Extended Encounters in Primary School Worlds: Shared Social Resource, Connective Spaces and Sustained Conviviality in Socially and Ethnically Complex Urban Geographies

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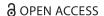
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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on a qualitative data set from a recently completed research project that uses education as a lens through which to understand social and place relations in super-diverse and gentrifying London geographies. Focusing on the collective sharing of a social resource and the (contradictory) social and spatial dynamics of conviviality, the paper argues that adult participants found primary schools to be a source of social exchange. Their relationships with other parents varied from interactions consisting of casual greetings to close friendships within school spaces but also outside of these, in the social spaces of the schools' localities and in participants' home spaces. We suggest that even if exchange is mostly avoided or is slight, the situated and sustained nature of being part of primary school worlds require social interactions between different others which we describe as civic conviviality. Exploring this process, the paper argues that attention to the micro-social geographies of conviviality, friendship-making and the collective use of shared resources show how complex, stratified populations manage encounters that are shaped by sustained proximities.

One of the issues in understanding how increasingly heterogeneous urban populations share urban public space has been the extent to which moments of interaction between people across cultural difference – a spontaneous conversation in the park, the queue for the bus, over the shop counter; an act of kindness and civility in helping with a buggy up a flight of stairs, holding a door open, giving directions, a smile in passing – are just that, moments. Their temporality generates a concern that they are merely slight engagements, more about enactment of a thin urban etiquette than transformative interactions (see e.g. Valentine 2008, Clayton 2012, Vertovec 2015). While some commentators have suggested that it is precisely urban etiquette that is important for navigating complex social and spatial landscapes (Noble 2009) and others that the momentary has a long reach and affective power, far beyond its actual time frame (Neal *et al.* 2015) there has also been a claim that momentary encounters, repeated and sustained over time, may be cumulative, becoming

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significant for informing the everyday negotiation of cultural difference and the development of social capacities (Onyx *et al.* 2011, Hall 2015, Noble 2015).

It is in this context that we aim to examine the notion and impact of what we describe as 'extended encounters'. These are not simply encounters that are repeated over time but encounters that take place, in different but connected spaces, between complexly diverse others through the joint sharing of a particular social resource. The extension of the encounter takes place through the practices necessary to share the resource but also because the social resource may itself generate interactions beyond its immediate boundaries and location. Exchanges or recognitions can travel further into other social sites, locations and personal geographies. Primary schools in the UK (compulsory education institutions teaching children between the ages of 4 and 11) provide an exemplar of such a social resource because of their intensely localised and social nature. Reflecting this, the paper draws on extensive data from a recently completed UK Economic and Social Research Council funded project which examines how local primary schools work as sites of social intimacy and friendship-making in the super-diverse geographies of North London. While the broader study looks at the friendship practices of children and parents, this paper focuses on the latter to explore the relationship between social geographies, the recognition of different others sharing the same social resource and friendship interactions.

The importance of the *where* of encounters across difference and over time was emphasised by Kaleb, (the Black African father of a child in one of the schools involved in the project) who suggested that one of the areas in which people mixed was,

> … in the school; activities and you know, parent meetings – whenever there are events … .it's my view, the society is a little bit, you know, reserved society. Apart from places like pubs and school, places like meetings, events, sometimes in parks as well, or where children can go and play, you can see people opening up, opening themselves, so you can have such kinds of interactions and in rare situations, rare conditions, making friends.

The paper picks up on Kaleb's observations of interaction and 'reservation' and looks at the ways in which particular social spaces – primary school worlds and their social geographies (their playgrounds and the houses, streets, roads, parks, cafes, shops that surround them) and the social practices of using/being in them (playing in the park, walking to/from school, negotiating the playground, going to others' homes and inviting others home) – may generate affective interactions and social intimacy. Drawing on Amin's (2002, 2012) notions of 'micro-publics' and 'collaborative strangers', the paper first examines how sites of social resource bind diverse populations together in sustained social and spatial proximities with difference and then outlines the project's design. It goes on to consider the *situated* nature of school-based social interactions, suggesting that these are connective, radiating out to a range of other social spaces both locally and in the intensely personal home spaces of parents and their children. Finally, the conclusion returns to consider the primary school as generative; a shared social resource where, even if exchange is mostly avoided or slight, the situated and sustained experience of the school world requires interaction with difference.

Connecting encounters to places and social resources

The concerns about the overly rose-tinted interpretations of encounter debates tend to focus on the over-claiming of their transformative potential. What has perhaps been

given less attention is the emphasis that literature has put on the contradictory possibilities of encounters of difference; they have the potential to be deeply antagonistic as well as open and engaged. This is what Back (1996) identified as the 'metropolitan paradox' and what others Gilroy (2004), Noble (2009), Karner and Parker (2011) and Neal et al. (2013, 2015) have noted: that conflict and tension are integral to the unpredictable dynamics of conviviality and the lived experience of intense formations of difference in urban environments.

