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**Title:** Social mixing in urban schools: class, race and exchange value friendships

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**Abstract:**

Based on empirical, qualitative research on 'social mixing' in multi-ethnic London schools, this paper argues for a conceptualisation of social mixing as an exchange of the self. Through analysis of three working-class, minority ethnic students who attempt to 'cross borders' into White middle-class subcultures, I explore the differing capital value embodied in their raced, classed and gendered identity positions. Friendships across this border are characterised by 'semi-investments' on both sides, and promise only partial possibilities for social mobility via social mixing, though limited access to academic capital and embodied Whiteness.

**Keywords:** social mix, friendship, value, social class, ethnicity, youth, education

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### Introduction: troubling mixing in urban space

This paper explores the possibilities for social mixing through studying relationships of sustained encounter, in the form of urban secondary school friendships. Holding in tension race and class, the paper explores whether and how these urban spaces produce possibilities for genuine mixing, and to maintain friendships across difference.

Studies of mixing in urban space have often focused on everyday public encounters: for example, in the corner shop (Wessendorf 2010), the street market (Anderson 2004) and the public park (Neal et al. 2013), where relationships are surface and fleeting, rather than sustained. Such studies often paint a picture of conviviality (Gilroy 2004), where diversity is celebrated and 'everybody feels welcome' (Wessendorf 2010, 20). Critical Race Theory (e.g. see Rollock and Gillborn 2011) and work on 'new hierarchies of belonging' (Back, Sinha and Bryan 2012, Yuval-Davis 2005) provide some tools to critique convivial accounts of urban multicultural encounters, highlighting racial orderings and exclusions. While everyone 'gets on' and 'gets by' in urban space, this work demonstrates how Whiteness moves 'through', 'on' and 'up' more easily. However, theoretical approaches that centre a racial lens only go so far in fully understanding these processes of mixing and in/exclusion.

When studies find a convivial, hybrid multicultural, these tend to be *working class* cultures (e.g. see Back 2003 [1995], Hewitt 2003 [1992]). Vincent and colleagues (2015) studied social mixing among parents and children in London primary schools finding that

*'where there were more middle-class children in the class, polarisation between working and middle-class children tended to be greater. The White British middle-class children in the research tended to mix less across ethnicity and social class than others, despite often being able to talk in a sophisticated manner about diversity' (ibid, 17).*

With rising gentrification of urban areas, the middle classes 'keep to their own' with limited mixing with others that are different (Butler and Robson 2001, 2003; Jackson and Benson 2014). Lees (2008) demonstrates that when social class is the difference that is being mixed, experiences are often less than convivial (and see Watt 2009, Atkinson 2006, Jackson and Benson 2014).

Some critics point to how multicultural, cosmopolitan relations are based on exclusionary practices, where Whiteness is the norm against which other ethnicised groups are

measured. The concept 'multiculturalism', in and of itself, assumes a 'universal' position which is inherently one of superiority and in which the 'authentic,' static, ethnicised, Other is appreciated from this superior vantage point (Haylett 2006, Binnie and Skeggs 2004). Such appreciation of the 'Other' works in a way that is acquisitive, and indeed *depreciative*, in that 'the Other is a form of knowledge for one's own enhancement' (Skeggs, 2004a, 158). Class *and* ethnicity are both central to these processes.

Reay and colleagues' (2011, 2007) work on urban schooling provides empirical explication of these processes of mixing and acquisition. They explore relations across racial and class difference in urban secondary schools, exposing the unequal and acquisitive nature of White middle-class relations. For example such parents discussed the advantages their children could gain from the consumption of other (multi)cultures and saw the urban comprehensive school as providing this through proximity to 'ethnic' Others.

Here, multicultural competence operates as cultural capital, preparing White middle-class young people for success in a globalised society. They are cultural 'omnivores' (Skeggs, 2004a) 'who can access, know, take part in, and feel confident about using, a wide variety of cultures from high to low' (Reay *et al* 2007, 1046), but still remain – importantly – firmly embedded in White middle class networks not accessible to their minority ethnic peers. The authors found a hierarchy of minority ethnic friendship suitability, where parents valued high-achieving minority ethnic students (often Asian), while 'loud' Black children were avoided. Mixed friendships were unequal, visible in differences in attainment and cultural and social capital. As one White middle-class girl stated: 'I always knew I had more going for me than they did' (Hollingworth & Williams 2010, 56). The embracing of an acceptable ethnic 'Other' was an 'excluding inclusivity' (Reay *et al.* 2007, 1054).

