**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Blowing hot and cold about diversity**: **White middle-class gentrifiers and ethnically mixed schooling in Belgium**

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**Abstract**

*It has been argued that white middle classes act in the best interest of their offspring, even when these actions clash with their values. In urban contexts, parents often do this by avoiding ethnically diverse educational settings. Drawing on 35 interviews, this article aims to gain a deeper understanding of the school-choice process of white gentrifiers going against a dominant, white middle-class norm by selecting an ethnically mixed school in the context of Ghent (Belgium). Making use of critical race theory, it is suggested that, although these white gentrifiers have in their actions gone against the grain, they have done less so in their motives, as these are permeated by instrumental reasons*.

**Keywords**

Critical race theory, gentrification, middle-class, school choice, whiteness

**Introduction**

I would not want that there was no mix but I also feared an overkill to the other side.

(Heather, respondent)1

A rich body of research in education has paid attention to the process of school choice, in particular to school aspects that inform parents’ choices, such as academic performance (Karsten et al., 2003; Schneider and Buckley, 2002), commuting distance (Karsten et al., 2003), pedagogy (Goossens and Van Gorp, 2016; Clark, Dieleman and de Klerk, 1992; DeSena, 2006; Stillman, 2012), religious denomination (Ball, 2003; Butler and Robson, 2003; Karsten et al., 2006; Minow, 2011), school atmosphere (Ball, 2003), school curriculum (Cucchiara, 2013; Karsten et al., 2006; Minow, 2011), school demographics (Goossens and Van Gorp, 2016; Clark et al., 1992; Hamnett et al., 2013; Saporito, 2003; Schneider and Buckley, 2002; van Zanten, 2003), school facilities (Karsten et al., 2003; Schneider and Buckley, 2002), school identity (Karsten et al., 2006; Minow, 2011; Parker, 2012) and tuition fees (Cucchiara, 2013).

Traditionally, literature on school choice has claimed that middle-class families carefully weigh these aspects in the school-choice process so as to maximise utility and advantage to their children (see Bourdon, 1974; Goldthorpe, 1996). Although the importance of a search for utility and maximum advantage has not been questioned, there is a growing consensus that school choice is not only driven by *self-interest* but also by a framework of *personal* *values* (Ball, 2003; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Jordan et al., 1994). As Ball (2003:111) asserts, middle-class families ‘attempt to realise their desires for their children in the immediate and for the future within various social and ethical contexts’. As a result, rather than being straightforward, the process of school choice is often complex (Gewirtz et al., 1995), as self-interest might conflict with personal values on various aspects.

Several studies have suggested that this is certainly the case for white middle-class gentrifiers living in ethnically diverse urban neighbourhoods as they struggle with the issue of ethnic diversity (Hamnett et al., 2013; Kimelberg, 2014; Quiroz, 2013; van Zanten, 2003). This paper builds on this body of educational research by focusing on the school-choice process of white middle-class families that selected an inner-city, ethnically diverse public school. The next section reviews the literature on gentrification and schools and suggests the need for research on the school-choice process of gentrifiers who are opting for ethnically diverse schools. In the second section, critical race theory (CRT) is introduced as an analytical framework for this study. The third section discusses the specific research context by briefly going into the district under study, followed by an examination of the district’s schools and its allocation system. The fourth section concentrates on the method and sample on which the analysis is based. In the fifth section, attention is paid to the complex and conflicting nature of the school-choice process by addressing the question as to why our sample of white middle-class gentrifiers *opted in* to an ethnically diverse public school. Finally, the concluding section discusses the main findings of this study and draws out some implications for educational policy.

**Literature review**

Although being a diverse and ambivalent group (Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2008), it has been argued that many white middle-class gentrifiers champion liberal, pluralistic and multicultural values (Allen, 1980; Bridge, 2006; Caufield, 1994; Jackson and Benson, 2014; Ley, 1996; Zukin, 2008). As Tissot (2015) shows in her study on the South End in Boston, many white (upper) middle-class gentrifiers celebrate ethnic diversity and, as such, distinguish themselves from suburban white middle classes (for similar findings in a UK context, see May, 1996). Indeed, despite the fact that it has been demonstrated that social relations in gentrifying communities are often no more than ‘tectonic’ (Robson and Butler, 2001), it seems that many white middle-class gentrifiers stand genuinely positive towards ethnic diversity.

However, when gentrifiers start having children – a phenomenon that traditionally has only been observed scantily in the literature, due to the fact that many gentrifiers arrive childless in the city – these positive attitudes do not necessarily align with the need for cultural reproduction. In fact, several studies have demonstrated how many white middle-class gentrifiers are wary of ethnic diversity in the context of schooling (Ball, 2003; Boterman, 2013; Butler and Robson, 2003; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Karsten et al., 2003; Roberts and Lakes, 2016). As has been maintained by van Zanten (2003: 107), minoritised pupils ‘are rejected or looked at with suspicion because they are constructed as a hindrance for the cognitive, personal and social development of middle-class children’. In other words, in the field of education, the issue of ethnic diversity could entail a tension between values and self-interest.

In the trade-off between values and self-interest, self-interest has been concurred to often take the upper hand. Indeed, a bulk of studies demonstrate how white urban middle classes avoid ethnically diverse schools by deploying different strategies, depending on the context, such as moving to ethnically less-diverse areas (Boterman, 2013; Butler and Robson, 2003), taking refuge in the private sector (Butler and Robson, 2003; Clotfelter, 2004), applying for magnet schools (Saporito, 2003), enrolling in schools outside the district, whether or not by renting property in an area close to a desired school for a short period of time (Boterman, 2013; DeSena, 2006), or testing their children for talented and gifted programmes (DeSena, 2006). This is being buttressed by a recent study of Roberts and Lakes (2016: 203) in the context of Atlanta, Georgia. Investigating the school selection process of 30 middle-class mothers in gentrifying areas, the authors concluded that, although ‘mothers expressed an equity agenda honoring educational diversity, actual school-selection outcomes belied their liberal intentions’ (for similar conclusions in a Dutch context, see Clark, Dieleman and de Klerk, 1992).

Although research in this area has well been developed, most efforts have concentrated on white middle-class families *opting out* of ethnically diverse schools. Consequently, fractions that have gone against the grain, this by *opting in* to ethnically diverse schools, have received much less attention (for notable exceptions, see Byrne, 2006; Kimelberg, 2014; Reay et al., 2007). This lacuna has become a pressing research issue, as recent studies suggest that middle-class enrolment in urban, ethnically mixed schools may be increasingly common (see Billingham and Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Stillman, 2012), reflecting a potential shift in the thinking of urban middle class families in cities throughout the Western world. Moreover, while existing studies in the field of education provide us with a nuanced understanding of white middle-class families portraying ethnic diversity as a *threat*, they often overlook the possibility of white middle-class gentrifiers framing ethnic diversity also as an *asset* for individual advancement. As such, with regard to diversity, white middle-class values are placed in diametrical opposition to their interests. As a consequence of the former, it is easy to view white middle-class parents who have gone against the grain (i) as individuals who are indifferent towards issues of ethnicity or (ii) as disinterested selfless or even self-abnegating subjects who solely put their values into action. In fact, some scholars seem to have picked up the view that selecting an ethnically diverse school is an act of self-sacrifice, which can only deserve one’s upmost respect:

I have a deep admiration for those gentry parents who do enroll their children in the neighborhood school and set the stage for the integration that is possible in gentrifying neighborhoods. I believe school integration remains an important societal goal, and I am glad to have met others who not only share this belief, but have the courage to do something about it. No one will ever consider them heroes (…) But, after spending months interviewing gentry parents about their school choice decision-making process, I offer them my sincere respect (Stillman, 2012: xiv-xv).