The tendency in encounter literature to focus on the mobile populations inhabiting the informal, busy spaces of urban landscapes – shopping centres (Wise 2010; Anderson 2011), markets (Watson 2006, Rhys-Taylor 2013), buses (Wilson 2011), parks (Neal et al. 2015), cafes (Hall 2012; Jones et al. 2015) and the street (Nast and Blokland 2014, Hall 2015) – has contributed to a sense of the slightness of any convivial impact. Socially, little is owed or expected of unknown others in these settings beyond an urban etiquette and a relatively low threshold of social care and civility. Even in the encounter work that examines repeated contact and interaction through residential proximity and suburban neighbourliness – such as Wise's (2009: 37) study of practices of gift giving and the capacity of such neighbourly practices to 'dissolve boundaries' – the focus tends to be on informal, elective socialities between only loosely connected others.

We retain a concern with the examination of convivial interaction through the optics of everyday, micro-social life. But we also seek to incorporate social class and locality into understandings of complex ethnic differentiations, and focus on affective social interactions in semi-formal, welfare-related social resource settings in order to map more granulated configurations of conviviality. Exploring the relationships between socially and ethnically complex urban populations who share a social resource such as school builds on Amin's concept of the 'micro-publics of everyday social contact' (2002: 969). We seek to add empirical detail to the argument that encounters in sites such as 'workplaces, schools, colleges, youth centres, sports clubs' are more likely to have meaning and impact because of the 'compulsory' nature of the coming together of different others. We suggest that not only are primary schools micro-public sites but they also connect into wider social networks. As Collins and Coleman (2008: 281) argue, primary schools 'are central to the social geographies of everyday life', and have a 'social significance for households [and] neighbourhoods' (2008: 282) as well as an 'ability to foster a sense of community' (2008: 291).

This means that they are associated with particular collective activities and, as locally situated, social institutions with community and family 'hub' associations, primary schools 'are places that matter to many people' (Collins and Coleman 2008: 296). In this context, we use Amin's later concept of 'collaborative strangers' to analyse social interactions and attachments within and extending out from primary school worlds. The concept of collaborative strangers highlights the ways in which differentiated others can come together in 'joint endeavour' and 'productive collective venture' [but] without the expectation that they will necessarily 'develop close affinities' (Amin 2012: 56). The emphasis that the concept gives to the significance of a 'light' togetherness particularly resonates with primary schools worlds, because they involve repeated and routinised encounters between an intergenerational, semi-closed, school 'user' population over an extended period of time (5–6 years) but also because they can generate a collective institutional mutuality (caring about a school) and lead to wider encounters and social interactions

in associated public, semi-public and home spaces. In short, primary schools are socially productive sites.

The paper uses the data from the research project to reimagine and pluralise conviviality as a dynamic and contradictory set of socio-spatial practices for engaging in and managing complex urban encounters created through school-based relationships.

The project

Our two-year project has been qualitatively designed and has an ethnographic inflection. Focused on three primary schools with mixed social class and multi-ethnic populations, the data were collected through various interviewing strategies and observation methods. As well as interviews with children we completed 58 individual interviews with parents (using interpreters where necessary) and 12 with teaching and school staff. We spent approximately 300 hours observing at school events such as assemblies, fetes, fairs, parents evenings, as well as spending time in contiguous local environments. Interpreters were available for participants but these were only required in a small number of interviews. The interviews with parents lasted between one and two hours. Parents were asked to self-define their class and ethnicity and that of their children. All the interview data were fully transcribed and each interview intra-text and inter-text analysed and coded with NVivo.

The research is based in a multicultural, super-diverse London geography characterised by a complex mix of older migrant, newer migrant, never migrant populations. This ethnic diversity is intensified by the gentrification taking place in all the schools' locations. Gentrification is more extensively and deeply established in some areas than others but the social mix delivered through gentrification is a feature of each of the schools in which we have been working. The schools were chosen as sites of class and ethnic diversity with the help of a range of official data and local knowledge. We spent approximately 10 weeks in each school spending 1–2 days per week in the Year 4 class of each school. This ethnographic 'being in' the school, the classroom and the locale facilitated our embeddedness in the wider geography of each school as well as within the school itself.

Our 'nested' immersion within the classroom, within a school, within a locality was used as the basis for getting to know, invite and recruit adult participants. Participant recruitment strategies involved us building from being familiar faces and providing information sheets to using the time we spent in schools' playgrounds, at home and drop-off time, at assemblies, school events and in parent rooms to chat to and invite parents to be involved in the project. The classroom teachers would also introduce us to parents. We also used snowballing techniques and the social networks of the parents as we were 'passed on' to friends and other parents once a few parents had vouched for us.