The existing literature thus prompts the following questions: how do we understand the potential for social mixing across both ethnicity and class? Are relationships of friendship, in spaces of *sustained* encounter, different to more fleeting 'stranger' encounters? Are there possibilities for genuine friendships across class difference, or are all multicultural relationships across class difference acquisitive like this? This paper seeks to address these questions.

### Theory: the self as a system of exchange

This paper is Bourdieusian in its application of cultural and social capital to understand how economic inequality is reproduced via social and cultural means. Cultural and social capital, however, are not just carried around in a 'rucksack' (Erel, 2010) but embodied: 'different bodies carry unequal value depending on their position in social space [...] the capitals they embody' (Skeggs, 2004a, 17). Following Skeggs' work, this paper is concerned with how different bodies become 'inscribed, and marked with characteristics, and how certain cultural characteristics fix some groups and enable others to be mobile' (2004a, p.2). The paper explores the idea of gendered and racialised identities as embodied resources or capitals, which have differential value in different 'fields', most explicitly in the context of the urban school.

This paper, then, further develops ideas of the self as a system of exchange (Adkins 2005, Skeggs 2004a). It explores the idea that value can now be generated from culture. In this model, the middle classes advance their position through the accumulation of social and cultural resources or capitals, and these resources make particular kinds of selves. Skeggs distinguishes between use-value which becomes a value (to the person) only by use and exchange-value, where the subject, or attributes of the subject, have value in their exchange. She claims that exchange-value dominates contemporary personhood (2004a). In an economic model, the satisfaction that is obtained from the *use* of a commodity is known as the value-in-use. For example, water has its value in its use, while diamonds have a low use-value but high value-in-exchange. Value-in-exchange depends on time and place, it varies from one *market* to another. Only when commodities are ascribed an exchange-value (e.g. one metre of silk equals 50 metres of cotton) the object becomes exchangeable on the market. Value in exchange is basically the price of a good which can be bought or sold in the market.

Friendship-making, then, in this model can be understood in terms of exchangeable resources, or an exchange of social or cultural capitals. What are you worth? Rather than being *in the moment* with friendship choices (a friendship having a value-in-use), exchange-value friendships are about whether the relationship is an investment. In an economic sense, an investment is the purchase of goods that are not consumed today but are used in the future to create wealth. So, a friendship that is an investment is one in which the 'investor' sees 'potential' in the friendship, that it can bring them some benefits at a later date. We can explore then gendered, raced and classed ways of being as social resources that have differential value in their exchange. In the educational market place,

'moral distinctions of worth become social distinctions of value negotiated out in the playground' (Kulz, 2017, 109).

Building on Youdell (2006) and Kulz (2017), the White middle class body in the educational field (the 'ideal learner') is explored as a body which has superior value and more extensive mobility. Conversely, working-class and Black bodies have less value, and more compromised possibilities to embody valued learner identities and for educational mobility (Kulz, 2017, Reay et al 2007). Skeggs (2004a) argues that the working-classes 'begin from a different starting point where their culture is not valued, thereby limiting their culture's potential for use in the development of the subject of value who can enterprise themselves legitimately' (2004a, p.75). The working classes do not have the same 'approach to accrual, access to the knowledge of how to accrue effectively and access to the sites for optimising the cultural capital that they may have acquired' (ibid). This paper unpicks this assertion, by exploring instances where different minority ethnic working-class young people attempt, or refuse, to accrue value in mixed schools, albeit unconsciously. Indeed, the urban school is a key site to explore these practices and processes of 'everyday' (Kesten et al. 2011) racial and class mixing, as forms of sustained, rather than surface interactions, across difference (Hollingworth & Mansaray, 2012).

### **The study: exploring friendships in urban schools**

This paper draws on a qualitative study exploring the extent to which young people make friends across social *and* ethnic difference in multi-ethnic, socially diverse schools (Hollingworth, 2014). Two schools in London, England provided the empirical setting for the study: 'Eden Hill school', and 'Stellar Academy'. Both were 11-18, co-educational schools, 'comprehensive' in their intake. Both were located in areas of mixed housing and were ethnically and socially mixed. Eden Hill was in an established middle-class area, with a large social housing estate in the catchment; and Stellar Academy was in a gentrifying neighbourhood, with social housing nearby. The largest minority ethnic group in both schools was Black (African and Caribbean), with around one third White British students, and the remainder other or mixed ethnicities. The schools were on opposite trajectories in terms of school attainment (Eden Hill results were high and rising, and Stellar Academy, lower than average).

