**Transgression for transition? White urban middle class families making and managing ‘against the grain’ school choices.**

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**CONTEXT**

As the editors of this volume point out in the introduction, there is a contemporary belief amongst policy makers and many educational professionals that the concept of *transition* may be highly significant in issues of social inclusion and exclusion. There is also a belief that enabling people to *manage transitions more effectively* is itself a possible and worthwhile policy objective with implications for achieving greater social justice. With these beliefs in mind, this chapter draws upon a study of middle-class school choices at a pivotal transition, namely that from primary to secondary schooling. Both this and the subsequent period of secondary schooling were highly managed processes. As well as revealing the nature of a particular kind of ‘transition management’, the data and analysis lead us to question the idea that such practices do anything to promote equality: indeed, they may do the very opposite.

We begin the chapter with a sketch of the features of the study that are most relevant to this discussion. We then set out several important concepts of *transition* that appear helpful to understanding the social practices of families as they anticipate, make, manage and live with ‘against the grain’ school choices. Finally, we focus upon the nature and extent of the *management* of the transition, comparing this to other research-based insights on parenting. We show that even counter-intuitive school choices appear to bring advantages to middle class children, and suggest that these may be at the expense of other school pupils.

The project to which we refer was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Award reference RES-148-25-0023) as part of their *Identities and Social Action* Programme. Entitled *Identity, Educational Choice and the White Urban Middle Classes*, the research focused on 125 white middle-class families sending their children to urban, socially diverse comprehensives with average or below-average league table positions[[1]](#footnote-1). In most cases, other options were available to the families – though these other options would often have required actions such as buying and selling houses, renting a new address or paying for private schooling. As well as looking at motivations and orientations, the study examined how identities gave shape to - and were shaped by - dilemmas of educational choice, and how class and ethnic differences were handled. The study covered a 30-month period and was based in London and two other cities, ‘Riverton’ in the South-west and ‘Norton’ in the North-east of England. The schools attended were more ethnically mixed in London than in Riverton or Norton. Families were identified through a mixture of responses to an advertisement in the national press, identification by head teachers, and ‘snowballing’. Interviews took place in the homes of the families. For parents these covered their own biography and educational background, the process of choosing a secondary school, and their experiences of primary and secondary schools. For children, interviews included looking at the part they had played in choices of school, current and past experiences of schooling, and their attitudes to social and ethnic diversity.

Amongst the many conclusions of the study, we found that counter-intuitive school choice was for the most part perceived and experienced as a risky strategy. It was often motivated by ideas about ethical behaviour, but there was more evidence of an individualised ‘investment’ orientation than there was of being driven by a sense of community or the common good. Family history was important too, with some parents reacting specifically to their own educational past. The transition and subsequent schooling was highly monitored, and it often appeared to yield its own form of social advantage.

**1. THE MEANING OF *TRANSITION***

It is worth considering established uses of the term *transition*. Aside from its technical uses in specific fields (such as physics, music and architecture), there are two meanings that are worth noting. The first is a concept used by psychologists interested in how people cope with trauma and major change, and by those bringing psychological concepts to bear on organisational problems. We might call this an *individualist* concept of transition. For some, the ‘transition cycle’ is nothing less than a survival mechanism inside each individual:

‘Just as the fight and flight response has evolved to equip us to cope with danger, the transition cycle enables humans to adapt to trauma and change. Both are powerful survival mechanisms. They operate spontaneously and are available to everyone from presidents to refugees. But they can go badly wrong in modern societies. Possibly the most important feature of transition psychology is that it explains the mechanism by which individuals make radical changes of values and attitudes most appropriate to a new environment i.e. personal transformation. So transition awareness and transition management skills are fundamental issues for leaders who seek to transform organisations and societies. Because transitions are an individual process, leaders can facilitate or impede personal transformation but not demand it…Greater awareness of transitions may be a key to personal and national survival in an era of unprecedented change.’ (Williams, 1999).

