

“Childcare, class and social mix – The role of networks for school choice”

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Extended abstract

Urban educational processes and school choice strategies have been well-reported in literature. In many approaches, class is one central dimension covering the well-known typology of choosers (privileged or skilled, semi-skilled and disconnected) (Ball et al., 1996), the role of cultural capital to encode and decode knowledge of schools, the emphasis on reproduction and social closure as well as research on parental value dilemmas and the risks and fears involved in school choice for different social class groups (Ball et al., 1996; Butler & Robson, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007; Vincent et al., 2009; Vowden, 2012; Noreisch, 2007). Related to the focus on social class, another line of research on urban education focused on the interaction between educational provision and residential choice (Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Hamnett & Butler, 2011; Boterman, 2013; Rangvid, 2007), the interplay between class and place in intervening in parental choice, different circuits of schooling as well as local parental networks and their influence on parents' access to inside knowledge about schools (Butler & Robson, 2003; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Ball & Vincent, 2007; Kosunen, 2014; Noreisch, 2007).

According to Ball & Vincent (1998), parental school choice is highly influenced by social networks and informal information – so called grapevine knowledge – that is distributed unevenly across different social groups. Other mothers seem to be “the most important sources of information” (Byrne, 2006: 1008). Since school choice has a very local character, parents tend to perceive local networks as the most reliable source of information (van Zanten, 2013). Studies have thus identified the important role of different foci in the local neighbourhood, such as baby groups, child-related activities, childcare centres and primary schools, which facilitate and maintain the social networks through which information about childcare and school can be accessed (Byrne, 2006; van Zanten, 2013; Ball & Vincent, 1998).

Apart from its role as a useful source of information, grapevine knowledge provides a medium for social comparison “with others 'like us' and 'others' not 'like us'” (Ball & Vincent, 1998: 393). Choice strategies and attitudes to childcare, schooling and social mix are framed by social norms and values and parents often feel a pressure to con-

form to dominant norms regarding social matching of school (van Zanten, 2013). These norms are often localised pointing to the important role of place in school choice context. As research could show, place can shape classed attitudes to parenting leading to ‘local parenting cultures’ (Holloway, 1998) that are not neatly confined to members of a specific social class (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). It can therefore be assumed that contacts and networks in socially mixed childcare centres could influence parents’ school choice strategies. An analysis of the relationship between social class, the socio-spatial environment and parents’ educational aspirations and strategies might thus be of high interest.

Being effective brokers of organisational and social ties (Small, 2009), childcare centres might be one important place for shaping parental aspirations and educational strategies. The role of pre-school organisations in shaping parental educational strategies has not yet been adequately investigated. However, focusing on mixed childcare centres might be crucial for two reasons: While parental strategies are mostly understood through the lens of their cultural (and economic) capital, there is little knowledge on how parents’ educational strategies are shaped by organisational structures and internal practices on the one hand and by social networks and encounters (with other social groups) in these organisations on the other hand. Furthermore, since research has mainly focused on middle classes, there is currently less knowledge about non-middle-class parents’ intentions and the potential mutual influence of both groups through regular encounters in mixed childcare centres. The dominant focus on middle-class families’ strategies “may lead us to overlook inter-group processes” (Nast & Blokland, 2014: 485) and impedes from examining the relevance of mixed institutional settings. Since current research points to the positive effect of socially mixed childcare centres on children’s development (Groos & Jehles, 2015), the question arises if the institution’s social composition is also reflected in social networks and to what extent these networks influence parents’ educational strategies and their attitudes towards socially mixed primary schools.

Therefore, the underlying research questions are:

- What are the effects of encounter and networks in (mixed) childcare centres on parental educational strategies?
- And how are these strategies formed and shaped by the organisation and its internal practices, routines and structures?

Building upon the arguments above, I am planning to conduct an empirical study on parental school choice strategies in city in the Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)/Germany, where school catchment areas have been abolished in 2008. Although free choice of primary schools was advertised as a tool for working class and other underprivileged families to access better schools than those in their immediate living environment, privileged parents strategically use this freedom more often than disadvantaged families (Weishaupt et al., 2012). The research study shall allow for insights into the role of (class-crossing) networks on the one hand and organisational structures in childcare centres on the other hand in shaping parental educational strategies. Findings from a mixed childcare centre are planned to be contrasted with the analysis of two more homogenous ones. Moreover, the study shall investigate the differences and similarities between middle-class and non-middle-class parents in negotiating with free school choice and the underlying values and perceptions behind these strategies.

The study will have a mainly qualitative approach based on interviews with the parents of children between four and six years in the chosen childcare centres and expert interviews with staff in childcare centres and schools. The interviews with parents will include a network analysis with name generators to qualify ego-centred social networks and (class-bridging) resource transfer. The interviews will be supported and complemented by participatory observations in order to get access to ordinary practices, organisational structures and internal routines, which cannot be illustrated by expert interviews.

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