Individual and group interviews were conducted by the author with 36 young people aged 16-19 across both schools, purposively sampled from the sixth form cohort in each setting. These interviews focused on friendships, exploring their perceptions of friendship groups in the school and personal experiences of friendships and networks

inside and outside of the school. Discussions of 'mixing' across class and ethnicity arose through such discussions, and were later prompted if they did not already emerge. The research also included semi-structured interviews with eight members of teaching and senior management staff; collection of school promotional material; analysis of student demographic and attainment data; and unstructured observations. Interviews were conducted with an ethnographic sensibility, involving extensive fieldnotes and sociogram friendship-mapping. This paper draws primarily on the student interview data and where double quotation marks are used, this denotes verbatim quotations from interviewees.

Analysis was immersive, iterative and reflexive, deploying techniques from discourse analysis (Wetherell and Potter 1992) and psychosocial analysis (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) where discourses are understood to be situated in wider structures of inequality (Skeggs 1997), and knowledge is deemed to be produced in the encounter. Analysis began as 'data driven' (Holliday, 2002), however, the author's location within youth studies literature meant that particular analytical attention was given to subculture. Key subcultural groups emerged within the interviews, and the 'friendship-mapping' exercise revealed demonstrable White and middle-class subcultures and Black and minority ethnic subcultures. This process produced three cases Damian, Lara and Tyler: the 'border crossers' (Bunnell et al. 2012, Hey 1997), who became the foci of the analysis in this paper. All three were minority ethnic working-class students, who discussed their ability to mix into the middle-class subcultural groups. It is worth noting that the identities and negotiations identified and explored in this paper were produced through the interview encounter with a young-ish woman, who is White and middle class, but who is often not read as either, due to her appearance, accent and Asian-sounding name. Furthermore, while staff positioned the researcher as somewhat like a 'student doing a project', the pupils were more likely to view the researcher as like a 'youth worker' due to a lack of professional distancing, including dressing down. While the researcher was generally not asked by respondents about her own background or positionality, this assumed mixed-heritage-young-ish-lower-middle class-woman-youth-worker-student-type may well have provided a welcome sounding board to produce such discussions about social mix, mixing, and mixed-ness. It is also worth noting that, while several scholars have found interviews with parents produce an instrumental rationalisation of friendship-making (Reay et al, 2007; Vincent et al, 2016), here, these three students were reflexive and analytical about their friendship 'careers', but they were not instrumental or calculating. Analysis of capital accrual through friendship-making is the author's own.

## The data: the exchange-value self

### The White middle classes, exchange-value and value accrual

Despite being ethnically diverse schools, Black-White ethnic divisions were present in both schools, as White middle-class friendship groups were set apart from others. At Eden Hill a tight-knit White middle-class group - 'the Smokers' - spent their time smoking outside the school gates. Stellar Academy featured a smaller White middle-class friendship group in the 'top tier'<sup>i</sup>, referred to as the "Neeks" or the "posh group".

Similar to Kulz' (2017) findings, apparent from ethnographic immersion was the separateness and 'specialling' of the White middle-class groups. The Smokers, many joining the school from fee-paying schools, maintained a physical separation from the mass. Avoiding the common room, they spent their time outside the school gates smoking. Distinguished by their 'hipster' style of dress, they were constructed by the working class and minority ethnic participants as 'work hard, play hard'. Dominating the top grades, their 'effortless' academic achievement (Mendick 2006, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Bradford and Hey 2007) was balanced by a rebelliousness (embodied in their smoking outside the school gates, and well-known socialising at parties outside of school). The Smokers' disobedient behaviour (smoking on school property) - was tolerated by the school authorities because of the cultural capital exchange to the school in terms of high achievement, while Black students' behaviour, such as hanging around at the bus stop was constructed as a "mugging" risk, and was heavily policed. Whiteness moved 'on' and 'up' more easily at Eden Hill (Hollingworth, 2015a,b). Kulz' (2017) also observed White middle-class misbehaviour being overlooked. She deemed this due to these students being worth more to the school in grades: 'they recognise themselves as valuable assets that produce good results with minimal teacher labour; they literally carry and produce value for [the urban school]' (Kulz, 2017, 108).

At Stellar, despite being denigrated as 'Neek', the White middle-class students accrued social capital as a peer group of like-minded, hard-working, high achievers. Furthermore, this was *institutionalised* in the academic streaming in the school and legitimated in staff narratives that constructed them as "top Oxbridge material". Whiteness and middle classness became implicitly superior, as they accrued a special status (see also Kulz, 2017, 108). By their own admission, the Neeks did not mix beyond this friendship group (Hugh: *"if you are not as clever [...] what would I have to talk to them about? [...]"*). The Neek's friendships could be seen to have value in exchange: someone who is studying at the same level, is bound for Oxbridge, has more value than someone who is not.