We were very aware we working within a complex environment in which parents might be more (or less) willing to talk to us because they knew we were in the classroom doing research work with their children. We were also aware that adults might feel more pressure to talk to us because we were located within the school environment although we emphasised in the invitations and project information the voluntary nature of participation. We also recognised that we would have much less opportunity to include parents who did not engage with the primary school world for a variety of reasons (e.g. work, time, confidence, exclusion, health and choice). The normative nature of a project on friendships –

that is, with the implicit assumption that friendships are a positive social relationship – also made the project data collection vulnerable to participants telling us what they thought we might want to hear. While there is insufficient space to reflect on these tensions here it is important to recognise that our data come from accessing particular populations and collecting partial and subjective narratives from participants.

We worked in three case study primary schools – Leewood, Junction and Fernhill – each within six miles of the other, but each is located in a quite distinct social geography within inner London.

Leewood School is located in a relatively affluent area, within a socially polarised London borough. The school is surrounded by mixture of social housing estates and expensive owner-occupied housing. A large, well-used park is a short walk away. Leewood School is in an area of well-established, *entrenched* gentrification. The boutique cafes, shops and facilities that are very close to the school are indicative of a well-established middle-class presence in the area. The school is over-subscribed and attracts an ethnically and socially mixed pupil group; 19.7 per cent of Leewood's pupils receive Free School Meals (FSM) (below the national average) and the school population reflects the ethnic diversity of the area with pupils having family origins in the UK, Caribbean, Turkey and various African countries.

Junction School is located in a quiet residential street that has a little play area and a small park at either end. The street is just off a major traffic and commercial artery that leads to a well-used shopping centre. The area is busy, socially mixed and visibly multi-ethnic and this is reflected in the mixed nature of discount shops, cafes and facilities. There are no large social housing estates in the immediate catchment area of the school and the residential roads that surround it are dominated large Victorian and Edwardian terrace houses. Some of these have been converted into flats, but others remain as houses. This is an area of *emergent* gentrification as reflected in the recent appearance of boutique cafés, organic food shops and rising house prices. Junction School is increasingly popular with local middle-class families. In the school, 32.8 per cent of pupils receive FSM. Pupils have family origins in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, South American and Eastern European countries, as well as the UK.

Fernhill School is located in a grid of residential streets about a five-minute walk from two busy main roads where there is a mix of discount shops, boutique cafes, pubs, chain restaurants and estate agents. It is surrounded by a number of social housing estates, new build developments and Victorian terraces. There is a large and well-used park about a 10-minute walk from the school. Parts of the local area are also experiencing housing and commercial redevelopment and there are pockets of well-established gentrification reflecting a more *partial* gentrification. The school is popular and socially and ethnically diverse. It has a small but established middle-class pupil group and a relatively high percentage (38.7 per cent) of pupils receiving FSM. The family origins of pupils include the UK, Somalia, the Caribbean, Turkey and Eastern European countries.

Convivial space? Social exchange and friendship-making in primary school worlds

In their study, Savage *et al.* (2005: 143) found that most participants identified their close friends as having been made in childhood or at their children's schools. In our study it was

similarly apparent that in our participants' adult lives, schools continued to work as friendship-making sites. Nearly all of the participants in our three schools had established some degree of friendship and social networks through their child/children attending primary school. However, there was significant variation in the depth and type of these friendship formations.

We have suggested (Vincent *et al.* 2015) that adult friendships tend to reflect uneven degrees of intimacy. While some friendship forms correspond to Spencer and Pahl's definition of friends as 'comforters, confidants and soulmates' acting 'as a vital safety net providing much needed support and intimacy' (2006: 197, 210), other friendships are more situational and life-course generated. As one participant, Aarthi (a mixed heritage, middle-class mother at Leewood School) explained in relation to her children's school, 'you see a lot of circumstantial friendships' and another parent (a white English middle-class mother at Leewood School) pointed to the significance of 'disposable friends'. These descriptions echo with Savage *et al.*'s findings that less contact is required with 'best friends', while 'high contact' friendships tend not to be so emotionally intense. The situational focus of these friendship descriptions is also consistent with the work of Smart *et al.* who suggest that there is 'movement in and out of friendships' and that 'friendship, like kinship, cannot be a static relationship' (2012: 92). However, the seeming paradox of high contact but thinner, situational friendships does not mean that these were unimportant friendships. A recurring pattern across our interview conversations with all the parents was that primary schools were a key source of affective connections and these could be emotionally meaningful and supportive social relationships. We return to Aarthi here because she was not unusual in her description of how, despite the circumstantial friendships that she saw and had herself experienced, her closest and most valued friendships had come from meeting people at Leewood School where each of her three children were or had been pupils,

> I think the friendships that I have had that have been most enduring have been the ones that I have had with the parent's of C's [son] classmates, my oldest boy, and S's [daughter] classmate's parents.

