Beyond School Gates:
Children's Contribution to Community Integration
Final Project Report, July 2024

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Contents

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Executive Summary

Aims and Objectives

Our research provides insights into the contribution that children's social cognition, experiences and networks make to community integration and how this contribution is supported within local policy landscapes.

We examine how children's perspectives, experiences, interactions and friendship networks, as well as parents' perspectives and experiences, feed into community integration and cohesion at a local level. We have also sought to understand more about what local policy-makers and stakeholders can do in order to shape the conditions for meaningful connections across difference in schools and beyond.

A better understanding of children's contribution to community integration can inform a framework of action available to local policy-makers, community leaders and schools to support children's belonging and connectedness, and in turn generate community integration and cohesion.

As a note on the language, when we talk about 'connecting across difference' we are referring to positive social interactions that happen between individuals of different ethnicity, faith or linguistic background.

Research Design

The research involved four strands:

1. We gathered schoolwork from 2020-2024 from three primary schools across the target region that addressed the themes of the research. We also collaborated with the British Library and The Linking Network to deliver 'Journeys', a reading and creativity programme, to five schools across our target region. The output of this programme was a collection of children's creative work exploring their own journeys and communities, and interviews with 28 participating children.

2. We used established and child-friendly psychological measures to examine relationships between children's intuitions, understandings and feelings about diversity and integration. Four hundred and forty-four 9-11-year-old children completed the series of measures in a psychological survey, supported by a researcher.

3. We focused on peer friendship networks to examine the structural constraints of children's experience of integration. The same 444 participants from Strand 2 completed self-report measures designed to elicit children's own experiences of peer friendship networks in school and beyond school gates. A subsample of 83

children were selected to participate in an in-depth interview to probe further and 181 parents completed an online questionnaire about their perspectives and experiences.

4. To understand more about how the local policy landscapes shape children's contribution to community integration, we carried out 50 interviews with 57 local stakeholders and policy-makers to probe how they conceptualise and support children's contribution to community integration in the context of local council initiatives, community groups and schools.

Findings

Across strands, our findings highlight the importance of focusing on parents and carers, schools and public spaces as parameters that shape children's contribution to community integration.

Parents/carers shape children's engagement with their local community. Parents/carers' own connections across diversity correlate with children's diverse friendships and their willingness to make friends with children who are not like them in some ways. If children's friendships are to last over time, and have a lasting effect on their views on the world, children need support from parents/carers to develop diverse friendships outside of school, including role modelling and explicit approval.

Looking across the data we gathered, diversity within a school is correlated with the diversity of children's school friendships. However, our interviews suggest that some schools may need to be more proactive in supporting children to connect across difference, depending on the particular local context. School is often a way that children and parents connect across difference. Fleeting interactions during drop-off and pick-up are important to parents/carers and connections can be strengthened through school events and provision of clubs and activities.

Public spaces that children can access for free are particularly important for supporting connections across difference. Local parks where children can play safely are an important way that children deepen diverse friendships outside of a school context. Sport is another hotspot for connection and shared belonging, and particularly football clubs. There are opportunities for other services to play more of a role in this (e.g. arts, libraries) and this depends on thinking carefully about both hyper-local and central provision, and the ways in which families can be welcomed into spaces that may be unfamiliar to them.

Recommendations for local policy-makers

- Support schools to be more diverse and, where this is not possible, invest in programmes that proactively support children and parents to connect with one another across difference (e.g. Schools Linking).
- Invest in schools as community hubs to help foster community cohesion.
- In the wider local infrastructure, support hyper-local community groups to connect with each other and foster cohesion across geographical divides.
- Invest in safe parks close to children's homes as a practical way to support children to contribute to community cohesion.

Recommendations for schools

- Consider your role as a community hub, brining parents and carers together in meaningful ways.
- We recognise that the capacity of a school to perform as a hub is dependent on material support from the local authority, but a first step that any school can take is to map parents/carers' current opportunities to interact and think about how these might be expanded in small, feasible ways.

Recommendations for community groups

- Hyper-local provision works best for engaging families.
- In order to support connections across difference, community groups can connect across the geographical divides and look for opportunities to bring people together (e.g. exchange programmes across community groups).
- Where more geographically central provision is intended, it is vital to support families to access transport with ease and at no cost.
- Community groups and services in the arts (e.g. libraries, theatres) can learn from the successes of football clubs in generating connection and belonging across children and families.

Introduction

Through this research, we aim to provide insights into the contribution that children's social cognition, experiences and networks make to community integration and how this contribution is supported within local policy landscapes.

Working across three local authorities in the North West of England, the research involved: 1) interpreting children's narratives in their creative work about diversity, belonging and integration; 2) probing children's social cognition with regards to diversity; 3) analysing the integration of networks among children and families and how these are shaped through access to community groups and public spaces, and 4) examining local policy-makers' conceptualisation of children's contribution to community integration and how this can be enhanced.

While we understand the term 'integration' is problematic and variously defined, we use the term 'community integration' in this project to highlight the extent to which local communities enable meaningful connections across differences in ethnicity, faith and linguistic background. While current and previous governments have spoken about the importance of facilitating community integration across the country, there remains an urgent need to address divisions within communities with the rise of new socio-economic and ethnic cleavages (Jennings et al. 2021). Research has shown that investing in social cohesion at a local level, where individuals are supported to connect across difference, can support higher levels of resilience in the face of adversity (Hopeful Towns, 2020; Broadwood et al., 2021). However, little research has explicitly probed the perspectives and experiences of children and families within the context of community integration and asked the question of how children's movements and actions through the local community feed into the extent to which community integration is effective. The tendency has been to include schools and children only as vectors for social mobility and skill formation, rather than seeing the potential for children, schools and families to be essential pieces of the puzzle in generating more resilient and connected local communities.

Our research examines how children's interactions and friendship networks, as well as parents' perspectives and experiences, feed into community integration at a local level. We have also sought to understand more about what local policy-makers and stakeholders can do in order to shape the conditions for meaningful everyday interactions across difference. So far, policy initiatives to support community integration relating to children and families have focused on policy levers to limit social segregation between children, such as school admission policies (LGA 2019, HM Government 2019). We need a more nuanced and connected understanding of children's social cognition, as well as their experiences of integration and friendship networks, to inform the framework of action available to local policy-makers to support children's contribution to community integration.

Research Design

Our approach

We have approached community integration, and particularly children's contribution to community integration, as a 'wicked problem' that cannot be solved through any one particular approach or research paradigm (Peters and Tarpey 2019). We have drawn on a wide range of disciplines and methods to gain insights into children's contribution to community integration currently and the opportunities for advancing this in the future.

Three Cases

We selected three towns in the North West of England to centre our research around: Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen and Preston. Our selection was linked to the government agenda to invest in community integration through particular 'levelling up' areas as well as the political attention towns have received (e.g. Hopeful Towns, 2020). We first selected Blackburn with Darwen on the basis that there is a high level of ethnic diversity (56.9% White British according to the 2021 census data) and it was previously recognised as an Integration Area, with an Integration Plan that prioritises schools and children's services (Blackburn with Darwen, 2018). It also benefits from well-established links with the Linking Network, who are partners in this project and have supported in brokering access. We then selected Bolton and Preston which are two of five towns in the North West where the proportion of White British residents is below 80% according to the 2021 census data.

All three towns have similar migration histories. They are Northern mill towns with a history of immigration from South Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. This has resulted in similar demographic profiles, where the majority of the town are White British with significant South Asian minorities (Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi communities). More recently, all three towns have experienced immigration from Eastern European countries (e.g. Poland, Romania) and have supported refugee resettlement following global crises (e.g. Syria, Ukraine). Our intention is not to generate comparisons between the three towns but instead to generate insights across the three towns by pooling our data. Having said this, in the fourth strand of the research we note any important differences in the local policy context, which in turn shape children's experiences in the town. Through this level of comparison, we can begin to unpick alternative approaches to supporting children's contribution to community integration when demographic profiles are similar.

Strand 1
Archived Voices: Children's Narratives of Integration

Children's archives function as one fundamental way of tracing the child's voice and understanding children's lived experience. They are sites of investigation that enable a better understanding of the historical experiences of childhood, attending to the way in which these historical records leave traces of the child's voice behind (Sànchez-Eppler, 2013; Bernstein, 2011). Archive materials were gathered from Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books, and oral histories and school records at the Lancashire Archives held by Lancashire County Council. These national and county archives provided a contextual basis for gathering archives from schools in the North West.

We gathered schoolwork from 2020-2024 from 4 schools across the target region that addressed themes of belonging, community, diversity, home, and migration. We also collaborated with the British Library and The Linking Network to deliver 'Journeys', a reading and creativity programme, to 5 schools in the target region. The output of this programme was a collection of children's creative work exploring their own journeys and communities, and interviews with 28 participating children. We processed these selections of archival material using thematic and literary analysis. All sources have been anonymised in order to protect the identities of the children who contributed to the research.