Neal *et al* (2016) found that White middle classes tended to have stronger relations with other White middle classes across different schools. Similarly here, it was striking how middle-class students' patterning of external associations tended to involve 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) with individuals across the elite field of private and prestigious state schools across London, further enhancing their social capital. White middle-class participants at Eden Hill talked about associating with students from neighbouring private schools. These casualised 'friends of friends' networks were formed through "parties"; siblings attending higher status schools; primary school friends and friends of the family. Similarly the Neeks all knew each other "vaguely" before joining the school as their parents "socialised together" having met at a local baby group.

Echoing Reay *et al's* (2007) study, a 'multicultural competence' was attributed to these young people, through their positioning within multi-ethnic urban comprehensive schools. For example Tom's father claimed:

*"My kids rubbed along with classmates of all races and classes. They know the other people in their community, they are not frightened when they walk down the high street after dark, they have gained an understanding of how society works."*<sup>ii</sup>

Tom's father reported taking pride in his son's "fluency in African-Caribbean swear words"<sup>iii</sup>. The Neeks talked about enjoying *The Wire*, a particular US urban crime drama series with cult status, based on the inner workings of the illegal drugs trade in Baltimore. The Neeks connection to the Black and multi-ethnic working class 'Other', is through the consumption of Black 'culture', rather than having Black friends. This cultural omnivorousness is an appropriation of 'Black cool' (Skeggs 2004), but from a distance via popular cultural consumption.

The White middle-class young people admitted they did not have Black friends. Tom claimed he wants to be friends with people he has something in common with, "*who want to talk about what I want to talk about and not [...] rap music*". Omnivorousness had its limit, as distinctions drew a line between certain acceptable popular cultural forms (Friedman 2011) where "rap music" was imposed on Black students, and came to epitomise the 'constitutive limit' (Skeggs 2004a) fixing the minority ethnic other in place and outside their friendship group. Black cool, in the form of African Caribbean swear words and *The Wire*, are mobile cultural markers which can be consumed by the White middle classes, and can be used as cultural capital because they can be paraded at



interview in the urban job market, for example, but actually having Black friends has little exchange-value.

In the following sections then, I move on to analyse the stories of three minority ethnic young people, who discussed constrained attempts to mix into these groups.

#### **Lara: the acceptable minority ethnic Other with exchange-value?**

Lara at Stellar Academy was a petite, attractive South American girl of Peruvian heritage, with olive skin, long dark hair and dark eyes. Born in Peru, she grew up in London in social housing. Neither of her parents had attended higher education, but she was in the 'top tier' academic group and planned to go to university herself.

Reay *et al's* (2007) research with White middle-class parents found that 'high achieving' ethnic minorities such as Indian and Chinese girls were considered the 'acceptable minority ethnic other' for their children to befriend *vis a vis* the 'troublesome' Black and White working-class (p.1048). This section explores the possibilities for Lara to perform this acceptable minority ethnic other - as an agentic subject in this process - through the idea of *embodied* exchange-value. Lara's story is of a move from a Black working-class friendship group into a White middle-class one. Lara joined Stellar when she was thirteen and by the time she was sixteen, she associated mainly with middle-class White students. Showing some discomfort in categorising students in racial terms, Lara nevertheless conceptualised the sixth form as divided into three groups: Black students and two White middle-class groups, a high-achieving and a rebellious one (the "Neeks" versus the "posh rebellious"). Eventually choosing to associate with the "rebellious" White middle-class group, she dissociated from the Black students, stating "*Most people here are gangster. Most people are Black*".

Lara explained that when she arrived at Stellar aged thirteen she was formally 'buddied up' with a Black girl, Joleen, who helped her settle in. Lara recalled that she initially "hung out" with Joleen's friends, but found this a jarring experience:

*"The first girl that took me around, [Joleen] she was basically part of this [Black] group. And then I was with them for a while, [but] they were just a bit too much for me. They were really confident and really like, 'Oh my God, yeah, yeah, yeah!' and I was [...] really shy and really quiet. [...] they liked to take the piss a lot and I didn't know how to react to that. They were like, 'we're only joking', and I was like 'okay'".*

Black students are often constructed as loud and boisterous (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth 2007b, Ali 2003, Mirza 1992). In Kulz' (2017, 98) research participants describe the Black students' behaviour as 'frenziered', 'hyped' and inciting 'drama' and as embodying 'larger gestures' and 'louder sounds'. Indeed, for the Black students at both Eden Hill and Stellar, 'loudness' (and 'jokes') was a cultural marker, characterising performances of Black working-classness. These performances produced inclusions and exclusions, manifest in subtle, albeit perhaps misrecognised, antagonism between them and other White middle-class students (Hollingworth, 2015b).