This (dominant) view, however, is problematic not only because more often than not it is underlain with a sense of superiority and racist stereotypes,2 but also because some studies are beginning to reveal a different and more complex picture than the one commonly drawn. For instance, in their ESRC research project *Identities, Educational Choice and the White Urban Middle Classes*, Diane Reay, Gill Crozier and David James have started to question the assumption that the choice of a fraction of white middle-class families for ethnically diverse schools is solely guided by the enactment of liberal, multicultural and communitarian values (see e.g., Crozier, Reay and James, 2011; Reay, Crozier and James, 2011; Reay, 2008, Reay et al., 2007; Reay et al., 2008). Focusing on three conurbations (one of which was London), the authors argue that white middle-class interest in ethnical diversity should “be understood not only as recognition and valuing of ‘the ethnic other’ but also as a project of cultural capital acquisition” (Reay, Crozier and James, 2011: 83). An equally complex picture is drawn in research carried out by Bridget Byrne on the experience of white middle-class mothers of young children in two South London areas, Clapham and Camberwell to be more precise (Byrne, 2006a; 2006b). After interviewing 25 women, Byrne (2006b: 127) concludes that whereas respondents seem to espouse multiculturalism and prefer schools with some amount of ethnic diversity, one ‘could certainly have too much of a good thing’. The current study aims to contribute to this emerging body of critical scholarship.

Our focus here is on the fraction of white middle-class gentrifiers that indeed went against the grain by opting in to ethnically mixed schooling, thereby avoiding both all-minority and all-majority schools. Making an appeal to critical race theory as an analytical framework, we contend that this fraction relates itself to diversity, neither as indifferent nor as disinterested. It is suggested that the school-choice process of these white middle-class gentrifiers is highly ethnicised, making a more complex and nuanced understanding of the school-choice process of the urban middle classes necessary.

To support this claim, we draw on in-depth interviews with 35 white middle-class parents who selected an ethnically mixed urban school in Brugse Poort, an ethnically diverse and gentrifying district of Ghent (Belgium). Ghent is a compelling case, as parents have relatively much control over the degree of ethnic diversity with which their children are confronted in school. As such, the Ghent context differs strongly from the one in previous research in which parents experienced a sense of ‘powerlessness’ during the school decision-making process (Byrne, 2006b: 121). This is due to three reasons. First, as Ghent is characterised by a relative freedom of school choice, children are not allocated to schools. Second, throughout the Ghent educational landscape, there exists a great variety in the ethnic makeup of schools. Third, more than 99% of all primary schools refrain from collecting registration or tuition fees. Taken together, this enables parents to more or less select a school with a preferred ethnic makeup.

**Critical race theory as an analytical framework**

Critical race theory (CRT) is a lens for interpreting the meaning and role of race and racism in contemporary society (for an elaborated statement, see Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Originating in the mid-1970s in the field of legal studies (see Bell, 1976; Freeman, 1978), since the mid-1990s, CRT has been present in educational scholarship (see Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). In both fields, CRT starts from the premise that race is not biologically but socially defined. Yet, this does not mean that issues of race and racism do not matter (Möschel, 2011). Rather than having entered a colour-blind or even a post-racial society, where racism is aberrant, CRT asserts that we live in a society where racism is endemic, permanent and structurally ingrained on legal, cultural and psychological levels (Tate, 1997). Consequently, racism is viewed as a force that steers practices in a variety of societal domains and hence contributes to contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage (Matsuda et al., 1993). Indeed, although race is a social construct, its effects throughout society are real and significant.

To analyse the role of race and racism in a variety of practices, CRT scholars often rely on a ‘conceptual toolbox’ (Gillborn, 2008: 31). In this study, we especially make an appeal to two of these concepts, namely to the concept of *interest convergence* and its counterpart *interest divergence*. Taken together, these principles suggest that the answer to the question of whether white people will support or hinder racial equality depends on the benefits that can be gained. As Derrick Bell (1980: 523) argues, interest convergence suggests that ‘the interest of blacks [and by extension, all minoritised communities] in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites’. In contrast, the principle of interest divergence suggests that white people will hinder racial equality when they understand and see that a direct advantage will accrue from it (Gillborn, 2013). It is important to stress that the principle of interest convergence and that of interest divergence relate both to *real* and *alleged* advances for minoritised communities. As a matter of fact, Bell (1976, 1980) viewed the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which the court ordered the end of state-mandated racial segregation in the US, as an example of interest convergence notwithstanding the fact that he also doubted whether desegregated schools would serve the interests of minoritised communities.

In this article, we employ the concept of interest convergence and interest divergence to examine the school-choice process of a specific fraction of white gentrifiers going against the dominant middle-class norm by selecting an ethnically mixed school for their children. By employing this conceptual toolbox, it is endeavoured to focus attention on how these choices are permeated, not only by values but potentially also by interests. Moreover, by extending the concept of interest convergence and interest divergence to the field of school choice, we aim to open up new avenues to analyse processes of social reproduction from a critical race perspective. Before going into these matters more deeply, we will first provide an overview of Brugse Poort district, its schools and the system of school choice in Ghent, followed by a discussion of the methodology.

**Reseach context**

***The District***

Brugse Poort is one of the 25 city districts of Ghent (Belgium), located northwest of the city centre. It was developed in the early nineteenth century as one of the new industrial centres of the city. Housing a number of thriving textile mills, the district soon attracted a mass of people willing to work and, hence, evolved into a fully fledged white working-class district.