A second and rather different use of the term refers to whole nation-states that were formerly parts of the Soviet Union, formerly communist, or less ‘developed’. The journal *Economics of Transition*, published on behalf of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, has a particular interest in the ‘transition economies of Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS, China and Vietnam, as well as enlightening studies of reform and institutional change in other emerging market environments, including India and Latin America’[[2]](#footnote-2). Here, transition appears to denote a particular kind of upward trajectory characterised by progress, economic development and new opportunities to make profit.

To many, these are powerful and attractive ideas. However, both the *individualist* and the *economic development* conceptions of transition are of limited use in relation to educational policy and practice, and we would argue that s*ociological* conceptions offer more promise. There are several contenders. They include the interactionist notion of transitions, articulated by Denzin (2001) as *epiphanies*. These are turning-points in a person’s life, but importantly they are moments when both the social and the personal are in focus, sometimes described as the intersection of the public and the private worlds, or public and private troubles. Along with other aspects of Denzin’s work, there is a clear link here to C. Wright Mills (1959). Fuller, citing Elder et al (2003), points out that Mills’ call for a sociological imagination, which looks for the connections between biography and social structures, was important in the development of lifecourse theory and is helpful when looking at mid-life transitions (Fuller, 2007).

A different concept of transition comes from the work of Raymond Boudon, who distinguished some time ago between primary and secondary effects of social class. Primary effects include the different academic abilities of children; secondary effects include the kinds of choices made by people in different social class groupings at key transition points in their educational careers (Boudon, 1974). Boudon’s particular focus was on how people weigh up the costs and benefits to them of pursuing particular routes or pathways, and how (contrary to crude versions of human capital or rational action models), such calculations will not have the same meaning and currency in different social groups. This insight has since become built-in to a whole range of studies and is part of the most elaborate rational choice modelling, where the factors at a key moment of school transition are expressed in a mathematical equation containing values for ‘expected utility’, ‘educational benefit’, ‘anticipated social status decline’, ‘investment risk’ and so forth (see Pietsch and Stubbe, 2007).

Boudon is sometimes contrasted with Bourdieu, with the latter being positioned, inaccurately in our view, as ‘culturally determinist’. Yet in rejecting crude notions of rational action, and in trying to understand differential stakes and positions, they wrestle in different ways with the same problem. For Bourdieu, the habitus frames strategy: That is, it provides a sense of reality, of possibilities and limits, within which decisions for action are taken. In their turn, these actions confirm or develop fields – in other words, they affect the space for subsequent actions or choices of other people.

Patton et al (2008) illustrate the importance of ‘networks of intimacy’ in the processes of making decisions (and non-decisions) around education and employment transitions. Networks of intimacy often include several family members and other key individuals: Our fieldwork was slightly more focused on parents and children, but just as illustrative of the significance of family habitus, whether we were exploring parents’ own past experiences of schooling, or listening to young people talking about their day to day experiences. For example, there were often particular ‘family stories’, where parents and children would independently refer to the same events or episodes in their accounts of school choice and schooling.

A further theme in recent discussion is the idea that in the last decade or so, key transitions have become more difficult or complex. Fuller provides a summary of the main reasons that a theory of reflexive modernity may be helpful in understanding the increase in mature student participation in higher education, including the decline of certain traditions, a heightened sense of risk and a greater perception of identity as something to be ‘made’ (Fuller, 2007, p. 222). Yet not all those studying transitions would support this view. Although writing specifically about the school to work transition, Vickerstaff (2003) makes the point that it is too simplistic to characterise transitions of the 1950s and 1960s as smooth and unproblematic, and contemporary transitions as full of ‘uncertainties, fluctuations, discontinuities, reversals and seesaws…’ (EGRIS, 2001, cited in Vickerstaff, 2003, p. 275). In other words, it would appear easy to overstate the individualisation thesis of the rise and presumed ubiquity of a reflexive project of the self – themes which are usually set out with reference to Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991). Undoubtedly, there are shifts in the context for choice-making with regard to participation in education or training, linked to policy, and these can change horizons for action at certain stages in people’s lives (see Patton et al, 2008, pp. 22-3). Nevertheless, most choices are also highly framed by social structures and positionings. Du Bois Reymond, for example, suggests that ‘choice biographies’ are themselves unequally distributed (Du Bois Reymond, 1998)