Lara found this loud, confident, boisterous and antagonistic embodiment "a bit too much". Conversely, she described herself as "shy" and "quiet" and this led her to her bond more with Ivy, a White middle-class girl who was "not at all like that [...] really timid". Lara felt out of place with the Black students' performance of confidence, joking and "taking the piss a lot". She felt more 'at home' (Bottero 2005, Johnson and Lawler 2005) in a White middle-class feminine habitus, conforming to White forms of comportment. What Kulz refers to as the three Cs: compact, controlled, concise (Kulz, 2017, 108). The school was characterised by a crude Black-White divide due to its ethnic composition, and there was an absence of a sizable South American community, or indeed other minority communities, so this White middle-class identity became the mode of recognition available to Lara.

However this new location was not solidly inhabited. She revealed:

*"I still get on with them [the Black girls] because, I live around people like that. It was just, I would have rather preferred to be around people that... understood me a bit more".*

What helps Lara's position as a social mixer are her claims to *know the Other*. She used to have Black friends and on her estate she "lives around people like that." Lara has some (urban sub)cultural capital which enables Black friendships. She can claim proximity to an authentic Black domestic experience and can bring this capital into the urban school. But in terms of habitus, she cannot move like a fish in water (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992, 127) in this group - it doesn't come naturally and they don't fully "understand each other".

While Lara does not explicitly discuss her friendship choices in terms of academic alignments, we can also understand this as an unconscious positioning in terms of an affective distancing from the 'unhappy objects' (Ahmed, 2007) of academic failure. As Kulz argues, in the urban comprehensive, achieving academic success is still associated

with acting White (2017, 108). For Lara to become 'respectable' (Skeggs 1997) she had to dissociate herself from the 'impossible subjects' of educational failure (Youdell, 2006) and seek out another positioning. The spectre of "trouble" on the estates attached to Black bodies (Archer 2003, Alexander 1992) and Lara, being from 'the estates,' needed to take care to avoid 'contamination'. Lara's story is one of the 'good', or desiring, upwardly-mobile-social-mixer (Kulz 2017). While Lara's positioning is unconscious, her association with these Black girls risks her too becoming pathologised and read as the 'wrong sort of pupil' (Archer 2005, 3) who does not value education. Lara can be seen as having an aspirational habitus (Baker, 2005), which makes her *not too different*. This is reinforced by the cultural capital Lara has by virtue of being enrolled in the 'top' tier. The promise of success resides in Lara's proximity to Whiteness and distancing from Blackness (Ahmed 2007) and her potential embodiment of the impossible learner must be constantly defended against and worked upon.

At the same time as distancing from the Black working classes, Lara has to be acceptable to the White middle-classes. As other authors have argued, middle-class femininity is coded as sexually restrained, demure, and passive (Archer 2005, Walkerdine 1996) and Lara's particular 'constellation' of identities (Youdell, 2006) - both in being 'Whiter' and occupying a 'passive', 'shy', 'timid' femininity - enabled her to have currency as the good learner (Archer and Francis 2005), as Reay describes: 'the acceptable face of working classness' children who are a 'paler shade of dark', the 'model minority'. (Reay et al., 2007, 1048 citing Leonardo, 2004, 129). Lara's Spanish-speaking, Whiter femininity is exotic and has more value -in-exchange than English-speaking Black Londoners.

Nevertheless Lara's mobility was still fragile. Stellar Academy had begun to experience White middle-class flight. Lara confessed that most of her White middle-class friends had now moved on to 'other' schools and *she had lost touch with them*. Analysis revealed that these schools were higher performing and popular with the middle classes. Without the same cultural capital as her White middle-class peers, Lara thought it was "crazy" (risky perhaps) for her to move schools and remained at Stellar Academy and she has not remained in the extended middle-class social networks. Lara's friendship was discontinued: she was not worth the investment. Lara's femininity had some exchange-value to the White middle classes but still fixed her in place as not quite the ideal mobile subject.

### Damian: becoming user friendly?

How does the high achieving Black working-class boy achieve person value? This section discusses Damian at Eden Hill school. He was a gregarious Black British working-class young man of Caribbean heritage. He was a leader in the school, known to everyone, and had been central to the “Football crowd,” a group of Black and multi-ethnic working-class boys. Damian revealed that since entering the sixth form, he had begun to associate with the White middle-class “Smokers” crowd.

