



## Conviviality under the Cosmopolitan Canopy? Social mixing and friendships in an urban secondary school

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### Abstract

Social mix and social mixing are topics of increasing significance to both the policy and academic communities in the UK, and have particular salience in urban multi-ethnic and socially diverse contexts. Enshrined in the comprehensive school ideal, and implicated in the now legal duty to promote 'community cohesion,' (urban) schools play a pivotal role in agendas for social mixing but little is empirically known about how this is lived and experienced by the young people in those schools. This paper begins to develop a theoretical understanding of social mixing drawing on qualitative data on the patterns, discourses, and experiences of associations and friendships collected in a London comprehensive school. We find that while the social mix of the school is celebrated, in official discourse as congenial and 'convivial', by staff and students alike, the extent of actual mixing - of associations and friendships forming between those of different social and ethnic backgrounds - is both constrained and complex. We point to the social and cultural factors which produce this sense of conviviality, and the opportunities for cultural learning it supports. At the same time, we argue that there are limitations. Schools are sites of differentiation, and friendships as exemplars of social mixing, both (re)produce and are (re)produced by existing social hierarchies and inequalities.

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**Keywords:** *Social Mixing, Comprehensive Schooling, Education, Social Class, Ethnicity, Community Cohesion, Inequality*

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### Introduction

**1.1** The concept of social mixing in schools is not a recent phenomenon. One of the founding ideas of the UK comprehensive school system was that children should be given the same opportunities through schooling and not be separated into different schools by 'ability' (Ford, 1969; Pring & Walford, 1997). Further, by schooling a mix of young people from different social backgrounds, it was claimed that this would encourage mixing across the social class divide, thereby levelling out inequalities and blunting cultural differences (Pring & Walford, 1997, p. 3). Pring and Walford in their work on the *comprehensive ideal*, argue that as British society has changed and become more stratified, a wider conception of mix and mixing needs to inform this founding ideal:

We now live in a multicultural society that is increasingly harshly divided by class and ethnicity. Social mixing [through schooling] gives at least some possibility for mutual understanding and greater equity. (1997 p.3)

**1.2** There are two claims contained in their notion. First, that social mixing will lead to better understanding amongst pupils of each other's differences through social and cultural learning; second, that mixing itself might contribute to the erosion of class, ethnic and cultural inequalities.

**1.3** More recently, in the wake of the supposed 'failure' of multiculturalism (Janmaat, 2009), policymakers have been concerned with schools as agents of 'social integration' and 'community cohesion'. At the time of writing English schools have been charged with a legal *duty to promote community cohesion* (since 2007). This takes on a number of forms including: a common vision across different communities represented in the school; a positive valuing of diversity and difference; a commitment to equality – where those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and, of particular focus here,

'strong and positive relationships [...] between people from different backgrounds[...]' (DCSF, 2007, p. 3).

**1.4** In much of the policy literature there is a conflation between provision of a mix and the increased likelihood of mixing (see Lees, 2008 for discussion of this). Further, the perspectives of young people themselves are largely absent. In this paper we begin to develop a more complicated understanding of what the implications of social mix are in an urban school in terms of the actual experiences of social mixing and interactions that occur. Using an eclectic range of critical theoretical resources, we seek to problematise social mix and mixing. We do so by attending to young people's voices and experiences, specifically in relation to friendships and associative ties, and framing these within wider questions about the social reproduction of inequalities.

## Background

**2.1** Whilst not explicitly conceptualized in these terms, social mix and social mixing have been enduring topics of sociological significance, particularly in relation to the urban. Much of this literature has focused on the notions of 'cosmopolitanism' and issues of cultural and social distance (see Bridge, 2006; Iveson, 2006). In a recent reprisal of these themes, Paul Gilroy (2004) offers an account of urban spaces and sites of interaction framed in terms of 'conviviality'. For him, 'conviviality' refers to the coming together of previously unconnected cultures, a bridging of social and cultural distances. In parallel, the American sociologist Elijah Anderson (2004), has written about the 'cosmopolitan canopy': urban spaces, often public or quasi-public, of social mix where people can appreciate, enjoy a sense of being together, and engage in cultural learning from each other. He describes the canopy as:

a setting in which people of diverse backgrounds come together, mingle with strangers, and gain from their social experience, a critical folk knowledge and social intelligence about others they define as different from themselves. (2004, p. 29)

**2.2** In contrast to these optimistic accounts, gentrification scholars have pointed to the inequalities and stratification between the groups which mix within urban spaces. Some have characterized mixing within some urban areas between White middle class and working class groups as volatile and 'tectonic' (Butler & Robson, 2003a) or simply an act of 'cultural voyeurism' (May, 1996): lives lived in parallel in a 'mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate' (Amit and Rapport cited in Bottero, 2005, p. 8). Others stress the fundamentally ambivalent experience of city living and mixing: mix as simultaneously desirous and intolerable, attracting and repelling (Back & Keith, 2004); and as something that requires (by some) careful control and management of just the 'right' or 'good' mix (Byrne, 2006a; Reay *et al.*, 2007). Zygmunt Bauman refers to this ambivalence in terms of 'mixophilia' and 'mixophobia' (2003, 112-115).

