

“Birds of a feather flock together”: Middle class education strategies and social mix in multicultural neighborhoods in Athens

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the different forms of educational strategies of middle classes and their social relations with less privileged neighbours in mixed neighborhoods in the inner city of Athens. To this end it attempts to answer questions, such as: Do the middle classes have a negative interest in poor neighbours or do they contribute to integration of less affluent residents through various forms of use of neighborhood services? Which groups of the middle classes are tolerant towards their disadvantaged neighbours and to what extent?

This research is based on data collected from semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents and teachers in two different neighbourhoods in the city of Athens. The results of the empirical research show a closer examination of the different forms of educational strategies of middle classes and an ongoing geographical and social separation of middle class residents in the city of Athens.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on an explanation of social and spatial inequalities and segregation processes in mixed neighbourhoods in Athens. More specifically it seeks to examine the forms of school segregation and the specific separating mechanisms which affect social and ethnic distribution in schools. It is therefore necessary to study neighborhood schools and social conditions under which school choice is changed.

Also, it seeks to investigate the different forms of middle class education strategies centered on school choice and the consequences of school catchment area evasion.

We address the question of how the residential context contributes to the formation of school choice and which strategies parents develop in response to the perceived negative influence of schools pupil-mix. To this end it attempts to answer questions, such as: Do the middle classes have a negative interest in poor neighbours or contribute to integration of less affluent residents through various forms of neighborhood use? Which groups of the middle classes are tolerant towards their disadvantaged neighbors and to what extent?

The collective behaviour of middle class parents is based on homogeneity tendencies with people who have the same social norms and habits as them and avoidance of outsider groups with different ethnic or class features. When social and physical visibility of different social-ethnic groups is more intense, school competition and intervention strategies of middle class parents are more pronounced. In contrast, when social distance is greater between middle class groups and disadvantaged groups, there is more tolerance and willingness to help. Various middle-class groups are tolerant of disadvantaged groups and willing to help less affluent neighbors but it depends on the proximity and the ethnic or cultural identity of the disadvantaged people (Roma and Muslims are in most disadvantageous position).

The role of institutions is very important in this process. It seems that the activities of many institutions—schools, cultural associations, local services - become

mechanisms of social reproduction and their tactics reproduce and reinforce social segregation. Such institutions become centres of the formation of “dominant discourse” and “exercise of power” (Harvey, 2002: 243). In this context, schools do not simply mirror the social conditions of the neighbourhood but mediate and reproduce social selectivity and inequality by adapting parenting strategies through educational selectivity. In this context we also observed differences between schools dependent on the strong or weak presence of middle classes and their intervention in how schools function.

The contemporary Greek elementary and secondary school system is organized on a principle of “proximity”, which means that children from a given neighbourhood attend the school that is closest to where they live. Enrolment is controlled by catchment areas which mirror the local environment and the neighbourhood. To analyze the extent to which middle classes adopt homogeneity or heterogeneity tendencies in school choice we conducted research in two different areas in the city: one a north eastern suburb of Athens (Acharnes), a working class area, and one in the inner city: in a renewal area (Metaxourgio) and neighboring working class areas (Votanikos, Acadimia Platonos).

Both areas are multicultural neighbourhoods with a high mixture of social strata and ethnic groups with diverse ethnic and cultural identities (Roma people, Muslim gypsies, repatriated Greeks whose origins are from the former Soviet Union and Albania, immigrants from different Balkan and Asian countries). In Acharnes the study area is characterized by various forms of urban informality, especially in housing, together with large-scale interventions and mega-projects for the Olympic Games (2004). The west suburbs are a large region that receives population mainly from low economic social strata that work in the neighboring areas in industry and manufacture. There is a concentration of low-income population in the west suburbs, in contrast to the north-east neighboring areas. The expansion of Greek professionals and higher socio-economic groups in the north-eastern suburbs further intensifies the historical formation of the city space across the west-east social class division.

In the inner city, the tree areas Metaxourgio, Acadimia Platonos and Votanikos are part of an urban renewal operation where land uses are still changing. Acadimia Platonos is a working class area near the centre, an almost new neighbourhood in contrast to the old one Metaxourgio, which concentrates people from upper and lower middle classes. The two neighbourhoods are near to important archaeological sites (Acropoli, Acadimia Platonos).

