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Middle-Class Versus Working-Class White Mothers' Approaches to Diversity in the Netherlands

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Abstract

There is a large body of literature on how white middle-class parents select schools for their children in gentrifying urban contexts. In this study, we aimed to explore the experiences of such parents after enrolling their children in ethnically mixed schools but also how these experiences varied in gentrifying urban contexts and smaller cities. We interviewed mothers without a migration background living in a large city (Amsterdam) or a medium-sized city (Tilburg) who had chosen to send their children to an ethnically mixed school in a majority–minority neighbourhood, asking them to reflect on their neighbourhood choice, school choice, and subsequent experiences. Based on our analysis, we developed a typology of parents' positions towards diversity, whereby they could be described as idealists, pragmatists, and realists. Aligned with previous studies, this article shows that the *idealist* position on diversity was more common among the white middle classes in Amsterdam, who expressed a positive attitude towards diversity but engaged with it to a controlled and limited extent. However, we also identified a group of mothers, mostly working class but also middle class, who did not take an idealized approach to diversity but embraced it as a lived reality. The study underlines the importance of mothers' engagement with diversity during their own childhood and youth as an important factor in shaping parenting behaviour around diversity.

Keywords

Amsterdam; diversity; middle class; mothers; parenting; school choice; working class

1. Introduction

Increasing ethnic diversity in urban cities has resulted in so-called majority–minority cities and neighbourhoods: places where the demographic makeup means that no group has numerical majority status (Crul & Lelie, 2021). This increased ethnic diversity goes hand-in-hand with gentrification processes, which also leads to the diversification of social class backgrounds among residents as middle-class residents move into neighbourhoods populated by working-class groups. While diversity in urban settings is not limited to ethnicity or social class, these are the most influential dimensions, especially when it comes to understanding social mixing and inter-group relations.

Increased ethnic and social class diversity in urban areas has also had a direct impact on schools in these neighbourhoods, creating various interesting dynamics concerning school choice and relations within and surrounding schools (Keskiner & Waldring, 2023). One popular area of research has been the school choices of white middle-class parents who have moved into gentrifying areas (Hernández, 2019). These studies, however, mainly focus on school choice and rarely delve into how relations between children and parents evolve once parents have decided to send their child to an ethnically mixed school. Although most studies on diversity experience and social mixing are almost exclusively conducted within the context of large cities (Crozier et al., 2008; Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007), ethnic diversity and mixed schools are also to be found in smaller, medium-sized cities. This presents us with an opportunity to understand diversity under different conditions. While large, super-diverse cities are home to people from both higher and lower social classes and various ethnic backgrounds due to the impact of gentrification processes, medium-sized cities may be more homogeneous in terms of social class background while still embodying ethnic diversity and the impact of gentrification, albeit to a lesser extent (Distelbrink et al., 2024).

Comparing the experiences of mothers without a migration background (referred to as white mothers) in Amsterdam versus Tilburg, this study aims to fill the aforementioned gaps in the literature by scrutinizing (a) how white mothers who select ethnically mixed schools engage with diversity and (b) how their experiences vary in gentrifying areas in large cities as opposed to working-class areas in medium-sized cities.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. School Choice in Gentrifying Areas

Middle-class parents who moved into gentrifying areas, which are diverse in terms of the ethnicity and social class backgrounds of their residents, are often faced with a choice when it comes to selecting a school for their children. Once they have entered this new living environment, parents must choose whether to send their children to a diverse neighbourhood school or opt for a school with a larger middle-class composition outside the neighbourhoods. Many white middle-class parents have chosen the latter option (Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007). Scrutinizing the relationship between school choice and living in a gentrifying area using national-level data in the US, Candipan (2020) finds that when nearby school choice options are available, parents in gentrifying neighbourhoods are more likely than those in socioeconomically stable or declining neighbourhoods to avoid ethnically diverse neighbourhood schools, opting instead for schools that match their ethnic and social class background. However, middle-class parents do not form a homogenous group, and a new wave of studies has shown that some middle-class parents in gentrifying areas do select diverse

schools in their neighbourhood (Hernández, 2019). During the selection process, parents pursue a range of strategies such as seeking "the right mix," to ensure their child does not fall into a minority (Byrne, 2006), or bearing a specific "threshold" in mind regarding the composition of the school and the number of children from a specific background (Boterman, 2022). This careful act of controlling diversity in school choice is also coupled with an appreciation of diversity (Tissot, 2014). These parents perceive attending mixed schools or living in diverse neighbourhoods as a crucial component of middle-class identity which will hopefully help their children develop a form of "multi-cultural capital" that will enable them to be comfortable with diversity (Evans, 2021; Underhill, 2019). Hence even when parents do choose ethnically mixed urban schools, they simultaneously display specific ideals and complex motives of altruism and instrumentalism which may not always lead to inclusive or equal school practices (Crozier et al., 2008). We need to go beyond school decision processes to see how these decisions play out in practices and everyday experiences in diverse school settings for middle-class parents who chose ethnically mixed schools. The literature on middle-class parents in gentrifying areas shows that many of these residents are also newcomers to diversity and this may be the first time they have socialized with people from different ethnic and social class backgrounds (Evans, 2021), making their practical experiences more challenging.

