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Title

Community and School Choice: Geographies of Care and Responsibility

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Short bio

Andrew Wilkins is Reader in Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. He writes about education policy and governance and governing relations with a focus on privatisation management, meta-governance, attraction and soft governing, risk responsibility, expert administration, regulated participation, and democratic cultures. His recent books include Modernising School Governance (Routledge 2016) and Education Governance and Social Theory (Bloomsbury 2018).

Abstract

This paper draws on elements of critical discursive psychology in order to explore some of the issues and concerns raised by parents' responses to the policy and practice of school choice. Drawing on data from a group of mothers of diverse social class and racial backgrounds, this paper examines the dilemmas some mothers engage with in their role as chooser—reconciling competing rationalities for choosing or trying to manage contradictions. A central argument of this paper is that the policy and political context shaping the emergence of school choice in Britain has provisionally secured the development of certain trends in education—consumerism, individualism and competition. Alongside and coupled with this has been the veneration of a narrow utilitarian conception of parents as consumers of education services, defined as people who share the capacity and willingness to maximize the utility of their decisions in a rationally self-interested way. This paper questions the value of this approach as a framing for understanding the aspirations, motivations and fantasies informing parents' school choice and highlights instead the ways in which some mothers articulate the importance of community in their decision-making practices.

Key words

School choice; community; consumerism; parenting; active citizenship

INTRODUCTION

There are many schools [in Britain] 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, p. 5: 49).

Research consistently shows that working-class children and parents place a higher value on going to local schools and are much more troubled by the idea of travelling long distances to secondary school than are middle-class children and parents.. .However, middle-class practices of manoeuvring and moving are valorised while the more community-building practices of attending the local school are often depicted as indicating a lack of initiative and educational ambition. (Reay & Lucey, 2004, p. 40)

As the above quotations indicate, school choice and community are often located in antagonistic relationships as speaking to different sets of values, commitments and priorities. School choice on the one hand works to maintain a deregulated space in which parents compete against one another for access to welfare resources (i.e. school places). As Oria et al. (2007, p. 92) observe, school choice generates 'an ethical framework which encourages ''personal'' values and legitimates parents in the pursuit of competitive familial advantage through education'. Consequently, the decisions of some parents to exit their local network of secondary schools in search of 'better' provision is legitimated as a preferred form of user engagement with education services. This is because such behaviour testifies to the parents' willingness to behave in logical, calculating and self-interested ways and strive for a 'maximum' position. The meaning and practice of community on the other hand is characterized by relations and associations of solidarity, mutual assistance

and forms of belonging that stretch beyond the remit of the self-interested individual. Community evokes popular desires for co-operation, mutual engagement, and shared interest and repertoire (Frazer, 1999; Wenger, 1998), making it a joint process or activity requiring active work and engagement from a plurality of participants. In this view there is no singular definition or practice of community, but rather there exists a plethora of meanings and associations pervading its usage and intelligibility as a socio-cultural and geographical construct (Clarke, 2009; Massey, 2004). It is thus important to stress the unevenness and contradictoriness of community and the different motives parents might have for deploying it, which I consider in my analysis of mothers' school choices. This has implications for thinking around the relationship between choice and community and the different sets of responsibilities and identifications they give rise to.

A central focus of this paper is to make visible the ways in which some mothers communicate complicated expressions of community in their role as chooser and to outline the extent to which these decision-making practices conflict with or undermine the logics and dynamics that spring out of the 'sovereign' role of the consumer. Such a conflict stems in part from the way in which community-building practices appear to be silenced through governmental discourses around choice; or worse, indexed to signify a deficit in parental 'initiative and educational ambition' (Reay & Lucey, 2004, p. 40). This is because 'good' parental choice is invariably constructed in terms of an implicit entrepreneurial norm which operates with a view of the parent as a consumer at its centre and therefore fails to open possibilities for discussion around the extent to which parents might wish to comply with or reject these constructions. Hence, for researchers like Reay and Ball, school choice, with its concentration on individualism and self-interest, results in a systematic denial or displacement of working-class experience, since it is thought to be predominantly working-class parents who value and invest in the sense of comfort and familiarity, of security and connection generated through localized expressions of community (Reay & Ball, 1997, 1998). Community-building practices therefore appear to go against the grain of self-interest implicit in the act of consumption. This paper is not only intended as a contribution to some of these debates but also seeks to extend ideas and perspectives on the dynamics of concepts and practices of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting in the realm of education.