Yet, since the 1960s, Brugse Poort has started to ethnically diversify as (the then struggling) industry started to recruit labour migrants, mainly from Turkey and Maghreb countries. This process was facilitated by the national government that pursued several bilateral agreements in which the employment of labour migrants was settled. Migration to Brugse Poort firmly continued in the next decades as a result of subsequent processes of family reunion and family formation. Since the opening up of the European Union in 2004 and 2007, also migration from Central and Eastern Europe has drastically increased. As such, in 2013, 49.50% of people living in Brugse Poort were of foreign origin (9,031 out of 18,246 residents). Taking into account that the origin of 10.72% of the district’s population is unknown (1,955 out of 18,246 residents), it is apparent that Brugse Poort has passed into a majority-minority district.3

Since the 1990s, Brugse Poort has also been confronted with an on-going gentrification process (Goossens and Van Gorp, 2016). Initially, gentrification has been spurred by the actions of individual white middle-class families that bought and rehabilitated former working-class houses. Since the 2000s, however, also property developers have jumped on the bandwagon and hence fuelled the process of gentrification. Student complexes, gated communities and loft apartments increasingly characterise the view of the district. At present, one can even witness the development of a so-called ‘creative hub’ that will house several IT start-ups and a ‘pop-up’ that will be the habitat of a diverse mix of art and design galleries. These large-scale projects will go well with recently established businesses, such as an organic and fair-trade grocery store, ‘Belgian’s very first indoor camping’, and a ‘relaxation locality’, which serves a mix of cocktails and renowned beers in a trendy setting that, according to the owners, is cleansed of ‘slot machines and fluorescent tubes’. The planning and implementation of an urban renewal project in Brugse Poort from 1998 possibly explains this movement of capital (Smith, 1979), as the project explicitly endeavoured to initiate a ‘social mix’ – a concept that has been recognised as a euphemism for legitimating gentrification strategies (see Bridge et al., 2014).

***Schooling in the District***

As a booming industrial district in the nineteenth century, it did not take a long time until a network of (both public and private) schools emerged in Brugse Poort (i.e., from the 1850s). For over a century, the student bodies of these schools have been predominantly white working-class. However, the district’s growing ethnic diversity from the 1960s has not gone unnoticed for schools. In fact, since the early 1970s, minoritised children started to make up part of the school population. In the next two decades, this process not only continued but also intensified – something that led to some schools becoming majority-minority and even all-minority. Up till now, this situation had not changed, due to two elements (see Table 1 for an overview of indicators on the socio-economic and ethnic makeup of schools located in the district). First, due to the youthful age structure of minoritised communities, they make up a majority of the school-age population living in the district. Second, many whites (including numerous gentrifiers) living in the district reject neighbourhood schools due to their ethnic diversity. Nevertheless, two schools of the district are at present majority-white. These schools, which we refer to as *Somerset* and *Park Lane*, are very popular with some fraction of white gentrifiers, notwithstanding the fact that the makeup of these schools is still ethnically diverse.

***School Choice***

In Ghent, every legal person has the right to establish a school autonomously. One can therefore discern public schools (i.e., schools organised by public administrations, such as a community, a province or a municipality) from private ones (i.e., schools organised by another body, such as a diocese, a monastic order, a non-profit organisation, etc.). However, the public/private divide in education is not as clear-cut as in other contexts, such as the UK or the US. This is because more than 98% of all primary private schools in Ghent are publicly funded. In return, these schools are obliged to refrain from collecting registration or tuition fees. As a result, the process of school choice is less affected by financial means.

With regard to student allocation, the Ghent education system is marked by parental freedom of choice. This implies that parents are free to select a school in accordance to their personal beliefs, values and attitudes. It also implies that enrolment requests are ordered on the basis of the ‘first come, first served’ principle. In recent years, however, this absolute freedom has somewhat been restricted. Starting from the enrolment period for the school year 2009-2010, the Ghent education system orders children on the basis of the distance between their residence and the school. In this case, the shorter the distance, the higher the ranking a child obtains. This decision applies to enrolments from the school year 2009-2010 onwards. For enrolments from the school year 2011-2012 onwards, it was decided not only to order pupils based on the distance between their residence and the school but also on the distance between their parents’ workplace and the school. Consequently, to a certain extent, school choice was limited, due to the installation of what are *de facto* catchment areas. Nonetheless, the presence of many majority-white schools in neighbouring districts, in combination with many loopholes in the educational legislation, makes it feasible for white middle-class families to game the system and avoid schools with more minoritised and socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils than is the case in *Somerset* and *Park Lane* (see Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

**Sample and method**

The data presented in the next section draw on interviews with 35 white middle-class parents of whom the children were enrolled in the public and ethnically mixed progressive primary school *Park Lane* (ages 3-12). *Park Lane* is an interesting case as it is well-liked by a fraction of white middle-class families. Yet, *Park Lane* has not always received attention from white middle-class families. In the late 1990s, the student body of the school comprised 99% minoritised pupils, many of which from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. As the former school board felt it was necessary to reverse this tendency, a pilot project was set up in the year 2000 (see AUTHORS ANONYMIZED, 2016 for an elaborate description). More precisely, it was decided to establish a new school within, but separated from, the already existing school. As the school board foresaw in a progressive pedagogical approach (i.e., Jena Plan pedagogy), set a maximum quota of 30% minoritised pupils, and carefully selected which minoritised pupils were allowed in this new school through a process of ‘filtered permeability’ (Quiroz, 2013: 61) – measures that were legally possible due to the fact that both schools were *de jure* recognized as one – it was hoped to entice and retain a new and desired clientele. This is because these anticipatory measures were believed to be attractive to and served the interests of the white middle classes (cf., Ball Maguire and Macrae, 1998 on the privileging of certain families through an economy of student worth; Jennings, 2010 on the concept of schools’ choice) . As the project appealed to sought-after families, it was possible to expand it while at the same time allowing the already existing school to peter out. The net result of this process has been a continuing ‘whitening’ and a ‘middleclassization’ of the student body. Whereas during the 2004-2005 school year, *Park Lane* was characterized by 73.43% pupils whose language spoken at home is not Dutch and 72.86% pupils with a low-educated mother, one decade later these figures have dropped to 25.45% and 32.72%, respectively.

Participants were recruited through an advert posted on the PTA *Facebook* group of the school, which provided information on the researcher and the research topic. Parents were asked for an interview on the school-choice process for their children. Nevertheless, the reason why *Park Lane* was selected for this research project (i.e., because of its ethnically mixed student body and high popularity among a fraction of white middle-class gentrifiers) was deliberately kept vague so as to obtain more reliable information on such sensitive issues as race and ethnicity. For one and the same reason, there was made no mention of ethnicity, education or occupation as a condition of participation, something that was moreover needless, given the fact that the group was predominantly comprised of white professionals. In fact, this was also the reason why the PTA *Facebook* group was purposefully selected for the advert.

While several fathers responded to our call, mainly mothers agreed to participate in the study (23/35). This is because the majority of the members of the PTA *Facebook* group were mothers (136/204), something that is unsurprising, given the large involvement of mothers in the schooling of their offspring (Jordan et al., 1994; Reay, 1998). Geographically, all participants lived close to the school (all but one within a one-mile radius). Soon after graduating from college, in the first chapter of their professional careers, most participants (all except one) had bought a home. In all but three cases, this was also in the period before starting a family, the consequence being that only a minority of our respondents had taken schooling into account when acquiring property in the district (4/35). Compared to other city districts, Brugse Poort was and still is characterised by relatively cheap housing prices and is, moreover, strategically located, close to the main railway station and at walking distance from the city center. Combined with the planning and implementation of an urban renewal project, mainly these factors drew many participants to the district. With regard to socio-economic status, a large majority of participants were holding graduate (10/35) or postgraduate degrees (23/35). Moreover, most participants were self-employed (3/35) or were occupying professional, administrative or managerial positions (30/35), many of which in the education (n=12), culture (n=5), welfare (n=5), healthcare (n=3) or media sector (n=2). Taken together, most if not all participants fit the profile of white middle-class gentrifiers, here defined as highly educated white persons with a high occupational status that had moved to and bought a property in the district (see Table 2 for an overview of respondents’ characteristics).