2.2. School Choice in Non-Gentrifying Areas and Working-Class Areas

The majority of the literature on gentrifying neighbourhoods focuses on the school choices of middle-class parents. Some studies have focused on how white middle-class parents enrolling their children at diverse schools in gentrifying areas has led to working-class or ethnic minority parents feeling more excluded at these schools (Cucchiara, 2008). Kroeger's (2005) study of middle-class parental involvement at an ethnically and socially diverse school revealed the multiple obstacles that less privileged parents experienced in becoming involved in school events. These studies pointed more to the consequence of parents from different backgrounds mixing in the same school and how their experiences evolved over time. The literature on the school choices of working-class and ethnic minority parents remains rather limited. Bell (2009) compared the selection process of parents from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds in a Midwest city in the US and found that working-class and ethnic minority parents were also concerned with choosing the best academic options for their children. Their choices, however, were constrained by income, as private schools were not an option; by information, as their social networks could only provide useful information to a limited extent; and by proximity, as they were unable to move or travel for a better school. It has been found that working-class and ethnic minority parents living in ethnically diverse areas are more likely to select schools in the same areas compared to middle-class parents (Candipan, 2020). What requires further inquiry is how the experiences of working-class parents without a migration background evolve once they opt for an ethnically diverse school.

2.3. Beyond School Choice: Experiences of Diversity and the Discrepancy Between Ideals and Practices

While there is a large body of literature on the school choices of (mostly middle-class) parents, the ways in which parents engage with their surroundings once they have opted for a diverse school are rather understudied. When asked about school-related decisions, parents often talk about the expectations and ideals they had before selecting a certain school and how these are put to the test when their children actually start attending school. This discrepancy between ideals (attitudes) and practices (behaviour) regarding diversity has also been theorized by Crul and Lelie (2021) using diversity attitudes and practices

impact scales. These scales show that attitudes and behaviour about diversity may align when people are positive about ethnic diversity and also engage with it. They may, however, be at odds with each other when people express positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity without engaging with it. Kraus (2023) has empirically tested the diversity attitudes and practices impact scale using Becoming *a* Minority data. Controlling for social class background, Kraus (2023) showed that although middle-class people expressed enthusiasm about diversity, they didn't really engage with people from different ethnic backgrounds ("segregated enthusiasts"). She also talked about the group of people who are negative about diversity yet more engaged with it ("integrated sceptics"). Both studies underlined the complex nature of diversity experience which showed variance across middle- and working-class residents. Another critical finding of Kraus (2023) is how ideals and practices may start to align if residents live longer in their neighbourhood.

In studying the experiences of mothers with varying social class backgrounds in Amsterdam and Tilburg, we will pay attention to school choice but also to how this experience has evolved over time from the perspective of attitudes versus practices. By doing so, we aim to fill a gap in the literature by illustrating the complex nature of expectations and engagement practices and how these may or may not be aligned with each other.

3. Methods

3.1. The Case of the Netherlands: Selection of Neighbourhoods and Schools

In the Netherlands, large cities like Amsterdam are subject to both gentrification and increased ethnic diversity. In Amsterdam, 55 percent of the population has a migration background, making it a majority–minority setting. For this study, we selected our respondents from the gentrifying majority–minority neighbourhoods in West and Nieuw West. Our previous studies have shown that, in gentrifying neighbourhoods, residents without a migration background are usually newcomers who have bought a house and have a high education and income level (Keskiner & Waldring, 2023). This was also the case in our sample.

As a comparison, we selected Tilburg, a medium-sized city in the south of the Netherlands. This decision was primarily informed by the lack of literature on diversity experience in medium-sized cities. The selection of this particular city had a practical nature as one of our team members lived in Tilburg and was familiar with the area. Thirty percent of Tilburg's population has a migration background and, following a desk research of its majority–minority neighbourhoods, we focused on recruiting mothers from ethnically mixed schools located in majority–minority neighbourhoods in Tilburg-North and Tilburg-West. While there are some efforts at urban renewal in the area, the rate of gentrification is not comparable to that of Amsterdam. Hence, compared to the middle-class white mothers we encountered in Amsterdam, the mothers we spoke to here were more often educated to secondary school level and did not have high income levels.