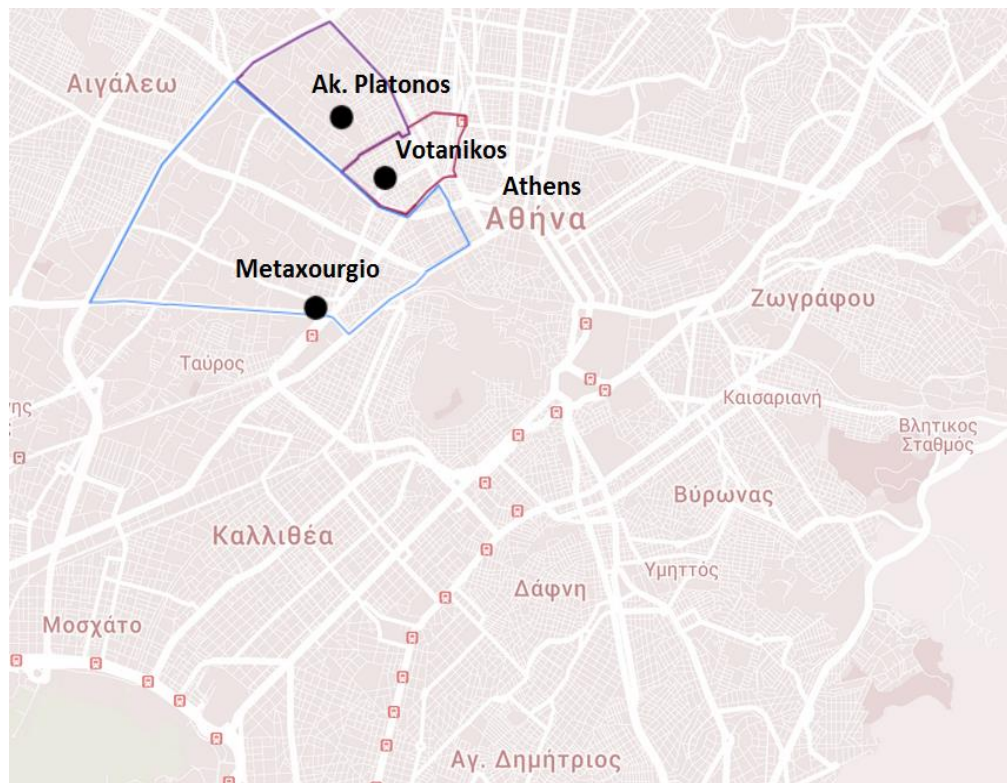
In these neighbourhoods small developers, realtors and individuals from upper and lower middle classes (early gentrifiers) renovate older houses in Metaxourgio and major investors through state-corporate partnerships invested in the area (Academia Gardens, Jessica plan)¹. In Academia Platonos and Votanikos there is a strong presence of organized civil society and community initiative against the gentrification planning projects claiming their rights to public spaces and to specific archaeological sites.

The research results are based mainly on data collected from seven secondary schools (grades, drop-out rates etc.). This is further supported by data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents, teachers and key participators in school education. 2001 Census data² were also used to obtain information on the social-economic background at the district level and the socio-spatial differentiation of educational performance. The sample pertains to 1,094 pupils (558 boys and 536 girls of secondary education) and 80 semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents, teachers and administrators (Map 1).

¹ Academia Gardens is a big Mall in the area of Acadimia Platonos and joint European Support for Sustainable Investment in City Areas. The Jessica initiative is a “regeneration” urban plan and a public-private partnership which supported by low-interest loans to the investors by the European Central Bank (Alexandri, 2013)

² National Centre for Social Research-(EKKE)-Panorama

Map 1: Schools catchment areas in mixed inner-city neighbourhoods (Metaxourgeio, Ac. Platonos, Votanikos)



2. The formation of educational strategies of middle classes: homogeneity and heterogeneity in collective behavior

Understanding socio spatial changes in the cities means to understand the urban relations that are formed and the strategies of upper and middle social classes. It is crucial to consider their role and their choices in education services as a key mechanism in the production of new forms of segregation and fragmentation of urban space. Upper and middle social classes adapt strategies of distance or proximity with other social groups in order to control and select the nature and intensity of the social interactions. These strategies of “secession”, “colonization” or “partial exit” (Atkinson 2006, Andreotti et al., 2012) affect their coexistence or separation from other social groups and also intensifies their educational selectivity in the school system.