It’s important to note that in interviews we did not impose an a priori view of the nature of school choice by presenting parents with a list of possible reasons for selecting a school (for a critique on this approach, see Gewirtz et al., 1995). Rather, we tried to capture parents’ *process* of school choice by questioning (i) their views on various schools inside and outside the district, (ii) their reasons for (not) going on school visits to certain schools, (iii) the impediments perceived and encountered during the school choice process and (iv) how decisions on schools were made and what information was used in this process. As such, we draw attention to the ambivalences, the uncertainties and the contextualised nature inherent to the school-choice process. Afterwards, interviews were transcribed orthographically and later analysed thematically in *NVivo* *10*. Throughout this approach, we also paid attention to the prevalence of specific sentiments. By using CRT as an analytical framework, we aim to apprehend how issues of race inform these gentrifiers’ school-choice process. Given our small sample size, the use of self-selection sampling and the focus on one school, however, results should be interpreted with caution.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

**Results**

***Interest Convergence***

As could be expected, most respondents embodied and expressed strong liberal and multicultural sentiments (32/35). While a combination of job opportunities and low housing prices brought many of them to the district, many celebrated the district’s diversity (for similar findings, see Billingham and Kimelberg, 2013). In fact, some respondents even juxtaposed their urban lifestyle ‘which makes your world bigger’ to a rural one that, in their view, was characterised by conservatism and narrowness (n= 8). These sentiments also came to the fore in relation to education. For instance, many parents expressed their aversion to Catholic and elite schools (30/35). For some, this antagonism towards such schools also translated into an explicit preference for progressive education (16/35). Rather than searching for the best school in the city (like many *other* parents did), they consciously looked for schools in the neighbourhood:

It makes no sense to live in a neighbourhood and to tell your child ‘This neighbourhood is not good enough for schooling, therefore we’ll visit another one. However, this neighbourhood is all right for living’. To me this does not seem to be a respectable starting point. As such, I really got annoyed by friends of whom the spouses started saying ‘Maybe, there is a better school somewhere else’ (Nathan).

The choice for an inner-city public school was driven by an ambiguous interplay of several aspects. Parents pointed to the convenience of a school nearby in relation to transportation (30/35). In fact, as few of our respondents needed a car to get to work, many opted to commute by bicycle, sometimes combined with public transport (30/35). Next to schools within the district, most parents had therefore only looked to feasible school options in relation to transportation (i.e., schools that were located on the way to work or the train station). Taken together with their aversion to Catholic and elite schools, parents’ lists of potential school options were relatively small to begin with, notwithstanding the fairly high amount of school choice characterising the education system. Some parents nevertheless valued nearby schools, as it was felt these could strengthen one’s connectedness to the neighbourhood in general and facilitate the establishment of local social networks in particular (19/35). More surprising was the fact that almost all respondents proclaimed to have chosen a neighbourhood school due to its diverse student body (32/35). Indeed, whereas many members of the white middle-class tend to reject public neighbourhood schools because of their ethnic makeup, respondents in our study mentioned the exact opposite:

This is what I really like about *Park Lane*: the fact that it is balanced. It is the kind of mix you would find on the street, a great mix of nationalities. I really like the fact that they get in touch with all these nationalities. I really would not want an all-white school (Abigail).

As the latter part of Abigail’s comment already suggests, some respondents even discarded schools in adjacent districts because of their elitist and white status.

I rejected *Bellevue* [public school in an adjacent district, see Table 1] because I got the impression that it was somewhat more elitist and whiter than most schools in the neighbourhood. Really, I would rather have my children growing up in a school that matches the neighbourhood. There’s a lot of diversity, certainly in Brugse Poort, in Ghent in general too. Hence, I think it’s natural that this diversity is reflected in the school (Erin).

This was the downside of *Hemsworth* [public school in an adjacent district, see Table 1]. *Hemsworth* is rather white. The ratio in *Park Lane* is six to four. Six whites against four, and I think that’s the best possible proportion. This is because you assume your kid will have to live his entire life with other cultures (Derek).

In almost all interviews, it became clear that school choice was highly ethnicised (33/35). Not only did parents seem to base their school selection on issues of ethnicity but also did they have a good understanding of the ethnic makeup of neighbourhood and popular schools – something that, however, was unsurprising as many tried to obtain such information through conversations with acquaintances, friends, family and/or educational staff at school visits and/or through sifting online forums and school websites. Indeed, schools’ ethnic makeup was anything but a matter of secondary importance. In this way, our respondents did not differ to a great extent from gentrifiers rejecting inner-city public schools, often noted in other research (see Ball, 2003; Boterman, 2013; Gewirtz et al., 1995; van Zanten, 2003). But whereas the latter reject ethnic diversity, our respondents embraced it, at least to some extent. By selecting an inner-city public school, our respondents seemed to have gone beyond liberal, multicultural and pluralistic rhetoric and, as such, established a difference from other white middle-class constituents:

One reason why I think it is important that our child is going to a neighbourhood school is that society has become really diverse. I believe it is an *asset* that she [respondent’s daughter] is immersed in such diversity, that she is really going through all this (Alexander) (emphasis added).

I think it is important for Flemish kids to get a broader perspective on the world. We are not the only ones here. It is not only privileged white kids on clean streets and water coming from the tap. It is important they learn to deal with it because the world has opened up (Lauren).

In these comments, it is clear how our respondents perceive a racially mixed student body positively in today’s society. But rather than exclusively being motivated by values, it seemed that instrumental reasons permeated these comments. In fact, none of our respondents gave some indication of perceiving a racially mixed student body as a means to make race a focal point of discussion and hence to politicise structural inequalities present in society. Instead, racial mix was mainly recognised and used to one’s individual advantage. More specifically, respondents took multiculturalism in contemporary society as a given, not likely to change in the nearby future. As a result, these white gentrifiers perceived a racially mixed student body as an ‘asset’ that could be appropriated as a means for acquiring multicultural competencies, which were found to be essential in today’s diverse society (for similar results, see Reay et al., 2007). Indeed, parents were convinced it was necessary to go beyond business as usual so as to prepare their children ‘well’ for life. In order to provide their children with at least an equally strong position as they held, it was felt that it would not suffice to create replicas of themselves by molding their children in their own image. Rather respondents were of the opinion that their children should become *evolved* versions of themselves that are *attuned* to the new realities, of which ethnic diversity is an important one. As such, our respondents are highly similar to the parents in the study of Crozier, Reay, and James (2011: 200) whose espousal of cosmopolitanism was underpinned by “the drive to recreate more contemporary versions of themselves and the lives of their children”.