Strand 2
Social Cognition: Children's intuitions, understanding of, and feelings about integration and diversity

Strand 2 used established, child-friendly, psychological measures to examine interrelationships amongst children's intuitions, understandings and feelings about integration including:

a. Intuitions about group differences and societal patterns (Hussak & Cimpian, 2015).

b. Understanding of social norms for integration and confidence in forming diverse friendships (e.g. Bagci et al., 2019; Cameron et al., 2011).

c. Feelings of intergroup anxiety and empathy (Bagci et al., 2019; Vezzali et al, 2017)

Four hundred and forty-four 9-11-year-old children completed a survey, supported by a researcher. Children were sampled across seven state primary schools from the three areas. Schools were recruited to reflect different levels of school ethnic diversity: low (with one ethnic group forming the majority of the school population), moderate (slightly more representation across multiple ethnic groups) and high (significant representation of

multiple ethnic groups in school). Although this was not achieved in each town, all levels of school ethnic diversity are represented in the overall sample. Demographic information (age, Socio-Economic Status (SES), ethnicity/race, religion) was also collected (See Appendix A). We were interested in children and parent/carers views on social mixing and integration across different ethnic backgrounds. As a child-friendly explanation for ethnicity, we elaborated that this can include a person's religion, customs (clothes/dress), language and skin colour. This was supported with a collage of faces of adults and children from different ethnic backgrounds.

Strand 3
Networks and Experiences of Integration

Strand 3 examined children's integration experiences through their own social networks in school, and beyond school gates. Diverse integrated friendship networks are one of the most powerful tools we have available to reduce prejudice and create good relations between and within communities (Turner & Cameron, 2015; Casey, 2016). Cross-group friendships rely on having the opportunity to meet in multiple contexts in the wider community and engage in less-structured activities outside of the school setting (Blaylock et al., 2017).

The same participants from Strand 2 were asked in a survey about their experience of integration and diverse friendships. School classrooms (17 total) were sampled but within a specific classroom all students were invited to participate so that class friendship networks would be as close to complete as possible permitting 'whole' network methods. Multiple measures were used to capture the level, nature, and quality of friendships across multiple contexts (e.g., Brown et al., 2013; Rutland et al. 2012), in school and outside of school. This tells us the level of diversity within friendship groups in school and beyond school gates.

Interviews: A subsample of young people surveyed were selected to participate in an in-depth, individual interview (N = 85; Male=41, Female =44) to investigate the research questions across Stands 2 and 3 in greater depth. Young people were selected based on ethnicity and gender, to ensure the sample reflected the demographics of the school, and children from all ethnic backgrounds in the school were represented in the project. The interviews used stimuli such as photos, scenarios and direct questions, previously used by Cameron with this age group (Hossain et al., 2007). The purpose of the interviews was to explore in greater depth the level and quality of interactions across various contexts, barriers to and facilitators of integration (Kitts and Leal 2021), as well as intergroup anxiety, self-efficacy, and intuitions about diversity (e.g. Scrantom & McLaughlin 2019). The interviews also explored the bi-directional influence of children's and parents' networks, looking for evidence of how children's friendships might open up parents' networks as well as be influenced by them.

Parent survey: To gain a better understanding of how children's networks are shaped in the local community beyond school gates, parents (N = 181) of those children participating were invited to complete a brief questionnaire in which they reported:

- Local services that they have heard of, have accessed and used regularly
- Opportunity for social mixing across difference at these activities (for both parents and children)
- Views of integration and social mixing in school and their local area

This information was integrated with children's responses to provide a more detailed analysis of the intersection between children's social cognition, perspectives and experiences and the contexts and networks they participate in beyond school gates.

Strand 4
Local Policy Landscapes

To understand more about how the local policy landscape shape children's contribution to community integration, we carried out 50 interviews with local stakeholders and policy-makers to probe experiences and perspectives on children's contribution to community integration: 20 interviews with stakeholders in Blackburn with Darwen, 18 interviews with stakeholders in Bolton and 6 interviews with stakeholders in Preston. There were an additional 6 interviews that spanned two or more of the towns or related more broadly to the North West of England. Across the interviews, which were mostly conducted on a one to one basis but were sometimes a group interview, we heard from a total of 57 individuals.

Of the 57 individuals involved in our interviews, 26 were based in the community and voluntary sector (CVS), 17 were based in the local authority, 4 were based in local schools and 10 in faith organisations. While we had initially planned to distinguish between those interviews with 'local policy-makers' and those with 'local stakeholders', we found that in reality these roles were not clearly demarcated. Those working in the council and CVS often had responsibility for the implementation of key policies and were able to feed back into the design of these policies. Our final research design did not therefore distinguish between these roles.

Through our interviews we sought to understand more about how individuals and organisations conceptualised the contribution of children to community integration in the local context. We asked interviewees to reflect on whether there was a shared local sense in the town where they worked regarding how children and families might influence and be involved in community integration and if so, where this conceptualisation of children's contribution had emerged (e.g. key policy documents or local authority agendas). We asked them to consider their own work in relation to this focus and whether they had any examples of this local model of children's contribution being put into action. Interviewees

were also asked to comment on enabling factors and barriers in the local policy landscape and whether there were any future developments that they anticipated being important.

In reporting the findings, we have opted to anonymise illustrative quotes. While some participants were happy to be identified as part of our research, others were clear that they would only feel comfortable sharing their authentic perspectives and experiences if we could guarantee anonymity. We therefore decided to anonymise our data in the context of publication.

In order to draw out shared perspectives and experiences across the data, we carried out an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020). Our themes relate to what is common between the three towns rather than what is different, but there are details in each theme that demonstrate the importance of local context and what parameters shape the experience in one town compared to another.

Our preliminary thematic analysis was shared with stakeholders in a one-hour online workshop described as a 'stakeholder consultation', to which all interviewees were invited. This consultation was attended by 20 individuals and the dialogue from this event fed into the development of our analysis.

Meta-synthesis

The novel contribution of this project owes much to the interdisciplinary connectedness of the findings emerging from each strand. As a project team, we dedicated a six-week period to dialogues designed to tease out thematic threads that cut across the four strands of research and developed these further through dialogue in three community workshops held in May 2024. In this report, we present a brief overview of the findings from each strand, but we also offer a broader thematic breakdown which aligns with the main messages we share in our executive summary and conclusions.

Strand Findings

Below, we present brief overviews of the findings gathered through each of the strands. We have not presented these findings in detail, since it is our intention to delve deeper when presenting the cross-strand thematic analysis. The sections below therefore give just an impression of the findings from each strand.

Strand 1: How do children narrate belonging, community and connection in local contexts?

As well as revealing the influences of their teachers, parents and peers, schoolwork is where children learn how to narrate and curate a sense of identity. One class used their

'Journeys' scrolls to narrate their whole lives as a journey, which supported them to narrate their own 'life journeys' in geography. PSHE exercise books show children developing personal identity through exercises such as 'A recipe for me' and their own 'metaphor for life'. These narratives reveal some of their child authors' priorities, as emerge below. Thematic analysis of schoolwork from 9 schools produced the following findings:

Home and community

Home and community have different and layered meanings. 'Journeys' scrolls depict dual national identities, for example, from a child who drew 'going home' to Pakistan. Private homes were depicted as sites to welcome others, as were football clubs, public libraries and places of worship. Family was crucial: children described enjoying times they had learned about their parents' and grandparents' lives and childhoods, and the births of cousins and siblings were included in many 'life journeys'.

Friendship and diversity

Friendship was vital in the schoolwork explored here. Some 'Journeys' scrolls depicted a journey of friendship with a best friend, while other scrolls show overlapping friendship networks. In interviews, fun and mutual support emerged as the cornerstones of friendship. Friendships were sometimes seen to be stronger when parents also knew each other. For some, having friends with shared interests was important, but this mattered less to others. Several children liked meeting children from different backgrounds, especially through their Schools Linking linking class, while for ethnic minority children in majority white schools, having a friend with a shared background provided a sense of solidarity.

This 'Journeys' scroll shows a child's Journey home to Pakistan

Shared sites of belonging

School emerges as an important shared site of belonging, as do places of worship. Sports clubs are for fun and for meeting new people and consolidating school-based friendships. Support for local football teams was an important site for secular belonging and for bonding with trusted adults. Parks were depicted as important places of relaxation and connection. Drawings of roads are sometimes realist and sometimes metaphorical of links between different important places. These roads are themselves sites of connection; several children depicted the conversations with family while walking or driving, the local shops whose owners they knew, or the friends' houses they pass. 'Journeys' in particular has shown the value of public spaces about which children can feel a sense of ownership and connection.

This child's 'Journeys' scroll shows their favourite places and who takes them there.

Strand 2: How are children's views about diversity, their experiences and friendships shaped by the world around them, including school, friends and family?

First, the findings from this part of the research show that children in more ethnically diverse schools have more ethnically diverse friendship groups in school. That is, children in diverse schools are taking up the opportunity to have diverse friendships, and this is important since other research has found that children do not necessarily take up opportunities for diverse friendships and can prefer same ethnic friendships. Here we see that, in general, children's friendship networks reflect the ethnic diversity of their school.

Second, the findings suggest that seeing social mixing matters for children's beliefs and attitudes about friendships across difference. We asked children how much social mixing they see between people who are different to each other in three contexts: in school, among children outside of school, and among parents and adults in the wider community. We also measured their interest in and confidence in holding friendships with children

from different ethnic groups to their own (e.g. '*Are you confident you would find things in common with children who are different [ethnic background] to you?*'). We found that when children see social mixing happen (via their parents' friendship groups, in school and in their wider community), they are more positive about diversity, less likely to view social boundaries as discrete and unchangeable, and more open to and confident about friendships across difference. They also hold more diverse friendship groups in school. We also found that while attending an ethnically diverse school is important for these outcomes, it is seeing social mixing around them that more strongly predicts children's friendship choices. That is, regardless of the opportunity for diverse friendships in school, it is children who see more social mixing around them in their wider community and school that have more diverse friendship groups.

