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Ethnic and social "mixes" and the educational strategies of the Black middle class.

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Background

One of the key features of the school choices of the white middle class that has been identified in previous research is a concern with the 'social mix' of schools and to find schools to which other 'people like us' go. Ball (2003) and Vincent and Ball (2006) point to the importance given by middle class families to the degrees of social mix of the schools their children might attend - both in relation to race and class. Schools with significant proportions of working-class students tend to be avoided, but schools which have an 'appropriate' ethnic mix can be attractive to some middle class parents who want their children to experience and learn from social diversity and learn social tolerance. Indeed Crozier, Reay, James et al. (2008) identify a group of middle class parents who deliberately sought out 'mixed' inner-city schools for their children, but often with complex and mixed motives in mind. In previous work by Ball (2006) on 'ethnic choosing' in Higher Education, two different tendencies among minority ethnic students were noted. One group choose universities where there would be a high proportion of other students of their ethnicity, a second group preferred universities with intake diversity and no single predominant ethnicity. The first group choose to reaffirm their ethnic identity; the second group saw their choice as a form of 'escape' from an ethnic identity.

Research Questions

As yet we know little about how Black middle class parents understand social mix or the ways in which mixes (of different kinds) influence their choice of school for their children. Drawing on this on-going ESRC funded research study - "The Educational Strategies of the Black middle classes" (ESRC RES-062-23-1880) - this paper will explore the role of mix in school choice and educational planning for Black middle class families. The paper will consider how issues of mix relate to the race and class identities of the respondents (Rollock & Vincent, 2010), their aspirations for their children, their choice strategies and their experience or perception of the impact of racism on the education of their children. The paper will also explore the relations between location and school choice, the relations between school and 'street' and the relations of families to their 'community'.

Methods

We have carried out over 60 qualitative interviews with parents from Black Caribbean backgrounds identified, using Standard Occupational Classification codes, as being in professional or managerial employment. Parents have at least one child between 8 and 18 years, encompassing key transition points in the school calendar. Sensitive to debates about the role of Black men as fathers we have interviewed 10 Black Caribbean fathers as part of the project.

Frame

We employ a broad range of conceptual tools, including the work of Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory to make sense of and analyse the data.

Research findings

Choice for these parents, like white middle class parents, is a relational process and an act of classification and distinction. The paper will make an important contribution to research and policy on race and social class. It will draw on and develop previous research on class and choice using the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and theoretical writings on ethnicity, racism and education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Gillborn, 2006).

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