Damian’s friendship group had previously consisted entirely of Black African and Caribbean boys, but most of them had now left school. He then became friends with two White boys, Kieran and Michael who were in the Smokers crowd. Kieran was new to Eden Hill, having moved from a fee-paying school. He “hasn’t had the same growing up as we’ve had” Damian elucidated, referring to his own working-class Black London upbringing. However, Damian explained: “even though Kieran went to a middle- class [fee-paying] school, he hanged around more with working class people”. Michael had spent his life in Black and working-class schools, so Damian reasoned that he “understood how to act” and how to “understand them”: to understand the Other. Like the Neeks, Damian’s White middle-class friends have some ‘multicultural competence’ (Reay et al, 2007), able to ‘bridge’ the social class divide because they have some knowledge of *authentic* (minority ethnic) working-class life via Michael’s lived experience of the urban comprehensive (Hollingworth & Williams, 2010; Reay et al, 2007) or Kieran’s proximity to working-class friends. We can understand this as a kind of urban sub-cultural capital (either attending a working-class school or having working-class friends) that can be converted into social capital, namely mixed friendships.

According to Damien, they get on because they have some of the same humour and they like sport. Kieran specifically was “very loud and very social” and had “made a big impression since he arrived in the school”. Loudness and sociability were central to the (re)production of *Black working-class masculinity* and the football crowd (Hollingworth, 2015a), and therefore a key subcultural performance to gain status when moving into an urban school (albeit not being legitimated cultural capital held by the school authorities). Kieran, despite being White and from a feepaying school, is able somehow able to align himself with, or reflect back, sub-culturally valued performances of a Black urban working-class masculine identity. Perhaps he had adopted these ways of comportment because he “always hanged around with working-class people”.

These relationships could be seen to confer Damian some cultural capital: the friendships promote his continued participation in the sixth form, for example. Connection with them through A-level classes may bring him access to cultural capital in a legitimated form, and his proximity to these White middle-class boys may be read positively by school staff. With the majority of his Black friends having left the school, Damian admitted that access to this different friendship group “is starting to affect me”. Damian used to be someone who would “slack off” with his Black friends who did not take school work seriously, whereas now he is beginning to become the ‘aspirational subject’ (Kulz 2017). He resigned: “you are forced to make new friends”, in order to get on, and up.

So Damian’s attributes have some value in exchange? Fundamentally, Damian’s friendship with Kieran and Michael *should* give him access to *social* capital in terms of access to White middle-class networks. However, these boys were described as ‘outliers’ on Damian’s friendship map: their friendship was partial and characterised by semi-investments, or ‘limited intimacies’ (Neal et al 2013). Drawing on Neal and colleagues’ (2016) work we can distinguish different depth of friendship and degrees of mixing. These friendships were ‘circumstantial’, ‘disposable’, ‘thinner’ (Neal, et al, 2016, 469). Kieran and Michael were Damian’s friends *in school* - he could “jam with them” at the gates- but they never associated outside of school. The Smokers spent their leisure-time going to parties and illegal raves, where they drank alcohol, smoked and took recreational drugs, all of which Damian avoided. The White middle classes and the multi-ethnic working classes frequented different places outside of school, representing classed practices (Neal et al, 2016). Damian’s successful engagement with the Smokers group was through performances of Black working-classness, which did not travel beyond school.

When asked Damian if he could pin-point what makes a successful ‘mixer’, his elaboration was eye-opening:

*“I think it depends on their likeability. If they have a thing interesting to someone else, and are very enthusiastic into what people’s interests are, then they will be accepted anywhere. So with me, I’m always up for doing stuff. I’m always up for having a laugh. I think people who make jokes are easily put into groups and easily liked and accepted because they create happiness and stuff. And I think I am one of them, where people find me funny and easy to talk to, and I’m not shy when it comes to meeting new people, so I make them feel comfortable easily. So I’ll be accepted in any group”.*

Ahmed's (2007) work shows how some bodies are presumed to be the origin of good or bad feeling. The ethnic minority Other who *resists* 'mixing' is seen as the origin of bad feeling, while the integrating 'migrant' brings good feeling (ibid). Kulz analyses how Black young men, in particular, embody 'good mixers' (Kulz 2017), acting as 'conversion points' and turning bad feeling into good. Here, we can see how Damian is the happy smiling social mixer who 'creates happiness' and good feeling everywhere he goes. In embodying a particular form of urban-inflected 'diversity,' Damien becomes 'user friendly' (Skeggs 2004a, 157). Damian has exchange-value, right? However at the same time, Damian's performances are a re-enactment of forms of Black working-class masculinity, which fix him in place as the 'joker' or the 'clown' (Hall 1992). This is a form of contemporary exploitation, according to Skeggs, when a person is forced to use the cultural attributes by which they are positioned for the benefit of others. What is not visible here is the extraction – the consumption of Damian's 'happiness' that he emanates, and where it goes. Damian is giving/sharing/making happy. This is not an exchange: it is one way. Kieran can perform Black working-classness but ultimately he is not fixed by it: it is a mobile cultural style, a prosthesis which he can append and remove. When he needs to perform the White middle-class high-achiever he can. Damian, however, does not optimise his value: he is not able to make the best use of his access to White middle class friends, because he does not, or cannot, associate with them outside of school. Instead, Damian is optimised by others.

