reay *et al.* 2008: 252). The significance of this argument is twofold. First, it points to the separation of domains of the individual versus collective, private versus public, commercial versus political as weak categories for designating and distinguishing between types of choice-making. These domains need to be understood as relationally constituted and powerfully interrelated, loose and amorphous, knotted and woven together, making them mutable and contested categories. Second, it demonstrates how choice stands at the intersection of multiple ethical and political framings; that parents negotiate choice through these framings and lend their voices to multiple identifications in the hope of being understood and positioned in a certain way – e.g. as part of a segment of the left leaning, pro-welfare, liberal-egalitarian grouping. For these reasons, I suspect that Reay and her colleagues might caution against generalizing these tendencies to non-White middle-class parents, given that their sample constitutes 'a very specific middle-class grouping distinguished by high levels of cultural capital' (Reay *et al.* 2008: 241). It is clear, however, at least in this study, that some mothers engage in active processes of negotiating their choice around a multitude of responsibilities, with a principled focus on wanting to sustain some kind of commitment to community or ethnic diversity. But this commitment is often displaced by or supplemented with an uncompromising desire to do the 'best' by the child and his or her future welfare; a desire that is encouraged and legitimated through the promotion of values of the market, choice and individualism in education (Oria *et al.* 2007). This makes moral subjects of all parents at the moment they are activated in the field of choice as consumers of education services.

It is interesting to observe, then, how mothers negotiate these conflicting and contrasting sensibilities around and valuations of choosing; negotiations that transcend class, gender and racial boundaries, but at the same time are implicated in the production of these discursive categories. The next extract, taken from an interview with Judith (J), a single parent with one child, shows how mothers' understandings and interpretations of responsibility sometimes mediate, but are not constituted through, concepts of race and ethnicity. Judith's daughter, Anna, scored low on her SATs in primary school and as a result her new secondary school is planning to allocate her to a class with children of similar academic ability.

Extract 8:3

J: What done me was this SATs result thing. You know, don't get me wrong, all the other classes they've still got lots of Bengali kids in but these, in Anna's class, these are the kids that need the help with the English. They're struggling. Well my Anna aint struggling in English. So is she gonna be left behind for a little while while they deal with these children and that class is gonna have the interpreter in. Well I aint put Anna in a school to be held back by interpreters. Course they've got to get on, but it should be the Bengali children altogether, not with Anna who can speak fluent English. You know, that's what I can't come to terms with. So she's gonna be held back while this interpreter saying everything in Bengali while Anna's the only one who can understand English.

At the centre of this account of choice is the subject of the child, Anna, which conveys the message that the child is central to the decisions shaping some mothers' negotiation of school choice. Also, the constant reiteration of her name, mentioned five times, helps us to move beyond the abstract vocabulary of choice, which simply addresses parents as choosers, and instead begin to imagine the place of the child in the decision-making process. Judith is clearly anxious about the class to which her daughter will be allocated when she finally enters her new secondary school, where

she fears her child would be among children of minority ethnicities, namely 'Bengali children', with little or no knowledge and practice of the English language. Some researchers have noted the way in which some parents negotiate their school choice in the context of racism and discrimination (David 1997). Judith, however, is putting the vocabulary of race and ethnicity into service as a way of framing some of her anxieties and responsibilities as a mother. She wants her daughter to succeed educationally and to do better than she did previously in her primary school. In this context, vocabularies of responsible parenting are sometimes managed in the context of vocabularies of race and ethnicity. The interrelations of these two vocabularies produce messy and complicated expressions of choice. This shows how vocabularies emerge as scattered discursive resources which pre-figure and shape talk and therefore emerge as interpretative frameworks for talk itself (Billig 1996; Maybin 2001). But also, Judith demonstrates how vocabularies slide into and interact with other vocabularies, revealing the way in which choice is constructed around multiple framings. This suggests also that the repertoire of responsibility is subject to conflicting and sometimes contradictory discourses.