Although the research project did not set out to develop a specific theorisation of transition, it is helpful to look at some of the project data for what it suggests about transitions and their management. We found tools from the social theory of Bourdieu particularly helpful for this purpose. We now turn to the different types of transition that run through our data on ‘against the grain’ secondary school choice.

**2. TYPES OF TRANSITION IN SCHOOL CHOICE**

Broadly speaking, there were four concepts of transition apparent in the data and analysis of the project. The first, and perhaps most predictable, was the pivotal movement of children between Primary and Secondary schools. This transition had the potential to produce a great deal of anxiety and was seen by all our participants as ‘high stakes’, having major and continuing ramifications. The perceived quality of secondary schools is a major dynamic in the housing market and is often, at least for the more occupationally and geographically mobile, a major consideration in choices about where to live. Estate agents regularly incorporate information about schools in the details they provide to prospective buyers. Of the many marketised aspects of educational provision, this one is surely the most developed in policy and practice. Secondary school league tables do not only function to create pressure for so-called improvement in standards: they also seem (and in some hands, purport) to offer a set of information on which parents and children can make ‘good’, informed choices. The assumption here is that un-chosen schools will either improve or wither away. In other words, schools themselves are seen as dynamic players with a great deal of choice in how well they do, and are widely perceived as having a trajectory (they are ‘on the up’ or ‘coasting’, or worse). The end of Primary schooling is also a point at which a significant minority of children who have been in the State sector enter private secondary schools.

Secondly, there were profound experiences of transition in the lives of many of the parents we interviewed, between generations and in terms of social class, namely transitions in family ‘position’, both historical and immediate. Families, or key relationships in families, have a *habitus*. That is, they have a set of collective dispositions which generate a sense of place and a sense of reality. Families ‘carry’ certain key narratives and experiences as shared property, and these are used as reference points for decisions and/or the interpretation of consequences of actions. For example, a surprisingly high 59% of the parents in our sample had been to either private or selective state (usually grammar) schools, and these school backgrounds of parents remained very important in contemporary choices. Several of the more established middle class parents made school choices that were a conscious reaction to the perceived narrowness, socially and/or academically, of their own schooling. On the other hand, particularly amongst the ‘first generation’ middle class families, the choice of an ordinary state school sometimes reflected a wish to reproduce in microcosm the trajectories of the parents, with a desire on the part of parents that their children should have to compete in ordinary circumstances and should experience something of the same climb they had themselves made as part of their own upward mobility.

Thirdly, geographical transitions were often important. Nearly 70% of the parents we interviewed were ‘incomers’ to the area or city where they now lived. This high level of geographical mobility was accompanied by a remarkably high rate of qualifications held, with 83% qualified to degree level, and over a quarter with postgraduate qualifications. There were other important senses of place too, in people’s commentary on the relationship between housing, house purchase and school catchment, or where a child’s journey to school involved ‘transitions’ such as crossing borders that had high social significance. Even in a small city, different areas had a particular social meaning and school choices were sometimes framed by more and less acceptable journeys or destinations.

Fourthly, our analysis highlights transitions in *identity*, at least in the sense of *identifications*. Psycho-socially, the self can be understood as defined or re-defined in relation to a ‘generalised other’ through a variety of possible mechanisms. For some middle class white families, ‘the other’ is the white working class, and there is a contrasting positive identification with black and minority ethnic groups. Thus, white working class children were sometimes derided as ‘chavs’ or ‘trash’ whilst the white middle class family was seen as having an ethnic identity that was distinguished by its cosmopolitan acceptance and tolerance of ethnic diversity and even its anti-racism. It is therefore meaningful to speak of different notions of ‘whiteness’ and a perceived transition of ethnicity. We have documented and discussed this tendency and its probable effects, showing how some white middle class families saw themselves as ‘a darker shade of pale’ (see Reay et al, 2007).