#### **Tyler: the impossible nerd, resisting exchange value**

Tyler (Eden Hill) was Black African, born of Nigerian Muslim heritage in the UK. His story represents a refusal to be optimised. His parents had emigrated to Florida, USA in search of a "better life". However, the family moved back when Tyler was thirteen because the UK schooling system was judged to provide "better" opportunities. They now lived in council housing in South London. Now with athletic physique, when he arrived at Eden Hill Tyler confessed he was of "large" or "obese" body-size. This specific embodiment both constrained and enabled his belonging in different raced, classed and gendered friendship groups.

Tyler explained that when he had joined Eden Hill school as an overweight, bespectacled, Black-Floridian kid, Laurence and Dillon - two White boys who were "higher class" with "cash to splash," took him "under their wing". Tyler remained friends with these boys ever since, but this experience was not without some resistance and ambivalence:

*“Dillon helped me to get into the White crowd, which I kind of resented at first, because I’m a Black guy, and it was like, ‘What are you doing guy? What are you doing?’”*

As Tyler admits, he was acutely aware of how his Black body was out of place (Puwar 2004) in the White crowd. Tyler’s fit felt ‘impossible’ (Youdell, 2006) and his incorporation into this group was “resented” by Tyler but tolerated as a necessary “stepping stone” (in his own words). Tyler revealed how he gradually “worked” to get into the “Football crowd”, populated by Black African and Caribbean boys. Once he had settled in the school, he met Udell, a Black Londoner of Caribbean heritage, who helped him “relax”. He gradually became “cool”, he lost some weight, and the “Black side” of the school “opened up” to him. Note Tyler’s desired “stepping stone” is not into the White group but the Black one.

Tyler explained his families’ rationale for returning to the UK. Central to this story were familial concerns about his weight in the US:

*“I would have been huge and I would have been one of the book nerds. [...] I was really a nerd there [in the US], but I would have been more of a nerd like, because those things you see on - like a stereotypical American lazy guy sitting with his Mom when he’s thirty years old. I would have been one of those guys. I would have gone like that. But when I came to England, that’s when I had to put my own individualism as well as my, like, book down: come on control yourself.”*

Tyler’s narrative evokes a historically-grounded, commonly-shared, perspective of the overweight American man, but importantly, one that sticks to an amalgam of other ‘negative’ features, such as laziness, immaturity, bookishness, and nerdiness. His experience is governed by a ‘complex configuration of space-time embodied relationalities and intersectionalities’ (Hopkins, 2012, 1238). Tyler’s experience is simultaneously about Blackness, working-classness, masculinity, Americanness and obesity, and is differently experienced in different periods of his life and different contexts. This American ‘nerd’ had some appeal to two White boys at age thirteen, but did not confer Tyler capital to get into the Black working-class sporty crowd. We can analyse Tyler’s experience in terms of spatially and temporally specific (relationally and intersectionally contingent) inclusion and exclusion: a rare, exceptional inclusion to a White middle-class friendship group, and initial exclusion from, and uneasy access to, a predominantly Black working-class friendship group.

When joining the school from the US, Tyler's 'rucksack' (Erel 2010) of cultural capital etched on his body – of cosmopolitan transnational travel; an exotic but familiar American lifestyle only known to White British boys through movies – was embodied in his American accent and his “party lighter,” “cool guy” performances – which made him prime consumption for these awkward, uncool White middle-class thirteen year old boys. Tyler revealed how he was jokingly branded a “freshy”<sup>iv</sup> as these boys saw him as a “novelty”. Tyler embodied the US TV comedy Black cool: the joker or the clown (Hall 1992). His identity could be consumed or prosthetised by the White middle-class boys. They could enjoy his performances, take pleasure from his exoticness, but he was being used for their enjoyment, he was not ‘one of them’, he was an appendage, an accessory. Tyler could not fully belong in the White middle-class group: he was the ‘impossible nerd’ (Youdell, 2006). In this school, the ‘nerd’ was a White (middle class) identity, which was impossible to inhabit as a working-class Black boy.