In the Netherlands, parents have the freedom to choose their children's school. Proximity to home, the quality of the education on offer, or a school's special pedagogic/religious affiliation are known to play a prominent role in school choice (Karsten et al., 2006). In Amsterdam, there is also a postcode system where parents make a list of the schools they want their child to attend and are allocated a school at a later date.

In the areas we selected in Amsterdam and Tilburg, we visited two or three schools with an ethnically mixed student population. These schools did not officially participate in the research; instead, we recruited the

mothers in their schoolyard. All of these schools are public institutions where Dutch is the official language of instruction and communication (Distelbrink et al., 2024).

3.2. Interviews and Respondents

In selecting our respondents, we focused on mothers instead of both parents since it was difficult to recruit both parents in a consistent way in both settings. The mothers we spoke to had one or more children between the ages of 4 to 13, enrolled at a school with a mixed student population. The educational level of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

In the Netherlands, working-class or middle-class identities are not saliently acknowledged or communicated concepts (van Eijk, 2011). Instead, education levels serve as a proxy for social class (Bol, 2016). Therefore, we refer to mothers with a higher level of education and income as being middle class while working class is used to denote practically educated mothers with lower income level or living on social benefits. As with social class, people in the Netherlands find it difficult to acknowledge whiteness as well as race, and therefore having a migration background (or not) are commonly used terms (Wekker, 2016). We set out to research white mothers who also did not have a migration background, so we asked them whether they had a migration background during our recruitment process. We do not call these mothers "native," since most mothers with a migration background are also native groups, having been born and raised in the Netherlands. There is an immense body of literature on the school choices of white middle-class parents in gentrifying areas. Our goal was to follow up this line of research by focusing on how white mothers who did not have a migration background experienced sending their children to ethnically mixed schools in gentrifying areas. It is important to mention that during the interviews respondents referred to their own group or their children as white, hence whiteness is to be found in the discourses of people, and schools are even referred to as white schools if they have many pupils without a migration background.

We conducted 28 interviews: 18 in Amsterdam and 10 in Tilburg. Data collection was carried out from February to August 2021. During our recruitment process, we sought ways to effectively navigate the constraints imposed by the corona pandemic. By leveraging our social and professional networks, we were able to identify and reach out to potential participants. Most participants were contacted through a collaboration with Stichting Wie Ben Jij Film, which has a large network of parents in several selected schools. Additionally, we used the snowball technique, asking initial participants to refer other parents who met our criteria of not having a migration background, living in a majority–minority neighbourhood, and sending their children to an ethnically mixed school. Various members of the research team collected data in Amsterdam and Tilburg. The interviews were transcribed and later we devised a codebook using an iterative approach. First, we created deductive codes to analyse data based on the literature, but, along the way, we began to include inductive codes and modified our codebook. For example, prior socialization with diversity

Table 1. Number of respondents per educational level and city.

	Up to vocational secondary education (vmbo)	Senior secondary vocational education (mbo)	Higher professional education (hbo)	University education and above (wo)
Tilburg	5	5		
Amsterdam		1	6	12

was not a deductive code, but something that emerged from our analysis as an important factor at a later stage. As a group of researchers, we have different fixed and subjective positionalities: We all identified as female, but some of us had a migration background while others did not. Being in a team helped us to reflect on each other's positionalities and perspectives, both during data collection and the analysis process.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Towards a Typology of Parents' Approach to Diversity

Our thorough analysis of the data has revealed recurring patterns in parental behaviours concerning neighbourhood selection, school choice, and interactions with diversity. These common patterns informed the development of a typology that encapsulates the multifaceted nature of parents' experiences with diversity. This typology is not intended to delineate ideal types or to assert rigid boundaries between categories; indeed, we can observe overlapping behaviours among the types. In this section, we delineate three positions in relation to specific patterns in neighbourhood choice, school selection, and experiences with diversity.

The first type is the idealist position: parents who display an "idealized approach to diversity." We call this the idealist position because these people have an idealistic definition of diversity and high expectations of diversity or living in diversity which do not always match their expectations. These parents did not grow up in diverse environments, but once they moved to a diverse area, they had very positive expectations about sending their children to a mixed school in line with their ideals about a multicultural society. As we will show, however, these ideals did not always match their practical experiences. This position was mostly seen among middle-class mothers in Amsterdam.