It is important to note that respondents’ dispositions toward ethnically-mixed schooling and multicultural competences were associated with what Reay et al. (2011: 31) have named the ‘family habitus’ (i.e., the active presence of a collective family history). In fact, parents’ own educational trajectories (i.e., trajectories that were mapped out by their parents) and subsequent experiences seemed pivotal in the formation of such dispositions, and hence, in the process of school choice itself. For instance, a number of respondents indicated that, as a result of their own education in a different temporal and spatial reality, they only came into contact with ethnic difference once they moved to the city for post-secondary education. As this led to troublesome experiences with ethnic difference in the past and for some still does in the present (e.g., one respondent explicitly argued that she is still struggling with how to act and behave naturally in ethnically diverse environments), respondents preferred to avoid the ethnic makeup of their own schools for their children. In sum, the problems that respondents’ experienced later in life as (what they believed to be) a consequence of their education in all-majority schools were internalized to form certain dispositions (e.g., that all-majority schools were not a proper form of education) that later on interacted with a specific social context to produce a choice for an ethnically-mixed school.

Furthermore, by instilling multiculturalist dispositions *through* a process of rubbing shoulders with the ethnic other, we believe parents also aimed at instilling a specific (progressive) *middle-classness* in their children that is set apart from the quality of being of *other* (conservative) white-class fractions. In fact, what respondents seemed to aim at when selecting an ethnically-mixed school is the reproduction of a specific middle-class self open and tolerant toward ethnic difference by means of an immersion in diversity. From this view, it is intelligible why white gentrifiers chose to integrate their kids in an ethnically-mixed school. We have a clear example of what critical race theorists have tried to capture with the concept of interest convergence (Bell, 1980). White gentrifiers’ interest in acquiring multicultural competences aligned with integration efforts. The fact that these gentrifiers recognised an ethnically mixed student body as a means for acquiring multicultural competences prevented that they felt squeezed between their liberal, pluralistic and multicultural values and their interests in their child, as has often been the case in other contexts (see Boterman, 2013; Bridge, 2006).

It is, however, essential to note that we observed that some respondents tended to (over) emphasise the importance they attached to, and their positive feelings towards, the presence of minoritised pupils in Park Lane’s student body:

I find it [the ethnic mix in Park lane] fantastic. Every day I get there, I’m still pleased. I’m very content and I do not want to hear from people who are complaining about mixed schools. (…). You just cannot fault it, it’s really a great mix! (Piper).

Although there certainly is a risk of falling into researcher speculation, the idea that some respondents were (over) emphasising the value they attributed to the presence of minoritised pupils became plausible/convincing when juxtaposing some of their statements. For instance, while Piper fiercely champions the ethnic mix in Park Lane, earlier in the interview her husband Aaron claimed (as one of the few respondents) that they ‘didn’t think too much about’ ethnic diversity when choosing the school. As if the combination of these statements was not strange/paradoxical enough, Piper later in the interview went on to say that she would be scared if a school would be characterized by a majority of minoritised pupils, this because of the ‘effect’ it could have on her child. In the next section, we will return to, and elaborate on, these fears toward ethnic diversity. For now, however, we want to argue that the possibility of *post factum* exaggerations in relation to ethnic diversity are intelligible when taking into account their significance regarding self-representation on two levels. Indeed, as has been argued, this specific fraction of urban white middle-class families wants to be (perceived as) both good parents and good citizens (Reay, 2008).

First, by stressing the unequivocal merit of ethnic diversity in Park Lane, for example, by saying that you ‘just cannot fault’ the ‘great mix’ present in the school, respondents seemed to have found a way to rationalise their school-choice process, this in a context where few feasible school options in relation to commuting distance were observed. They were, therefore, able to present and define themselves as good parents, something that was crucial, given that respondents felt they had to answer for their school choice to friends, colleagues and family. The theme of going against the norm and needing to answer for this behaviour was in fact something all respondents struggled with to a greater or lesser extent.

I am recalling the comments I got when I enrolled my son. I got a lot of comments of people saying ‘Come on, you cannot do this?!’ I used to reply by saying ‘He’s only two and a half years old. It would be a shame if you would not do the same. If you want to keep your child within a reserve that is okay for me.’ But you soon realize you cannot ask them the same question (Katie).

By using a pejorative term such as ‘a reserve’ to describe all-majority schools, it seems that Katie tried to defend her own choice for the ethnically-mixed *Park Lane* by stressing the worldly character of the school - a characteristic that, as a result of respondents' specific middle-class habitus - was a signifier of a 'good' school. Nevertheless, the fact that she also referred to the young age of her son as a means to legitimize her choice illustrates that she is neither completely confident about the choice made, nor completely free from doubts about the potential ‘effect’ minoritised pupils could have on her son.

Second, by accentuating their positive feelings towards ethnic diversity, respondents were also able to present themselves as good, ethical and progressive citizens valuing multiculturalism who explicitly denounce racism and discriminatory behaviour. Indeed, parents mentioned that they would feel ‘uncomfortable’ when they would have enrolled their children in an all-majority school. As one respondent noted, such a choice ‘would go against everything I stand for’. In contrast, going against the grain was felt to be ‘kind of rock ‘n’ roll’ and left participants feeling ‘proud’. By reiterating the importance they attached to ethnic diversity, respondents made it very clear that they were not the ones who were taking ‘sanctuary’ in ‘fortified’ white schools. A particular intersection between class and race is situated here. In fact, throughout their discourses, respondents used ethnic diversity in symbolical ways to actively distinguish themselves as superior from *other* white *classes*, whom in Piper’s words were ‘complaining about’ ethnically mixed schooling and whom others referred to as ‘anxious,’ ‘boring,’ ‘traditional’ and ‘*bourgeois*’.

***Interest Divergence***

The fact that this fraction eschewed all-majority schools, however, did not mean that there could not exist such a thing as too great of a proportion of minoritised pupils within a school. This became very apparent when respondents started talking about an ‘appropriate,’ ‘good,’ ‘perfect’ or even ‘healthy’ ethnic mix:

We consciously selected a neighbourhood school. There are middle-class people living in this district who send their kids to Zwijnaarde [a suburban majority-white city district of Ghent] because they believe their kids will not receive enough learning opportunities as a result of the high number of immigrants present in class groups. We on the other hand wanted to send our kids to a school in the neighbourhood. However, we also did not want a school of which 90 or 95% of the kids is of non-Flemish origin because we think it’s important to have a healthy mix (Matthew).

As can be observed, parents used these terms to describe the kind of racial mix they preferred. For our respondents, an adequate racial mix should not be comprised of too many minoritised pupils, as this situation was perceived to be ‘unhealthy’. Whereas schools characterised by some diversity were regarded as ‘enriching,’ schools with a majority of minoritised pupils were rejected by our respondents, due to their alleged threat (31/35). Indeed, some respondents explicitly stated not wanting to become a ‘minority’. Consequently, schools where their offspring would be ‘outnumbered’ were discarded in advance. For instance, in their process of school choice, none of our parents went on a school visit to *Sacred Heart*, a school that is literally adjacent to *Park Lane* (separated only by a wall) but which is characterised by a high number of minoritised pupils. This could also be explained by the fact that *Sacred Heart* is a denominational school. However, most respondents referred to the ethnic mix of the school as a drawback. In fact, one respondent, Beatrice, initially planned to visit Sacred Heart but when confronted with the amount of minoritised parents upon arrival decided to turn back. Moreover, only three respondents visited the close-by non-denominational public school *Pinewood,* also characterised by a majority of minoritised pupils*.* In contrast, the much-further-away majority-white *Hemsworth* received six visits from parents:

We could see that some other schools in the neighbourhood really were minority-white schools and we were not comfortable with that. We absolutely do not have a problem with other cultures, we even find this enriching *but* it cannot have the upper hand. In other schools, however, we felt this was indeed the case (Jessica) (emphasis added).