**3. THE MANAGING OF TRANSITION**

Arguably, the ideal-typical consumer in neo-liberal times makes informed choices having considered the relevant information about products or services. This holds whether they are buying a car, buying a toothpaste or selecting a secondary school. In England and in some other places, a marketised view of educational choice has become the keystone of much educational policy, with the percentage of high GCSE passes taken as the proxy for the ‘quality’ or any given school. One of the reasons for the prevalence of this view is that many middle-class parents – literally and metaphorically - ‘buy into’ the marketised ideal. Beyond the small percentage who pay for private education, many more seek out schools with high A\*-C league table positions and the social composition that often comes with it. Many see the choice of such schools as maximising the chances that their own children will do relatively well – or at least see the league-table position as proof of the school’s capabilities.

On the whole, the parents in our study did not share in this mainstream perspective. Rather, there was a degree of recognition and sometimes a confidence that conventional outcomes can be relied upon to take care of themselves when it comes to young people from relatively supportive, comfortable, middle class homes who have already shown themselves to be ‘clever or ‘bright’. These parents are concerned as much (sometimes more) with schooling as a socialising opportunity to acquire certain ethical qualities and the capacity to deal with a ‘tough’ world, to be able to ‘relate’ to a wide range of people, and to ‘wise up’. Our interviews cover this ground extensively, and parents listed all kinds of characteristics that they thought could be nurtured in a socially mixed school. Similarly, several parents spoke in terms we might summarise as a ‘school of hard knocks’ approach. One of these referred to the ‘(drug) dealers at the gates’ of her son’s school, and presented this as a positive feature insofar as he had to learn to cope with it, and having done so would be equipped to cope with any challenging situation in life.

Such concerns are anchored in normative or value-based perspectives, but also in specific experiences. In many families there were moral objections to the purchase of privilege. In some, parents cited examples of other young people known to them who represented what they did not want their own children to become. A particularly clear example of this was the Smiths, one of whom taught in a university. They expressed dismay at how many of the students they taught, who had been highly successful in academic terms, were nevertheless ‘clueless’ about so many things. The Smiths did not want their own children to turn out the same way. In some families, parents’ personal experiences of ‘narrow’ schooling were a key ‘push’ factor in the choice of school. In others the desire for the young person to ‘stand out’ was important. Rather than becoming ‘invisible’ in amongst a group of higher achieving pupils, as they might in some schools, an averagely performing school was expected by some parents to provide a context in which their son or daughter would do well and be noticed for doing well.

These kinds of engagement with the educational world break with the mainstream established patterns of the most privileged, though they may have much in common with longer-established choices of ‘alternative’ schooling, such as Steiner schools. It is clearly not an example of the illusory defying of social gravity, the attempt to unilaterally escape from the multilateral markers of social position which Bourdieu termed a ‘dream of social flying’ (1984, p. 370). Rather, it is based on a more or less sociological reading of educational processes. The parents take a hands-on approach to constructing a total schooling experience that is designed to lead to much more than academic credentials. Whilst it is quite abstract, the Bourdieusian concept of social capital appears to be helpful in grasping what they are doing. For Bourdieu, social capital is ‘the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly useable in the short or long term’ (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 52). As with Coleman, social capital here is about networks, connections, who you know, who owes you a favour, and so forth. However, there the parallel ends, and Bourdieu is referring to something more dynamic, that is *worked at* and is *generative of* and *responsive to* conditions of social inequality.