Alongside experiences of situational and long-lasting friendships made through their children's schools was a recognition of the importance of the school as a key setting for *making* friends and building wider social connections through these relationships as Elif, a Turkish, working-class, middle-aged parent, explains,

> It is not easy to make new friends, new social groups, you do it through kids' schools or your school if you are studying or your job. But mostly I think these days we do make, most of us, friends through our kids' school because if you want to be involved in the school life that is what you do. You do learn more about people through your kids' friendships.

Elif's reference to 'most of us' is gendered if only because most of the parents directly involved in school life are women. Harry (a white English, working-class, middle-aged long-term resident, Leewood School) contrasts what happens when his partner (also white English working-class middle-aged) takes the children to school with his own experience:

> She knows a lot of other people, like in the school. She gets on with a lot of people, so she tends to … it could take her twenty minutes to get out of the playground after she drops

Serena off, whereas I'm usually in and out … [Laughter] and like home by five past nine. She's rolling in at half nine and I'm thinking like where have you been? That's just from her chatting to everyone in the playground!

However, what is perhaps more significant in these friendship accounts is the emphasis that both Elif and Harry place on the school as *generative* of friendship relations and as a wider environment of affective and communal social care. This is consistent with Hage (1998, 2003) and Amin (2012) who use notions of the ethics of care and public care to refer to a non-defensive, more open and mutual recognition of others. A hopeful reciprocity lies at the heart of such ideas – Hage refers to the 'very *presence* of the other as a gift' as this presence may elicit our humanity for example (2003: 151). In her interview Rabia, a Pakistani, working-class, young parent at Junction School, highlighted how, by being part of what Hage calls 'an imaginary collectivity' (2003: 99), the particular interactive civilities of the primary school world and the concomitant encounters between parents meant that primary schools differed from other social sites,

> I think the school is the best place, when you go and see each other and you meet people, otherwise if you stay home you don't do anything, you don't go out, you don't get to see any other person you know. Normally when you go shopping and stuff you don't see people and say 'Hello Hi', it is just I think school and if you go to the different like little parties or functions, these are community functions or get together then you get to see [other people] … I think it is probably because you go every day, you see them every day, so obviously you will get to know them and you will meet many people.

As well as identifying the civic interaction that school world *requires* from those who are within it Rabia, (like Elif and Harry), also picks up on the importance of the ways in which familiarity and public intimacy are accumulated through the routine 'you go every day and see them every day' practices of being part of the school world. In the three schools, the routines tended to generate what we would call 'civil attention' or the tacit and affective acknowledgement of others (see Noble 2015). While one of us has used Goffman's (1963) concept of civil *in*attention to examine how brand café spaces are used by multicultural others (see Jones *et al*. 2015), we refine this notion slightly here to one that involves a recognition of others who inhabit and share the same (school) world. In his distinction between 'collaborating strangers' and 'co-present strangers', Amin (2012: 37) emphasises labour and practices, as it is 'the nature of work that sustains productive alignment between strangers' (2012: 37). Over time it is processes of 'doing' which bind and enrol strangers into the shared project as particular populations are more interdependently, intimately and repeatedly thrown together as they access a social resource through shared material spaces.

As an enrolment project, the world of the primary school amplifies the need for collaborative practice. The thickness of interaction and acknowledgment will vary significantly – from a smile, passing hi, hello greetings, holding open a door, to more developed friendship relations – but there is a thin line of civil *attention* that runs through all these practices. This thin line or minimum threshold is similar to the 'delicate adjustment' to the presence of the other that is a feature of civil inattention (Goffman 1963: 76). What makes it possible to talk of civil *attention*, however, is the extent to which there is more

of an orientation towards discursive and non-discursive (smiles and nods were experienced by participants as convivial codes) recognition of collaborative belonging. At the same time it is also necessary to acknowledge that we observed and were told about clusterings of parent friendship groups and experiences of feeling excluded, which sometimes had social class and/or ethnic dimensions and for some participants meant that school environments were not experienced as easy social spaces.

But, we would emphasise that participants did not always or straightforwardly view particular ethnic clusterings with unease or as necessarily divisive or exclusive. For example, Elif's interview reveals a more complex response to the ethnicised social interaction she sees in the school:

> In a way I think it is mixed but in other ways I think not. Because it's okay for them to say to each other 'hello' in a few minutes, but then again there are groups that I can see in the playground that most of the mums kind of go with their cultures. I can see Turkish ones kind of becoming a little group. Germans, we have quite many Germans now. The Germans are kind of becoming their own group. And we have Somali mums they are kind of becoming their little group. I can see that they are trying to act together.