**2.3** Research on urban education suggests that the 'right' ethnic (and social class) composition of a school is an important factor for some parents in finding a suitable school for their child (Bruegel, 2006; Butler & Robson, 2003b; Byrne, 2006a; Reay, *et al.*, 2007). For the middle classes some urban schools are seen as socially imbalanced, or not containing enough children like their own (Ball, 2003). Choosing urban schools therefore generates a great deal of anxiety for middle class parents who fear that their children will not 'get on' and 'fit in' with the 'unruly mob' imagined to populate such schools (Reay, 2007; Crozier *et al.* 2008). A large part of this parental anxiety about schools is centred on the friendships and associations their children might form. Research by Diane Reay and colleagues (2007) found that amongst middle class parents sending their children to multi-ethnic, predominantly working class, urban schools there was a careful management of mix orchestrated by parents. Certain high achieving minority ethnic friends were valued for their children (e.g. 'diligent' Asian children) whereas 'others' were perceived as abject and to be avoided (e.g. 'rude' Black girls).

**2.4** In terms of studies which focus on students' experience of social mix and mixing, these mostly focus on ethnicity/ 'race', or religious difference (see for example George, 2007; Hewitt, 1986; Janmaat, 2009; Perry, 2001; Ross *et al.*, 2006; Scourfield *et al.*, 2005). There is some evidence to suggest that at primary school children do make friends across ethnicity in particular where the demography of the school allows, but these inter-ethnic friendships can be disrupted by the secondary school transfer process (Bruegel, 2006; George, 2007). Interestingly, at secondary level, some research suggests that friendships across ethnicity are more common than friendship across social class (Ford, 1969; Hollingworth & Williams, 2010; Papapolydorou, 2010; Reay, *et al.*, 2007). This is a key finding which warrants further investigation. There is a dearth of research on social mixing in schools which takes a sociological approach focusing on multiple axes of difference, including social class, and the role that power and inequality play in this process (cf. George, 2007; Hey, 1997).

**2.5** Our analysis here is underpinned by a feminist poststructuralist approach to identities, seeing both 'race'/ ethnicity and social class as social constructs that are contingent, fluid and shifting, as well as produced through interaction in different contexts. However, in this paper we attempt to hold in tension structure and agency. We deploy Wendy Bottero's conceptualisation of 'differential association', that is, whom one associates with is not random or arbitrary personal preference but people with similar social resources tend to associate with similar people (the 'homophily principle') (Bottero, 2005). This, she argues, is a consequence of stratification but also helps to reinforce it (Bottero, 2005, p. 10). However, Bottero claims that 'when different social circles intersect, then some degree of heterophily (social mixing) will result' (Bottero, 2005, p. 171). So in this paper we want to explore, in the context of a socially and ethnically mixed urban comprehensive school, to what extent heterophily or social mixing occurs, and under what constraints.

## The Research

**3.1** This paper draws on data from a qualitative study of social mixing in London secondary schools by

the first author. The research explores to what extent young people make friends across social and ethnic difference in multi-ethnic socially diverse schools and their experiences of such friendships. Here, we draw on data from one of two schools investigated, 'Eden Hill<sup>[1]</sup> community school', an 11-18, co-educational comprehensive state school with diverse demographics. The school has enjoyed a steady rise in attainment from around forty per cent of students achieving the benchmark grades in 2007 (below average), to over sixty per cent in 2010 (above average). Entry requirements to the sixth form<sup>[2]</sup> (age 16-19) are reasonably high. A member of staff reports that students from the lower school comprise some seventy per cent of the intake to the sixth form with the remainder being external students joining from other schools.

**3.2** In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with a purposive sample of 21 young people in the sixth form (in both years 12 and 13), exploring their perceptions of the different friendship groups in the school and their own personal experiences of friendships and associations within (and outside) the school. This was probed using 'friendship maps'<sup>[3]</sup> as a discussion tool. The research was framed as being about friendships (not explicitly social mixing), in order not to lead discussions, so initial questions focused on the differences that they saw as pertinent, and social class, ethnicity (and gender) differences were probed much later in the interview. The research also included semi-structured interviews with five relevant members of staff; collection of relevant school documents; analysis of student demographic and attainment data; and an element of unstructured observation.

**3.3** Students who participated in the research were recruited through a variety of methods including advertising in assembly and tutor period, posters in the common room, and snowballing from existing participants. Demographic information was collected from students to ensure a diverse range of students. Just over half were girls; just over half were from working class backgrounds, and just over half were from minority ethnic backgrounds. Three students had attended other schools prior to the sixth form.

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**Table 1:** Sample characteristics

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	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ascribed social class<sup>[4]</sup></b>	<b>Self-ascribed ethnicity<sup>[5]</sup></b>
1	Nathanial	M	working class	Black Caribbean
2	Carl	M	working class	(Black) Jamaican
3	Helen	F	working class	Chinese
4	Tanisha	F	working class	Mixed other (Black Caribbean and Indian)
5	Oliver	M	middle class	White British
6	Tristan	M	working class	White British
7	Liam	M	middle class	White British
8	Tyler	M	working class	Black English (African heritage)
9	Faith	F	middle class	(White) English
10	Gemma	F	working class	(White) British
11	Jayne	F	middle class	White British
12	Francis	F	working class	White British
13	Damian	M	working class	Black British (Caribbean heritage)
14	Ben	M	middle class	White-Asian (White British and Japanese heritage)
15	Amber	F	working class	Black Caribbean
16	Aarti	F	middle class	British Indian
17	Amanda	F	working class	European White
18	Delores	F	middle class	(Black) Caribbean
19	Diane	F	working class	(White) English
20	Neera	F	(indeterminate)	(Black) Somalian
21	Cherry	F	working class	(South American and North African)
22	Farhan	M	(indeterminate)	British African

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**3.4** We acknowledge that there are limitations in focusing on Years 12 and 13 in that they are non-compulsory years. There is an obvious element of selection and exclusion already in that some students will have left school for work, college, another school, or other destinations. However, this was taken into account in the research design, and we believe, actually raises some interesting and relevant issues about selection, through educational transitions, which we discuss.