The second type is the pragmatist position: mothers with "mixed feelings" towards diversity. Similar to the idealists, they had not grown up with diversity. Unlike the idealists, they did not view the multicultural society in purely positive and idealistic terms and voiced fears about living in a diverse environment. The reason why we call them pragmatists is because, despite these concerns, they were practical about engaging with diversity. They sent their children to a multi-ethnic school in the neighbourhood and established contacts with various groups. We mainly observed this position among working-class mothers in Tilburg.

The last type is the realist position. Like the idealists, these mothers were positive about diversity. This positivity, however, was not voiced in terms of a societal ideal but as the result of lived experience. These women had become familiar with diversity in childhood as they had either grown up in that neighbourhood or a similar one. What's more, they embraced and accepted the reality of diversity. These mothers were mostly working-class women living in Tilburg, but we also interviewed one middle-class mother in Amsterdam who had adopted a similar position.

Even though we see clear relations between the positions toward diversity and social class background, previous familiarity with diversity emerged as a crucial factor that cut across class lines. Figure 1 provides a further characterization of each type as a guide for reading the coming sections.

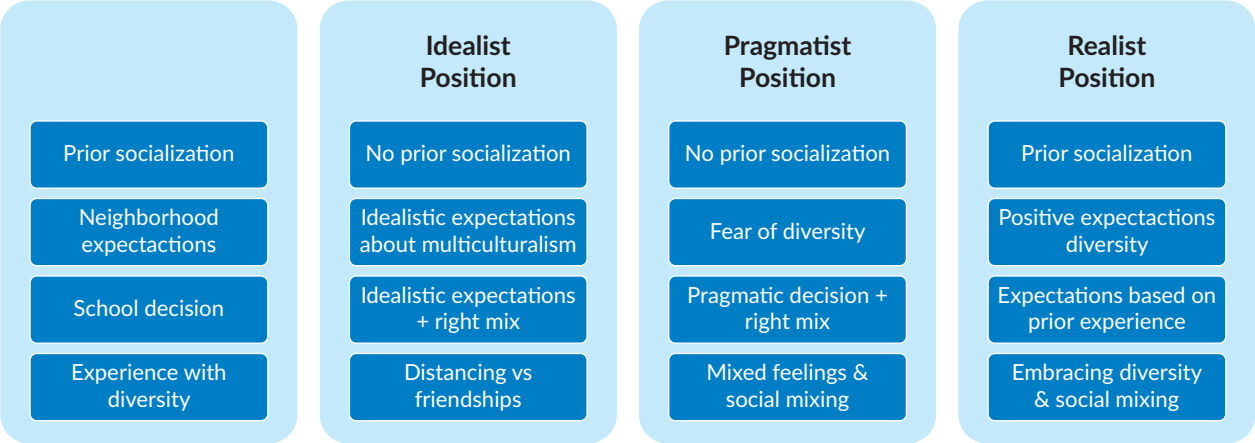

Figure 1. Parents' positions regarding diversity.

4.2. Neighbourhood "Choice" and Expectations

Both in Amsterdam and Tilburg, the decision to live in a specific neighbourhood was mainly influenced by financial considerations. In Amsterdam, residents had chosen their neighbourhood because the houses there were more affordable than in other parts of the city, while in Tilburg, the respondents had either been offered social housing or had found affordable houses to purchase in the neighbourhood. No respondents mentioned diversity as a reason for moving to their neighbourhood.

In Amsterdam, many young families were motivated by the need for more space and affordability as their family expanded; "seeking more square meters for less money" as one respondent put it. These neighbourhoods used to be predominantly populated by migrant families, but they are now gradually gentrifying due to new private housing developments. Even though purchasing a private home was their main motivation, many of our respondents had an idealized view of "diversity":

> Look, we also had practical reasons for moving here. We wanted children and we were living in a small rented house and we wanted to buy something and here we could get metres. But I also came here with a kind of *idealistic* idea of: Oh integration and fun, all cultures together and cooking couscous together and I don't know what. But that looks different in practice. (Merel, Amsterdam)

Merel's experience was comparable to that of the other mothers in Amsterdam. While diversity was not their main motivation for moving into the area, this does not mean that they did not have expectations or perceptions regarding the demographic composition of their new neighbourhood. They saw their move as an opportunity to meet new people with a migrant background, and a chance to learn more about other cultural practices. Except for one mother, the respondents from Amsterdam had not grown up in a diverse environment and moving to a diverse one was therefore more of an abstract ideal.