David *et al.* (1997) argue that structural and moral constraints shaping and determining some parents' private responsibilities – to childrearing, part-time work, domestic work and so forth – put them at a disadvantage when it comes to choosing a secondary school for their child. This is because some parents appear to be 'lacking', either the material or symbolic capital, needed to adjust their behaviour to make it compatible with the 'new individualism pervasive in the public sphere, [where] the notion of individual choice is linked to notions of consumerism' (1997: 399). This account, though fascinating and intriguing, skates over the intersecting dynamics of

private and public responsibilities and their interrelations, thereby foreclosing that space in which we can view parents articulating and combining contradictory notions of responsibility. Moreover, the transmutability of discourse makes it increasingly difficult to reduce voices to moments in the expression of a singular discourse, as Judith illustrates.

This has important implications for thinking through simple dichotomies of public and private, citizen and consumer, and so forth. Arguably, the activity or practice of choosing a secondary school is an anxious time for parents, not only because it involves the delicate process of matching the needs of the child to the school, where 'bad' choice can be translated into personal failing, but also because parents, in particular mothers, engage in complicated dialogues with other mothers over what counts, or should count, towards constructions of responsible and reasonable choice. These dialogues, as outlined in chapter 2, are in the main unsettled and morally ambiguous precisely because they are framed around a structure of affect and feeling. It is the child who emerges as the 'sovereign' figure in these dialogic exchanges and not the abstract, commercial figure of the consumer or the politicized figure of the citizen. It is the mothers' struggle to preserve an image of the child as unique, that is, a subject who is beyond calculation, estimation or easy categorisation, which registers their aversion to the abstract, lofty calculating framework of choosing. However, parents are responsabilized through calculation (Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008; Rooney 2007), which some mothers view as a privilege: 'well if I am the consumer I'm going to get what I want' (extract 5:6). A consumerist orientation to choosing is therefore desirable for some mothers, as it is elided with an advantageous

or 'maximum' position, that is, it holds competitive advantage for the subject who inhabits such a position.

In both cases, whether the mother rejects or appropriates the consumerist orientation valorised through dominant policy discourses around choice, the child is always presented as a particular and distinctive subject with a personality that is made up of discrete and unmatched qualities (extract 5:2, 5:3). It is this view of the child, as a subject like no other and thus unlikely to fit into any system of equivalence or sameness, which contributes towards making the notion of responsibility a slippery and dynamic concept. Instead of focusing on the extent to which parents displace different sets of obligations in favour of others, and affirm the separation of public and private, citizen and consumer responsibilities, and so forth, it is important to show, as I have, how different sets of responsibilities and ethical imperatives are articulated and combined. It is not simply that people 'are consumers only in the market place', while 'in the public domain they are citizens' (Marquand 2004: 135). As illuminated by the mothers interviewed in this study, there are competing forms of pressure flowing from citizenship-based, consumer-oriented and parental obligations. What is understood by self-responsibility thus tends to be activated and performed in a number of contrasting, competing, but also intersecting ways.

Hence, choice opens up spaces in which subjects are incited to govern themselves as ethical and moralized agents (Malpass *et al.* 2007; Rose 1999). In this way choice is indeterminate by virtue of the multiplicity shaping it. Multiplicity generates its own contradictions and complexities and this is evident through the way some mothers graft and patch together different interpretative frameworks for rationalising their

school choice, and thus articulate and combine different sets of concerns, valuations and vocabularies. The multiplicity generated through these frameworks of meaning and practice produce competing understandings of, and claims to, 'active' parenting. This complicates the active-passive dynamic particular to dominant representations of active citizenship (Johansson and Hvinden 2005) as it makes transparent the ways in which some mothers appear to be negotiating different representations of active citizenship, for example – socio-liberal, neo-liberal and republican.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, the orientations and motivations shaping some mothers' school choices cannot simply be reduced to instances of classed or raced behaviour precisely because the reasons and rationales underpinning framings of choice are sometimes shaped by complicated sets of meanings and practices that slide into each other. This meant that it was difficult for me to find singular or categorical form of expression which could adequately capture the identity of the speaker. Instead, I chose to examine those expressions that made visible the complications and messiness around choice, and the intersecting dynamics between discourses. My intention was not to reproduce speakers as fixed occupiers of particular classifications, but instead generate a sense of their movements and the dialogic capacities of mothers to inhabit and perform multiple and intersecting positions.