**3.5** Interview and focus group transcripts have been subject to both an iterative thematic analysis – coding for common themes in perceptions of social mixing and also discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), playing close attention to how staff and students variously construct what differences are being mixed, and how this draws on wider societal and institutional discourses circulating. This data has been

triangulated with demographic and attainment data provided by the school.

**3.6** Before we proceed it is important to define the terms social mix, and social mixing. We use social mix to refer to the composition or make-up of the school in terms of the common indicators of social difference: ethnicity and socio-economic status or social class (acknowledging also gender). In contrast, our use of social mixing refers to more dynamic processes and interactions: the dynamics of associative ties and friendship formation across social and ethnic difference. It is this process that we seek to explore in depth and attempt to understand this as grounded in wider processes of social stratification.

**3.7** The rest of the paper is structured in two parts. The first examines the social mix of the school, and the second how this mix plays out and how much mixing occurs. We begin by discussing the official discourse of Eden Hill School: its specific mission to be a 'socially mixed' school and we explore how this discourse circulates among staff and students alike at the school. We go on to discuss the sixth form context, in particular, which is seen by students to epitomise this mix. Following this, we observe to what extent espousals of social mix are reflected in experiences of social mixing, exploring the ways in which social class and ethnic (and gender) divisions are still woven into the school and shape opportunities for friendship and resources which students can utilise in friendship formation.

### **Celebrating the Mix at Eden Hill School**

**4.1** In this section we outline how the social mix of the school underpins the official discourse espoused by the school, and also permeates staff and students' narratives. Eden Hill school is framed by all as having the 'right' or a 'good' mix (Byrne, 2006a). We argue that this discourse is a celebratory one in which the mix is constructed as positive and as evidence of community cohesion.

**4.2** The school is located in a relatively wealthy area of London, and anecdotally was said to have become popular with local middle class families. There were also a number of large council estates in its catchment, which currently resulted in a diverse social, ethnic and 'racial' mix in comparison to some inner London comprehensive schools which can have ninety per cent minority ethnic children; or profess to have no middle class children at all (e.g. see Reay, *et al.*, 2007). In terms of composition, roughly half are White British children, a third Black African and Caribbean, the rest are a mix of other or mixed ethnicities. Social class mix is obviously harder to assess. The number of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) is in line with the national average (12%), but this is not always a reliable indicator of social class. In conducting the fieldwork, it became apparent there were a significant number of White middle class, and also a number of minority ethnic middle class children in the school.

**4.3** 'Social mix' is said to have underpinned the school's mission from its conception. The school's public website claims:

The main aim of the school was to provide a school for all the community – that includes students from some of the leafiest parts of London, as well as some of the most deprived in Europe.<sup>[6]</sup>

**4.4** This is a public statement of a particular 'social mix' ideology – a commitment to being an inclusive school for 'all the community,' rich and poor. There is a hint of pride present in this statement, in its perception of 'bridging' worlds. This, we argue, is part of the self-image of the school and underlying it is an assertion that its mission therefore is morally good and valuable. Indeed, the school website proclaims the school to be an 'integrating force' and a 'force for community cohesion' and appears to promote this notion successfully, as the latest Ofsted school inspection report indicates:

The inclusive culture and ethos of the school extend beyond its gates and result in outstanding promotion of community cohesion; in many ways the school is at the heart of the local community (Ofsted, 2009).

**4.5** This marketing of the school as embodying social mix and community cohesion can be read in a more critical vein. Ahmed (2006) points to the 'turn to diversity' in Higher Education in which certain ethnically and socially diverse institutions are able to market themselves as 'doing diversity' purely by virtue of having a diverse student body. She also writes about how such diversity work involves working with, as well as through, emotions, where 'pride' is mobilized and doing diversity is constructed as 'doing good' (2006, p. 754).

**4.6** The (White middle class) Community Liaison Manager – also a parent of a child at the school – explained that before the school opened, children from the local primary schools were dispersed to some forty-seven different secondary schools, which she argued was very divisive for the community. She claimed that the opening of the school 'potentially had a huge impact on the cohesion of the local community really', and 'that has been proven, you know, ten years down the line'. For her, attaining a social mix, schooling students from all the different social, cultural, ethnic backgrounds in the community together – was an end in itself. Achieving this was equated with the aims of a wider community cohesion agenda.

**4.7** Echoing previous findings on school choice, this discourse of the 'good' mix was ingrained and espoused by most staff interviewed (four out of five). When asked 'how would you describe this school to an outsider?' the Head of year 12 (White British middle class) replied:

It's very mixed. It's genuinely mixed. I think that's what I like about it. It's got kids from a wide range of social backgrounds, outlooks, values, religious beliefs ... cultural backgrounds and so on. So it's genuinely a very mixed school.

**4.8** This teacher is talking about more than just a socio-economic mix, but cultural, religious, and a mix of outlooks and values. Here again we have this 'self-congratulatory' discourse, of being 'genuinely' mixed as opposed to schools where the mix is 'not genuine' or somehow contrived. There is thus an implicit claim to a certain kind of authenticity in its celebratory tone. In other words: we have 'real' mix here.