The mobilization of citizens as autonomous, self-maximizing and discriminating consumers of public services has resulted in citizens being positioned differently as either active or passive, deserving or undeserving subjects depending on their inclination to and capacity for choice (Clarke et al., 2007). Leader of the Conservative party and British Prime Minister, David Cameron, championed the way 'middle-class' parents 'play the (education) system' in order to get ahead, for example, where he likened their behaviour to those of 'active citizens' (cited in Webster & Eliot, 2008). These messages around what it means to be 'active' and 'responsible' have even been taken up and circulated 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, p. 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 represent the worth and value of, a consumerist orientation to choice. This type of user engagement with education services is discernible through a liberal or neo-liberal understanding of citizenship in which citizens are incited to behave as individuals who exercise choice 'responsibly' and 'reasonably' between a given set of providers (Johansson & Hvinden, 2005). The elaboration of norms around what constitutes 'active' and 'responsible' choosing is subject therefore to a narrow, limited view of the parent as a consumer of education services.

Through identifying the ways in which some mothers draw on community as a framing for negotiating issues and concerns around what it means, or should mean, to act 'responsible' and 'reasonable' in the realm of education, this paper examines the potential 'conflict between parental choice and community' (ODPM, 2004, p. 5.59) and the different kinds of commitments and obligations that underpin these concepts. In what follows I briefly outline the historical and political exchanges and negotiations shaping the emergence of school choice in the UK, with the intention of generating a context for later discussions around consumerism and school choice. This is followed with an examination of the research background to the paper in which I give an account of the methodological choices informing the results of the study. In turn I draw on interviews conducted with mothers in order to bring into focus the importance of community as a framing for school choice, in effect outlining the different elements of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting being practised and supported through these accounts. I conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications of these results for thinking about the relationship between choice and community and how they offer insight into the ways in which some mothers construct and negotiate representations and embodiments of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting.

MAPPING THE EMERGENCE OF CHOICE AND MARKETIZATION IN BRITISH POLICY AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The development and implementation of school choice in British education policy discourse and practice can be traced to the radical programme of economic and institutional reform that characterized the 1980s Conservative administration, which had as its aim the restructuring of welfare state institutions within neo-liberal strategies of marketization, privatization, deregulation and competition (Keat & Abercrombie, 1991). Much of government policy rhetoric at this time was geared towards generating assumptions concerning the superiority of market mechanisms over state monopolies, and therefore was directed towards displacing Keynesian conceptions of the social democratic welfare state, with its commitment to state-coordinated attempts to manage the distribution of welfare goods (Ball, 2008). The significance of school choice as a dominant policy strategy was that it represented government attempts to undermine 'statist' models of public provision not only through appealing to the parent as a consumer of education services— empowered, self-regulating and autonomous— but also through inciting schools to manage

themselves in ways that were attentive to and complemented market concepts of supply and demand (Jones, 2003; Lowe, 2005). The combination and interaction of these policy trends— marketization, deregulation and decentralization— worked to produce contexts in which parents and schools could be located through the exchange and intersection of consumers and producers.

Through the introduction of the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), choice became a central feature of education reform in Britain. The policy of school choice evolved in tandem with a number of other education strategies implemented at this time, such as diversity of provision, further autonomy for schools and closer parental involvement in schools (Ranson, 1993; Walford, 2003), which constituted elements of a 'renarration of the public sector in terms of neoliberalism (or neoconservatism)' (Ball, 2008, p. 72). Indeed, the range and scope of Conservative administration policy and political thought at this time is clearly identifiable through Blair's New Labour government, where it is evident that New Labour continued much of the ideological and discursive work of shifting emphasis away from 'parental rights to increased parental responsibilities initiated under the previous Conservative adminis- tration' (Reay, 2008). Alongside and allied to this was a veneration of the use of private and voluntary companies for the delivery of public services and the role of private sponsorship more generally (Ball, 2008). This is captured through the plurality of attempts by the New Labour government to articulate the use of market forms in public sector organization— the creation of academies, for example (DfES, 2005). Originally introduced to the British education system in 2002, academies are publicly funded independent schools responsible for their own admission arrangements, subject to the approval of the Secretary of State. 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). Such strategies can be understood to contribute to creating the conditions necessary for the creation and development of a pseudo-market education system—that is, a system of education managed within particular assemblages of market rationalities, politics and ethics.