If we suppose *Park Lane* had a ratio of 8/10 [8 minoritised children, 2 white children], I would never send my kid there. (…) You cannot make your child the victim of your ideological choices (Derek).

The last comment is very informative in this regard. First, it demonstrates how parents negotiate their supposed liberal, pluralistic and multicultural ideologies with the aim of letting their children thrive. Second, this comment also illustrates how a reconciliation between these two facets is not whitout problems as (too many) minoritised pupils are perceived as a liability in realising this aim. In fact, sentiments as these often came back throughout the data and seem to point toward a number of implicitly shared assumptions. First, it seems that most respondents shared the supposition that minoritised children were not equal to white (middle-class) children and that in fact their own offspring was superior. Second, and as a result of the previous, there was a fear amongst parents of contagion as many believed that the characteristics which they themselves assigned to minoritised children could be transferred to their children directly or indirectly as a result of an exposure to too much diversity. These beliefs will be discussed below in more detail. For now, however, we wish to point out that, when bearing in mind this belief system, it becomes intelligible why respondents felt that selecting a majority-minority school would require to sacrifice their children and make them 'the victim' of their choices. Consequently, whereas our respondents did not feel squeezed between their values and their interests with regard to schools with some proportion of minoritised pupils, they did feel so when it came to majority-minority schools. As such, respondents seemed to work towards integration while at the same time also aiming at isolation.

In all of this, *Park Lane* school emerged as a solution. It allowed respondents to select a neighbourhood school that, in their view, was acceptable – a school that reflects the composition of the neighbourhood, but in a filtered, a sanitised way. As we were highly interested in why respondents recognised minoritised pupils both as an asset and as a threat, three themes stood out that related to the view of minoritised pupils as a threat. First, some respondents expressed explicitly that a high proportion of minoritised pupils would negatively affect the academic quality of schools (n=16). In fact, some even used the racial makeup of schools as an indicator of academic quality. This emerged strongly in the interview with Megan, who answered a question on the importance of academic quality in *Park Lane* school by stating:

Of course it’s important to hear a school board saying ‘look, we only allow that many of immigrants,’ ‘we only allow that many of gypsies [Roma people],’ ‘we allow that many children of which the father or mother has Dutch as a mother tongue’. I really loved the mix, I thought it was really interesting (Megan).

Interestingly, respondents differed in the way they drew a direct relation between poor academic quality and a high proportion of minoritised pupils. Some respondents felt that majority-minority schools put too much focus on Dutch language acquisition, which in turn limits the time available for acquiring other competences (n=5). As a respondent commented:

I was worried that she [respondent’s daughter] would be afflicted if she belonged to a small percentage that has mastered the Dutch language. I was worried by the fact that more attention would go to Dutch language than this is the case in another school (Erin).

This view is highly similar to the one of parents in the study of van Zanten (2003), who questioned the schools’ and teachers’ capacity to effectively cope with ethnic diversity. Other respondents in our study, however, got the impression that the Dutch language skills of minoritised pupils were poorly developed and pointed to – in their view – a possible contagion risk for their kids (n=11) (see also Butler and Hamnett, 2013). As noted by one respondent:

Parents with some insights know that *Sacred Heart* is the Roma school. Instead of learning Dutch, they are unlearning Dutch. I’m not a racist, with all due respect, *but* I want to offer my kids a wide-ranging palette, not a one-eyed facet (Emily) (emphasis added).

Underlying these views are two assumptions. First, it is presumed that the Dutch language skills of (all) minoritised pupils are inferior, contrary to the language skills of white pupils. Second, it is believed that language skills of minoritised pupils and white pupils operate as communicating vessels. White pupils are constructed as being on the giving side, whereas minoritised pupils are constructed as being on the receiving side. The fact that minoritised children often bring ‘linguistic capital’ (i.e., the intellectual and social competences that one can acquire through perpetual communication in more than one language [see Yosso, 2005 for an elaborated discussion on the cultural wealth of marginalised groups]) to school and that their children could potentially tap into this form was thus not recognised or valued by parents as something that could contribute to the desired ‘wide-ranging’ education (see also Bourdieu, 1990 on the use of the word *reconnaissance* and the concept of symbolic capital). Consequently, the act of a white family enrolling their offspring in an ethnically mixed school is defined as a socially engaged one – something that some respondents mentioned throughout the interview (n=9). In other words, some respondents perceived the outcome of their choice for an ethnically-mixed school - a choice which was driven by the interplay of habitus, respondents’ capital and the specific field structure – as anything but perpetuating social differentiation. In contrast, the choice for an ethnically-mixed school was primarily seen as something that contributed to a greater equality. The net result of such ‘misrecognition’ (Bourdieu, 1990; Grenfell and James, 1998, 2004; James, 2015) was not only that parents cognised their own motives somehow as disinterested but also that they did not see their pursuit for a ‘good’ school as partly driven by discriminatory tendencies.

Notwithstanding the generalising character of respondents’ view toward the language skills of minoritised pupils, it proved powerful enough to discard scientific research. As illustrated by one respondent:

We did not visit *Sacred Heart* because I heard from colleagues that the school was characterised by 100% immigrants with a lot of Roma people and Bulgarians. This frightened me, it frightened us. [In the scientific community] it is said that children in these schools achieve equivalent, I can also imagine that … but still … We did not make it our ambition to become pioneers (Mary).

It is intriguing how this respondent expresses understanding how children could perform equally while at the same time being very cautious towards majority-minority schools. This ambivalence seems to point to deeply ingrained beliefs about majority-minority schools in general and minoritised pupils in particular. Also interesting is the use of the term ‘pioneer,’ a term that also popped up in other interviews (n=5). As has been indicated by Smith (1996), the use of the term is arrogant in that it suggests a place is not socially inhabited. In fact, (it is as if) minoritised pupils in such schools are objectified as savages being a part of a hostile environment that has to be domesticated. It is exactly these two notions, namely the notion of savageness and hostility, that some respondents referenced when explaining why they rejected majority-minority schools. In fact, besides reasons of academic quality, some respondents made mention of problem behaviour among minoritised pupils. In explaining why she did not select *St. Joseph*,Michelle, for instance, stated that:

There were already some bigger boys, you know those Eastern European boys, way too old. So you start to think ‘I do not want my kid taking an example from them’ (Michelle).