The results show that school choice by the middle class is based on the existence of strong social networks, the social homogeneity of school composition and the good reputation of the school among residents. Social enclaves in schools and networks of homogeneity are conducive to upgrading social mobility and positional opportunities in the labor market. Middle class parents are more informed about school education and choose schools outside their neighbourhood and residence. The mobilization of parents for choosing the right school and the use of social networks is described by a parent, who is also president of the Parents Association of the school (Axarnes):

“In order to choose the right school for his child, a parent should be communicative, knowledgeable and talkative. Also, she/he must have someone to help him with the false address. For example, I should have enrolled my child in another school (according to our residence) but finally I enrolled her in this one, because it is a good school with good teachers.”

Personal networks influence the access of social groups to education and help middle class parents to find “good” schools and to achieve the transfer from one public school to another. These parents have a strong connection between the school and home principles and tend to have homogeneity tendencies with people who have the same social norms and habits as them. “Birds of a feather flock together” or “like clings to like” or “Ὅμοιον ὁμοίῳ αἰεὶ πελάζει” according to the Greek philosopher Plato (*The Symposium*, 385 BC: 195 b). Their participation in school is part of their habitués (Martin and Vincent, 2000).

A middle class parent (Acharnes) said:

“When I came to this neighborhood for my job (I work as a teacher), I had contact with the director of the school where my daughter is now enrolled. He said to me that I could send my child here. It is considered a good school in the neighborhood because it enrolls pupils mostly from the working class areas. In contrast, there is a school near this neighborhood where the children can’t speak Greek.”

Language is a key for manipulation of social information and social networking (Christakis and Fowler, 2011). Also, it defines the acceptance or not of the different ethnic groups in school. According to parents’ responses all pupils have the right to

education whatever their social or ethnic background is but, in contrast, they believe that pupils without language proficiency are a threat to the school performance of their children. In some cases of highly mixed neighborhoods, parents complained about teachers who give special attention to immigrant and Roma pupils and less to their children. In these cases parents intervene in the function of schools asking for special treatment for their offspring and even change school classes.

For middle class parents ignorance of the Greek language downgrades the level of the school and creates obstacles in the progress of their children. According to the answer of a father:

“I believe that the presence of children from other social and cultural groups is positive, provided that they do not have problems with the Greek language. For example, there are some schools in the region that have a big number of children who do not speak Greek. They are not considered good schools.”

But, he adds:

“Children, who have the desire to continue, including immigrants, make efforts. Next to our house there is a boy from Russia who comes to us to help him with reading. His parents are unable to help him”.

Parents with high intervention strategies in schools also have a strong concern for their children’s employability. They believe that education is the key for their future; they have a strong feeling of responsibility for their children’s educational performance and push them to have high goals. The educational career of their children and finally their position in the labor market is planned early under the supervision of their parents. To the question, what would the profession of children be, they answered:

“She is probably going to become a military officer, like her mother. She should choose something with prospects. We must plan it carefully before she decides”.

Social class and diversity between new and old residents contributes to clustering, with mutual relations and networks between parents. Personal networks indicate the extent to which parents have more power to choose the “right” school by avoiding the local one or intervening in the function of the local school. According to a parent,

“Children go first to a private primary school and then to a private secondary school. In some cases children get a good start in the private elementary school and then, because of a lack of money, they continue in a public school. This happens because we don’t have the money to send them to a private secondary school. My daughter goes to this public school that has a reputation as a good one. There are families from social housings and families with many children but no foreigners with language problems.”

To the question why they think the school is good for their children, a parent answers:

In school there are quality children. The level of teachers is high and the neighborhood has residents who have a level [social status]. The only thing that my child should do is to be always the first in school. To be the first and never fail and left behind [...]. The school is not enough for the education of our children. As parents, we should have free time to be involve in their education, but this depends on educational level and family circumstances. For example, children of divorced parents don’t have good performance in schools.”