By explicating the discourses some mothers bring to bear upon their experiences of and engagements with the meanings and practices made available through choice, I have demonstrated how the practise of exclusion extends beyond the 'fearful' middle

classes (Ball and Vincent 2001; Reay and Lucey 2004) to include parents of dominant and minority ethnicities. Moreover, I have shown the difficulties in conceptualising the school choices of 'working-class' parents as limited to temporal and spatial parameters, the here and now, the immediate (Reay and Ball 1998). For example, some mothers mobilise community as a reference point and discursive resource for imagining, containing and projecting future selves (extract 7:3). Moreover, community is necessarily built upon a politics of exclusion and inclusion (Massey 1995) and works to generate a definition of who is an insider and who is an outsider, and thus different parents, working-class and middle-class, practice exclusion. This forces us to re-think assumptions around class-based bifurcation and instead emphasise the transmutability of class boundaries and the dynamics of discourses of emotion, community and responsibility inscribed in and through those framings.

The focus on discourses of emotion, community and responsibility as framings has enabled me to illuminate the different kinds of quandaries opened up through the activity or practice of choice – ethical, moral and rational – which permits a more complicated reading of the subject as locked into, and standing at the intersection of, a number of contradictory discourses and ethical and political imperatives. This is important for moving beyond any analytical framework that treats discourse as unambiguous pathways to actions, beliefs or actual events. My study shows how all utterances are dialogic and dialectical, that is, shaped by other utterances, and that subjects tend to inhabit a number of intersecting and crosscutting positions which resist easy categorisation. This breaks down binary distinctions based on categories of public and private, collective and individual, and so forth, and points to the indeterminate character of the subject as unsettled and unfinished. In particular, it

demonstrates how some mothers appropriate, resist and rework the positions and practices opened up through the dominant policy discourses around choice, and how, in the these critical moments of resistance and subversion, choice is socially inflected through discourses that transcend class boundaries. Choice creates its own trajectories, motives, fantasies, aspirations, valuations and sensibilities, and thus it is crucial not to condense these highly unstable and contradictory sets of social contradictions and disparate voices to moments of a single classed, raced or gendered articulation.

Conclusion

In this study I have explored the ways in which some mothers engage with meanings and practices summoned up through dominant governmental discourses around choice and made visible the extent to which these engagements are negotiated in the context of competing rationalities and ethical orders. In mapping out the policy and political context through which choice emerged as a dominant narrative in debates over the restructuring of welfare state institutions in Britain, I have highlighted the ways in which market rationalities and devices have been inscribed in through the relationships between parents and schools. A central strand in British government texts around education, from the Conservative governments of the 1980s to the New Labour government and then Brown's Labour government, is the idea that parents should be activated and 'empowered' as consumers in their relationships with schools, with schools assigned the role of providers of education services (DES 1988, 1991; DfEE 2001; DfES 2004, 2005; DCSF 2008a, 2008b). With this there has also been a continuing emphasis on the role of parents as active and responsible citizens (Ministers of State 2004: Paragraph 3.4.3). The idea of choice, however, is configured around a view of parents as consumers and therefore mediates a set of neo-classical economic assumptions regarding the self-interested and rational utility maximizing capabilities and willingness of all social actors. The concept and practice of being/becoming active is therefore elided with a clinical and instrumental rational approach to choice.

There is also an active-passive dynamic inscribed in through dominant policy discourses around choice (Clarke *et al.* 2007) in which embodiments of active agency echo and redeem the kinds of assumptions presupposed by public choice perspectives (Downs 1967; Le Grand 1997; Niskanen 1973), namely that individuals are self-maximising agents with ‘well-informed preferences which they can perceive, rank and compare easily’ (Dunleavy 1991: 3). Parents are charged with the responsibility of choosing a secondary school for their child (DES 1991) and putting into practice risk-avoidance strategies which enable them to ‘navigate the system successfully’ (DfES 2005: 3.11), with a view of transforming parents from so-called passive recipients of education services into active, autonomous and responsabilized subjects. Through dominant policy discourses, however, the activity or practice of choosing a school is primarily framed by a set of injunctions around ‘reasonable’ and ‘responsible’ behaviour in which a clinical, instrumental approach is legitimated and rendered desirable (DfES 2005). Inhabiting and performing the role of the active citizen therefore involves putting into practice a set of economic vocabularies and positions, which have at their centre the ‘sovereign’ figure of the consumer.