In Tilburg, the main reason why our respondents had moved to their particular neighbourhood was that they had "received a social housing offer." One group of mothers, whom we call pragmatists, expressed concerns about living alongside people from "different cultures," highlighting their unfamiliarity with the neighbourhood and/or diversity. Nevertheless, they accepted the housing offer or purchased affordable

housing. Danielle, for instance, shared her initial hesitations about moving into a culturally diverse area, fearing potential conflicts:

> That was actually a bit the thing I had a lot of trouble with. I used to live in a place where there were no other people from a different culture. It was just kind of a Christian town. I actually had quite a lot of trouble coming here, not because I am racist but purely because of the different cultures and because of how people are. This can lead to conflicts with our own culture. (Danielle, Tilburg)

At the same time, there was another group of mothers in Tilburg who did not experience such initial fear and hesitation, as they had been born and/or raised in this neighbourhood or a similarly mixed one. This familiarity seemed to smoothen their arrival as they had already enjoyed living in such a context:

> I come from The Hague myself. It is much more multicultural than here. And I have absolutely no problem with that [people with a migration background]. We live in Tilburg-Noord. Many different cultures and many children live here. The youngest always plays outside with all the neighbourhood children. One of her friends is a Chinese-Finnish girl. I have lived here for seven years now. (Nanike, Tilburg)

This group, the realists, differ in the sense that their expectations regarding moving to or living in a diverse neighbourhood were based on their actual experiences with diversity, rather than idealistic notions or prior prejudices.

4.3. School Choice

While parents' decision to move to or stay in an ethnically mixed neighbourhood was not informed by "diversity-seeking" behaviour, a school's ethnic composition did play a role in school choice, though in varying ways.

In Amsterdam, mothers with an idealist position wanted to send their children to a nearby school that was ethnically mixed. With this ideal in mind, they distanced themselves from white middle-class parents who sent their children to a school with a predominantly white student population in a different neighbourhood, arguing that schools should be a reflection of the wider diverse society. Considering what society looks like, this ideal translated into avoiding both schools dominated by children without a migration background (referred to by the mother as "snow-white") and schools where almost all of the pupils had a migration background (referred to by the mother as "black" schools) and were therefore not "mixed" enough:

> In the neighbourhood, there are about three schools that I think are 90 percent black schools and then one snow-white school, I don't feel at all at home with that either. (Monique, Amsterdam)

While being positive about diversity, many mothers with an idealist position openly voiced the concern that their children would belong to a small minority or even be the only white pupils in the class. Strategies to "control" this include "parental initiatives" (Mesic et al., 2021) aimed at placing white children in a mixed school along with a group of other white parents to alter the school composition and create "safety in numbers." Some of our respondents were pioneers of a parental initiative, playing an active role in promoting their mixed school

to white middle-class parents as a way to create or maintain the "right mix." Others were followers of such endeavours and had selected a school because it was home to this type of initiative. These efforts to control numbers and create the right mix also reflect an approach to diversity as an ideal rather than an engagement with existing conditions. According to these parents, a properly mixed school can benefit their children by helping them find their place in this diverse society, mirroring the larger society in a way that aligns with their vision and values.

We didn't observe anything similar to the parental initiatives in Amsterdam among the parents who had adopted the pragmatist position. We saw some similarities to the idealist position of "looking for the right mix," but proximity, convenience (being close to grandparents or home), and compatibility with their child's needs took priority:

> The reason [to select this school] was that the schools we saw in the old neighbourhood, there was a school with a lot of disadvantages and a lot of ethnic diversity. We did not feel comfortable sending our child to school there. That school wasn't good for him, we are happy with our school. But our current school is also mixed, I think the majority has a migration background. (Chantal, Tilburg)

This quote shows the nuanced approach to diversity. This mother rejected one school due to disadvantages and a lot of ethnic diversity, yet she chose another ethnically diverse school because she was satisfied with its pedagogy and the quality of education it provided. This was reminiscent of the pragmatist position, whereby parents may have concerns about the ethnic composition of a school and the drawbacks this may entail, but are still willing to settle for a "neighbourhood" school that is convenient and a good fit with their children, even though they will be in a minority position. In that sense, mothers compared different diverse schools in the neighbourhood and selected the one that corresponded to their interests.