Although most respondents embodied strong liberal and multicultural sentiments, the narratives through which respondents re-constructed their school choice process pointed toward the fact that some parents were not free from pervasive racialized discourses (cf., Byrne, 2006b). By associating visual body traits with certain (undesired) behavioural traits – traits that shouldn’t be taken as ‘an example’ – Michelle, for instance, adopted a (gendered) racialized discourse and ended up acting upon it as this became a decisive reason to discard *St. Joseph* as a possible school for her son. Another respondent not only shared the view that behaviour is an issue with regard to minoritised pupils when explaining why she rejected *Pinewood* but also provides us with a sense of the behavioural traits that are at stake:

In *Pinewood* I had the feeling there were mainly immigrant children. (…). I found it really odd, but that’s just something that stuck with me, that there was a set of regulations at the door that said ‘we will not spit at each other,’ ‘we will not beat each other,’ ‘we will not offend each other’s family’. This is not what you expect hanging out at a school. Rather you expect ‘we will not run in the hallway,’ ‘we will not shout’. I still remember I thought ‘the fact that these kids have to be reminded of these things is quite something’ (Lisa).

Lisa’s comment clearly illustrates how some respondents viewed minoritised children as troublemakers that could possibly incite their own kids to engage in problem behaviour (n=7). While white children are constructed as ‘normal,’ peaceful and rational subjects, minoritised children are defined as the opposite, namely as abnormal, violent and irrational. In turn, some parents felt that on a long-term basis this could change the (white) identity of their child, something that was undesired:

I think we would end up with a kid that is not ours. You can already notice this right now. In the street, he [respondent’s son] is playing with Arda, a Turkish boy. Now when these two have played together, our kid has become a Turk. He suddenly talks in a completely different way. I think if he had to sit in a class full of these kids day by day, we would lose our child. (Aaron).

It is striking to see how respondents extrapolated the individuality of an individual (e.g., that of Arda) to the individual’s ethnic group, after which, they no longer perceived this individuality as individual as it was reduced to a typical example of that ethnic group (cf., Schinkel, 2017 on the concept of de-individualizing individualization). Indeed, as was the case with the previous quotes, it is possible to see how certain aspects of a group (in this case the nationality and/or migration background) implicitly are associated with certain unique dispositions (i.e., dispositions that are not shared across groups). What is interesting is that in all these cases a sense of superiority is tucked away. This points us to an important distinction that has to be made: whereas the white middle-class parents in our study do wish for their children to acquire multicultural competences, they do not wish for them to adopt the (real or imagined) traits of a culture other than their own. We believe this is also what Reay et al. (2007) are somewhat more optimistically pointing out in their study on identities, educational choice and the white urban middle classes when they claim that acculturation definitely could go too far for the liberal white-middle classes they interviewed. Intermingling with the ethnic other is embraced as long as it purely leads to the production of a confident, tolerant and worldly-wise white middle-class subject that not only understands but also is being comfortable with and around diversity.

As such, just as with the desire for diversity, respondents’ caution towards ‘too much diversity’ was more than just about securing the development of conventional competences. In fact, through the avoidance of all-minority and majority-minority schools, respondents also worked towards the inculcation of what they thought to be *white* values. In short, when respondents selected an ‘ethnically mixed school’ they also seemed to aim at the reproduction of *whiteness* through an immersion in a sufficient degree of ethnic homogeneity. While stating that their children ‘could not come in to contact with too many cultures,’ parents equally stressed the fact that it was important for their children to recognise ‘the culture they know at home’ so as not to ‘lose’ their child. It is worth mentioning that the culture, which was being juxtaposed to the one of minoritised pupils, often came down to a white *middle-class* habitus. Here an interesting intersection between class and ethnicity comes into play. When parents described the ethnic other, through the formulation of ascribed characteristics – characteristics that moreover were contagious – use was made of prevalent working-class stereotypes (e.g., in relation to language, communication and physical behaviour). This is because our respondents seem to judge minoritised pupils as working-class a priori and are viewing *middle-classness* mainly as a white social category and vice-versa (cf., Ball et al., 2013). Consequently, respondents also seemed to perceive the ethnic other through the lens of working-class stereotypes. This entanglement of ethnicity and class became very clear when respondents discussed exceptional minoritised pupils. Aaron, for instance, reflected on the diversity he encountered during his schooling:

The children of a different colour that I used to encounter at school were all adopted and were equally well-off as we were at home. They were as white as we were (Aaron).

It is clear how in such statements ‘white’ does not only signify colour or race but also class, middle-classness to be precise. Anxieties that parents expressed in relation to too much ethnic diversity (e.g., the fear that their child could become ‘a Turk’) should thus also be interpreted as a concern with the acquisition of the proper white *middle-class* habitus. It thus seems that the sort of whiteness that our respondents were trying to reproduce is a very classed one.

A third and final reason why respondents rejected majority-minority schools referred to possible consequences of being a minority. More specifically, some respondents feared their offspring could become minoritised in the process of being a minority and hence become subject to practices of discrimination, victimisation and/or othering (n= 9). Talking about majority-minority schools, the following comments are clarifying:

From our view this is like the world has turned upside down. (…) You start to think ‘is my child going to be discriminated?’ (Nathan).

Whilst several respondents referred to all-majority schools as sanctuaries or reserves, not a single one implicitly or explicitly suggested that these schools make them feel like ‘the world has turned upside down’. We believe this is because respondents perceive and are used to (their) whiteness and middle-classness (as being perceived) as the norm – in spite of the changing reality. When this ‘norm’ seems to be undermined/in jeopardy, even if simply and solely on the visual level, this causes a number of uncertainties that are all related to the idea of being a minority and the potential of becoming minoritised in this process - as has so often been the case the other way around. Although respondents were thus looking for diversity, it was one in which whiteness, middle-classness, and a specific habitus would always remain the norm both on a moral and visual level. Schools which meet these criteria have the potential to become 'good' schools in our respondents' view, as they can make their child feel like a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu, 1990: 108; Grenfell and James, 1998), this in contrast to schools which fail to comply:

I felt if I chose for such a school [a majority-minority school] my kid would be all by himself. (…) Perhaps this is a fear that is not justified but still I had the feeling ‘what if he does not find any connection to peers at the playground?’ or ‘what if he has the feeling he is the stranger in the midst of a minority-white school?’ (April).

As the three themes make clear, notwithstanding their liberal, multicultural and pluralistic values, respondents deliberately shunned majority-minority schools. This is mainly because our respondents did not transcend dominant ethnicised discourses working at the societal level and, as such, perceived a majority of minoritised pupils as a threat to the development and the wellbeing of their *white* middle-class children. As respondents’ interests in their children diverged with radical integration, they felt no inclination to support such efforts. Choosing an ‘ethnically mixed school’, therefore, can also be understood as an example of interest divergence. Indeed, the choice of our respondents to integrate their children in an ethnically mixed school was also a choice to eschew majority-minority schools. This became very apparent when, through a process of white victimisation, some respondents noted how ‘there was just no alternative’ to *Park Lane*, as they were living in a ‘minority district’.