In my analysis of government and non-government websites, I demonstrated how the meaning and practice of choice is subject to a structure of abstract rules and guidelines and therefore lends itself to an economic rationality of decision-making. I also traced some of these behavioural obligations through government policy texts where there is a veneration of the roles and capacities nominally ascribed to the figure of the consumer. However, rather than view the discourse of choice through the singular lens of an economic or sociological determinism, in which parents are portrayed as either self-interested and autonomous agents or as social actors whose

choices are circumscribed by their position in a structural hierarchy, I have adopted a kaleidoscopic lens that captures the multiplicity shaping choice and the tensions resulting from the interaction of different discourses. By examining national and local newspaper articles, I have demonstrated the strain and anxiety that is opened up through the policy of parental choice and which parents are forced to cope with as responsabilized users of education services. In turn my analysis of school brochures and websites and local government texts has shown how a field of choice is discursively and materially constituted. The focus on these data sources has thus enabled me to demonstrate the way in which discourses of community, faith and race shape and organise the field of choice nationally and locally – and has indicated some of the dominant and contested positions around schooling, schools and choice.

These data sources provided a rich and complicated view of choice as a discourse, framing and function parents inhabit and perform. By highlighting the different sets of repertoires and registers mothers bring to bear upon their understandings and interpretations of the meaning and practice of choice, I also addressed how they engage with choice. My analysis of the interview data revealed that some mothers resist and negotiate their school choice through three interrelated yet distinct discourses: emotion, community and responsibility. As I have shown, each of these discourses offers a different set of devices for understanding the ways in which some mothers engage with choice and for making explicit how they experience themselves as subjects when activated in a field of choice. In particular, the analytic value of these discourses has enabled me to illuminate how the discourse of choice contains multiple, heterogeneous and conflicting elements which resist easy categorisation.

Central to this was my exploration of how a discourse of emotion, with its emphasis on the affective relationship between the mother and child, is valued for the way it brings into focus the importance of the child and his or her needs, thereby displacing the parent as the 'sovereign' figure in the discourse of choice. Moreover, the discourse of emotion works to undermine the calculating framework of choosing and the dialogical capacities of the consumer. With this there is also an appeal to a more compassionate and thoughtful framing of self-hood coupled with an emphasis on the ethical strand of talk. At the same time, I have shown how the mothers interviewed in this study actively put into service a discourse of community as a way of framing their relationship to and understanding of the field of choice. The site of the local school is particularly significant in these accounts of community, precisely because of its apparent community-building capacity and its ability to strengthen the collectivist linkages between local families and their local area. The tendency to negotiate and rework what is meant by responsible parenting was also evident in the way these mothers engaged with the meanings and practices made available through dominant policy discourses around choice. A discourse of responsibility was therefore present in much of the negotiation work enacted by mothers in their engagements with choice. This is captured through the way my interview participants assembled, combined and deployed contradictory notions of responsibility and thus acted out complex negotiations of reconciling apparently competing sets of valuations, rationalities and preferences.

The richness of the data and modes of analysis I developed has enabled me to tease out the intersecting positions and crosscutting impulses framing mothers' engagements with choice. The empirical data shows the extent to which all the

mothers in my sample are agentic, discourse-bound and situated in local contexts, and demonstrates how conceptions of active and responsible parenting are subject to contrary pushes and pulls as mothers tussle with what these terms mean in the context of their relationships to others and the needs of their child. As a result I have been able to suggest how what the government highlights as ‘effective citizenship’ (Ministers of State 2004: Paragraph 3.4.3) – what counts towards the creation of active, responsible agents – tends to be practised differently by mothers. In particular, this study makes transparent the permeability of boundaries and the dynamic of choice as a social practice.