**4.9** In some cases, staff recited the school's promotional material. For example the Community Liaison Manager talked of the mix of 'gentrifiers' and those living in social housing: 'some of the most deprived in Europe'. Others offered their own interpretation of what the 'mix' was and what it meant. The head of Citizenship education (White European middle class), who also taught Sociology, perhaps unsurprisingly elaborated in more detail, explicitly using social class terminology:

Officially it's a mixed abilities school with um, you know, very mixed backgrounds. Having said this, having seen other schools in London that classify themselves in the same way as mixed -they're not as mixed as Eden Hill School, because I would say there is also something like forty per cent or fifty per cent of White middle class, there is also a huge Afro-Caribbean middle class as much as White middle class. You also have the White working class. [...] because of the positioning of the school [...] in Eden, it's inevitably [...] meant to be an opportunity to this kind of integration between various groups who come from different classes.

**4.10** Again, this teacher suggests the mix in their school is a more authentic mix than other London schools. While analysis of the school data suggests this teacher overestimates the size of the minority ethnic *middle class*, it is important to note his emphasis that the mix is an intra-class one, White *and* Black middle class as well as minority ethnic working class and White working class<sup>[7]</sup>.

**4.11** This official discourse also permeated young people's talk. For example Jayne (White British middle class), made reference to the ethnic mix of the school, at the outset of her interview:

I really like it. I've always just loved it. [...] [In] this school, race is just really mixed [...] Since year 7, like, I used to have so many friends of different races to me, and we all kind of had a group together. It was really- that's why I like this school so much, because it is not so segregated

**4.12** Another girl, Amber (Black Caribbean working class), also this notion of authenticity:

It's very mixed [...] Loads of people from loads of different cultural backgrounds. Where some schools say they're diverse, I think this is a good example of it, like ... in terms of like income and stuff as well, because we get like ... I mean Eden Village is just up the road and you get some really well off people coming to this school. But then you get others who are like not so well off. But everyone just kind of knows each other and just mingles. That doesn't ever seem to be an issue anyway, so I think it is diverse in terms of culture and just in terms of general background as well.

**4.13** Amber is talking not just about the mix of 'cultures' but different 'income' backgrounds as well. In both girls' statements there is a sense that this mix of 'races', cultures and socioeconomic background is a good and harmonious one ('I love it', 'every one mingles and it is not an issue'). You might presuppose, as Byrne (2006b) and others suggest, that this narrative of a 'good mix' might be a White middle class narrative. Some gentrification research suggests that White middle-class attraction to the city is rooted specifically in a desire for that mix (what Bauman refers to as 'mixophilia') – and that some seek out the city for its mix (Butler & Lees, 2006; Butler & Robson, 2003a; Byrne, 2006b; Reay *et al.*, 2008). However, our data suggests a more complicated picture than a White middle class omnivorous approach to consuming other cultures (May, 1996; Reay, *et al.*, 2007): of the five students who espoused this, two were White middle class but three were Black and from working class backgrounds.

**4.14** Moreover, as Reay and colleagues (2007) argue a social mix does not necessarily mean there is *mixing*. As we have highlighted, previous research suggests a 'good mix' can mean enough people 'like me,' or 'like my child' (Ball, 2003), or a mix can be nothing more than a colourful backdrop (Butler & Robson, 2003a; May, 1996). The head of Citizenship claimed the *raison d'être* of the school is an 'opportunity' for 'integration' or social mixing. Further, the Community Liaison Manager suggested that the 'cohesion' of the local community has been 'proven', but to what extent these opportunities for integration were being taken up remains to be seen, and is the focus of the rest of this paper.

## **Social Mixing at Eden Hill School?**

**5.1** In this section we explore the extent to which the social mix of the school did or did not lead to mixing. Applying Anderson's concept of the 'cosmopolitan canopy' (2004) we discuss the construction of the sixth form as a specific unique space, in relation to the rest of the school, where 'everybody gets on' and in which social mixing can and does occur. However, we go on to illustrate how friendships and associations in the school are structured along social class and ethnic lines, and mediated by institutional processes and external social networks.

### ***Everybody gets on under the cosmopolitan canopy?***

**5.2** 'Everybody gets on' was a common sentiment expressed by more than two thirds of students. Carl's (Black Jamaican working class) comment was typical: 'It is just a place where generally everybody gets

along. It is a nice place full of friends.' Jayne agreed that 'everyone is really friendly'; and Amber claimed 'everyone mingles,' difference is 'not an issue'. Interestingly this discourse was present in the comments made by Ofsted school inspectors in 2009: 'We were particularly impressed by how well you all get on together in the school.'

**5.3** Among the students interviewed, for some this was the picture they painted of the whole school, but at least one third more readily identified the sixth form as this particularly 'convivial' space: as one big happy family. As Liam (White British middle class) claimed 'I think everyone gets on pretty well, especially in the sixth form. Everyone's quite close, and everyone sort of knows everyone else, which is good.'

**5.4** Ben (White - Asian, middle class) who joined the school for the sixth form from a boys' state secondary school, also described it as a welcoming place:

When I first came here [...], it was really hard to tell, you know, who was mixed with who, because everybody appeared very open and friendly with each other. It is really hard to sort of categorise you know.

**5.5** For Ben, compared to his previous school where the different friendship groups were fairly easily identifiable, at Eden Hill sixth form, it was hard to identify immediately discrete groups because everybody appeared to get on with everyone:

I mean there are people who I don't talk to as frequently, but if I do, it's on good terms. It wouldn't be like as if I'm talking to a stranger or anything. It would be sort of friendly terms or gossip, I don't know. You know, it would be very friendly.