A corollary of this is that preferred models of user engagement with education services often come to be signified through neo-liberal framings of active citizenship, with its concentration on the individualized and self-interested character of parents as consumers. Moreover, the view of parents as 'active' users of services tends to rely too heavily on a notion of parents as once being passive recipients of welfare provision. The active–passive formulation underpinning the concept and practice of choice means that parents tend to be differently positioned as active or passive, independent or dependent, deserving or undeserving, depending on their inclination to and capacity for self-governing and creating for themselves a model of agency that fits with the market imperatives and political rationalities of neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2005; Larner, 2000).

In this way, school choice articulates a liberal or neo-liberal understanding of citizenship, which has at its centre a view of citizens as consumers who demand goods that require public provision (Johansson & Hvinden, 2005). 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. The principle of socio-liberal citizenship is Marshallian in

character and promotes the idea that 'citizens should enjoy a minimum level of rights (economic security, care, protection against various risks and so on) and normative obligations vis-a`-vis the community' (2005, p. 106). A libertarian conception of citizenship on the other hand stresses the importance of the individual and their preferences and values, while republican citizens are characterized as people who identify with the community to which they claim to belong and who 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, but nonetheless should not be treated as realities— stable and determinate. Instead, it is helpful to explore how different models of active citizenship are articulated and combined, and therefore performed jointly, through mothers' engagements with the meanings and practices opened up through school choice. In what follows I explore how different conceptions of 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. I intend to move beyond a static model of active citizenship, in which parents are hailed as consumers of welfare services, through taking account of the way in which some mothers articulate messy and complicated expressions of active citizenship, in effect unsettling the active–passive dynamic inscribed in through governmental policy discourses around choice.

THE RESEARCH

It is against this policy and political terrain that I conducted my research. Through identifying the ways in which the meaning and practice of choice is the focus of certain injunctions around behaviour and orientations, my study examined how elements of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting in the realm of education are assembled around the promotion of particular kinds of values, commitments and subject positions. There, I mapped the field through which parents are encouraged to engage with education services as consumers, paying particular attention to concepts and practices that aim to reflect and uphold a consumerist orientation to school choice. To do this, I utilized 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. These data sources enabled me to make transparent the various attempts by government and non-government agencies to contain the idea of choice through the singular lens of a consumer orientation, with its intransigent focus on 'autonomous, empowered and asocial rationality' (David et al., 1997, p. 401).

This paper draws on evidence gathered from in-depth interviews I conducted with two mothers living in the borough of Camden in North-West London. I chose to situate my research in this area of London because, like many other parts of London and places outside it, it is made up of associations that mediate complex cultural, economic and political identifications spanning different histories and trajectories, making it an interesting place to explore how frameworks of choosing might be negotiated in and through geographical, political and social imaginaries of space and place.

I wanted to speak to parents who were being addressed as choosers and who were therefore engaging in the kinds of negotiations that often characterize the field of choice as a difficult and anxious site for parents (Reay et al., 2008) and their children (Bernard, 2007;

Lucey & Reay, 2002) to engage with. To do this, I wrote to and later telephoned headteachers at some of the local primary schools in Camden, with the aim of opening up a discussion around the possibility of providing some access for the project. With the headteacher's permission, I then wrote letters to parents with children in the last year of primary school (year 6) in which I stated the background to the project, the aims of the research and its ethical dimensions, and how I intended to disseminate the research findings. It was around this time that these parents were being enlisted to choose a secondary school for their child, where they were required 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. All the respondents for this study were interviewed subsequent to these engagements and were mothers. There are, of course, issues to consider around why it was only mothers who responded to the study—to which I can only give speculative, baseless answers—and the implications of this for a gendered reading of school choice. However, I do not want to make essentialist claims to community as something only mothers and not fathers invest in; and since only mothers were interviewed, no comparative analysis can be made of the importance of community in male and female responses to the choice process.