In drawing attention to the ways in which voices can be understood as multivocal and dialogic (Bakhtin 1981, 1986), I have illustrated how voices move across, in and between discourses. In this way I have tried to resist an analysis of school choice that homogenizes voices through the singular lens of class, gender, race or even a formal rational discourse, and instead deployed an analysis that captures the unevenness and amorphous character of these discourses and which generates a sense of peoples’ movement in and through positions and associations. There is, however, a desire among some of the mothers in my study to be taken seriously as a consumer, capable of and willing to put into practice meanings and vocabularies that register dominant conceptions of ‘active’ and ‘responsible’ parenting. The position of the consumer therefore carries a certain popular cultural currency and a set of dialogical, anticipatory and ideological usages (Billig *et al.* 1988) which enables speakers to register their conversance with authorised and legitimated ways of speaking and acting. At the same time I have traced threads of resistance to the position of the consumer by some mothers I interviewed at the very same moment they take on its

dialogical capacities. This complicates the idea that parents simply reject any construction of themselves as consumers (Crozier 1997; Reay 1996). Rather, my research indicates both a denial and re-enactment of this position, suggesting that social positions and cultural representations are entered into and negotiated.

The usefulness of a discursive and dialogic approach in the context of this study has been that it has enabled me to show how mothers stand at the intersection of multiple sets of attendant and competing discourses which they actively engage with and negotiate. Moreover, by showing how voices mediate others, and therefore can be understood as responses to other utterances or imaginary audiences (Baldwin and Holmes 1987; Markovà 2006), I have made explicit the extent of my own involvement in the way mothers negotiate their choice of positioning within multiple discourses. This raises questions around the merits and accuracy of a positivist social science or a Sociology of Education that renders people's articulations to be objective or truthful, that is, reflective of their 'real' disposition or relation to others. In particular, it outlines the difficulty surrounding researchers' attempts to manage appropriate forms of expression which can adequately capture the voice of the speaker. For these reasons, my intention in this study has not been to reproduce voices as fixed occupiers of particular classifications, but instead has relied on tracking the speaker's movement in and between, and negotiation of, multiple and intersecting identifications.

This study has therefore opened up a research domain that will be highly productive for future lines of inquiry. In mapping the ways my research participants appropriate, resist and negotiate different formulations of what is meant by active and

responsible parenting, I have complicated the idea that voices can be homogenized through singular discourses and instead shown how mothers try to manage the contradictions resulting from their movement between discourses. By capturing the way discourses of emotion, community and responsibility are drawn on as strategies for reconciling ethical with consumerist imperatives, this study makes visible the shifting and mutable character of mothers' voices and the agency and willful action framing their decision-making. This has implications for thinking through and beyond static conceptions of active agency, where active comes to mean, or stand in for, someone who is basically autonomous and self-determining: the mothers in this study, for example, take up community as a framing for their school choice. Their desire to put into practice strategies and mechanisms that sustain an imaginary of community registers active elements. Community, however, engenders a cultural currency which is largely marginalized in dominant governmental discourses around choice. This is because it has its basis in collective rather than individual meanings and associations, and therefore undermines the centrality of the figure of consumer as 'sovereign' to the discourse of choice.

This points to the need for further research around the links between school choice and community. As the government seeks to develop partnerships with 'faith communities' (see Home Office 1999, 2004; LGA 2003; Smith 2004) and strengthen the role of faith in the state school system more generally (DCSF 2007b), it is important to ask what types of dialogue occur in, between and across communities and with the government, and how these dialogues shape the field in which school choice is located. This opens up important questions about how different schools and faith and non-faith communities seek to govern themselves through particular models

of active community-building. Moreover, it asks how are representations of community negotiated and managed by faith and non-faith schools and communities, and how far and in what way do these representations constitute a set of framings, discourses and functions parents inhabit and perform when formulating their school choice. Such an approach to school choice is needed, especially in the context of emerging debates in the media where some faith schools are being criticized over the lack of transparency and fairness of their admissions policy and their apparent tendency to sustain practices of exclusion through selecting in or creaming particular pupils and selecting out others (Moorhead 2009).