Unlike the pragmatists, mothers who fit within the realist position did not voice strong fears or ambiguities about living in diversity or their kids being in a minority at school. Any concerns they may have had were easily resolved and they had a more embracing attitude towards "the reality" of diversity, as exemplified in the quote below:

> In Adam's class, for example, there are only four Dutch children. And there are 21 children in total, so then, of course, there are very few Dutch children. Anyway, it's a very multicultural school. But I have to say that this doesn't bother me too much. There are also Iraqi and Serbian kids from refugee countries in Adam's class. In the beginning, I was a bit apprehensive about this because you hear a lot of stories about refugee children. But they are so nice and you get to experience so much but Adam also gets to experience a lot of different things. And I think that is also positive for a child growing up in a neighbourhood like this because he is not surprised by anything, to him everyone is equal. Whether a child is brown or not or whether or not they can speak Dutch, there is no difference. (Anne-Marie, Tilburg)

Anne-Marie's words were echoed by others with a realist position in Tilburg, who were at ease with the fact that their children were growing up in a predominantly ethnically mixed environment, or that they were the only white children in the classroom. Esther, a middle-class mother from Amsterdam, had sent both of her children to a neighbourhood school:

> Well, explicitly because I wanted them to grow up in the neighbourhood and have their life here. You see a lot of parents here with either a Western migration background or no migration background, who cycle an hour to the Jordaan or all the way to Zuid to take their children to school, and I expressly did not consider this a good idea. I think, your school is so important for your social environment. I want them to take root in this neighbourhood and have their social environment here, so they don't have to cycle three kilometres to visit a classmate. I think it is easier to make contact when you just walk down the street and play together in the playground. You just have those contacts more easily, more briefly. (Esther, Amsterdam)

This decision meant that Esther's daughter was the only white girl in her class. It was more important, however, to Esther, for her children to grow up in their neighbourhood and to have friends living close by. This stance does not fit within the idealistic position as instead of trying to set conditions and manage diversity, Esther chose to find her place in the existing conditions.

4.4. Practices of Diversity

In this section, we want to focus on the experiences of the mothers once they sent their children to an ethnically mixed school.

4.4.1. The Idealists: We Were Just Naïve

The majority of the idealist position holders in Amsterdam expected that sending their child to a multi-ethnic school would put them more in touch with diversity. During the first two years of primary school, the children all played together, but gradually they started to group together with children who were more "like them." Not only the children, but the parents also started withdrawing into their own circle. Below, a mother in Amsterdam reflects on her role in this group-forming process:

> You are always looking for recognition, also as parents I think, in the schoolyard. You know, birds of a feather flock together, you recognize someone, or your children, so the children start playing together more quickly because you have contact as parents. So you maintain that a bit. (Marit, Amsterdam)

Some respondents considered the contrast between their initial idealistic expectations and their actual experiences with mixing (or lack thereof) as a form of naiveté. They had been naïve in expecting that sending their child to a multi-ethnic school would easily lead to more contact with different groups or being welcomed with open arms by ethnic minority parents. Mothers with the idealist position in Amsterdam had had little experience with diversity, so being in these environments meant learning and adapting. Instead of being something that came about naturally, it required effort on their part, costing them energy. The energy that the idealists had to spend on mixing was also the result of the perceived value differences between groups. Religion, especially Islam, was sometimes experienced as a dividing line. While most of these mothers had no problem with celebrating Islamic holidays, many of them said that they disapproved of Muslim Dutch parents being critical of sex education in school. Once more, we see a form of idealism embedded here: Making space for other cultures is not seen as problematic—as long as they do not clash with one's own norms and values (Schut & Crul, 2024). Merel argues that the differences between groups are due to class differences rather than religion or ethnicity, underlining what she calls "liberal values":

> Well, that has nothing to do with religious origins and ethnic origins, because his best friends in class were Dalil and Emir, very Moroccan. But Dalil's mother is a dental assistant, so his mother works and they both speak very good Dutch. Emir is also brought up with…hey, pick up your trash, so [they have] an open mind, and his mother also chose this school even though she lives next to a black school. But she says: "No, I came to this school so that my child can come into contact with all kinds of children." So then you see a like-mindedness. Parents who read books to their children and go to a museum. This is something you can recognize more than the migration background….So I found it so striking that if a child joins the "white" group, so to speak, then it is always someone who is being raised liberally. (Merel, Amsterdam)

Again, this quote and the idealists' experience with diversity reveal that parents with a migration background must meet certain expectations before interaction can take place. If these expectations were not met, mothers with an idealist position deployed different strategies. A larger group of mothers withdrew from engaging with diverse groups. A few mothers went into deeper interactions and managed to form close relationships, which led them to reflect on their positions of privilege and power when judging different norms.