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 critical discursive psychology offered by Wetherell and Potter (1992) and one that complemented the theoretical reach of my study. In many ways, my study was an attempt to build on the work developed by Bowe et al. (1994) 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' (p. 75). The discursive approach developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987), 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 & Edley, 1999, p. 338), adds to the work of Bowe et al. (1994) by opening up that analytic space (formerly closed by deterministic sociological accounts) in which speakers can be found acting agentically: refusing, contesting, negotiating, and reworking the discursive resources available to them (Holland & Lave, 2000). In other words, a critical discursive psychology is useful for showing how mothers make use of particular cultural constructs in order to make themselves recognizable to others and accountable (Wetherell, 2005). In what follows I examine the decision-making practices informing some mothers' school choices, analysing them in the wider context of policy and political discourses around choice.

THE SEDUCTION OF COMMUNITY

It is evident in the way some mothers describe and rationalize their choice that community forms an integral part of the decision-making practices governing school preference. One of the seductions of community appears to stem from its capacity to invoke relations of solidarity, association, shared experience, familiarity, closeness, security, co-operation

and connection. The following extract is taken from an interview with Mary. 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.

Mary: 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, in effect highlighting community as a refracting and distorting medium. Moreover, she points to the way community is implicated in the identifications linking local people to the local school(s) and to the local area more generally. In this view the seduction of community stems in part from its capacity to articulate potentially disparate and disjointed voices around shared principles of position, place and experience. In other words, community reflects attempts to construct relations between people as stable, predictable and secure, thereby obscuring potential internal divisions and contradictions. However, it is precisely Mary's adamant rejection of the idea of herself as a consumer—individualistic, self-interested and clinical— that leads her to find comfort in this imaginary of community and the possibilities it offers for transcending or undermining the self-interested character of consumption. 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), namely the idea that choice impedes efforts that are primarily aimed at organizing and sustaining community-building practices of integration and support. This is evident in the way Mary approximates choice to a process that contributes to disruption, unsettlement and discordance around community, pointing to the potential estranging effect choice is felt to have on the relationship linking local families to local schools. The next extract, taken from an interview with Camilla, a lone mother with one child, makes visible the enabling and empowering effect local schools can have on some families.

Camilla: 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 (2004, p. 40) observe, choice is sometimes inflected through the desire to extend 'community-building practices of attending the local school'. Camilla's understandings and interpretations of community, for instance, is one rooted in conceptions of the local school and local area. Central to her motives for wishing to send her son to the local secondary school is a principled focus on the 'continuation of community commitment'. The relationship between families and their local school, expressed most

succinctly in the research of Ball et al. (1995, 1996), Reay and Ball (1997), and Reay and Lucey (2000, 2004), has become the victim of some misplaced criticism over the last several years, however. 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 Thrugg's (1997) argument that the implementation of choice has resulted in poorer families being released from the 'iron cage' of rigid catchment areas. 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 captured locally as defined by the geographical and social space shared by people in the area. Moreover, the survival of community is held to be contingent on the enduring presence of the local school as a site of integration and support. Such sentiment matches the core principles of the Campaign for State Education (CASE, 2008), 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).

Le Grand's (2007b) argument is therefore problematic in that it mobilizes the site of the local school as one characterized 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 standardized 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 characterize the local school. For Camilla, however, the local school performs a vital role in anchoring shared or communal ways of living which are felt to be integral to community. It is important to remember, then, that people hold different sets of values and preferences concerning the role of the local school and choice more generally. In this framing, as Touraine (2001, p. 33)

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.

The way in which parents are positioned through governmental discourses of choice as either active or passive, deserving or undeserving depending on their inclination to and willingness for choice is therefore problematic when we consider that some mothers resist, and even reject, any construction of themselves as consumers of education services and thus challenge the suitability of choice mechanisms in education, as Mary illustrates:

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

Mary: 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 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...

Andrew: Which conversations?

Mary: Well it's all these conversations, particularly by middle-class parents, about what, you know where to send their child to school.

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 (2007a, p. 54) proposes 'it is the poor, the dispossessed and disadvantaged who want choice more than the allegedly rabidly pro-choice middle classes'. 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 role of the consumer; and, conversely, as an attempt to legitimize community and locality as elements in the practice of 'reasonable' and 'responsible' choosing. Hence, some mothers envisage community and choice as containing or speaking to different ethical orders—to the collective and individual, for example. For some mothers, choice impedes or undermines the valued relationships linking local families to their local school(s). 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.