> As long as those people socialise I have no problem because I don't like to see people stone faced, walking around, I think it is a good thing and they all bring different qualities to school …

Same ethnicity parent clusterings are not seen as problematic per se by Elif because they do not prevent a wider set of practices in which parents acknowledge each other (the quick hellos) and can come together, while their sociality also lends itself to a wider sociality (people not being 'stony faced'). We have already detailed Rabia's work around sociality in Junction school but her efforts to cross ethnic difference in a similar way were also apparent:

> I go and say 'Hello, Hi' to everybody in the morning and at night time like afternoon as well. [I know] loads of people […] It is not like from Pakistan it is everybody like, so I just say 'Hello', but especially the kids' friends, so we know the parents, so we say, 'Hello Hi' basically.

Our observations of school spaces tended to confirm them as sites of collaborative sociality and friendly interactions which varied from the 'Hi, hello' exchanges Rabia identifies to friendship groupings and more intimate friendships. The playgrounds were the most obvious settings for observing these but other public spaces in the schools, such as the foyer areas in Leewood and Fernhill Schools which had comfortable seating with cheerful notice boards and the well-used Parents' Room at Junction School, also worked to invite lingering, chatting and interaction. This is not to gloss over the experiences of unease or of parents who 'look a bit tired and bored' as one parent at Fernhill School described the social landscape of playground. It is rather to confirm that the routinised, etiquette-demanding spaces of primary schools are first, very difficult (although not impossible) to navigate *without* some civic and social interaction; second, such familiarities and social interactions do generate friendships/friendship-like social relations and third, they have an *accumulative* sensory effect of creating *atmospheres* of social engagement and mutual recognition (see Anderson 2014) which are able to incorporate ethnic diversity and cultural difference. The extent to which these extend beyond school spaces is what we consider next.

Schools as connective conviviality sites

As well as approaching schools as collaborative sites of encounter we also see primary schools as *situated* institutions. As Collins and Coleman (2008: 291) note 'the social geographies of schools extends well beyond their physical boundaries […] they are sites of common experience within neighbourhoods, which link different generations and provide a physical site for the maintenance of local social contacts'. Primary schools are not a discrete or bounded social resource but can be better understood in *topological* terms, acting as nodes within webs of localised social connection. Social relations are made in, around, through and outside of schools creating social and spatial associations between the school and related elsewhere (see Allen 2016). So, for example, Fareeda, a parent at Junction School, told us,

> My sister-in-law […] she came over and we all went [out locally] for a meal and I think every few yards, she was like, 'Oh my God you are like a celebrity'. It was the half term holiday and it was [constantly], 'Oh Hello' you know, and [all] the mums – because everyone is out and about aren't they? So it is nice, it is not just something that happens in school. I know when I am outside, if I don't know someone they will say […], it is nice to introduce people that can help other people or just, you know, even friendship-wise, it is nice isn't it, someone to talk to?

In this account, the extension of school-based relationships into the wider, non-school environment is affectively experienced and valued (e.g. Fareeda uses 'nice' repeatedly). What Fareeda describes as her social interactions both inside and outside of her child's school is a primary school's mix of topology *and* topography. There is a geographic proximity to her experience of the school space but this can mutate beyond being 'place-based in a simple territorial sense' (Allen and Cochrane 2014: 1614) into broader networks of school-related convivial social interactions and recognitions.

'Our' schools (like many primary schools) are very much *within* their local geographies. The schools' proximity to residential streets means that children primarily walk to school and the daily journeys to and from school are part of the connective, iterative extension of schools into the streets, pavements and shops. The practices of drop-off and collection, of walking with and then without children, increase the likelihood of interaction and a number of participants spoke of this as being their first point of establishing friendship exchanges and public intimacies with others involved in the same spatial and social process (see also Vowden 2012). This sharing of routes and walks to and from school highlights the productive nature of space for social exchange and friendship relations, as routine spatial practices work to draw people together. More than just the proximity of diversity, it is the same spaces being used for the same things by different groups, which that allow and facilitate connection.

This spatial productivity extended to neighbour relationships in which residential and school intimacies overlapped and intersected. As Ava (Leewood School parent, African Caribbean working-class, long-term resident) explained to us,

> INT: […] obviously you know Pippa's dad because you were talking to him. Do you know the other parents?
>
> A: Yeah, Cindy's mum. Naomi used to go there [to Cindy's house] every Wednesday after school, so yeah we used to go there a lot. Cindy's mum, Aisha's mum, Gabra's mum –

and I think because we all live next to each other as well, Ashleigh's mum [too] … so we always see each other out of the school.