It is worth unpacking this idea a little more. Everyone has social capital, but it manifests itself in class-specific forms. Like economic and cultural capital, it works to reproduce class relations. Bourdieu talks of ‘endowments’ of capital that students bring into educational settings. There is also ‘conversion’ between capitals (Apple, 2004; Grenfell and James, 1998). The clearest example of this is where economic capital is used to purchase highly specialised forms of secondary education which offer small class-sizes, historically-embedded expectations and a clear position in the *field* of possible schools. Thus, wealth becomes converted into cultural capital, including a high probability of high-grade A levels, a certain kind of confidence and self-regard, and a dramatically increased chance of entry into the most prestigious universities. In turn, the institution at which the degree is completed can carry high cultural capital and this has a high chance of re-conversion into high earnings (economic capital) via employment that offers the sort of returns that can be used to purchase a similar advantage in the next generation. At each stage, the individual embodies something of the position of the particular institution in the *field*, and this stays with them, ‘rubs off’ on them, marked by signs as wide-ranging as linguistic style, manners, friends and acquaintances, ways of thinking, tastes, leisure pursuits, appearance, and of course educational credentials. Social capital (like economic and cultural capital) is one form taken by the ‘currency’ of inequality. It is always in relation to a *field* of positions.

Having made the choice of an averagely- or below averagely-performing State secondary school for their children, many parents in our study surprised us with the high levels of monitoring, intervention and control that they brought to bear once secondary schooling was under way. We acknowledge that they *may* have acted in similar ways had they chosen high-performing schools, but would argue that this is unlikely. Altogether, 61 (25%) of the parents in our families were or had been a school governor – and in London this rose to 30%. A high proportion of these were or had been Chairs of governing bodies. There were also many other ‘insider’ contacts and relationships with schools too, such as friendships with particular teachers or heads, or other connections through work, and some evidence that such contacts were ‘used’.

Some aspects of transition management are illustrated very well by the Smith family, mentioned earlier in connection with a dislike for privilege. The Smiths lived in a substantial four-bedroom house in Riverton, and towards the end of her primary schooling, their daughter had been desperate to go to a nearby private secondary school along with her three close friends from the primary school. Whilst they did value academic success, the Smiths were against forms of schooling that they considered would simply reproduce social advantage. Our interviews with Angela Smith also made it clear that she and her husband saw comparisons of schools that used figures on GCSE attainment as virtually meaningless. Like many others in our sample, these parents had strong values about education providing (a) social mixing and (b) opportunities to become ‘streetwise’. They also had the wish to realise this vision: in the run-up to the transition, they put considerable direct effort into orchestrating and broadening the range of children with whom their daughter came into contact, including helping with the running of a youth group which contained some of the children going to Meadowood, the chosen school.

Several months after the transition, we asked Sadie how she was getting on in her secondary school:

**Sadie:** Well I met people and I became friendly with them but it took ages, really, really ages to get settled in.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember how you were feeling?

**Sadie:** I was getting slightly bullied at the time

**Interviewer:** Were you?

**Sadie:** Yes, being called ‘posh’, ‘keener’ that kind of stuff, that kind of unsettled me and we (i.e. her parents) had to go to school about it and stuff.

**Interviewer:** So did your mum or dad have a word with the teachers?

**Sadie:** Yes and I went with them.

**Interviewer:** Good. Do you feel that’s been resolved now?

**Sadie:** Yes, but then the person started up again, so we filled in some bullying forms and it got sorted out.

**Interviewer:** Good, so you’re a bit happier about that now? It’s never easy that kind of thing, is it? So aside from that experience, the bullying stuff and that kind of thing, do you feel like you belong, you fit into the school?

**Sadie:** Yes, I don’t want to leave.

**Interviewer:** You don’t want to leave, you like it. What if I said I had a word with your mum and dad – and this isn’t true, this is just pretend, OK?

**Sadie:** OK

**Interviewer:** What if I said I had a word with your mum and dad and I had a word with the head teachers and there’s a place for you tomorrow at Hawthorne’s (the nearby private secondary school attended by Sadie’s closest friends from primary school) and you can go there, what would you say?

**Sadie:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** You would want to?

**Sadie:** Yes, but I’ve just settled in and my friends have changed, the people who went there, I probably have changed too and I’d lose touch with all the other friends. And me and all my friends made a pact not to change schools unless we were forced and had to move away to a different country.