**5.6** Tanisha (Mixed Other, working class) elaborated on this theme:

It's pretty cool because it's just really chilled, like. It's funny because when we were, like, from year 7 to year 11 it was all, like, there was different cliques and stuff, like, everyone had their own little group. But now in the sixth form it's weird because it's, like, everyone literally just chills with everyone. Like obviously we still have little groups that you just tend to go to, but we're all friendly sort of thing. It's more welcoming I guess.

**5.7** The sixth form is constructed as 'nice,' 'friendly', and 'welcoming'. A place where 'everyone knows each other'; everyone is 'close' and 'gets on'; everyone 'mingles'; is on good terms and everyone 'chills' with everyone else. It could perhaps be seen to epitomize Gilroy's (2004) 'convivial' multiculturalism.

**5.8** However, just as a 'good mix' does not necessarily mean there is mixing, 'everybody gets on' does not mean everybody mixes. For example, everybody could 'get on' living quite separate lives; everybody could get on because they don't mix *too much*; or everybody could get on because they can find sufficient other people 'like them'.

**5.9** While the official discourse was of a celebratory one of a 'good' mix and 'everybody gets on', at least half of students, and staff interviewed claimed that in the lower school years (age 11-16) students mixed noticeably less across social and/or ethnic difference. Students conflated their experience when they were in the lower school years with students who are *currently* in the lower school years. As Tanisha's quotation alludes, everyone had their own 'separate little group' in the lower school. The sixth form was constructed as 'different now,' in contrast to the lower school years where more divisions were/are seen:

It is evident from like year seven and that, you know, there is a kind of split from the, you know, richer students [...] Back in the day it was like working class and middle class people wouldn't talk, and now everyone is cool (Nathanial, Black Caribbean working class)

**5.10** Aside from Nathanial's emphasis on social class differences, it was more common to assert racial divisions in the lower school, and this was constructed by the students very much in terms of 'Black' and 'White'. For example Tanisha described:

But what we noticed during [the lower school], it's funny because there would be a group of like black girls all together and like one White girl and then there'd be like a group of White girls together and like one black girl and a couple of mixed race girls. And it was funny because we used to make fun of like mixed race people and say, it's funny because they're confused because they don't know which one to go to.

So from Tanisha and Nathanial's elaborations, 'everybody gets on' because they can find other people 'like them' in terms of social class/ wealth, and/or ethnicity.

**5.11** Both focus group conversations produced discussions of how the spaces of the school were segregated by 'race'. In this sense, everybody can be seen to 'get on' because they don't mix too much. Damian reflected that in the lower school, if there was no seating plan in class, all the White students would sit at the front and all the Black students at the back. Faith (White English middle class), in her interview, sought to strengthen her claim that in the lower school years students mix less than in the sixth form, by pointing out: 'If you just look outside [gestures to the playground], everyone is kind of divided in ethnicity... slightly anyway.' We can see both Tanisha and Faith are keen to stress that these groups were not entirely homogenous in terms of race but that this general trend prevailed. Similarly Tyler concurred: 'there was only a few White kids who hung around with both [black and White]' and vice versa. Tanisha described in more detail the racialised use of whole school spaces (predominantly occupied by the lower

school years) during break and lunch time. She recalled in the focus group discussion:

Remember the cafeteria was all Black people and then outside all the White people would be on the veranda trying to sunbathe and stuff. [...] Inside the lunch hall there's generally the majority White people like having packed lunches or whatever. [...] I'm not saying like it's [right or] whatever but I'm just saying how it is. Outside there, you know when you're walking from the atrium where the other sixth form used to be you just see loads of White boys just hanging around. Just there outside the assembly hall you see like all Tracy and that, like Black people.

**5.12** Indeed, a White middle class teacher described a very similar scenario to Tanisha. Taking the researcher on a lunchtime tour, he revealed how he was '*fascinated by the different groups of kids and their "territory" around school*', and went on to give his perception of the way spaces were used by different ethnic groups in the schools, noting also that the '*hall is mainly younger White middle class girls eating packed lunch*' (fieldnotes 31/03/2010). Thus social segregation mirrors a spatial segregation in which students from different backgrounds occupy different 'territory'.

**5.13** We can see Bottero's (2005) concept of 'differential association' at play here. She argues that people with different social resources tend to move in different circles, so are less likely to come across others different to them, and when they do, they have less in common. While students from different social and ethnic backgrounds *are* encountering each other in school, different lifestyles prevail – for example the White students spend their lunch time sunbathing (of no interest to the Black students), and something as seemingly insignificant and arbitrary as whether one has packed lunches or school dinners marks forms of distinction, and thereby forecloses opportunities for interaction with others that are different (Bottero, 2005). We argue that while a preference for packed lunch (or school dinners) appears to be a White middle class preference (and a Black student preference, in turn), this tendency further reproduces choice of packed lunch among the White middle class students who come to know where they 'fit in', as they choose packed lunch because that is what students 'like them' do, and vice versa. The lunch preference as a lifestyle choice is produced by position in the social hierarchy (for example more Black and minority ethnic students in the school are eligible for Free School Meals, so inevitably take this up), however, this lifestyle choice at the same time thus produces stratification. For White middle class students, school dinners may appear to be a stigmatised choice associated with poverty and those who claim it – Black and minority ethnic students – and hence avoided. The consequences are that Black and White students do not eat or spend their main recreational time in the school day together.