Arguing against the merits of a choice-based education system, Millar (2007), 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'. 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, p. 55)

Just as 'parental choice' and 'social cohesion' are sometimes anchored in an antagonistic relationship (ODPM, 2004, p. 5.59), with the former often assumed to be diametrically opposed to the latter, school choice and 'good local schools' are similarly positioned in dichotomous terms.

Both Camilla and Mary draw on community as a framing for negotiating what it means, or should mean, to formulate choice in 'reasonable' and 'responsible' ways. This is exemplified through the way in which each mother places a high value on local provision, social mix and community as elements in the construction of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting. Camilla demonstrates how community can be understood as a powerful symbolic and material resource people draw on and invest in, as the following extract outlines:

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

Camilla: 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.

For Camilla, community produces possibilities for generating and facilitating connection between people, but more importantly, works to insulate people, namely her son, from potentially threatening and unpredictable imaginary spaces, such as the borders of Bromley. In this view, community works to isolate, detach and cut off individuals from an imaginary and uncertain outside. Camilla's desire to produce a child that in the future 'fights for the community' therefore makes visible the indissociable link between communal ideas of belonging based on shared membership to a group and parental notions of responsibility. This opens up important questions around what is, or what is meant by, responsible parenting/choosing, where what is meant by responsible parenting is likely to shift and mutate in the context of peoples' identifications with community and locality and the perceived benefits it carries.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have traced the rise of the consumer as an organizing figure of policies, processes and practices in British education. Moving beyond a narrow conception of the parent as consumer, imagined as a self-interested individual, this paper examined how some mothers negotiate their choice around communitarian impulses and a desire to strengthen the geographical and social relations linking local families and local schools to their local area. These forms of parental engagement with education services appear to reflect pragmatic, engaged attempts to undermine the individualistic and self-interested character of choice. Moreover, they represent attempts by mothers to reformulate normative assumptions concerning what is 'active' and 'responsible' choosing. Analysed in the wider context of policy and political discourses around choice, these parental engagements reveal the extent to which some mothers' private or emotional experiences of bringing up children sometimes conflict with public expressions of market principles, rationalities and ethics.

The defining feature of the consumer is the act of purchase (Clarke, 2004) or 'choosing' (Hauptmann, 1996), which, according to Needham (2003), is essentially motivated by self-interest. As a corollary, working-class parents are thought to be at a disadvantage when activated as choosers in a competitive educational field, precisely because the working-class desire to invest in collective or communal associations of locality (Ball et al., 1996; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Reay & Ball, 1997; Reay & Lucey, 2000) undercuts the preferred role of the consumer. The mothers featured in this paper make similar attempts to rationalize their choice through an appeal to community and the sense of safety and belonging it supposedly offers. At the same time, these mothers are captured actively engaging with what it means to be 'active' and 'responsible' when choosing a secondary school for their child. There is, for example, elements of a republican model of active citizenship (Johansson & Hvinden, 2005) being practised and supported through these accounts of choice— the idea that responsible action is performed when individuals and groups participate in decisions that affect the community to which they claim to belong. Such accounts therefore differ from a liberal or neo-liberal inflection of active citizenship in that the sovereign character of the self-interested individual is supplanted with the imaginary of community as a locus of responsibility. In this way the active–passive dynamic inscribed through governmental discourses around choice serves to circumscribe understandings around what constitutes active and responsible parenting and therefore conditions and limits the horizon of possibilities for thinking beyond such narrow conceptions. We should consider instead therefore how behaviour and orientations geared towards the preservation of ideas around community integration and support constitute an active, responsible engagement with the meaning and practice of choice.

Central to Bauman's (2001) argument concerning community is the idea that it is only when people are no longer sure of community's existence that it becomes absolutely necessary to believe in it. This is reflected in the empirical data analysed in this paper in which some mothers, in rejecting the role of the consumer, perceive school choice as a threat to the preferred image of people as part of self-determining and self-responsible communities. It is important therefore that policy makers and practitioners recognize that parents who favour their local school do not do so passively or indiscriminately. Such decision-making might be interpreted differently as attempts to legitimize an ethics of care and responsibility which is despised and/or devalued in governmental discourses around choice.

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