Ava is describing a working-class friendship group which was ethnically diverse and whose members had known each other over time as neighbours on the social housing estate close to Leewood. In Junction School there was also a strong friendship group that walked to school together, was sociable, had friendship relations and lived in the same small network of roads. Unlike Ava's, this group was predominantly white English and middle class in a newly-gentrifying locality and there was a sense in which members of this group deliberately sought each other out and were seen by other parents as doing so. Lorna's narrative affirms how the walk to and from school is a friendship encounter but also identifies the ways in which the walking-to-school and friendship connection is socially ordered:

> I often walk back with Jordan's mum […], but mostly people – apart from the people who live in the Gate [network of residential roads] that is quite a tight knit community, there is a definite group of those people. They are all very friendly [with each other] and obviously do lots of things together.

While these residential geographies were quite mixed, with social housing estates and owner-occupied housing close by each other, the school walk especially at Junction School mostly appeared to reinforce social orderings, although the journey retained a potency as a space of conviviality. Friend-like exchanges were always either present or possible in the 'hi hello' public intimacy of the rhythms and routines of school arrival and departure. Other social spaces in the schools' environments – shops, bus stops, sitting places, parks and local cafes – also contributed to this convivial landscape. For example, in the established gentrification around Leewood School the abundance of boutique, independent cafes had facilitated a flourishing sociality of going for a coffee after/ before the school drop-off. Our field-notes detail seeing some of the participants sitting in what they described in their interviews as, their 'favourite' cafes just around the corner of Leewood School before school began as well as after the morning drop-off. The newer or more partial gentrification around Junction and Fernhill Schools meant there were fewer boutique cafes although those that existed were a particular focus for sociality among middle-class parents.

Going to these cafés was often a heavily classed practice with certain café spaces articulating a particular class 'grammar' which also worked across ethnicity with, some of the middle-class black and minority ethnic participants also using these boutique café spaces (see Anderson 2011). However, some cheaper Turkish cafes (at Leewood and Junction Schools) were used by ethnically diverse and more social class mixed groups of parents, while (at Junction and Fernhill Schools) brand cafes such as Costa, which present a more class and culturally 'neutral' environment, were also used by a range of parents (see Jones et al. 2015). In her work on place and, specifically, in her concept of urban space as 'thrown-together', Doreen Massey (2005) reminds us that space gets shaped by co-existing 'distinct trajectories'. As a result, what appear to be the same material spaces, are very differently experienced, felt, used, avoided by different populations that make up 'local populations' (see also Hall 2012). In this context these café spaces can be understood as sites where school-based adult friendship relations and networks were enacted, practised and

maintained, but they also highlight the ways in which such sites may reproduce or sustain difference particularly in terms of social class.

It was local parks, particularly at Leewood School where the park was close to the school, but also the park near Fernhill School, that presented the most socially and ethnically mixed sites of convivial exchange and friendship related sociality (see Neal *et al.* 2015). While Amin (2012: 59) argues that co-present strangers in public spaces and collaborating strangers in organisational settings are different and produce distinct forms of common habitation or togetherness, green public spaces with their sensory materialities (trees, benches, lawns, lakes and walkways) and their civic associations (play grounds, tennis courts, football pitches and band stands) can work as inclusive sites which bridge co-presence and collaboration. In their work on green public space, Neal *et al.* (2015) suggest that these play a key role in senses of localised attachment. The parks near to Leewood and Fernhill were routinely used by the schools for various events such as classroom trips, school sports days and school picnics. But these park spaces, especially the one next to Leewood School, were also heavily used by the participants and frequently identified by both the child and adult participants as one of the special attributes of the school's locality, as sites of meeting up, being in and 'bumping into' well-known and less known but recognised parents. For example, Mira (mixed heritage, middle class mother) explained how she had been sitting in the perk and been joined by a parent from her son's class to whom she had not really ever spoken before. They sat on the bench and chatted 'for ages' and the parent's older daughter now did babysitting for Mira. Kaleb too spoke about the ways in which the park worked as a spontaneous social and destination place for parents and children, 'you can call, let's meet, it's a nice shiny sunny day, so come on get out (laughs), bring Gabra, or bring Harley to the park and you meet there'. The park space at Junction School was used rather differently. Not only was it more of a green strip of land beside a busy road, but it was not generally viewed by parents as a destination site or a place to linger and chat, although this did happen in a small recreational play area close by the school. Some of the more recent migrant parents however, particularly those from Eastern Europe, spoke more fondly of this space and used it as a place to meet up and socialise with their families.

Green public spaces, with their children's recreational facilities, were sites of shared convivial resource as well as settings in which school-based friendship relations were enacted and 'done', which is consistent with work that has focused on the role of park spaces for fostering senses of belonging and attachment among diverse populations (Neal *et al.* 2015). If public and semi-public spaces were sites into which school-based social intimacies and related friendship-making and practices stretched, potentially interrupting and reinforcing ethnic and social difference, what of the more private geographies of home spaces?