**Interviewer:** That’s nice, this is your current friends?

**Sadie:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** You said ‘we’re staying here, all together’?

**Sadie:** Yes.

Sadie’s level of commitment to the school is impressive. It seems important to note that she is, in a sense, more *thoroughly* committed than her parents to the particular school: their commitment is to the school as a vehicle for certain forms of socialisation, and if it doesn’t work out, they talk of having ‘options’. These include, as a last resort, ‘going against their principles’ and moving to a smaller house so as to be able to afford private education.

Her mother Angela’s account of the bullying episode brings to light another important aspect. The bullying had started a few weeks after Sadie began at Meadowood, and Sadie had not wanted her parents to get involved in dealing with it. Angela said ‘…it really reminded me of all my experience of working with women going through domestic violence, of how they turned in on themselves, all those feelings of lack of self confidence, lack of respect for yourself, believing what’s been said about you’. The resolution came in two stages. Firstly, as in Sadie’s account, Sadie and her parents met with the head of year, out of school hours, and the perpetrators were confronted the next day. But secondly, after there was some resumption of the problem, Angela drew upon a different resource:

‘…she did get a learning mentor for a little bit which just gave her that bit of extra security at school – a different adult who she really likes, but that happened because I’m friends with one of the assistant head teachers, and she’s always wanting to know how it’s going from our point of view. I fed back and he sorted it out, whereas the head of year was supposed to have done something about it and he never got round to doing it. And it was only because I had that route in to push, otherwise I’d have had to go back, see him again, make another appointment…that’s one of those middle class privileges, really, in lots of ways that you get in that environment, it shouldn’t be like that, I shouldn’t have been relying on that’ (Angela, second interview).

The assistant head, who was a friend and was ‘always wanting to know how it’s going from our point of view’, is not an isolated feature across our study. Similar episodes, and sometimes a similar self-awareness and mild guilt about privileged access to school personnel or systems, appeared in several of our interviews. But one of the likely reasons that it was possible for these parents to micro-manage the transition and subsequent school experience was that schools were, for their part, highly responsive to parental intervention. They appeared especially keen to ‘hang on’ to white middle class pupils. We have no data on how deliberate all the many instances of this actually were, but we are clear about the tendency for schools to divert certain resources to the children in our study. Nearly all were in ‘Gifted and Talented’ schemes, which attract extra resources for the school to cater for those children with the ‘ability to excel’, and in one school, an entire A level subject was kept open for one student so as to dissuade them from leaving to go to elsewhere for post-16 courses. Many headteachers put time and effort into trying to persuade middle class parents to choose their school, or to stay if they were thinking of leaving. Clearly, they think that the school is better off as a whole if it contains more middle class pupils. It would seem, then, that schools also operate with a ‘sociological’ appreciation of which kinds of children are most likely to help them rise in the league tables.

**4. WHO HAS THE MEANS TO MANAGE TRANSITION?**

If there is such a thing as ‘managing transition’, it follows that some people will be better at it (or better placed) than others. The idea that people can be assisted to this end is an attractive one in policy terms, not least because it appears to be a sensitive and caring policy response to the news that market arrangements may exacerbate inequalities. In a marketised system this problem can be portrayed as one of individual resources and responsibility, or rather the lack of them. If there is general agreement about the signifiers of a good secondary school, and also plentiful information that is in the public domain, then it is possible to make ‘bad’ choices. This in turn means that people can be seen as individually responsible for such choices, opening up two possibilities – they can be blamed, or helped. Thus, offering help to people so that they can better ‘manage transitions’ may not be quite as innocent and benign as it first appears, and it may be understood as an instance of longstanding themes in policy responses around social inclusion/exclusion (see Levitas, 2005)