**5.14** However, these divisions did not appear to undermine the notion that everybody got on, most (though not all) were keen to assert that there was little animosity: according to the young people, these divisions were just a 'normal' and 'natural' consequence of different 'interests'. The head of sixth form commented: 'It's natural human behaviour really to kind of go with people that you feel comfortable with.' This discourse, commonly echoed by the students also, serves to neutralise class or race as structuring these differences or cliques. Damian's analysis is a clear illustration of Bottero's (2005) 'differential association':

So if your background is like working class and you're like, you're Black, you have more understanding of another person's life and like how they grew up, yeah, and you'll make jokes and references about it, and all of that, and that will make you more, that's why the social group kind of begins. (Damian, Black British, working class)

Overall, students did not tend to question why these interests coalesced around 'race' (and class) so neatly.

**5.15** To some extent then, it would appear that within the lower school, the discourse of 'everyone gets on' was consistent with a certain managed social distance (Reay, *et al.*, 2007). Difference can be tolerated from afar, and to some extent, as long as social hierarchies are not interfered with/ remain intact. In the next section, we unravel the 'conviviality' of the sixth form, and highlight the ways in which this was socially produced.

### ***The convivial nature of the sixth form, or how the institutional processes of schooling structure social mixing***

**5.16** As indicated, the 'conviviality' of the sixth form was constructed as pronounced because of its contrast to the divided nature of friendships within the lower school years. We expressively turn to the factors which go into producing this social experience. A common explanation given by students was that they were now more socially mature, and this enabled them to appreciate each other's differences. The following quotations are illustrative:

Everyone's got past what you look like. (Aarti, British Indian, middle class)

It is just really at sixth form everything changes. You just feel that little things don't matter anymore. [...] you see a bigger picture [...] you have to be mature enough. (Faith, White English, middle class)

Maybe you set differences aside or you are not as narrow minded about different people's interests and stuff. (Tanisha, Mixed Other, working class)

**5.17** Anderson observes that, under the 'cosmopolitan canopy' people 'may see profoundly what they

have in common with other human being, regardless of their particularity' (2004, p. 29). The students stress that this occurs through maturity, but there is also a sense that familiarity over time breeds this desire to put 'differences aside'. There was a sense of curiosity about others, which itself reflected the extent to which students' were becoming aware of wider social differences, the distance/nearness of others in the emergent adult world in which they were being socialized into. Nathaniel explained that people become more interested in other people's lives:

It is just like you are more interested in the other side. You want to see [...] how they live, [...] like all the richer ones seem to go to like, I don't know, wild parties and stuff that you imagine stuff that you wouldn't necessarily get to go to. So you just want to go in and experience it. And at the same time they want to come and like just sit around in a block with you and just like have fun, having jokes with us [...] Maybe it is just intrigue really-intrigued with how other people live.

**5.18** One can see Nathaniel's comments as further supporting Anderson's notion of the 'cosmopolitan canopy' as a space where exposure to others' difference invites intrigue and interest. Anderson argues that:

The existence of the canopy allows [...] people, whose reference point often remains their own social class or ethnic group, a chance to encounter others and so work toward a more cosmopolitan appreciation of difference.(2004, p. 28)

**5.19** We want to suggest that in students' understandings, many see the sixth form as a 'cosmopolitan canopy', which enables them to 'indulge themselves, observing, pondering, and in effect, doing their own folk ethnography [...] testing or substantiating stereotypes and prejudices' (2004, p. 25). Yet, we can read Nathaniel's account in a more critical way, pointing to the clear sense of distance implied in his language. He describes the 'other' young people as 'the richer ones': the image of the social world he evokes is one of 'us' and 'them'. Whilst providing opportunities for mixing, what is equally important about the canopy are the opportunities for interpretative work, or the development of our 'folk' taxonomies about what others are like, which can *reinforce* as well as challenge our understanding of social distance and our sense of place. We would argue that the cosmopolitan canopy, as Anderson suggests, may also provide opportunities for the 'substantiating (of) stereotypes and prejudices' (2004, p. 25). Rather than taking this conviviality as a successful resolution, or rather abatement, of processes of class and social reproduction, we would suggest that they point to the wider social relations which inform students' friendships. In addition, we suggest that the sense of the conviviality of social experience, and the structures of feeling (Williams, 1977) which underlie it, may actually contribute to the social reproduction of difference.

**5.20** At the same time as stressing maturity, at least a quarter of the students interviewed were also acutely aware that, with some fifty percent of students having left, and a large minority of students joining from other schools, the composition of the sixth form was different to the lower school and therefore the 'mix' was no longer the 'same'. One of the key factors shaping opportunities for friendships within sixth forms are its educationally selective function. It remains the domain for those embarking on a more academic post-compulsory trajectory and this is no different at Eden Hill where only A-levels, the traditional route into university, were offered<sup>[8]</sup>. Consequently, a significant proportion of students (around 50% or more) leave at the end of compulsory schooling. This therefore has a homogenising impact, in terms of their dispositions and orientations of those staying on. Faith (White British middle class) elaborated: 'You are not here because someone is telling you to go to school because you have to. You are here because you want to learn and because you want to get A-levels.'

**5.21** For some students, the transition from year eleven to sixth form had a major impact on their friendship formation and ties. Damian claimed that the sixth form 'forced' new friendships because of the restricted range of others available; there was little choice in the matter: 'You're forced to make new friends basically [...] you have to put it down in your priorities because there is no one else to – everyone's gone – it took away all your options.' Damian and Amber in their individual interviews talked about how all of their close friends were less 'academic', or did not like the school and so had left after year eleven. For Amber, all the friends she drew on her friendship map were now at college elsewhere, while Damian had made some new friends in the sixth form.

