

People like us: why some middle class families opt for the local comp

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A book co-authored by a UWE academic delves into the assumptions and motivations of liberal parents in making decisions about secondary schools.

There are few topics as contentious among the middle classes as that of education. Some families fight to get their children into the state schools with the best results; many move house in order to be in a particular catchment area. Others opt for the private system. But there is another group too: they are the ones who are determined to support their local school, even if its [academic performance](#) is average or below.

It is this category of middle class family which is the focus of a new book by three leading educationalists. In *White Middle Class Identities and Urban Schooling*, to be published on 1 April, David James (University of the West of England, Bristol), Diane Reay (University of Cambridge), and Gill Crozier (Roehampton University) journey into the better-off areas of three different cities to interview parents and children in middle class families about their children's education.

In a turnaround of the usual research scenario, the authors shine their spotlight on a group they describe as "people like us", in other words those who are white, middle-class and highly educated, working in professional jobs and, furthermore, supportive of comprehensive schooling. What they discover about the views of these largely progressive-thinking and left-leaning folk makes fascinating reading.

The research was based on in-depth interviews with 125 white middle-class families in London plus two cities in the south west and north east respectively, where there had been a positive choice of a comprehensive school. The target group was families who had deliberately “eschewed working the system to their advantage”. They had not engaged in the widespread middle class practices of moving house, renewing religious allegiances or going private to get their child into a higher-performing school. Most of the schools they had chosen were average or below average in the league tables.

One of the words used in the book to describe this section of the middle class is “omnivorous”, summing up their ability to pick and mix from the menu available to them. As David James, Professor of Education at the University of the West of England, explains, “One of the project’s general findings is that middle class families are in a position to make choices of school that are provisional, and to be ready to ‘pull out’ if things don’t seem to go well. In the book we liken this to someone making a higher risk financial investment which nevertheless offers a very high return, and indeed the young people did tend to thrive, doing extremely well by all conventional measures. The financial metaphor also extends to how closely and carefully many parents watched the whole process, being highly involved as governors or in other ways.”

Despite their strong allegiance to state education, and much-stated preference for schools with a “good mix” of children, the liberal middle classes are revealed to have classist attitudes that run deep into their identities. Based on an unspoken assumption of superiority, these views shape their decision-making, set the agenda for their relationships with other groups, and are passed on to their children. Rather than being motivated by civic duty, many of the parents saw the urban comprehensive as key in the acquisition of skills their children would need to succeed in a global labour market.

“Decades of neo-liberal reforms have established a market in secondary schooling, where choice and diversity will supposedly drive up standards and maximize individual responsibility. This is known to work in favour of middle class people who put effort and resources into working the system,” says Reay, a Professor of Education at Cambridge University.

“We wanted to find out about those middle class families who deliberately choose ordinary and even low performing secondary schools for their children. What were their motives, and how did they experience the choice? What was it like for the young people themselves? Where did they end up? We also wanted to see what all this could tell us about contemporary middle class identity.”

The study revealed much that surprised the researchers. “What we thought we would find at the outset of our research in 2005 and what our study actually revealed were hugely different and rather unsettling. We started out expecting that there would be a strong core of parents who held strong political convictions that would carry through in their attitudes and decision making about their children’s lives. In reality, we found very few who fitted these criteria,” says Reay.

Only a minority of parents seemed to be acting on the basis of strongly held community-oriented or political principles. Parents were more likely to see ordinary [secondary schools](#) as risky but also highly beneficial environments for their children. While tending to dismiss the usual GCSE league tables as indicators of quality, the families saw schools with a broad ethnic mix as being good places in which to prepare young people for life in a multicultural society and a globalised world. And once in the school, the parents found that their children were given extra resources, a feature they knew to be giving them advantages.

As Gill Crozier, Professor of Education at Roehampton University, explains, this seemingly egalitarian attitude masks deep-seated

prejudices. “The open celebration of ethnic diversity was in stark contrast to the way in which many of the parents and young people viewed white working class families. Having friends from different cultures was seen as adding a positive dimension to their children’s lives. Minority ethnic families were viewed as aspirational and hard-working with strong family values. In contrast, working class pupils were seen as having the potential to pull their own children down. Indeed, across the interviews there was a lot of classism, where working class youngsters were denigrated as chavs and so on.”

The researchers also found very high levels of confidence within families about their own children being ‘bright’, ‘extra’ or ‘special’, in other words not quite like many of the other children – even, perhaps, in a class of their own. In this respect, parents are seen to view the world through a middle class prism with their own child, and their ambitions for that child, taking centre stage.

But what does all this show us about contemporary white middle class identity and its formation? “The book points to an inexorable middle-class acquisitiveness, some undoubtedly selfish behaviour, a decline and relegation of political motives to second place behind ‘the needs of the child’ and heavy investment into the family unit,” says Reay. “There is also strong evidence of a mutual affinity between the needs of schools and those of middle class families. However, we also discuss the rise and spread of uncertainty for the middle classes, and how many of the parents in the study were seeking to make ethical judgements in an unethical situation.”

She adds that writing the book was at times a painful process. “We live in a society where there’s an ever-widening gap between rich and poor and in which some [young people](#) will suffer the effects of recession much more than others. Our research suggests that it is still a mistake to see educational opportunity as somehow separate from social class

practices.”

White [Middle-Class](#) Identities and Urban Schooling by Diane Reay, Gill Crozier and David James will be published by Palgrave Macmillan, 1 April 2011.

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