Third, the findings highlight that parents and peers have an important role in shaping children's views of diversity and their friendship choices in school. We asked children to what extent their parents would support their friendship with someone from a different ethnic background (the extent to which they agreed that *'My parents would feel happy if I wanted to make new friends who are different [ethnicity] to me'*). Children who believe their parents support their diverse friendships:

- express more positive views about diversity;
- are more open to attributing social inequalities to external factors rather than inherent traits;
- are more interested in and confident in their ability to hold friendships with children from different ethnic groups and,
- crucially, hold more diverse friendship groups*.*

Finally, the findings from this part of the research demonstrate that school is essential for children's friendships across difference. Children (both ethnic minority and ethnic majority) have more ethnically diverse friendship groups inside the classroom, than the friends they select to see outside the classroom. This is supported by interviews with children which revealed limited social mixing by children and parents beyond the school gates, with a number of barriers and facilitators, including parents/carers, cost of social mixing (financial and psychological), anxiety about interactions with the other group, safety concerns and geographical/residential limitations. Social mixing does happen, but in the face of significant hurdles. Ethnic minority students have more diverse friendship groups both inside and outside of the class than ethnic majority students. That is, they are more likely to have a friend from a different ethnic background to them, compared with ethnic majority children. This was the case for both in school and outside of school friendships.

In conclusion, as keen observers of the world around them, children detect the level of social mixing in school, parents' networks and their wider community. This then shapes children's understanding of inequality, friendship networks, attitudes to diversity and

openness to new friendships across difference. School provides essential opportunities for social mixing that can spill out beyond school gates, but requires specific support.

Strand 3: People, places and spaces: In what ways are children's social networks and parents' networks intertwined, and where are social connections across difference happening?

The findings show that children open up parents' social networks via school. In our survey of parents and carers, 37.97% agreed that there were opportunities to mix with carers/parents from different backgrounds in schools. 54.2% agreed or strongly agreed that they meet people through their children's school that they would not meet otherwise. 58.6% agreed or strongly agreed that their children's friendships are a way that they meet people they would not meet otherwise. Children provided a few examples of where they had brought parents together from different backgrounds, in order to arrange a playdate- for example:

I think my mom might know her mom, but that's just from, like, sleepovers and stuff (Participant - Female, Black Jamaican, 10 years old)

And then (other ethnicity friend) was gonna come to my dad's to watch a football match and then their mum asked my dad if he can and then that's when they became friends.' (Participant - Male, White British, 10 years old)

We were outside and then she invited me to play with her, and then after a few times, my mom got to know her mom, and then we were allowed to go to each other's houses…Because me and my friend who gets to know each other very well, and then we go tell our mom we are best friends and if they see them [other mum] outside somewhere, they get to know each other and then they talk and then eventually, they become friends, that's it. (Participant - Female, Asian Indian, 10 years old)

Children also open up parents' social networks via other community places, community groups and institutions. Our interviews with children revealed local parks, public, open, green spaces, as a crucial location for social mixing to occur - for example:

Because the park is like for everyone, everyone comes." (Participant - Female, Asian Indian, 10 years old)

This was reinforced in our surveys with parents/carers. When asked "What are the places in your local area where children and families are most likely to get an opportunity to meet and play with others from different backgrounds (e.g. ethnic background, religion, language) to themselves?", the most common responses were parks, playgrounds, youth centres, football clubs, and other public facilities. These are free, accessible, and viewed by children as a place where everyone can relax and have fun. Most still reported going to the park with parents/carers, and so parks provide opportunities where parents, via their children, mix with other families, including those from different backgrounds to themselves.

Another key finding is that parents and carers profoundly influence children's friendships beyond school gates. Children's friendships beyond school gates are less diverse, and more likely to be with other children from the same background as themselves. Our qualitative analysis revealed parents were an important factor here, and they shaped children's opportunities for diverse friendship in a number of way- for example children agree that to see friends outside of school, parents needed to know each other relatively well, particularly for friendships across ethnicity. This was driven by a perceived lack of trust for parents from other ethnic groups, which would need to be built gradually before children could meet up, and perhaps eventually go to each other's houses. This both reinforces the importance of neutral, green spaces where families can meet comfortably, and the importance of parents' networks in shaping their children's friendship opportunities outside of school.

R: OK. And you said you would like to have your friends come round your house right?

P: Yeah

R: Why do they not come around your house now?

P: Well, I guess, cause our parents don't know each other.

R: Hmm. OK. So do you think it would be OK then if they knew each other?

P: Maybe. But we have our differences and it can cause disputes.

R: Oh yeah, what kind of differences do you mean?

P: Like they're Muslims.

R: OK. And you are not Muslim?

P: No. (Participant - Male, Black Nigerian, 11 years old)

Children formed friendships outside of school that were derived from their parents' social network. Because their parents mainly were friends with others from the same background as themselves, this meant children often spent time as a family with other families from the same background. We also found where children spent more time at church or mosque, or in other community clubs or organisations, they reported more time spent with families from the same ethnic background as themselves. While children were overwhelmingly positive about this, and felt at 'home' there, and like they could relax and be themselves, this limited opportunities for friendships across difference outside of school.

R: Your mosque friends, do you see them apart from the mosque? Do you ever see them in other places?

P: Yes, that is purely because obviously a lot of their dads are my dad's friends. So I see them a lot. (Participant – Male, Asian Indian, 9 years old)

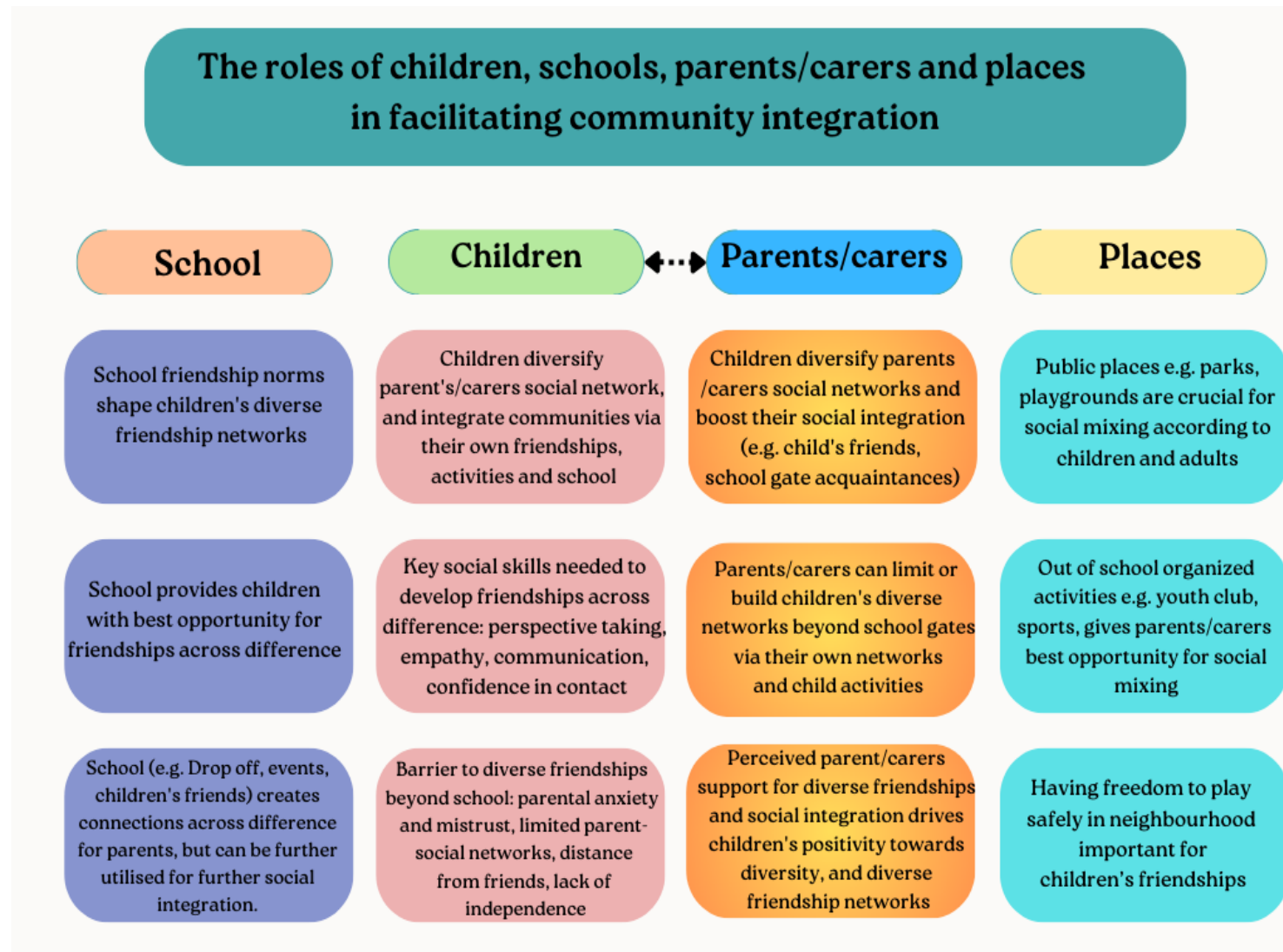Figure 1 below outlines the key themes that emerged across Strands 2 and 3.