4.4.2. Pragmatists: ``We Are in the Netherlands and They Should Act Accordingly"

The mothers with a pragmatist position had mixed experiences of diversity once their children started school. On the one hand, their children mixed easily with other children from different backgrounds. On the other hand, these mothers voiced difficulties with the diverse environment. They said that their prejudices had been partly confirmed and mentioned being annoyed by migrant mothers speaking to each other in their own language in the schoolyard or demanding translation in meetings for parents:

> You see that the mothers with a Turkish or Moroccan background stand together when they pick up the children and also speak Turkish and Moroccan with each other. That is something that can irritate me. This is not allowed at school, it is only allowed to speak Dutch there. I don't think those parents talk about anyone, but I do think: We are just in the Netherlands, if you want to use a different language in your own circle, I think that's okay; but not if you are standing in a schoolyard with 100 parents. (Naomi, Tilburg)

Despite Naomi's expectations, none of the schools in this study forbid speaking another language in or outside school. We observed that diversity in schools and strategies to accommodate it, such as saying winter holidays instead of Christmas holidays, sometimes led to feelings of loss of control. But once again, there were "mixed feelings" whereby both positive and negative emotions were expressed:

> I have learned, partly because of Amber's school and because I have been on the parent council for a few years…that people from a different background can also be very social. You learn things about culture and we have a parent room at school where, before corona, we would go to drink coffee once a week. That's the fun side of it. Many of them are very sweet and social. But there is still a negative side. I simply believe that we live here in the Netherlands, and we have our culture and our nostalgia here in the Netherlands. And I really notice, especially at school, that certain things are being gotten rid of a bit….So at school, when I was on the council, I tried to give this a different twist, to cover something from each culture throughout the year. So that we can still keep our Dutch things, but also include Ramadan. (Margrit, Tilburg)

Compared to the idealist position, the pragmatist position entailed much more explicit criticism of diversity, for example in relation to accommodating different languages and religious groups. Yet these pragmatists mixed much more frequently than parents who occupied the idealist position. Initially, these interactions predominantly served practical goals and did not necessarily evolve into deeper friendships. We observed a wide range of experiences within the pragmatist position: Several mothers maintained regular daily contacts, while some even created lucrative networks. For example, Margrit helped a mother with a migrant background whose child plays frequently with her son to secure a job at her workplace.

4.4.3. Realists: Diversity not as an Ideal but as a Reality

In the case of the realist position, it was immediately apparent that interactions were eased by having prior familiarity with diversity. Mothers in this subgroup had less difficulty with arranging playdates, and their children had a very mixed friendship circle and played both in their neighbourhood and at school with other children, as Fleur describes:

> All the children play with each other in the neighbourhood. They mainly play outside. In the summer I have a trampoline in the garden and then they play there together. And then they play outside with others, or they go inside and then they play PlayStation. So basically it all flows in and out for everyone. Also with migrant parents, the contact is not difficult. In the evening we drink coffee together outside and then the children spontaneously go outside and play with each other. That just happens automatically. (Fleur, Tilburg)

These parents also talk about playdates and activities at school in a relaxed way that does not hint at any extra effort or high expectations. Similar to the idealists and the pragmatists, the mothers with a realist position are also quite engaged in school activities or parental boards, but the way they talk about their experience with migrant mothers or other groups is different. They are more inclined to help parents with a migration background get involved with school activities, rather than criticizing their different language usage, which they do not even mention. Below, Annemiek talks about a school festival, showing a contrasting approach to diversity:

> In the beginning, they only had parents who spoke Dutch, because this made it easier to communicate with the children….Then I said, I think all parents should be able to participate because it doesn't matter whether or not you speak Dutch, anyone can blow up a balloon. We organized a carnival just before corona and then everyone was allowed to participate and register with me and then I would explain to them what to do on the day. At the time, I had parents who spoke very little English and they too were to guide one of the games. I explained it to them in very basic Dutch, but I also thought what does it matter, that lady did think up her own rules for that game. In the end, everyone was so proud. So now it really is a combination of communicating, chatting, and laughing with each other. (Annemiek, Tilburg)

While many mothers who had adopted the pragmatist position complained about mothers with a migration background speaking a different language, the realist mothers reflected on what could be done to make these mothers feel more comfortable about communicating and to get them involved. They showed considerable empathy for them and wanted to integrate them into school activities or parental boards. In this group, the

realities of living in such a neighbourhood were experienced without trying to manage them. Esther from Amsterdam talked about the importance of investing in her relationship with other parents:

> I think what really plays a big role here is that you primarily establish contact with mothers. You don't go up to a father to ask, "Can she come to the party to play?" Those are things I have really *unlearned*, I really don't do that. Even with the mother of Maartje's best friend, with whom I have really good contact, I would come inside, have tea, and all that. That contact is really there. But once I ran into her father, whom I always spoke to and it was always normal, but her father was at the playground with other men, and when I said hello to him, I really felt, okay, I shouldn't have done that. That was too much. I think I tried too hard because it doesn't fit into that culture, so it's like, I don't do that anymore. (Esther, Amsterdam)

Esther's words also illustrate the difference between the positions of realist and idealist parents; here she is willing to "unlearn" things that she is used to and establish contact on the terms of other parents and their cultures. This is a different approach than living diversity on one's own terms and conditions; instead, it is about engaging with diversity in line with the reality it presents.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we examined white mothers' approaches to diversity in two different settings: a majority–minority neighbourhood in Tilburg and a gentrifying majority–minority neighbourhood in Amsterdam. Our analysis of the 29 cases resulted in an emic typology of three different positions regarding diversity, dividing respondents into idealists, pragmatists, and realists. To understand these positions, we explored these mothers' expectations when selecting a school for their children and their actual experiences with diversity after their children had started attending a multi-ethnic school in the neighbourhood.