While middle class parents show the willingness to help their diverse neighbors, they separate themselves from others groups by enrolling their children to schools elsewhere, thus reproduce social divisions through institutional polarization.

The role of institutions is very important when in order to attract pupils from the upper and middle classes, schools adopt strategies of academic selection, such as: good grades, suspension of pupils with deviant behavior and resilient administrative measures for transfers to other schools. The attraction of pupils with higher economic and social status will preserve their position in the area, their image and the favour of local elites. In both suburbs and inner city, parents believed that the presence of specific ethnic groups Muslims and Roma children downgrade the level of the school. According to a teacher who works near Roma settlements,

“The school near to us has high grades because they want to select parents. They have their reasons to have such good grades. When the children are

going to continue to high school, parents ask which school is good in order to send their children there.”

And according to a teacher who works near the inner city gentrified area,

“We don’t have good relations with the school near to us. They don’t want Muslims so we fight about who is going to accept these children”.

3. Social mixing and tolerance

It is debatable whether middle classes have a negative conception of disadvantaged residents. The answers about the social mixing in schools were contradictory. Some parents of middle class seem to be proponents of social mixing in schools, on condition that this does not spoil the “good” education of their offspring. They believe that the presence of working class children and immigrants downgrades the level of the school as they are a “wrong role model”. A parent answered why he thinks that his children’s school is a good one, as follows:

“The school is “good” because it has a quality in the social mixing of pupils. The teachers have a high level of qualifications and the parents are also from upper social strata”

A parent that was asked which is the main disadvantage in the area answered that, it is mainly the Roma people and also the new immigrants in the area from the former Soviet Union, who have taken Greek citizenship. But when we asked his opinion about social mixing in the school he answered:

“Social mix is good in order to meet different people and love them. Only then can the child be a good person. I believe that social mix is not bad for people. My son has a friend who is black.”

Another parent that was asked about social mixing in schools and the neighborhood in the inner city answered,

“If you do not hurt them, they will not hurt you. Immigrants are more integrated than Muslims. My kids know immigrants from primary school. Now they are friends.”

Middle classes express their by identity socializing with like-minded individuals. When social and physical visibility of different social-ethnic groups is more intense, school competition and intervention strategies of middle class parents are more pronounced. In contrast when social and physical distance is greater between middle class groups and disadvantaged groups, there is more tolerance and willingness to help.

These diversifying tendencies of middle class strata are connected to the strong presence of children from disadvantaged social groups. The local social forces reshape the neighbourhoods towards segregation, based on social homogeneity in schools and the maintenance of “safety” in the area. We conclude that middle class parents consider the presence of disadvantaged social groups in schools as a negative effect more than the presence of ethnic groups. Often they include poor immigrant workers in this category. They believe that disadvantaged pupils from lower socio-economic groups downgrade their schools’ educational level and constitute a bad role model for their children by provoking problems.

However, there is a minority middle class group which is tolerant and helpful towards poor residents. Social professionals like teachers and local social workers are active at the local level and more tolerant and helpful towards disadvantaged groups. When citizens participate in initiatives in neighborhoods for the common good and public interest, there is more willingness to help disadvantaged groups. Also, this social engagement is linked to new residents arriving in the neighborhoods with idealistic ideas of tolerance, support and civil commitment.

Moreover, our research has shown that the number of Greek children that change school increases in proportion to the number of Roma and immigrant children present in the original school. In schools with Roma and immigrant children, the Greek parents adopt intervention strategies – either by changing the limits of the

school catchment areas, especially near Roma settlements (Map 2), or by evading the local schools through the use of false addressees or by adopting intervention strategies in the function of the school.