A further problem here is the positive halo around the concept of ‘choice’ itself. Greater choice, accompanied by more information, is often presented as an incontrovertible good in government policy, as a self-evident proxy for freedom, or as proof that one lives in a democracy. However, a more subtle concept of choice is necessary, not least because in the case of schools, the information that dominates perceptions of quality is league-table position based on higher grade GCSE examination results. Families like the Smiths do indeed value academic success, but they are *committed* to a particular vision of ‘the good’, or ‘good socialisation’ which is in some conflict with dominant assumptions about how educational success is to be secured. Commitments are not the same as preferences and have a stronger bearing on practice, partly because they are the *felt* as well as the *thought* aspects of social life, to do with habitus and the psychic dimension of social class (cf. Reay, 2005). The significance of strong commitments is illustrated in many of the families in our study. In the case of the Smiths, we would point to commitments that are strong enough to override the loss of Sadie’s friendships with the move to secondary school and to cope with the bullying episode. Sadie’s answer to our ‘magic wand’ question about suddenly being able to attend her original school of choice can also be taken to illustrate the strength of a particular commitment. (For further discussion of the distinction between commitments and preferences, see Archer, 2000 and Sayer, 2005).

Like the British middle class young women in the study by Walkerdine *et al* (2001), these families shared a view that high academic achievement and performance were ‘the norm’. For example, the expectation of university entry was almost universal amongst our interviewees, parents and young people alike. However, our data also shows that in the case of parents making ‘against the grain’ choices of secondary school, a great deal of thought, time and effort was being put in to other aspects and dimensions of the young person’s experiences, capacities and trajectory. This in turn leads us to the ‘reflexive project of the self’ that some writers have attributed to neo-liberalism (or simply to the conditions of post-modernity or high modernity – see for example Giddens, 1991; Elliott, 2001).

We would predict that in general most parents are concerned, and many are engaged with the detail of schooling. Yet many of the parents we studied went much further than this, and the manner of their engagement could justifiably be termed *parental managerialism*. The term managerialism usually refers to beliefs and practices in workplaces and organisations. It is ‘…underpinned by an ideology which assumes that all aspects of organisational life can and should be controlled. In other words, that ambiguity can and should be radically reduced or eliminated’ (Wallace and Hoyle, 2005, p.9). Like managerialism in the workplace, this parental managerialism is premised on a belief that all the important variables are controllable and within reach. It is a reflexive project of the self of the child, and it necessitates a great deal of deliberate activity.

In their study of parenting, Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) showed how middle class mothers tended to turn everyday interactions into explicit learning opportunities, and to give elaborate explanations to children for imposed restrictions, whilst working-class mothers tended to be non-interventionist and to give clearer boundaries with less justification. Lareau’s work (e.g. 2003) also outlined processes of ‘concerted cultivation’ amongst middle class parents in the USA. The parental managerialism we have found appears to be the extension beyond the early years, and beyond the home, of similar sets of practices. There are similarities with Reay’s earlier analysis of parental engagements with school and how the success or productivity of these encounters differed for mothers with different resources of cultural capital (e.g. Reay, 1998). There are strong resonances too with a study of parental voice which showed that whilst there were similarities across all parents, one group who were highly involved with schools had a particular habitus in relation to education which included a ‘…responsibility to monitor children’s achievement and the school provision’ (Vincent and Martin, 2002, p. 125).

We would argue that a person’s capacity to ‘manage transition’ is in large part a question of cultural and social capital. In order to be effective when it is taken outside the home, parental managerialism is likely to depend on contacts and connections that go beyond a standard relationship to the school as an organisation. As we have seen, governorship and other contacts with schools were quite common across our sample, and schools were highly responsive to parental concerns. One of our interviews with a young person in London illustrates more of the nature of this type and level of parental engagement:

My mum is like a big complainer if anything doesn’t go right at school she is like first there talking to the head teacher. She’s good friends with him now. In Year 7 she managed to get an English teacher sort of sacked, she is a bit like that, she is a bit of a tyrant. She’ll like, if I come back and they haven't marked my book for a while, then she will be “ok I am going to go and tell the school” because she wants me to have the best education I can and whereas I would rather just think oh let’s wait for someone else to do it, she is the one to do it. She is really involved with the school she is standing for governor. Yeah she really like feels strongly about trying to get me to do the best…and also she really wants to try and get more middle class people to go to Copeland School. And she has drawn up like made a little committee and this year when people were being shown around the school as a middle class parent she tried to like get other middle class parents to send their kids to Copeland (Ella Harding).