Home spaces, social intimacy and school-based friendships

In her work on social relations in the super-diverse context of Hackney, Wessendorf (2014) has argued that while mixing and interaction across cultural difference in public and parochial (semi-public) space is increasingly commonplace and taken for granted, what she calls private social spaces, remain sites of separation and division, 'people deal with diversity on a day to day basis in public and parochial space. But privately, at home and with friends, they want to relax and not deal with negotiations of difference'

(144). While Wessendorf uses private social spaces primarily to mean more intimate social networks and friendships, home spaces are at times alluded to as part of private space (for example, 'people go home separately' 2014: 145) and while we also found some of the homophily that Wessendorf identifies in her participants' friendship networks, it was apparent that, at times, home space reflected the topological nature of the primary school world becoming part of the connective reach of school-based social intimacies and (adults and children's) friendships between public and personal geographies.

The extension of school-based social relationships and friendships into the intimacy of home spaces was often ambivalent, complex and at times, avoided. Home space was distinct as a site of difference encounter and particularly managed. Anxieties over home space and school-based friendships were sometimes expressed in worries about the home environments of other parents relating to a range of care practices – such as the provision of right food, supervision of bed times, television and Internet access and the like – as well as to more generic concerns about trust and the safety of a child. As Iman, a black African, middle-class, Fernhill mother explains,

> in this country it is hard to trust, you have to make sure who is at home you know. So that is what bothers me, is it like a really safe environment, you have to make sure who is at home.

Alongside these worries other participants agonised about the ways in which ethnic and social class differences within home spaces might be difficult and uncomfortable (see also Neal and Vincent 2013). A version of this social unease is present in Elizabeth's (a white English, middle-class Junction School mother) deliberations over using home spaces for her son's school-based ethnically mixed friendship group,

> I have thought about inviting some of Ollie's friends from his class and their parents all round here and I've never done it because … I'm not sure how it would be enjoyable for the parents, it would be awkward. Although as I talk to you now I think, oh I must do that, it would be good. But again it would be an effort and because it would be an effort I don't know who would come and who wouldn't …

Elizabeth's reluctance to let school-based social relations into her home and the ambivalence that accompanies this has a number of articulations – the labour involved (it would be an 'effort') and social discomfort (it would be 'awkward') does not dispel a sense that using her home as a site of sociality for diverse adults and children 'would be good'. In the hesitancies in Elizabeth's position there are glimpses of how conflict and unease might get translated from being obstacles to social intimacy to being a basis for the negotiation of affective social interaction. In contrast to Elizabeth, there were other more straightforward narratives of home spaces being deliberately used as sites of inclusive school-related socialising and friendship practices. For example, Elif (a working-class Turkish parent at Leewood School) told us that,

> … because my place is small we don't do the big parties [… but] you know I had one before Christmas, I invited the mums from the school. Only the mums from [child's] class and the mums that I do know from the other classrooms as well … Yes, for everyone I cooked … yes, [and] my friend had the evening party … We are doing a little evening drinks [and] at Halloween we had [a party] at my friend's house.

Home spaces were, then – whether avoided as, or a focus for, social intimacy and friendship practices – part of the landscape in which school-related friendship and social care

relations were enacted and had to be routinely negotiated by parents. Nadeem, a working-class, Muslim father at Junction School, explained how his son's in-school friendships regularly involved home spaces in their out-of-school friendship activities,

> most of my son's friends are – two of them are English – Sam and Harley, they invite him round, we invite his friends round […]. So they have come round to our house, he has gone round to their houses to play.

As Nadeem's comments illustrate, the nature of the social world of primary schools and the extent to which children use and rely on home spaces for their friendships – for play dates, birthday parties, sleep overs – meant that parents were at times required to interact convivially with each other and most parents had experienced and/or evolved a variety of strategies for managing their own and their children's friendships in home spaces. Kaleb, whom we cited in our introduction, explained his experience of this,

> … apart from school events there are occasions in which you get to know other parents better [and] one of the best events is birthday parties. So we invite their parents and they also invite us. And in those occasions we will have the opportunity to sit down together with them and have little discussions […] in those situations, you exchange ideas [….] so it is useful to have parents you know. But those parents, especially the parents of the children who are very close to our children […] we are building up close relationships with their families as well, in particular with opportunities like birthdays and like that.

Kaleb's account, like Elif's, shows that school-sourced but home-based social intimacy may become established through birthday parties and similar celebratory/get together occasions which may generate interaction across difference for both children and adults in personal geographies. This is not to suggest these encounters are straightforward or easy. Some of the labour of convivial interaction can be heard in Kaleb's description of birthday parties with his use of terms such as 'little discussions', 'building up relationships' and 'using opportunities'. In all the accounts there is a sense that participants engage in careful and deliberated strategies for managing difference in home space. While we are cautious about over-claiming the extent to which home spaces became sites of extended encounter – we have noted that they were sites of difference anxiety and deliberate avoidance – we suggest that the stretch of the primary school-based social interactions and friendship relations means that home spaces are entangled in the experience of living with proximate difference and known and unknown others. Most of the participants had strategies for managing difference in their own and their children's school-based friendships outside of the school world and while these were enacted and worried over in a variety of ways, what is evidenced is the ways in which the personal geographies of home space were not simply bounded or privatised from difference but were, through the topology of the school world, also sites of exchange requiring convivial negotiation.