Figure 1. Thematic map: Ways in which parents'/carers' and children's social networks connect, and how these networks are shaped by school and places beyond the school gates

Strand 4: How do local policy-makers and stakeholders conceptualise and support children's contribution to community integration?

Local policy-makers and stakeholders across the three towns included in our study agreed that children's experiences represent an exciting opportunity for connection and interaction across diverse communities, and can thereby support community integration and cohesion. Children were perceived by stakeholders as more open-minded than adults when interacting with others and could therefore act as key agents in leading their families to be more open and interact beyond what was most familiar. While there was enthusiasm about the potential of working with children to support community integration, we also perceived a lack of confidence about the vision underpinning this work. Local policy contexts tended to demonstrate more confidence in models of early intervention or youth programmes (12+) than in conceptualising the contribution of 5-12 year olds in community integration and cohesion. Developing a clear vision for the important contribution that 5-12 year olds can make is therefore the most fundamental area for development to emerge from this research. Ideally, local authorities would be able to articulate how they expect middle childhood experiences to contribute positively to community integration and how this can be enabled through the key players of schools, hyper-local organisations and central hubs.

In our research, schools tended to be cited as the main route through which children's contribution to community integration could be effectively fostered. This was because schools were sites of day-to-day interaction among children, and even when schools were not themselves diverse, there was a practical opportunity to introduce diversity through exchange programmes such as Schools Linking. Such programmes were important because they could happen without needing to be led by parents/carers. Parents/carers were most typically seen among our interviewees as a barrier to children's connectedness with each other. Having said this, schools were also seen as having expertise in building trust among parents and supporting them to engage in activities that went beyond what they were familiar with. Thus, activities for children and families put on by schools could support diverse parents to meet one another and connect in a way that would not occur without the school acting as a broker of the contact.

Beyond schools, hyper-local organisations providing activities and services on the doorstep of children and families were seen as important in enabling children's contribution to community integration. Families were more likely to trust hyper-local organisations and this could then become the foundation for experiences of integration and cohesion, for example, when two hyper-local organisations connected with one another and engaged in an exchange of ideas, skills or people. Such exchanges were one aspect of the role of central hub teams, who aimed to support children's contribution

to community integration across the entire town. This was a feature of planning in Blackburn with Darwen, where funding associated with identification as an 'Integration Area' had been used to coordinate social action projects involving multiple hyper-local community groups. Across stakeholders, it was felt that in order for central events and activities to boost community integration among children and families, careful logistical planning was required – particularly in terms of transport. On the other hand, a more direct way for central teams to make a difference was to build capacity in hyper-local organisations and support connections between these groups and activities.

Building on our findings, we hope that our research can support local authorities and relevant stakeholders in:

- Envisioning the contribution that 5-12 year olds can practically make to community integration and cohesion.
- Reflecting on the current work of schools, hyper-local organisations and central teams in enabling children's contribution to community integration.
- Identifying opportunities to extend the work of schools, hyper-local organisations and central teams in order to further enable children to impact positively on community integration and cohesion.

To this end, we have developed a Framework for Action (Figure 2) that can be used to prompt visioning, reflection and planning among local policy-makers and stakeholders.

Figure 2. Framework for action for local policy-makers: supporting children's contribution to community integration

Step 1: Define your vision	**What does children's contribution to community integration and cohesion in your town look like?**		
	SCHOOLS	**HYPER-LOCAL ORGANISATIONS**	**CENTRAL TEAMS**
Step 2: Reflect on current realities	• What do schools do to support community integration and cohesion? • How do you support schools in this work? • What programmes operate across schools e.g. The Linking Network?	• What hyper-local organisations exist that children and families trust (e.g. local libraries, community centres, faith organisations)? • What partnerships exist between hyper-local organiastions to connect diverse communities in the town?	• What central events and activities are designed to draw in diverse children and families from across the town? How popular are these events and how welcomed do children and families feel? • How do central teams work to connect hyper-local organisations to one another?
Step 3: Identify opportunities to extend	• Is community integration and cohesion uniformly seen as part of schools' remit or are there select schools taking this approach? • How could schools share learning around enabling community cohesion? • What programmes could be implemented across schools to support community integration and cohesion?	• How can trusted services operating at a hyper-local level make links to support connections across geographical segregation? • How are local services supported centrally to make these connections? • What training is available for hyper-local organisations to enable them to support community integration? • What funding opportunities exist for grassroots community-based organisations?	• What would support children to be part of and make better use of centrally planned activities e.g. transport links, parents' confidence? • How could central teams build on the trust communities have in hyper-local organisations? • How could central teams be involved in fostering partnerships across diverse hyper-local organisations?

Findings from across the strands

Parents/carers and children shape each others' connections across difference

Across the strands, we found evidence of how parents and carers shape children's engagement with their local community. At times this influence is shown to be supportive of children connecting across difference, but at other times, it can be a constraining force that limits children's connections. Children's creative work shows how parents and carers can act as a starting point for finding a strong sense of belonging in the local community and an openness to others. This is echoed in the data gathered among children and parents, which shows statistically significant correlations between parents' own connections across diversity and children's willingness to engage and make friends with children who are not like them in some ways. In the interviews with local stakeholders and policy-makers, parents/carers were often conceptualised as a barrier to children's connections across diversity. For example, when community groups organised visits for children that would take them beyond their own cultural and religious background (e.g. to a place of worship for another faith), it was parents and carers who demonstrated concern and needed to be convinced of the worth of such connection-building activities.

Interviews with children in this research echo robust previous findings from research, which show that in order for children to build deep and lasting friendships, relationships need to be developed beyond the school gates (Blaylock et al., 2017). This might take the form of children visiting each other's houses, but it might also involve them meeting up in neutral public spaces (such as the local park). These meetings in the evenings and the weekends help to make friendships more resilient so that they can be sustained over time, including through the transition to adolescence and even adulthood. With this in mind, we can see how parents and carers' feelings about who their children mix with are so fundamental to the opportunities for children to build deep and lasting relationships with individuals who are not always like them. Our findings show how important children's perceptions of parental confidence or anxiety are for their own willingness to mix. If a child senses that their parent will not be happy with them playing with a particular person outside of school, it is likely that they will avoid doing this even if their relationship inside school is important to them. What matters is not whether the parent/carer has actually actively stood in the way of the friendship deepening, but rather that the child picks up on a more generalised sense of anxiety which they then translate into an understanding that they should not deepen the social connection they have made. This shows how essential it is that parents/carers actively encourage children to connect across difference, both through their own role modelling and explicit approval, if children's friendships are to have lasting effects on community integration.

As well as recognising the influence of parents/carers on children's openness to connecting with others and their capacity to do this, our data begins to demonstrate how this influence is bi-directional. That is, children's connections do appear to be important for what parents/carers experience and who they go on to meet and get to know. A majority of parents/carers agreed that they met new people who they would not otherwise meet as a result of their children's friendships. Thus, it is not appropriate to think about parents/carers as a 'block' against children's connections; rather, they are one of various moving parts. Their attitudes and experiences can change as a result of their children's encounters, particularly through school. This highlights the role that school might play as a way to support connections across diversity among both children and adults.

Schools can act as community hubs that support connections among both children and parents/carers

Our research shows that there are correlations between the diversity of a school population and the diversity of children's friendships. Overall, children are more likely to connect with those who are not like them when they are in a school that is more diverse. This is not necessarily the case in all of the schools we looked at and it is important to recognise that ethnic diversity in of itself is not enough to guarantee that children will mix more with one another. Our interviews with local stakeholders did pick up on the existence of schools where there were concerns that children's play (e.g. at break times) was segregated, despite efforts made by adults to bring children together in all formal learning times. This was the case when the connections between children of a particular community who had recently arrived were particularly strong, and were regularly reinforced through out-of-school connections and shared childcare arrangements. However, the overall picture across our data showed that the diversity of a school did predict the diversity of children's friendships. Further research would be needed to understand whether there are particular levels or types of school diversity that are particularly supportive of diversity in children's friendships.

School is a way that children meet other children who are not like them, whether in terms of ethnicity, culture, language or faith. We found the same to be true for parents and carers, who for the most part agreed that school was a way for them to meet people who were different to them and who they would not otherwise meet. When children themselves make friends across difference, this was even more likely to be the case. This suggests that how we organise and support children's social encounters matters for how adult parents/carers then experience their local community and relationships within it. Even the fleeting interactions involved in school drop-off and pick-up appeared to be important to parents and also to children, who observed their parents' interactions with others and used this as a guide in making sense of their own connections and friendships. Nodding to one another as they pass each other during pick-up, or offering a brief smile or 'hello', is a small exchange but an important one for laying the foundations of social mixing.

School events can then help to build on these interactions in order to deepen and strengthen them. The parents we surveyed were positive about school events that put their children's educational achievements centre-stage (e.g. concerts, performances, sports day) but also saw these as opportunities to meet other parents and feel part of a diverse parent/carer community at the school.

Children observe fleeting interactions between parents/carers and read meaning from them about what their parents/carers are comfortable with versus what they are anxious about. In the section above, we discussed how children use cues from their caregivers to understand who they should seek to get to know beyond the school gates. Children are more likely to ask their parent/carer for permission to meet up with another child (e.g. at the park), if they have a sense that their parent/carer will approve of this relationship. We imagine that they are more likely to feel this way if they have seen their parents interacting with other parents/carers who are not like them, and may even be the parents/carers of the child that they would like to play with outside of school. Thus, how a school supports relationships between parents/carers matters for how children then go on to experience making sustainable friendships with others, including those who are not like them.