There was a great deal of this parental managerialism visible in our data. In addition, there were frequent instances of high intervention, advocacy and marketing of the sort described by Ella Harding.

**5. CONCLUSION**

Our analysis of ‘against the grain’ secondary school choice amongst white middle class families illustrates a high level of parental management of primary to secondary school transition and of subsequent schooling. However, we also suggest that it is too simplistic to see such transitions solely or primarily as being about the skills or capacities of individuals to make good choices. In a nutshell, what some would regard as ‘bad’ choices turned out very well indeed for the families we studied, whether one is looking at qualifications attained, university entrance, or the qualities and characteristics that were attributed to schooling. This turns attention to more fundamental questions about structures of inequality and the actions and processes that constitute them.

The study puts a large question-mark against the idea that, for all its possible benefits, enabling people to better manage primary to secondary school transitions is an efficient route to greater social justice. The idea of managing transitions is itself based on an inadequate model of social inequality, one which locates the causes in individual deficits of attitude or information, or perceptions of (ir)responsibility. This is entirely in keeping with neo-liberal political thinking, and also with the perennial individualist thrust in Western cultures (see e.g. Geertz, 1979; James, 2003), and is also indicative of what Mike Savage has described about the assumed normality of white middle class lifestyles in contemporary policy (Savage, 2003). The linked idea of ‘responsibilisation’ (see for example Dwyer, 1998) continues to be a popular idea in some policy circles.

However, the difficulty is that there is more at stake than the properties of individuals. Horizons for action are collectively generated, experienced and deeply felt, and far from being neutral and technical matters, educational processes are themselves shot through with differential social valuing. There is a deep-rooted, intimate and largely mutually confirming relationship between social class and educational opportunity and attainment, yet it would seem that the habitual policy responses to the effects of this continue to misrecognise the nature of the relationship. In schools, this gives us such things as ever increasing pressure to raise the proportion of pupils gaining 5 or more ‘good’ passes at GCSE, accompanied by a remarkable shift in terminology, where a ‘satisfactory’ result in inspections of quality can be re-labelled as ‘coasting’, and therefore become newly problematic. In universities, it gives us a focus on ‘widening participation students’, where information and attitudes are seen as the barriers to participation presumed to afflict working-class young people.

We share with Brantlinger a wish to point out that because educational processes and credentials are recognised as positional goods, and must be understood relationally, one cannot really view any choice-making or other intervention in splendid isolation. As she put it:

As high tracks are created to accommodate the preferences of affluent parents, low-income children are relegated to low tracks…the middle class determines the nature of public education for their children and, simultaneously, even if inadvertently, for children of other classes’ (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 59.)

Like the notion of choice itself, the idea of working on the management of transitions to promote greater equality fails to take proper account of the above points. There is convincing empirical evidence from a German study that the primary to secondary transition actually *deepens* prior inequalities (Pietsch and Stubbe, 2007). The point to be taken from this is that the passage between one setting and another is not just a ‘transition’ to be ‘managed’: It is *itself* a site for social practices that generate and underline difference. One person’s transition is, simultaneously and subsequently, a generative part of the context for another person’s transition.

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1. The ‘headline’ measure in such league tables is the percentage of pupils gaining 5 or more A\* to C passes at GCSE. At the time of the fieldwork, the national average figures were 58.5% (for 2006) and 56.5% (for 2005). Such figures are widely used by politicians and policymakers as a proxy for ‘standards’ or ‘quality’ of secondary schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See publisher’s web pages, e.g. <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0967-0750> (accessed December 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)