By stressing the (inferior) otherness of ethnic minorities, in terms of language skills, behaviour and values, white middle-class parents not only actively contributed to a process of stigmatisation and hence minoritisation of ethnic minorities but also actively distinguished themselves as superior from the ethnic other. Moreover, as this demonisation discourse of ethnic minorities is broadly shared, it also set the stage for our respondents to rationalise their school choice. Respondents made it very clear that they selected neither an all-minority nor a majority-minority (read: bad) school. As such, by securing the interests of their children, respondents were able to act, define and present themselves as *good* parents. Indeed, while an immersion in diversity was felt to be ‘enriching’ or an ‘asset’ to the development of their children, parents made it very clear that they were not the ones that would allow their children to ‘suffer’ in majority-minority schools.

**Conclusion**

In their study on white urban middle classes, Jordan et al. (1994: 12) have argued that parents tend to ‘put the family first,’ even when the resulting actions clash with the principles they uphold. A body of research has demonstrated how parents have translated this motto by avoiding educational settings characterised by ethnic diversity (see Ball, 2003; Boterman, 2013; Karsten et al., 2003; van Zanten, 2003). In this respect, the white middle-class gentrifying parents in our study went against the grain by choosing to self-integrate in an ethnically mixed urban school. However, we argue that in their reasoning they did not do it completely. Our analysis indicates that, like other white middle-class parents, this fraction also acted in the best interests of their children. This is because this fraction acknowledges the ethnic diversity present in society as well as the need for their offspring to be able to deal with it. As such, unlike other white middle-class parents, these parents frame an ethnic ‘mix’ in educational settings as an asset to the acquirement of multicultural competencies crucial in today’s society. Moreover, ethnic diversity was also perceived by our respondents as a means to create a specific progressive *middle-class* subjectand hence as a means for social reproduction. In other words, an ethnically mixed student body was perceived as no less than an amenity that could be appropriated in the best interest of the child. We therefore contend that the decision of these white middle-class gentrifiers for mixed schooling cannot be understood without considering how this decision converges with their child’s best interest. This is neither to deny nor to downplay the importance of values played in their school-choice process. It is in fact clear that parents were genuinely positive towards some amount of diversity and that values often intersected with interests in their accounts. Yet, we do want to stress the pivotal role that interests have played in their decision. We suggest that a focus on interests is also crucial for understanding the ambivalence of this fraction towards diversity.

Indeed, while variations between individuals were clearly visible, it must be noted that all respondents were, to a certain extent, blowing hot and cold about ethnic diversity in educational settings. Notions of integration often existed along notions of segregation in one and the same parental discourse. On the one hand, parents seemed strongly supportive of the diversity of the ethnically mixed school they’ve selected. On the other hand, the same parents also voiced strong reservations about integration in majority-minority and all-minority schools. It is our understanding that respondents worked towards moderate instead of radical integration, due to the fact that their interests converged with former and diverged with latter efforts. Our analysis shows how these parents frame a majority of minoritised pupils as a threat to the development and wellbeing of their *white* offspring, inter alia, by a process of ethnic stereotyping. As such, this article also shows that we have not entered a colour-blind society. Issues of ethnicity permeated the school-choice process of these white gentrifiers. Rather than approaching ethnic diversity as a social justice ethic (see de Oliver, 2015), ethnic diversity was deployed instrumentally by these parents who were seeking out the amount of diversity with the best cost-benefit ratio.4 Indeed, parents looked at a ratio that would (i) enable the transfer of multicultural competences while at the same time not jeopardising the transfer of traditional competences included in the curriculum, (ii) ensure the construction of a specific (progressive) *middle-class* and *white* subject, which was set apart as superior from other *class* and *ethnic* groups, and (iii) allow respondents to act and to present themselves as good parents as well as good citizens. In all of this, the discourse of the mix provided an ethnic makeup à la carte, an integrated segregation, strictly tailored to the needs of white middle-class gentrifiers. Consequently, we concur that voluntary integration of a more radical kind is likely to fall on deaf ears, even among those who champion liberal, multicultural and pluralistic values (see Table 1). As such, our results also provide insight for education policies throughout the Western World, as it questions the feasibility of school integration efforts through the implementation of choice plans. An obvious recommendation would be to restrict the amount of school choice. We argue, however, it is at least equally important to take on Derrick Bell’s (1976; 1980) legacy by posing two simple questions. First, why should ethnically mixed schools be pursued? Second, do these schools serve the interests of minoritised communities? Certainly with regard to issues as the achievement gap, it is important to question whether a dominant focus on ethnic mix as a solution is wise. This is because the idea of ethnic mix as a means to combat the achievement gap has mainly been supported by mere correlations. Moreover, such an idea (i) is predicated on deficit discourses that demonize minoritised families and (ii) is devolving responsibility for educational quality from governmental and institutional bodies to individual families and their capabilities to invest in and keep an eye on a diverse range of school issues. We believe this shift in thinking from an exclusive focus on the question ‘whether we are doing things the right way’ to one that also pays attention to the question ‘whether we are doing the right things’ (cf., Vandenbrouck, Coussée and Bradt, 2010), has the potential not only to open the way we think about ethnic mix but also to breach through long-standing educational inequalities.

**Notes**

1. Pseudonyms are used for all schools and respondents to protect the privacy of the respondents. Respondents were ensured confidentiality by not disclosing any information provided by respondents or by doing this in such a way as not to reveal the identity of the respondents.

2. Behind the (seemingly innocent) view of the selfless white middle-class parent whose choice for a ethnically diverse school should be applauded as a couragous act, two problematic assumptions are tucked away. First, minoritised pupils not only are perceived as fundamentally different but also as subjects who are entering school environments with cultural deficiencies – an assumption which, as has been demonstrated by Yosso (2005), often springs from a misinterpretion of Bourdieu’s theorethical insights on societal reproduction. Second, it is believed that these assumed hierarchical differences operate as communicating vessels. More specifically, there is an idea that (radical) integration could benefit minoritised pupils while at the same time hurt white middle-class children. These assumptions are, indeed, echoed by Stillman (2012) who is referring to the ‘detrimental effects’ (xviii) of schools characterized by a high percentage of minoritised pupils on white middle-class children, while at the same time also stressing integration of white middle-class children as ‘an important way to help improve the education environment of struggling inner-city schools’ (xiv). By giving prominence to the assumptions that underly the view of the selfless and self-abnegating white middle-class subject, it not only becomes intelligible why these subjects are lauded as ‘heroes,’ but also why such terms, statements, and discourses are problematic.

3. People are registered as being of foreign origin on the basis of an identification key. First, the nationality of the father is studied. When the father does not have the Belgian citizenship at birth, the individual is registered as being of foreign origin. When the opposite is the case, the nationality of the mother is studied. When she does not have the Belgian citizenship at birth, the individual is once again registered as being of foreign origin. When the opposite is the case, the nationality of the individual is examined. Only when the individual does hold the Belgian citizenship is the individual registered as being of non-foreign origin.

4. This process is highly similar to the one described by Chan and Eyster (2009), in which diverse white socioeconomic status groups support affirmative action policies in higher educational settings to an extent that best serves their interests.

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