Children's creative work highlights how school can act as a community hub, bringing people together for far more than formal education. Clubs and events that take place at the school play a fundamental role in shaping children's sense of belonging within their school but also beyond the school gates. Whether children are welcomed to stay beyond school hours matters for their belonging, and whether families have a way to physically come into the school and participate in activities, matters for the connections that can then arise. Our interviews with school leaders, particularly pastoral support teams, show that some schools take their contribution as a community hub particularly seriously and put resources into this. There is a large degree of 'know-how' among pastoral teams in primary schools about how to support stronger connections of parents/carers to school and then within the parent/carer community. However, there are also barriers – time and money - to implementing what they know to be effective. School leaders find it difficult to make the time for parents/carers to come in more regularly because of the pressures of the national curriculum and ensuring that content with children is covered as required. There is also an issue of finding within the budget the smaller pockets of money that make it possible to host parents and carers at events and activities, such as a budget for catering the event.

Public spaces are important sites of belonging and connection for children

Public spaces that children can access for free are particularly important for supporting connections across difference. Children need places to meet up with friends that are neutral and support their play. Children may go to each other's house, but this requires a

deeper level of investment among parents and carers, which may not be forthcoming. Public places, particularly parks, are therefore an important way for children to move their friendship beyond the school gates. Of course, the safer a local community is perceived to be by parents and carers, the more opportunities children will have to spend time with friends that they have made in school who might not be like them in some ways. Similarly, the closer the park is to the home of the children, the easier this opportunity becomes. There is a clear case here for investing in outdoor play spaces appropriate for children in middle childhood that feel safe and are within a 10-minute walk of children's homes. Another project carried out as part of the Understanding Communities programme (Nature-based integration: connecting communities with/in nature - Nuffield Foundation) argues that nature spaces have a positive impact on community cohesion, and our findings show why this manifests among children and families.

Children's creative work elucidated important sites of belonging in their everyday lives. Places of worship, such as mosques, temples and churches, were talked about by children as being a space where they felt secure and a strong sense of collective identity. Football was a secular site of belonging that cut across genders, and recurred in discussions with children. For some, the site of belonging was a local football ground where they played for a local team. For others, the site of belonging was the football team they supported, whether this was a local or a national team. Places of worship and football were important to children as a way to connect with others, as places where they felt welcomed but also that they could welcome others. In our community workshops, we discussed how there were opportunities for other services (e.g. libraries, arts) to play more of a role in offering these secular sites of belonging, akin to what football offers.

In our interviews with local stakeholders, we found that parents/carers are more likely to engage with services and activities that target children when these are offered on a hyper-local basis. This is partly because of the physical accessibility of children's activities when they occur on the doorstep, but it was also linked to parents/carers' sense of confidence and trust. There is more trust in what is close by and familiar to you so hyper-local community centres or youth clubs offer a lot of potential when it comes to fostering cohesion among families. The implication was that services offered more centrally, such as the town's main public library, were less likely to visited by families because they were harder to get to but were also more likely to be associated with social anxiety among the adults. This highlights the importance of councils thinking about how central services can be delivered at a hyper-local level, but also how this hyper-local engagement might act as a springboard for supporting families to demonstrate engagement further afield. In thinking about this progression, stakeholders emphasised the need to think practically about issues such as transport. Without transport being provided, many families simply would not make the journey to attend a particular club or activity in the centre of town.

Conclusion

The multi-layered data we gathered from three towns in the North West of England suggest that parents and carers shape children's engagement with their local community. Parents' own connections across diversity correlate with children's diverse friendships and their willingness to make friends with children who are not like them in some ways. If children's friendships are to last over time, and have a lasting effect on their views on the world, children need to be supported to develop diverse friendships outside of school and this depends on their perceptions of their parents' approval of this. Diversity within a school is correlated with the diversity of children's friendships within the school, though this does not guarantee that this will be the case in every school and some schools may need to be more proactive in supporting children to connect across difference, depending on the particular local context. School is a way that children and parents connect across difference. Fleeting interactions during drop-off and pick-up are important to parents and carers and connections can be strengthened through school events and provision of clubs and activities within school. Public spaces that children can access for free are particularly important for supporting connections across difference. Local parks where children can play safely are an important way that children deepen diverse friendships outside of a school context. Sports are another hotspot for connection, and particularly local football teams and the town's football club. There are opportunities for other services to play more of a role in this (e.g. arts, libraries) and this depends on thinking carefully about both hyper-local and central provision, and the ways in which families can be welcomed into spaces that may be unfamiliar to them. It is important to note that the insights we offer into children's contribution to community integration have emerged in the context of three towns in the North West, which share historical similarities in migration and demographic similarities in the communities that live there. Further research in other parts of the country is needed to see whether similar patterns play out in alternative local contexts with distinct migration trajectories and demographic profiles.

Recommendations for local policy-makers

- Diversity in schools is linked to the diversity of children's friendships, which in turn predicts adults' connections across difference. An aspiration towards diversity can therefore be part of local planning around school inclusion criteria, catchments and intake. At the same time, there needs to be a local strategy in place for when schools are lacking in diversity. This might mean investing in a programme such as Schools Linking offered by The Linking Network, which brings together children across difference and proactively supports their connection to one another.

- Schools need to be given the support to act as community hubs that can foster cohesion among children and parents/carers. This means supporting schools to

find the time and money to put on events that will bring in parents/carers and engage them with one another.

- Parks are an essential part of local infrastructure for children's connections across diversity and supporting these to be sustained over time, as children transition into adolescence. The safer the park is, and the closer it is to home, the more likely children will be supported by parents/carers to meet up with friends from school who are not necessarily like them.

- There are ways to support parents and carers to connect across difference, as well as children. Local authority teams can support hyper-local community groups to connect with each other and create 'exchange' programmes, whereby members come together for particular projects and events. Support for Schools Linking can be extended to develop more opportunities for parents/carers to connect as a way to follow on from children's interactions in the programme.

Recommendations for schools

- Diversity within a school is a resource; making the most of this resource depends on the intentionality of the school leadership. There are ways to foster connection across difference among children, while recognising the benefits of children knowing others who they feel familiar and comfortable with.

- If diversity in a school is not present, school leaders can investigate ways to connect children across further afield within the local community e.g. through the Schools Linking programme.

- Schools play a fundamental role in local communities as a community hub for parents/carers as well as children. It is beneficial to think about parents/carers' opportunities to connect with one another, whether at drop-off/pick-up times or through clubs, activities and events. What are parents/carers' physical journey through the school and who are they likely to encounter? Are there comfortable places for parents/carers to wait for their children, where they can have positive interactions with each other?

Recommendations for community groups and services

- Hyper-local provision works best for families as it reduces anxiety among parents/carers. If hyper-local services and activities connect with one another across the town, there is an opportunity to bring people together who would not normally socialise (e.g. an exchange programme for two community centres that each serve a particular estate).

- Hyper-local provision might act as a stepping stone to more centrally organised provision, but this needs careful planning around transport and families feeling welcomed into spaces they are less familiar with.

- Sport, and particularly football, offers significant opportunities for secular belonging. There are opportunities for other services and activities (e.g. libraries, nature/gardening, arts) to grow their impact in a similar way.

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Appendix A: Demographics for Strands 2 and 3

All demographic data is as the respondent described - in other words, the interviewer has not made any judgement on the response.

A.1 Children's Age

Respondents were first asked to give their age as shown in Figure 1.
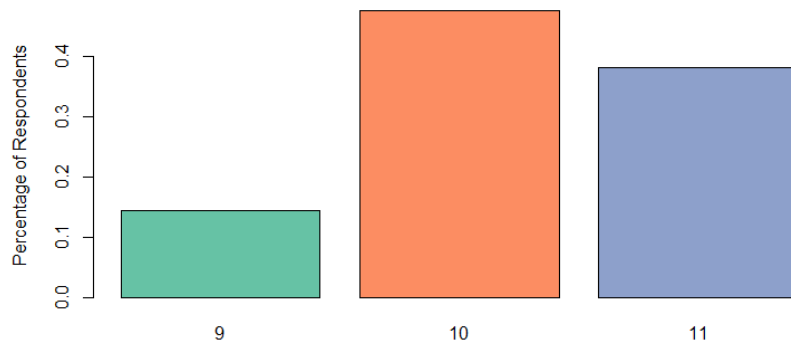

Figure 1: Age of Respondents

A.2 Children's Gender

For gender, ethnicity, and faith we asked respondents to nominate categories they identified with from a large list worded as follows:

If you were writing a true story about yourself and wanted to tell people about what you're like, which words would you use? I'll show you some words, and you can choose as many as you like [cards with words listed below on are laid out on table in a random order]. Would you say you are…….. African, Asian, Bengali, Black, Boy, British, Caribbean, Chinese, Christian,English,Girl,Hindu,Indian,Muslim,Nepalese,Pakistani,Polish,Srilankan,White,Catholic, Other? Blank cards were given to children to list the nationalities, religions or ethnicities that were not included in the list provided.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents with Male at 50% (219), Female at 49% (214) and Other at 1% (3). No student chose multiple gender categories.
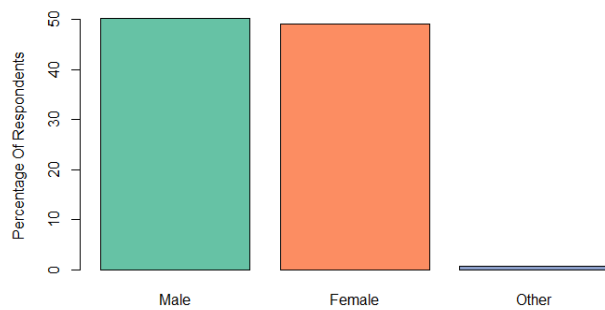
Figure 2: Gender of Respondents

A.3 Children's Ethnicity

Ethnicity was more complex with respondents choosing in four cases six different ways to describe themselves.