Conclusions

We began by arguing for the importance of social geography in considering understanding social intimacies acquired over time and through collective sharing and use of social resource and while the work on encounter and conviviality is often very much set in place (see, Back 1996, Wise and Velayutham 2009, Hall, 2012, Neal and Vincent 2013, Rhys-Taylor 2013, Wessendorf 2014) the ways in which sustained encounters of difference

travel *between* and *extend* into connected but distinct material spaces has received less empirical attention. The project's primary schools can be understood as *situated, co-productive* resource sites where the social interactions and relationships made within them topologically extend and get iteratively maintained elsewhere.

In this context, we consider primary school worlds as generative of affective social relationships – *all* of the participants in our study had formed friendships through their children's schools – and as sites in which localised social relations in rapidly changing and heterogeneous urban environments have to be navigated. While there has been comment on the social capital building role of primary schools in localities and communities (see Hillyard and Bagely 2013 for example) what, as Collins and Coleman (2008) note, has been less scrutinised are the ways in which primary schools and their geographies work as intergenerational collaborative spaces, as children's social worlds demand that parents negotiate difference in their personal lives. We have drawn on data to suggest that this can give rise to social networks and in some instances generate adult friendship relations, emphasising how a primary school world can be collective experience, shared over time, in which social interaction between unknown and different others is difficult to avoid.

In this context, we add empirical depth and develop Amin's (2002) identification of micro-publics to suggest that the nature of the social resource being shared and the wider social geography of the particular site of multicultural interaction matter. Amin's (2012) later emphasis on collaborative and co-present strangers is also helpful here. In this delineation it is possible to see how primary schools operate as 'common ground' (Amin 2012: 78–80) spaces in which civil attention or what might be thought of as *civic conviviality* contributes to the collective, interdependent use of social resource by diverse known and unknown others. This is not to underplay tensions or antagonisms within this environment but to suggest that given this mutualism there are processes of management and resolution of these. Elif's 'mixed but not mixed' observation about the presence of particular, ethically identifiable groups of parents in the Leewood playground provides an example of such a process. Elif chose to focus on the broader contribution of these friendship groups to the convivial atmosphere of the playground even as she is outside of (some of) these. This returns us to our earlier emphasis on the contradictions of conviviality. Incorporating conflict and ambivalence within the concept opens up a focus on non-defensive strategies for managing complex difference. In this way civic conviviality is a more dynamic, reflexive and ongoing form of social negotiation. This process can involve the recognition of proximate difference and the need to negotiate the diversity of those relationships that are developed through being part of the primary school world as Kaleb's, Rabia's and Nadeem's accounts each evidence. There are still practices of classed and ethnicised avoidance, exclusion and social ordering as parents seek the reassurance of others like them – groups of similar people in the playground, going to a certain café, the careful governance of home space – even as there are processes of recognition and dialogue with others. Put differently, being part of primary school worlds often *requires* forms of civil attention and may generate collaborative practice which gives a 'more than just proximity of difference' dynamic to social relations within schools and beyond the boundaries of the school space. Our data show connective social and spatial threads running through the local and personal geographies of those who are part of their world.

This is not to diminish the significance of intersecting ethnic and social stratifications and the capacities for cultural defensiveness and difference avoidance (see Elizabeth's

narrative for example), but in social resource settings a range of factors can interfere with and interrupt separations, creating the possibilities for sustained encounters, interactions and social bonds. These include, for example, the friendships and friendship activities of children; the school world with its routines and events – such as sports day, assemblies, parents' evenings, fetes and the like – and the location of the primary schools within the neighbourhood. These sites and events, marked by social intimacy as well as proximity, lend themselves to the forms of social gifting and collective imaginary identified by Hage. Within urban primary school worlds proximate, diverse populations *have* to be routinely managed and collaboratively negotiated and, as Lorna, Fareeda and Rabia demonstrate, friendship and convivial practices contribute to this process.

We have suggested that a focus on the sustained sharing of social resource and the *where* of convivial relations highlights the tensions and ambivalences of ethnic and social difference in adults' friendships as social orderings are made up and reinforced. But it also confirms the extent to which exchanges across difference were an ordinary part of school-based interactions and the navigation of school-related, connective spaces outside of school – the immediate surrounding geographies (the streets, local shops, cafes and parks) and, at times, the personal geographies of the home. We have shown that the spatial dynamics of social and friendship relations were an unpredictable, but always contributive presence, in shaping the possibilities of convivial practices.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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