An examination of the links between parents' conceptions of community and the kinds of representations of community sustained and practised by faith and non-faith schools would therefore be useful in order to further unpack some of the issues around community raised in this study. In particular, it would add another dimension of understanding to the ever-shifting field in which school choice is located, with the aim of making visible those practices of meaning-making that actively shape the way in which parents imagine and experience themselves as subjects when activated in a field of choice.

Appendix

1.1 Details of the mothers who participated in this study:

Name: Becky

Number and Age of Children: 3 (17 yrs, 14 yrs, 11 yrs)

Marital Status: Divorced

How Contacted: Primary School

Name: Camilla

Number and Age of Children: 1 (11 yrs)

Marital Status: Separated

How Contacted: Primary School

Name: Caroline

Number and Age of Children: 2 (15yrs, 11yrs)

Marital Status: Divorced

How Contacted: Primary School

Name: Claire

Number and Age of Children: 2 (10 yrs, 6 yrs)

Marital Status: Married

How Contacted: Email

Name: Cassy

Number and Age of Children: 1 (11 yrs)

Marital Status: Unknown

How Contacted: Primary School

Name: Janet

Number and Age of Children: 1 (11 yrs)

Marital Status: Separated

How Contacted: Email

Name: Judith

Number and Age of Children: 1 (11 yrs)

Marital Status: Separated

How Contacted: Primary School

Name: Kate

Number and Age of Children: 1 (11 yrs)

Marital Status: Divorced

How Contacted: Primary School

Name: Mary

Number and Age of Children: 1 (11 yrs)

Marital Status: Separated

How Contacted: Primary School

Name: Miriam

Number and Age of Children: 1 (11 yrs)

Marital Status: Separated

How Contacted: Primary School

Name: Pauline

Number and Age of Children: 1 (11 yrs)

Marital Status: Married

How Contacted: Primary School

2.1 Agreement to Participate Form (for parents)

This form must be signed and completed by the participant wishing to be included in the study. Participation will take the form of an interview and will be conducted by the PhD researcher in charge of the project, Andrew Wilkins. These are the conditions of participation:

1. The location, time and length of the interview are the participant's decision.
2. The participant is free to drop out of the interview at any time and can refuse to answer any of the questions.
3. Each participant will be sent an appropriate summary of the research findings at the end of the study. Or, if the participant prefers, the researcher in charge will be happy to discuss the findings of the report in person.
4. Anonymity is guaranteed, which means the participant's real name will be withdrawn from the final report.

Please read the following statements and sign below if you agree with them:

I have had the purpose of the research project explained to me.

I have been informed that I may refuse to participate at any point by simply saying so.

I have been assured that my confidentiality will be protected as specified in the information sheet (attached).

I agree that the information that I provide can be used for educational, policy or research purposes, including publication.

I understand that if I have any concerns or difficulties I can contact the office manager of the Social Policy Department, Carol Fuller: Carol Fuller, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, C.Fuller@open.ac.uk
+44 (0) 1908 654530

Signature/s: _____

Full Name/s: _____

Address: _____

Telephone Number (optional): _____

Please indicate where you would like the interview to take place:

At home:

At your child's school

At a local community centre

Other (please state where) _____

You can post this consent form to Andrew Wilkins using the self-addressed envelope that has been given to you.

2.2 Research attachment sheet (for parents)

The Dynamics of Choice in Ethnically Diverse Localities

Background

This research is about how parents choose secondary schools for their children. Currently there is lots of information available to help parents make an 'informed' decision about which schools to apply to. This information can be sought through local council websites, government (LEA and DfES) websites, local and national media, choice advisors, teachers, headteachers, school brochures, league tables, parents, children, and so on. This research looks at the different ways parents assess and utilise that information in their school choices. In Britain, government policy about schools has put a lot of emphasis on parents being able to choose secondary schools for their children. But such rights often carry a weight of responsibility with them (How do we know how to choose? How do we know what's the 'right' choice? What sources of information do we trust (or even understand) and how does this impact on our ability to choose?). In this project, I am inviting you to talk about the process of deciding on schools. I would like to know more about how you went about selecting and choosing which secondary school/s you wanted your child to attend.