**5.22** Damian in a focus group discussion claimed that all the 'popular people have left'. When asked what he meant by 'the popular people', he replied 'the Blacks', and the group laughed. Tanisha who had also lost several friends to other schools and colleges, made similar remarks, using humour, to articulate the same sentiment:

Maybe [there were divisions] because we'd made friends and we stuck with them and because everyone's [now] gone to different colleges and everything it's like we're mixing up again even though we're with some of the same people, friendship groups have broken up. Because we used to be in a friendship group of five of us and three left and now I talk to this White girl [pointing at Amanda] [everyone laughs].

**5.23** Both Amber and Damian, who claimed all their friends had left, admitted that all of their close friends were Black and also predominantly Black Caribbean. Though Damian had made friends with new people in the sixth form he admitted that those in his close circle were predominantly Black still.

**5.24** Thus, it would appear for these Black (working class) students, the sixth form represented a disruptive context to their pre-existing friendship formations. Whilst, as Damian's comments show, some also saw it as an opportunity, none perceived it as a matter of 'choice'. For many of the Black/working



class students, this is experienced as a constricted field, in which their 'choices' are fewer, in contrast to the White (middle class) students whose friendship groups move with them into the sixth form.

**5.25** Analysis of the school demographic data reveals that the composition of the sixth form was indeed different. In both sixth form year groups (year 12 and 13) the percentage of White British students was at least ten per cent higher than their cohort when they were in the lower school. This meant that within the sixth form White British students were the single largest ethnic group. Correspondingly, the percentage of Black (including mixed Black) students had fallen for both year groups of the sixth form also (from around 35 per cent to around 20 per cent). While social class composition is harder to ascertain from the data available, students who progressed into the sixth form were less likely to receive Free School Meals.

**5.26** Further, interviews with staff at the school indicated that the lower ability groups contained more Black students, hence acting as an even earlier filtering process for those who did not wish to stay on and study A-levels (or who did not get the grades). Jayne, (a White British middle class girl) explained, slightly uncomfortably, that she was the least academic out of all her friendship group and was in the lower ability group for maths and science. She went on to say:

I hate saying this, but this is quite common... I was the only [White girl]... me and about three others –were like the only White people in my [ability group]. And then in the top class, it was very mostly White [...] It was weird – thinking back. [...] a lot of the people in my [ability group] went [on] to either Stellar Academy or Queens Academy, or like, they just went straight to work.

In this sense the 'good mix' jars somewhat – Jayne is uncomfortable that the 'good mix' does not result in equal academic experiences. She goes on to say that the sixth form was more mixed because they were now taking different subjects and they are not in ability groups anymore.

**5.27** We can see from what she says that many of these Black students who were in the lower ability groups left school at the end of compulsory schooling. Damian spoke a lot about this in his interview. He claimed that such students left not only because they did not meet the grades, but even those who did meet the grades chose to leave because they did not like the school as they felt it did not 'respect' them. Youdell's work suggests that: 'In a racialised school context, students know, at least tacitly, that their Blackness renders them undesirable learners' (2003, p. 17). This makes it difficult for them to maintain high status subcultural affiliations *and* successful learner identities. Damian was intuitively aware of the way in which ability grouping was a mutually reinforcing process, as the lower ability groups became spaces for Black 'undesirable learners', they became desirable Black *social* spaces:

more of the people wanted to be in that set because of the social implications, kind of thing. Like all friends of friends really and that's it.

**5.28** The young people, it seems, are very reflexive about the ways in which wider schooling processes are structuring their opportunities to form and maintain friendships. There is an acknowledgement of the selective pressures in making the transition to sixth form. This, as we have highlighted, is in part a reflection of school practices of ability grouping which tend to disadvantage (working class) Black and some minority ethnic students (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001). However, what we are not arguing is that students only made friends within their ability groups. This actually was not the case. As we can see, Jayne, a White British middle class girl finding herself 'on her own' in the lower sets, did not make friends in these groups but with other White and minority ethnic *middle class* girls *and* stayed on in the sixth form to study arts subjects – despite spending her school career in the lower ability groups. Indeed those Black students like Damian and Amber who were not in the lower ability groups (as many of their Black friends were) also stayed on in the sixth form but for them this choice was a less comfortable one, and was against the grain. For example Amber lamented, of her friends, that 'they all just went and left me'. For Damian, while he admitted he was becoming more studious now, this was not expressed as an entirely comfortable identity shift:

my friendship group who I used to hang around with have gone, which I think is affecting me somehow - like I think is affecting me because I was more of a student where I would slack off and not do any work because my peers and friends were.

**5.29** Thus paradoxically, there appears to be more 'social mixing' in the sixth form, because the students to some extent are becoming more similar in terms of their likely social trajectories, and as McPherson argues 'similarity breeds connection' (2001:415 cited in Bottero, 2005). However, it would appear that for some of these Black students at Eden Hill school, becoming 'desirable' learners in the sixth form involves more sacrifice, not only in terms of identity shift, but in the loosening of *school* ties with other Black students.

**5.30** At the same time that many of the Black working class students' friendships in school were disrupted, through transition to sixth form, middle class patterns of association outside of school were sharpening. Analysis of friendship maps and accompanying discussion found that for the working class and minority ethnic students in the sixth form, ties revolved around their locale and existing forms of 'community' (family and 'people on my estate' for example) and tended to be embedded in lower status educational institutions and on vocationally orientated courses. However, what was striking was how the middle class students' patterning of external associations and friendships tended to involve 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) with individuals across the elite field of private and prestigious state schools across London. Oliver, Liam and Jayne, the three White, solidly<sup>[9]</sup> middle class, students in the study, for example, talked about associating, or 'hanging out,' with students from the neighbouring private schools. These were very much casualised 'friends of friends' networks met through 'parties'; through siblings

attending higher status schools; old primary school friends and friends of the family. But also, Oliver and Jayne (independent of each other) both had a substantial group of friends who attended other 'higher' status schools in the area.