In contrast segregated social groups from lower social strata and ethnic groups tend to have worse social conditions and fewer connections with social networks and, therefore, less access to services and opportunities for social mobility. Parents from lower social strata (routine occupation: cleaners, un-skilled workers, the unemployed etc.) experience more difficulties in educational attainment of their children because of their lack of economic and cultural capital and the absence of strong social networks. These parents feel excluded from the educational process of their children, something that is obvious when they don't participate in the parents' associations and the decision-making of the school. While they worry about the education of their children, they nevertheless believe that their offspring will follow them into similar jobs; so they don't think they need more effort in educational achievement. Educational attainment for parents from the working classes is a combination of the needs of the family and structural restrictions. It is a compromise and not a cultural deficit as occurs in middle class social strata (Ball et al., 1995). Mainly, working class parents are concerned about the presence of immigrants and their effect as a role model on the behaviour and school performance of their children. Mothers from lower social groups answer that:

“The presence of immigrant and Roma children has a negative effect on the behaviour of our children. They affect our children; however, I believe that their main life choices are personal”

“I believe that our children are harmed because of the presence of immigrants in the classrooms because teachers spend more time teaching them the Greek language and they pay more attention to them. So the level of the class is low and our children are left behind without any competition.”

There are different categories of parents who choose or avoid local schools:

a) Parents from higher and middle social classes (executives, directors in private companies, professionals: doctors, lawyers etc.) choose to transfer their children to

private schools outside the residential area. There is a significant increase in the proportion of children who enroll in private schools (through a school bus system).

b) Other parents from lower middle social classes (intermediate occupations, employees in private or public services, skilled technicians) transfer their children to different public schools outside the residential area, through the use of false address.

c) Competition between schools and intervention strategies of middle classes parents are more intense when the presence of different social- ethnic groups is more visible (Muslims, Roma). There are some parents of middle classes who choose to send their children to the local schools of their residential area, either because they have strong ties with the area or because they don't have the economic capacity to afford a private school. These parents adapt indirect intervention strategies, through social networks (family, friendship, associations for political preferences etc.) or other mechanisms (parents association), in order to control the educational attainment of their children and manage contact with socially different groups. More precisely, they co-operate with school administration in a clientistic way; they buy preferential treatment for their children by offering services to the school (economic, assistance, etc.); they influence the demarcation of school catchment areas through the decisions of local authorities (mainly near Roma settlements).

d) Parents from lower social strata, depend on their socioeconomic background. They adjust their needs to the specific educational environment with specific social and economic characteristics, often adapting middle class educational strategies where this is applicable. For working class parents the presence of immigrants, Roma or Greeks from the former Soviet Union, also has a negative effect on their children's school progress. We observed that they adopt the same strategies as middle class parents: geographical distance and attendance in schools far from the residential area or by adopting the symbolic distance and differentiation between "we" and "others".

4. Conclusions

Summarizing the results we conclude first that the choice of school is directly and dynamically connected with class differences and, is also a factor that affects and maintains segregation in the neighbourhood. For middle classes the choice of school depends not only on ethnic school composition but much more on socio-economic characteristics and social homogeneity of the pupils. The middle classes cluster together based on common social networks, income and on common aspects like old/new residents in the neighborhood and ethnic identity. Roma people and Muslims are the most segregated social group, with high drop-out rates from the school.

The role of schools is crucial for the selective process for “appropriate” pupils. Middle classes, through unofficial tactics manage to secure social homogeneity the of the school environment from lower social strata, immigrants and Roma people by reproducing regions of exclusion, racism and by constructing neighbourhoods with a lack of social and territorial mobility.

However, some middle class groups, mainly professionals like teachers and locally based social workers are more helpful in supporting their poor neighbours and it is debatable whether all middle class groups have a negative conception of disadvantaged residents. In conclusion, disadvantaged individuals should be helped to build new relations and change their social position in the neighborhood context and to focus on positional inequality. By targeting the periphery of the network society so as to help people reconnect and feel included, we help the whole fabric society and not only the disadvantaged individuals at the fringe (Christakis and Fowler, 2011).

Schools cannot be separate from the community. Without cooperation between school and community social, political, economic changes for disadvantaged and poor people would be difficult to implement with success, so it is necessary to provide mediation between community and school (Dippo and James 2011). Also, it is necessary to redefine the scale of the catchment areas, monitor the procedures of assignment of immigrants and Roma to special educational programs and take appropriate measures in cases of early drop outs or exclusion.

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