Figure 3 displays how many times each ethnicity category was selected.
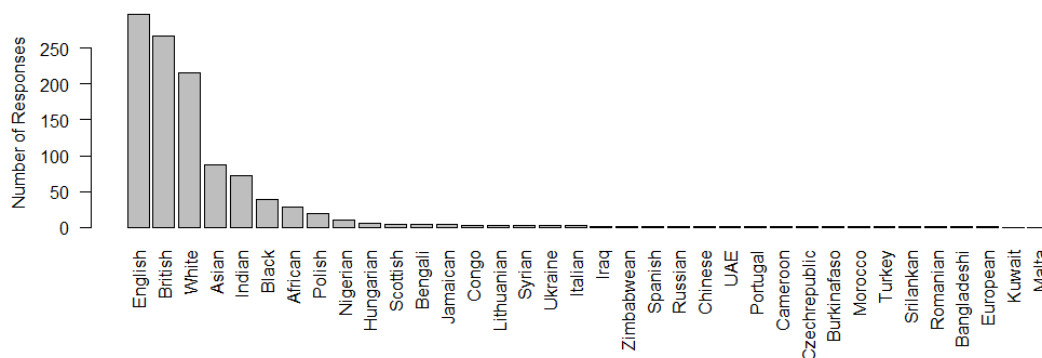
Figure 3: Respondent Ethnicity

We see English, British, and White as the most selected with Asian, Indian, and Black following. In terms of how these categories are combined, 133 respondents selected " British", "White", and "English" together. No other unique combination of responses had more than 20 selections, however 43 students chose "British", "Asian", and at least one more specific ethnic category.

For many analyses we need to condense these categories. We used rough categories of "Asian", "Black", "Mixed", "WhiteOther" and "WhiteBritish" and coded students into them so that we had mutually exclusive categories with "Mixed" representing any combination of the other categories. The percentage of respondents that fell into each mutually exclusive category are shown in Figure 4.
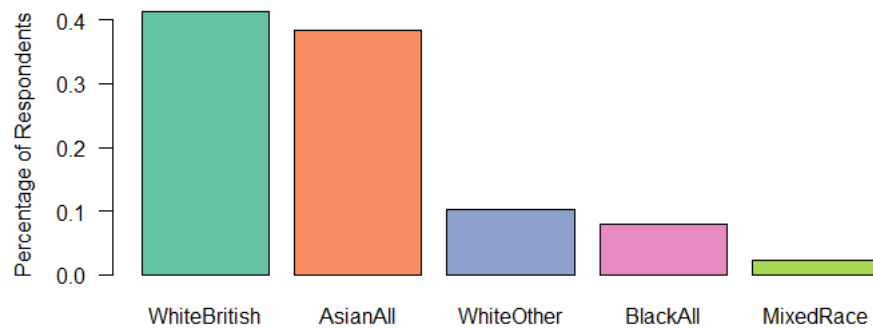
Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents with condensed ethnicity coding

A.4 Children's Religion

FIgure 5 shows the religion the students identified. As with the initial ethnicity question, respondents were allowed to select multiple faiths. Unlike with ethnicity, only 14 students chose more than one option.
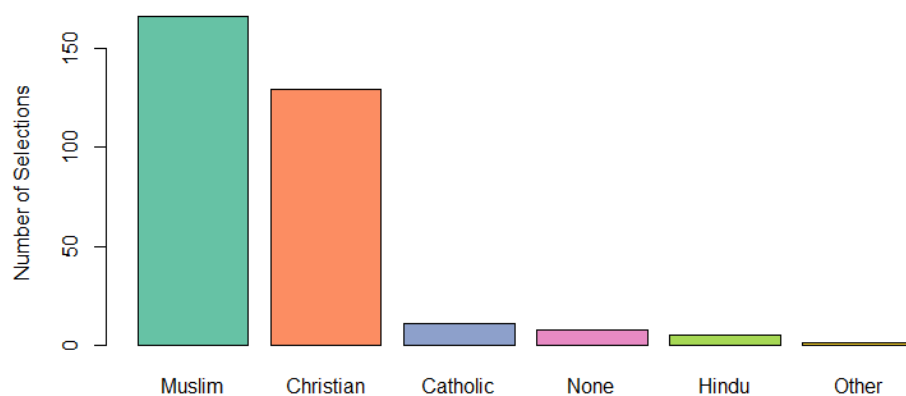

Figure 5: Frequency of Faith selections

A.5 Children's Socio-Economic Status

We asked respondents multiple questions to get a sense of their home life and socio-economic status. These are shown in Figure 6A-C.

Family Owns a Car

Family Traveled Away for Holiday

Family Owns Computer or Gaming Console
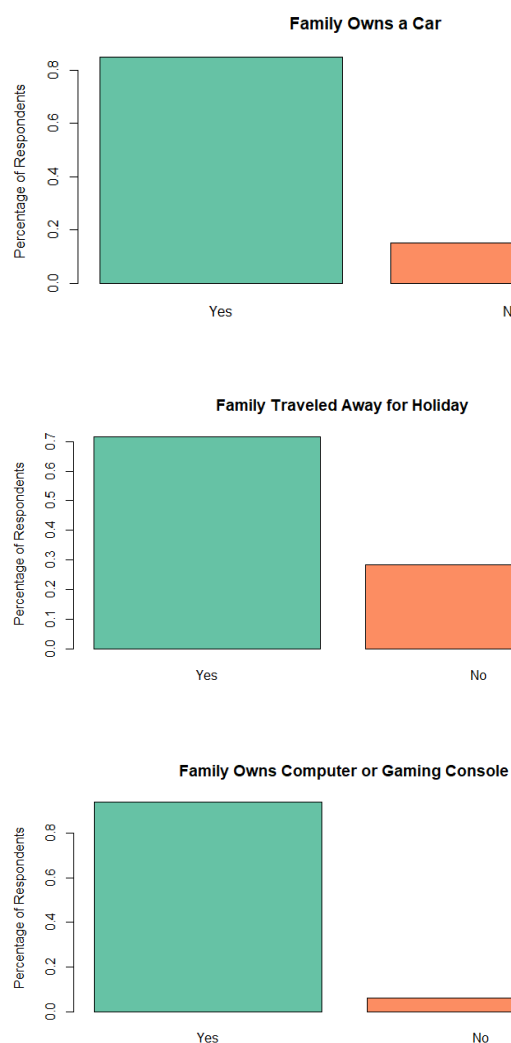
Figure 6: Does your family own a car, van, or truck? (a),During the past year, did you travel away on holiday with your family? (b), Does your family own a computer or video game console? (c)

A.6 Children's Friendships

Figure 7 shows a randomised perturbation of our resulting networks. Each shape (or node) is a child that was interviewed. They are coloured by the class they were interviewed in. The shape denotes their condensed ethnic categorization, and those who identified as "Female" have a black "bullseye" at the centre of their shape. We removed some nodes and edges as well as added other nodes and edges (our