**5.31** So, while the Black and working class students had 'opportunities' to form friendships and associations across social class and ethnicity *within* the sixth form, as we discussed, these were less comfortable choices (and not always seen as a positive social benefit). Moreover, such opportunities to access more privileged social networks and White middle class friends outside of school were not available to the Black/ working class students in the same way.

## Conclusion

**6.1** To conclude, it is clear that teachers' and pupils' perceptions and experiences of Eden Hill School were infused by a powerful and celebratory discourse of social mix: a 'mixophilia' (Bauman, 2003). In its articulation, this was conceptualised in terms of the cultural, 'racial' *and* social class mix of the backgrounds of students. In particular the depth and extensive character of the mix was cited as an aspect of the school's distinctiveness. Within the local educational circuits of schooling (Butler & Robson, 2003b), the mix, or racial/ethnic/class diversity was part of the school's positioning. This discourse of 'authentic', 'real' mix was mobilised by staff and students alike. Through this focus on 'mixedness', the school could make a claim of distinction and 'feeling good' (Ahmed, 2006). There was a genuine commitment and belief from all involved that Eden Hill school did indeed fulfil this promise. This imbued the ethos of the school with a sense of virtue.

**6.2** However, we have shown that while there was indeed a 'good' mix in the school, the extent to which this resulted in mixing, with friendships and associations forming across difference, was somewhat constrained. Indeed we have shown how the institutional processes of schooling contribute to reinforcing rather than dismantling social hierarchies.

**6.3** Let us return to the two claims contained in the *comprehensive* ideal: first, that social mixing will lead to better understanding of each other's differences through social and cultural learning; and second, that mixing itself might contribute to the erosion of class, ethnic cultural inequalities. In response we argue that in the context of this urban secondary school, there is indeed some degree of cultural learning taking place amongst students, as they grow up, putting their differences aside and become curious about how others, with whom they have gradually become familiar, live. Nevertheless, a degree of 'homophily' prevails because of lifestyle differences. In reference to the second claim, however, we have also argued that this does not result in equity. Rather, schooling processes such as ability grouping and academic transitions at age sixteen, structure, but are, at the same time, structured by friendships and associations.

**6.4** We are suggesting that, in some ways, the common interest of academic study and choice of academic trajectory provides the conditions to bridge social and ethnic divides: this level of commonality fosters the 'cosmopolitan canopy' (Anderson, 2004). And at the same time, friendship formation is clearly an important part of the process of becoming academically successful (or not). The cosmopolitan canopy is still structured: not every child has the same opportunity to be a part of this, as ability grouping and the academic vocational divide in trajectories results in more Black and working class students being filtered out. Further, the cosmopolitan canopy is not experienced equally for those who do 'make it in'. For those Black, minority ethnic and working class students who do take the academic route, such a trajectory is not experienced quite so comfortably: there is a sense of loss – of friendships and ties – as well as gain. It was apparent amongst the middle class students, that their social location, the external networks which this generated, and associated differences in lifestyles and tastes created intra-school distance. Contained within the comprehensive ideal and the aspiration for community cohesion is the goal that mixing will re/distribute opportunities amongst the socially unequal; however, what we have illustrated in this paper is that *differential association* 'acts as a conservative force on the distribution of opportunities and resources' (Bottero, 2005, p. 4).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The name of the school and participant's names are all pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup>Secondary schools in the UK typically comprise years 7-11 (aged 11-16 years old) compulsory schooling, which we term here the 'lower school,' and many schools also integrate years 12 and 13 (age 16-19), commonly termed 'the sixth form,' which is a remnant of the previous numbering system used prior to 1990. These are non-compulsory years but are due to become compulsory, raising the age to 17 in 2013, and 18 in 2015, but these additional two years can be spent in any form of education, not necessarily 'staying on' in school.

<sup>3</sup>Students were asked to draw concentric circles placing themselves in the middle; close friends in the

initial circle; less close friends in the second circle and so on. However students were also told they could draw their 'own kind of map' if they wanted to and some drew on different concepts such as a tree structure, a timeline and so on. The main purpose was to prompt discussion rather than to use as data in itself.

<sup>4</sup>Social class status is denoted using a combination of indicators such as housing status; parental occupation and qualifications where known; indicators of income (such as eligibility for Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)) as well as self-ascription; however, as we go on to discuss, this is only a starting point for an analysis which understands social class as formed through practices and processes.

<sup>5</sup>Students were asked to describe their ethnicity, and these exact descriptions are reported here. Brackets give further information, as defined by the researcher.

<sup>6</sup>This quote has been altered very slightly to protect the identity of the school.

<sup>7</sup>However, in comparison to the Black and Minority Ethnic working classes, there did not appear to be a sizable, visible white working class contingent, which we would argue has a bearing on the way in which middle classness has become conflated with whiteness in this school. However, discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>8</sup>In fact, the sixth form had just begun to introduce more vocationally oriented BTEC Business Studies and BTEC Sport (but still only Alevel equivalent and very few students at this time were taking these courses). The school had plans to offer more BTEC in future, in order to widen their offer. This will no doubt have an impact on the future composition of the sixth form; and consequences for friendships and associations.

<sup>9</sup>Oliver, Liam and Jayne's parents have professional jobs, are home owners and live in the gentrifying part of the locale.

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