Inhabiting this “obese” American “freshy” identity was experienced as exclusion from the Black group also. The ‘obese freshy’ had no exchange-value in this market. This amalgam of features were incompatible with the sporty body: as a master of control, the product of self-management, energy and self-investment: the good body. Further, the sporty body privileges the body over the mind and thus the studious ‘geek’ is incompatible (Hollingworth, 2015a). In particular, the obese body is an unwelcome vessel for a Black masculine subjectivity which, particularly in the institution of the school, presumes a ‘talent’ for sporting endeavors (Rollock 2007) and demands a hyper-heterosexualised masculinity (Archer et al 2007, Youdell 2006, Hollingworth, 2015a).

After his transition into the sporty crowd, Tyler remained friends with Laurence and Dillon but, as for Damian, this friendship was ‘thinner’ (Neal et al, 2016, 469). Tyler claimed that if he “had to choose”<sup>v</sup> he would choose Udell and his Black working-class friends. Despite Tyler’s admittance that he had moved to school in the UK to bring greater opportunities, Tyler did not see the potential instrumental benefits of aligning himself with his White and middle-class friends, in terms of access to wider middle-class networks, hobbies, ‘clubs’, Higher Education, and associated careers. Instead, Tyler dissociated himself from these friends. He rationalised that his White middle-class friends had grown up in a “hugely different social world,” which was protected and cocooned, and that the world of his working-class friends’ was “difficult” and more challenging, but you learn more about life here. Tyler had chosen use-value over exchange-value friendship. Despite being accepted, Tyler’s relationship with his White middle-class friends had



become characterised by a distancing brought about through racial divisions in the school, but also a gradual realisation by Tyler about their different social positionings. Tyler had chosen to circulate his capitals in a different marketplace.

### Conclusions and discussion

This paper shows that trying to mix into White middle-class friendship groups appears to bring challenges. This paper explores how *exchange-value* characterises opportunities for social mixing across class difference. Through the example of Lara, we can see evidence of exchange value: not only is she high achieving but she embodies aspects of subjectivity that are valued in the education system: shy, quiet, timid; aspects of her identity which buy her access to a White middle-class friendship group. However, being working class, Lara lacks other cultural capital and finds herself left behind as the mobile middle classes move on to 'better' schools and colleges and do not stay in touch with her: sustained friendships across class difference have failed. Damian's experience at first appears promising: despite embodying a Black working-class identity, identified by scholars as devalued in the education system, Damian has much *subcultural* capital, being the leader of the popular football crowd, and describes having two high achieving White middle-class friends. He describes how these boys are able to perform 'Black cool' which buys them subcultural capital, and his attempts to perform the 'good mixer,' buys him some access to the White middle-class group in the school. However, it is quickly evident that these are 'circumstantial', 'thin' friendships, because they do not associate outside school. Damian might generate some cultural capital through proximity to the high achieving White middle classes, but while they are able to perform Black cool (append it and remove it), Damian is fixed in his embodiment of it: his performances are consumed, and he remains an 'outlier' to the White middle-class friendship group which he is not fully invested in. Tyler, despite having White middle-class friends is quite clear that these are 'thin' (Neal et al 2016) friendships, and is cognisant of his 'novelty' to these friends: of how his identity performances are consumed. He conversely invests fully in his Black working-class friendships. What is interesting is an analogy Tyler gives. He says if he was trapped in a burning building, his Black working-class friend would risk his life for him and enter the building to rescue him, whereas his White middle-class friends would call the Fire Brigade. This analogy encapsulates some of the things this paper is trying to get at. Friendships across class difference are characterised by semi-investments: if they do not have enough exchange value in the form of embodying educational success, the middle classes will not fully invest.

Of course, it is unrealistic to suggest that all aspects of friendship are instrumental and calculating. But this paper attempts to show how, in spaces of sustained encounter, within dominant economies of value, and in an educational marketplace, it is difficult to sustain friendships across class difference. If we understand social mixing as a classed process in which there are hierarchies of value, the conviviality of multicultural relations is undermined by classed processes of valuing. In the space-time of the urban school and the education system, embodied Whiteness and middle classness carry more value. In both schools studied, Whiteness and middle classness corners the market on ideal learner identities; the 'good mixer' embodied in Black sociable masculinity is appropriated and prosthetised; and friendship with the acceptable minority ethnic Other tend to be partial.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The sixth form was 'streamed' according to post-16 educational trajectory. A-level students were separated from BTEC students, and A level students were seen as higher 'tier'.

<sup>ii</sup> Tom's father was not interviewed but was a Governor of the school and is quoted here from his column in a local newspaper. <http://www.newspaper.co.uk/education/2012//anon>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> Urban slang for someone who is 'fresh off the boat.'

<sup>v</sup> I did not ask Tyler to choose between his friendship groups, Tyler pursued this dilemma of his own volition.