perturbation) so that no respondent is identifiable from the image. Similarly, we've not identified the three students who marked "other" as their gender nor have we used the more complex ethnicity categories in order to avoid any chance of identification. The edges between nodes are the friendship nominations. Nodes are in general closer to other nodes they are tied to, but the generation of the image also has a random component so the placement is otherwise not meaningful.
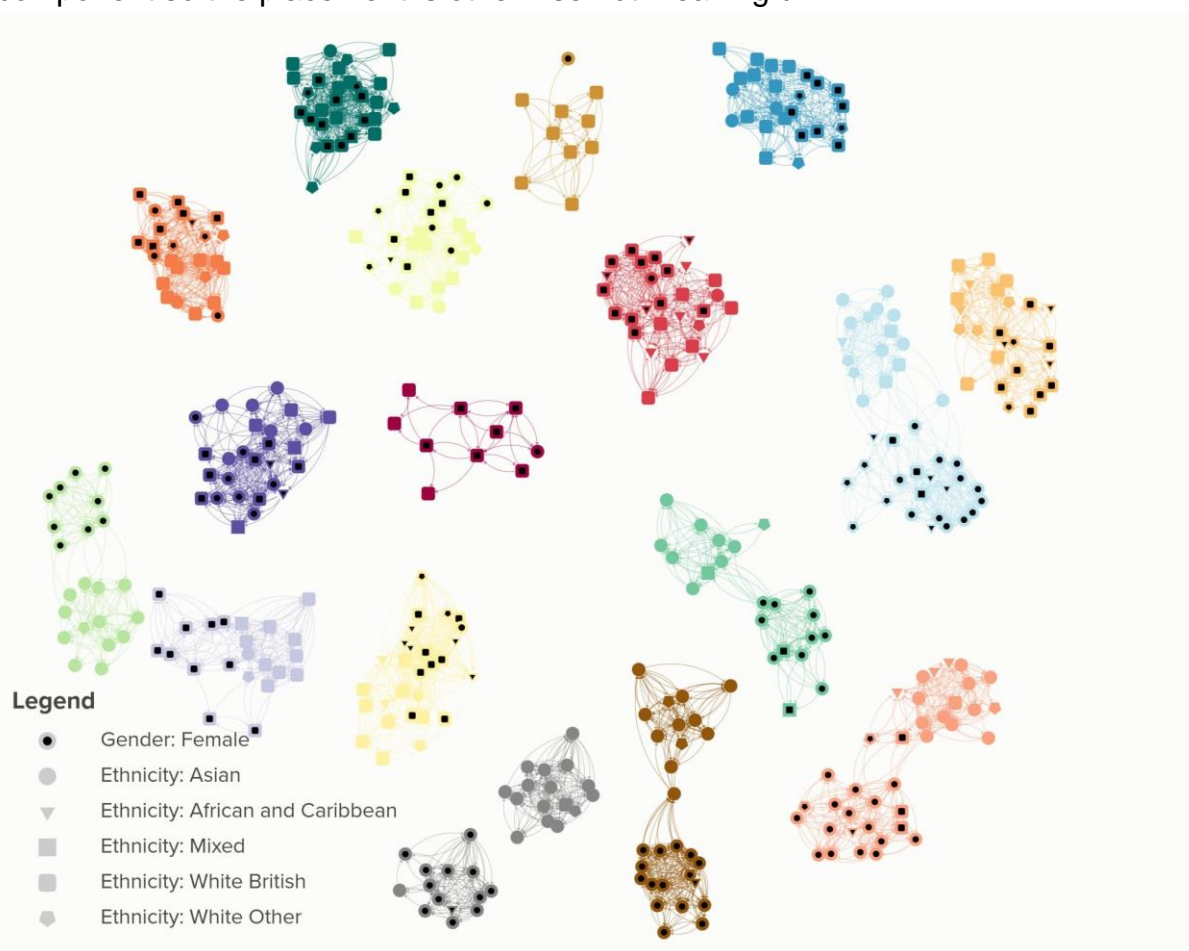

Figure 7: Social Networks collected. The nodes are coloured by class.

What we see is evidence of homophily (the grouping of similar others) by both gender and sometimes ethnic status. Our future analysis will look at this level of homophily to determine whether it is significant above what is expected from the level of diversity in the classroom as well as controlling for a number of other controls, but we present some descriptives in Figure 8 and 9. Homophily here is calculated as the number of ties that are the same (homophilous), minus the number of ties that are different (heterophilous), and divided by the total number of ties. The resulting score is between -1 and 1 where -1 would indicate that the respondent has no ties that are the same as themselves and 1 would indicate that all ties are the same as themselves.
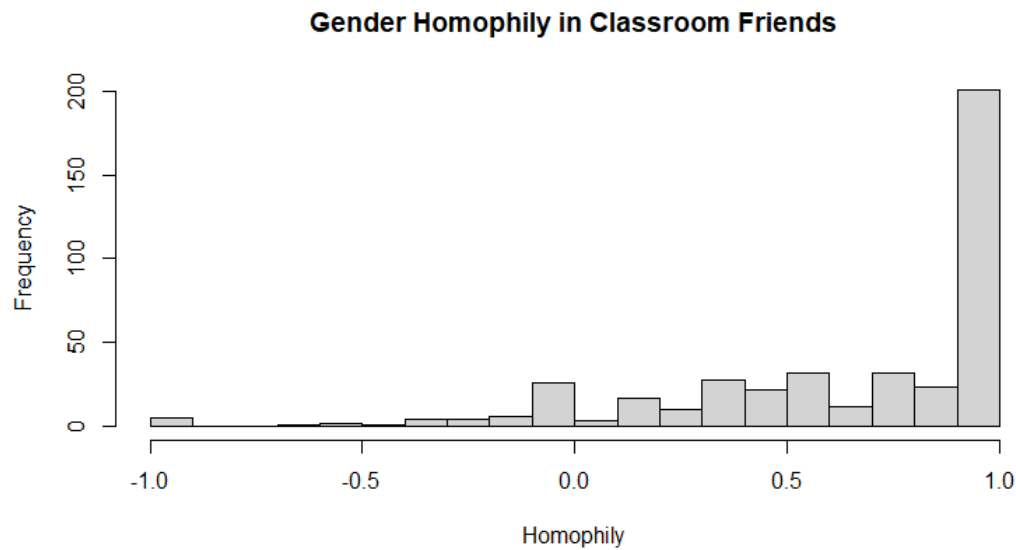
Gender Homophily in Classroom Friends

Figure 8: Gender homophily in classroom networks

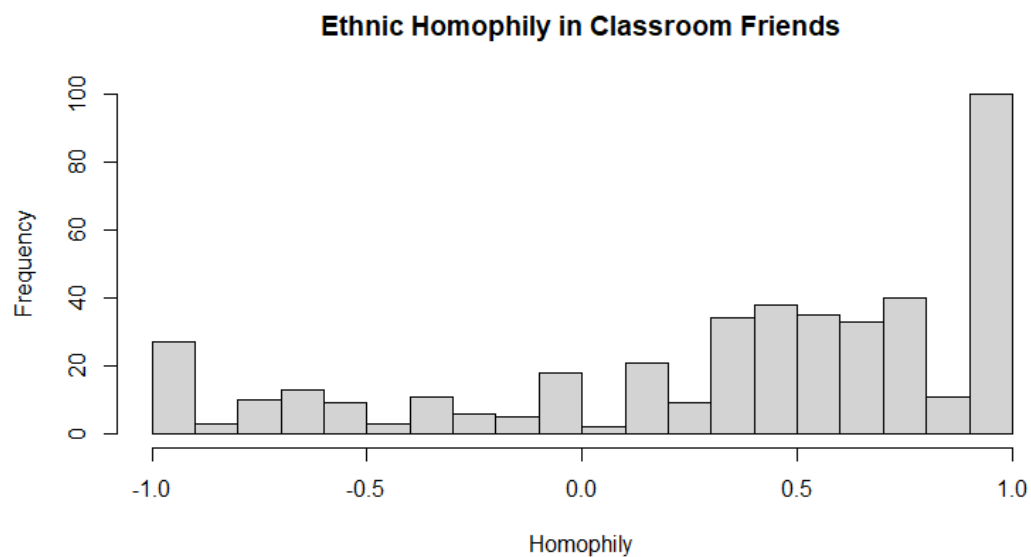**Ethnic Homophily in Classroom Friends**

Figure 9: Ethnic homophily in classroom networks

We see far more homophily along gendered lines than we see along ethnic. This will remain true after we adjust for the distribution of gender and ethnicity in the classroom as most classrooms have a roughly even split for gender although many are far more skewed for ethnicity.

We repeated the same analysis for their friendships outside of school. Students were asked about friends they see and then for each friend nominated we asked their gender and whether they were the same background as the respondent. We used a prompt to

indicate what we meant about background. We decided to use this rather than a specific ethnicity prompt which might have been more difficult for respondents to accurately access.

Gender Homophily in Outside Friends
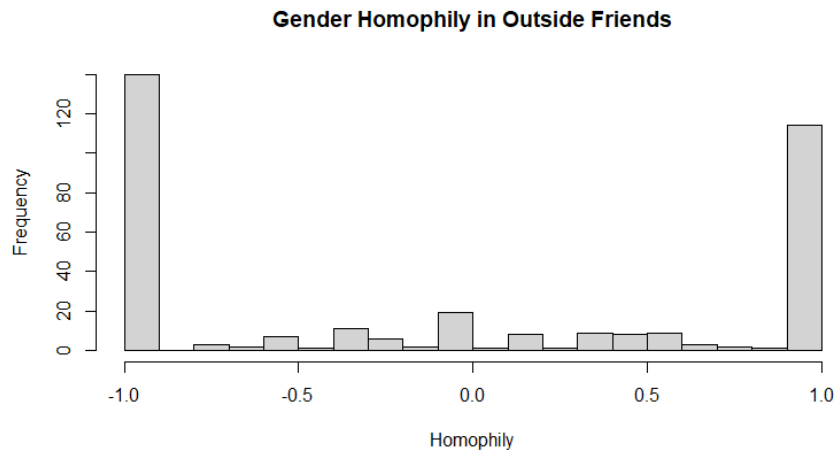
Figure 10: Gender homophily in Outside Friendships
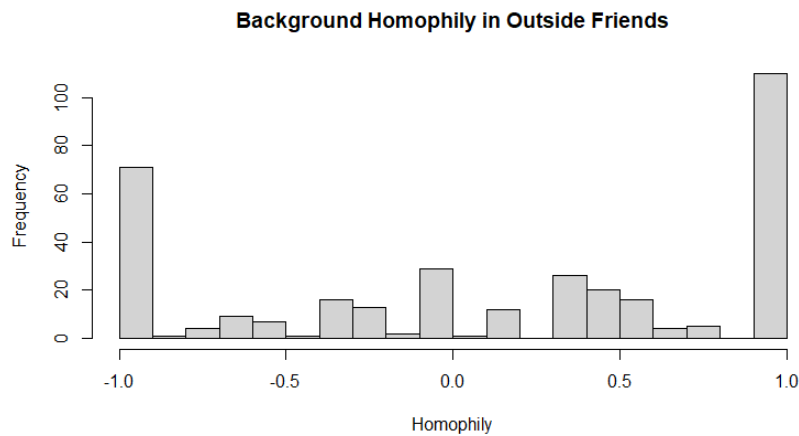
Background Homophily in Outside Friends

Figure 11: Background homophily in Outside Friendships

The relationships outside of school again show a marked degree of homophily but with some more heterophilous relationships.