This research explores how parents deal with the process of making such choices, around questions such as:

- How do parents feel about the responsibilities of choosing schools?
- What information do they use?
- What do they most want out a school for their child?
- How do they work out which schools are good schools?
- What counts as a 'local' school for where they live?
- What makes a difference to how they assess the different schools in their area?
- What roles does the social mix of schools play in such decision-making?

I hope you will agree to be interviewed as part of this project. The interview will take between 30 minutes and an hour and could take place wherever you would prefer it to be held – at home, at school, at a local centre.

Everyone taking part will be anonymous – it will not be possible to identify you, your children or the schools being talked about in any reports of the project.

The aim of the research is to improve our understanding of how parents make such decisions, so that public policy about schooling can be better informed by knowledge about the private decision-making processes of parents. The project will produce a thesis at the Open University, publications for education policy journals, and a report that can be read by parents, teachers, policy makers and practitioners.

If you would like to be interviewed please sign and return the enclosed consent form. If you would like to know more, please contact me, Andrew Wilkins, Faculty of

Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA,
Andrew.Wilkins@open.ac.uk. If you have any questions or issues relating to the
research that you would prefer not to discuss with me, here are the details for Carol
Fuller, office manager of the Social Policy Department: Carol Fuller, Faculty of
Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA,
C.Fuller@open.ac.uk +44 (0) 1908 654530

3.1 Letter to headteachers

Name
Address

Date

Dear

Last year I was awarded an Open University studentship to carry out a research project which may be of interest to you. The project is called the 'The Dynamics of School Choice in Ethnically Diverse Localities'. It will examine the complex ways in which parents of varying ethnicities – i.e. Black Caribbean, Black African, South East Asian, Arabic, Bengali, etc. – go about making secondary school choices in the context of gathering and using knowledge about local secondary schools. This includes questions about how – and to what extent – parents' choice of secondary school is framed around local formations of ethnic diversity and school composition. The research will begin in April and I am attempting to locate potential research participants, specifically parents who made their school choices back in September 2006 and have now received the outcomes of those applications.

My intention is to base the research in one or two case study sites situated in the borough of Camden, North London. In each I intend to interview the parents of year 6 children. I am writing to seek your permission to contact parents of children at your school.

Would you be willing to discuss the possibility of providing some access for the project? *I should point out that the research would not involve any costs to your school and neither will the school be involved in the organisation of the interviews. All I request is that the school sends out letters to parents of year 6 children, which I will provide.* Let me also stress that the parents involved in the research, their children, and the school will remain anonymous. *Confidentiality of all material in the project is guaranteed.* The project is fully funded by the Open University and has received ethical approval from the university.

I intend to conduct the research in a way that will have direct benefits for policy and practice. The early results will be fed back to each case study site as the basis for discussion. I will attempt to contact parents once analysis is complete, either to meet with them and discuss the findings of the report, or with an appropriate summary of the research findings. I would also be happy to come back to the school later in the year and present the findings at a staff meeting or to the board of governors of the school.

I sincerely hope that you will be able to agree to help with my study. You will find attached to this letter a more detailed summary of the background to the project and its aims. Please email me at Andrew.Wilkins@open.ac.uk if you wish to proceed and I will hand deliver the letters to your receptionist. Here are the details for Carol Fuller, office manager of the Social Policy Department, who you can contact if you have questions or issues relating to the project that you would prefer not to discuss with me:

Carol Fuller, Faculty of Social Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes,
MK7 6AA, C.Fuller@open.ac.uk +44 (0) 1908 654530

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Wilkins

3.2 Research attachment sheet (for headteachers)

The Dynamics of Choice in Ethnically Diverse Localities

Background

This research is about how parents choose secondary schools for their children. Currently there is lots of information available to help parents make an 'informed' decision about which schools to apply to. This information can be sought through local council websites, government (LEA and DfES) websites, local and national media, choice advisors, teachers, headteachers, school brochures, league tables, parents, children, and so on. This research looks at the different ways parents of varying ethnicities – i.e. Black Caribbean, Black African, South East Asian, Arabic, Bengali, etc. – assess and utilise that information in their school choices. In Britain, government policy about schools has put a lot of emphasis on parents being able to choose secondary schools for their children. But such rights often carry a weight of responsibility with them (How do we know how to choose? How do we know what's the 'right' choice? What sources of information do we trust (or even understand) and how does this impact on our ability to choose?). In this project, I am inviting parents to talk about the process of deciding on schools. I would like to know more about how parents go about selecting which secondary school/s they want their child to attend.