The extensive body of literature on how middle-class white parents in gentrifying neighbourhoods select schools illustrates that although these parents tend to value diversity, they also seek to control its conditions (Tissot, 2014) and are often in search of the "right mix" (Byrne, 2006). They may also have a regulatory attitude towards diversity that is limited to helping their children develop "multicultural capital" in the form of feeling at ease with diversity (Underhill, 2019). Despite equity concerns in theory, practices of middle-class parents do not match their ideals (Merry, 2023). These findings align with our characterization of the idealist position among the white middle-class mothers in our study. These women favoured diversity as an ideal but only under their own conditions. However, by examining actual experiences of engaging with diversity in multi-ethnic schools, we found that these parents' idealized conditions and expectations of diversity were often unmet, leading them to realize, in their own words, that they had been "naïve" in their expectations. This discrepancy between expectations and experience led us to coin the term "idealist position." The point we wish to make here is that idealist parents do not engage in relations on equal terms whereby everyone is entitled to pursue their own values and norms. A subtle hierarchy of values and an insistence on a certain level of "integration" into "liberal values" seem to prevail. In that sense, engaging with diversity often reveals its boundaries in the sense that diversity is considered acceptable when it involves different foods and cultural festivities, but problematic when people speak their own languages in the schoolyard or have different views on how children should receive sex education.

The mothers with a pragmatist position, all of whom were working-class and living in Tilburg in our study, also pursued certain conditions of engagement, such as expecting migrant mothers to refrain from speaking their mother tongue in the schoolyard. However, they did not idealize diversity or have high expectations. On the contrary, they tended to fear living in multicultural spaces or sending their children to multicultural schools. Despite this, they ended up engaging with diversity more often than mothers with an idealist position, who tended to withdraw into their own circles. We termed this the pragmatist position because, despite having prejudices about living in ethnically diverse settings, these parents were pragmatic and practical in their engagements, and they interacted with diversity to a much greater extent.

Both idealist and pragmatist mothers shared a lack of early exposure to diversity, as they had not grown up in diverse neighbourhoods or attended multi-ethnic schools as children. Another crucial contribution this study makes is the identification of the realist position, characterized by mothers to whom diversity came much more naturally and who accepted it as a daily reality. While the majority of these mothers were working-class and living in Tilburg, we also had one middle-class mother with this position in Amsterdam. What distinguished these mothers from the others was that they had been raised in diverse settings as children. They had neither positive ideals nor negative expectations; they were familiar with diversity and had chosen to raise their children in a similar setting. In their engagement statement, we could not identify the (subtle) hierarchies in a comparable way. Interactions seemed to be on more equal terms.

Based on these findings, is it possible to say that social class is the main determinant of one's position? Middle-class respondents seemed more likely to maintain an idealized notion of diversity, whereas working-class mothers' positions were either negative or more realistic about living in diversity. What seems to be the dividing line is that early exposure to diversity influences how one engages with it. Can we then argue that longer exposure to diversity is a condition for respecting and accepting people from different backgrounds? It is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion as many of our respondents with idealist and pragmatist positions had lived in these areas for many years without adopting a realist position. However, we still think that early exposure can be crucial. Due to the nature of the study, we do not know whether there were mothers who did not enjoy growing up in a diverse environment and therefore chose to leave. However, it is important to note that the Amsterdam mother who had adopted a realist position, and whose daughters had had both negative and positive experiences with being the only white children in the classroom at a mixed school, emphasized that diversity had eventually become a reality they internalized and felt at ease. This led her to conclude that she had made the right choices by sending them to mixed schools. Additionally, considering that the white children of all these mothers are growing up in ethnically mixed schools, we think that this may help them to develop more realistic approaches to diversity.

We urge future studies to consider prior socialization as an important factor in understanding experiences with diversity and how they intersect with social class, ethnicity, and also gender if both caregivers can be interviewed. We also think focusing solely on a single school setting can enhance our understanding of the nature of relations and how they evolve.

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Conflict of Interests

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