A.7 Parents' Age
Figure 12 shows the age responses. The mean and median ages are 39.
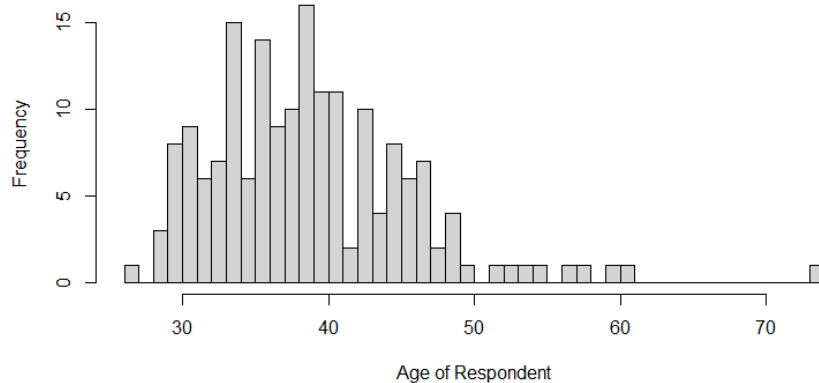
Figure 12: Parents' Survey Respondent Age

A.9 Relationship

We asked the respondent about their relationship to the student who had already participated in the survey. The vast majority of respondents (82%) are mothers, 13% are fathers, Special Guardian and Other Caregiver both make up 2% of respondents and the remaining categories are each less than 1%. This is shown in Figure 13.
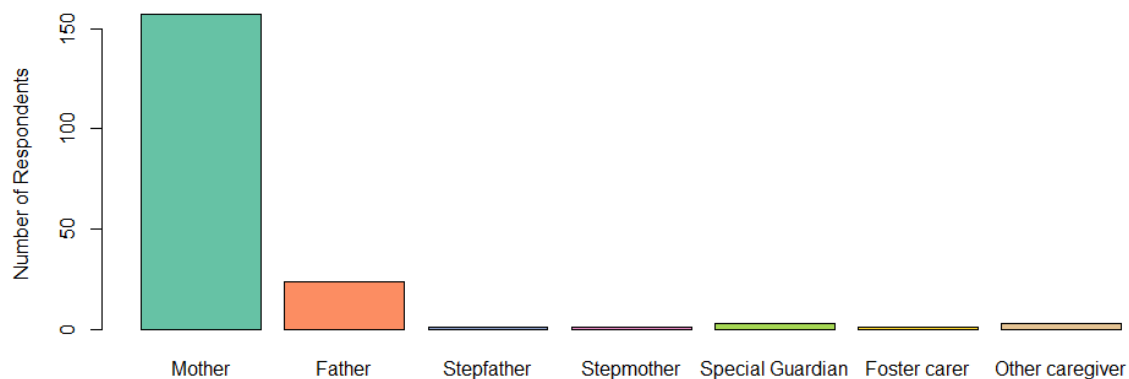

Figure 13: Parents' Survey Respondent Relationship to Student

A.8 Parents' Gender

As we could infer from the relationship, the vast majority of respondents are women. This is consistent with their stated gender. "Transgender" and "non-binary" were also included as options but not selected.
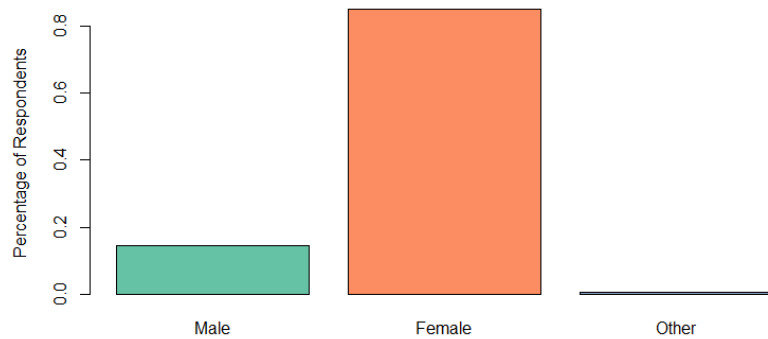
Figure 14: Parents' Survey Respondent Gender

A.9 Parents' Ethnicity

Parents were asked a much shorter version of the ethnicity question in the student survey. Their responses were also coded by the same reduced categories that was applied to the student data.
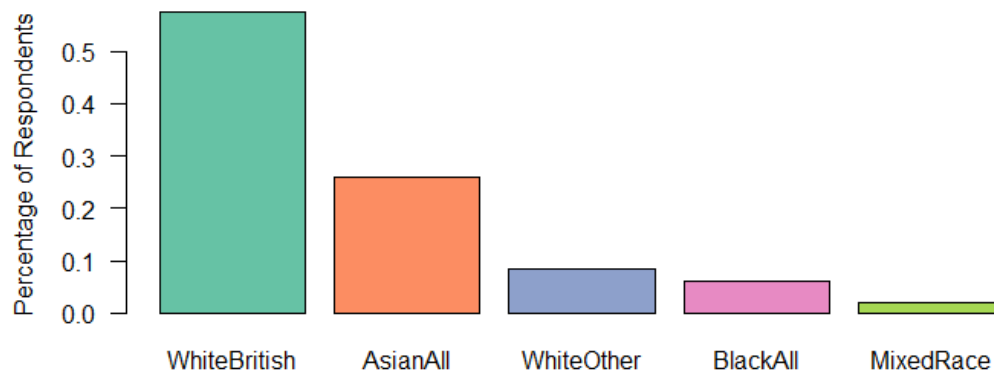

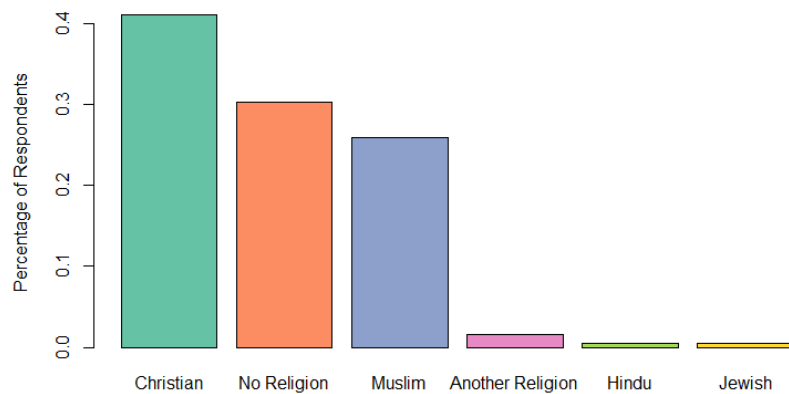*Figure 15: Parents' Survey Respondent Ethnicity*

A.10 Parents' Faith

Figure 16: Parents' Survey Respondent Faith

A.11 Parents' Socio-Economic Status

Rather than asking parents about their specific socio-economic status, where they provided their postcode this was matched to the Index of Multiple Deprivation. The deciles are displayed in Figure. "1" indicates that the respondent's postal code is in the 10% most deprived of all postal codes. We can see that the vast majority of respondents (47%) fall into this category.
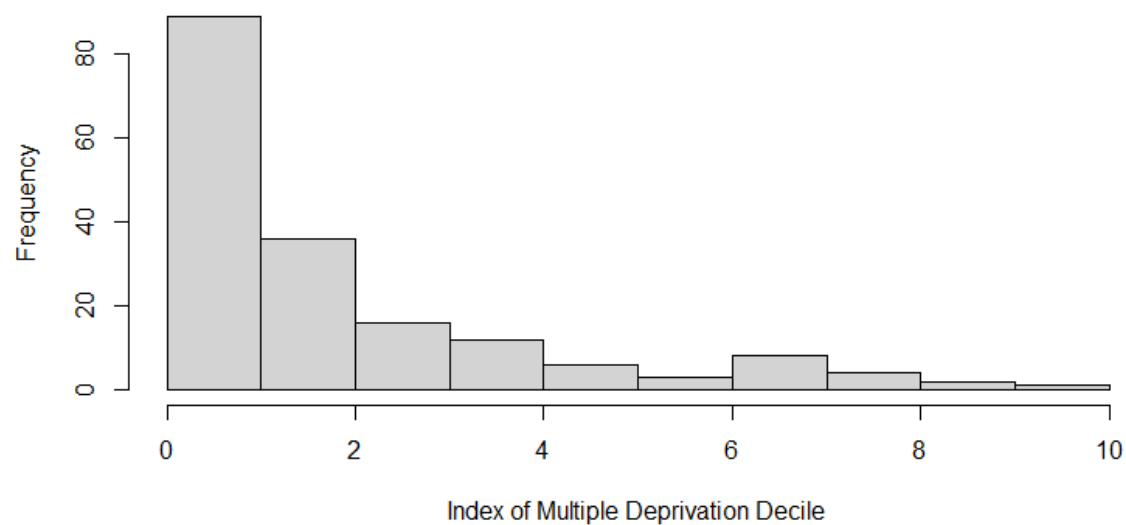

Figure 17: Parents' Survey Respondent Postal Code Index of Multiple Deprivation Decile