This research explores how parents deal with the process of making such choices, around questions such as:

How do parents feel about the responsibilities of choosing schools?

What information do they use?

What do they most want out a school for their child?

How do they work out which schools are good schools?

What counts as a 'local' school for where they live?

What makes a difference to how they assess the different schools in their area?

What roles does the social mix of schools play in such decision-making?

I hope you are willing to discuss the possibility of providing some access for the project. The interview – which will be conducted by myself with the parents – will take between 30 minutes and an hour and can take place wherever the parent would prefer it to be held – at home, at a local centre.

Everyone taking part will be anonymous – it will not be possible to identify the school, the parent or their child being talked about in any reports of the project.

The aim of the research is to improve our understanding of how parents make such decisions, so that public policy about schooling can be better informed by knowledge about the private decision-making processes of parents. The project will produce a thesis at the Open University, publications for education policy journals, and a report that can be read by parents, teachers, policy makers and practitioners.

I want to stress that the school will not be involved in the organisation of the interview. All I am seeking from your school is permission to write to the parents of year 6 children and ask if they would be willing to participate in the interview and reflect back on their experiences of the choice process.

If you would like to know more or are happy to provide access for the project, please contact me, Andrew Wilkins, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, Andrew.Wilkins@open.ac.uk. If you have any questions or issues relating to the research that you would prefer not to discuss with me, here are the details for Carol Fuller, office manager of the Social Policy Department: Carol Fuller, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, C.Fuller@open.ac.uk +44 (0) 1908 654530

4.1 Interview schedule

Hello. Before we begin I would like to thank you for taking the time to read the letter I sent you and for agreeing to take part in this interview. Your participation is very much appreciated. Is there anything that is unclear at this point? Would you like to know a little bit more about the study? I should remind you that you're under no obligation to answer any of my questions. If you feel uncomfortable about answering a question then just let me know and we can move on. Hopefully this won't be a problem anyway – the questions are very straightforward.

Q1. How long have you lived in this particular area of Camden? Why did you move here?

Q2. When did you start thinking about secondary schools for your child? How did you go about weighing up, evaluating and choosing between schools for your child? Did you consult league tables, schools brochures and websites, local newspapers, school open days or evenings? Was this an important part of your overall assessment of the different schools in Camden?

Q3. Which people did you speak to when you were deciding on a secondary school for your child? Did you speak to friends, family, teachers, etc.? What did they say? Which people did you discuss your school choices with the most and whose opinion did you tend agree/disagree with? Was your partner very involved in choosing a school for your child? Do you think you're more competent than your partner at identifying the 'right' school for your child?

Q4. Which secondary school/s did you voice a preference for? What attracted you to these schools? How are they different from the other schools you looked at? Were there any schools you did not want your child to go to? Did you think about sending your child to a faith school? Why? Can you tell me a little bit about the secondary school your child is starting in September? What do you know about the children that go to the school? Does the school have a good mix of children from different social and ethnic backgrounds? What is its reputation? Can you tell me what you mean by the term 'reputation'?

Q5. Would you classify yourself as someone who belongs to a community? Can you tell me a little something about the community in which you live? What is distinctive about it and how does it differ from other communities you have either lived in or encountered? Are there any aspects of your community that you feel are important to the educational and/or social development of your child? Do you have other members of your family living close to you?

I am in the process of transcribing and analysing lots of data at the moment. What I will do, once I have transcribed this interview, is write up a list of specifics (or bullet-point remarks) from this talk. I will send them to you and then you have the option to change or alter any the remarks made. Thanks for your time and for answering my questions.

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