School segregation: institutional rules, spatial constraints and households' agency

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ABSTRACT

'School segregation' indicates the concentration of a minority into a school that significantly exceeds the presence of the same population living in the surrounding territory. A segregated school is generally synonymous of low level of attainment and social marginalization. This phenomenon can be addressed as an urban issue or an educational problem, studied through spatial measures or qualitative interviews, interpreted as an institutional or a spatial effect. Many disciplines and approaches have in fact addressed the topic. This article, through a critical literature review, identifies the main drivers of segregation in the institutional context, the residential distribution of the population and the households' choice. Taking into account evidence from the literature, especially from Northern Europe and United States, the author then disentangles the three drivers highlighting similarities and differences that can be found in diverse cities. Segregation in schools in fact seems eligible to acquire various shapes and features especially according to urban contexts, educational system and middle classes behaviors. The article will then highlight flaws in the current literature and suggest further research lines in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

1. Introduction

'School segregation' means a significant concentration of a minority group into a school that considerably deviates from its average distribution in the whole educational system. As this minority is usually underprivileged, a segregated school is generally characterized by a strong presence of disadvantage social groups, low level of attainment and high marginalization. As highlighted by Ben Ayed and Poupeau (2009), the notion of segregation holds the idea that the spatial separation of disadvantaged social groups is not only the result, but also the cause of social injustice. This concept refers therefore to dynamics of social exclusion that overstep the concept of 'spatial distance' to include the idea of 'social inequality'.

School segregation has been a widely debated topic especially in the United States due to the huge racial divisions within the American educational system. More recently, the rise of new schooling patterns, fostering the diffusion of private and exclusive schools, has even fostered scientific analysis and public discussion on this issue.[1] In Europe, school

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segregation is not only a more recent phenomenon, but it has also emerged in a more diversified manner, showing relevant differences from the United States, both in terms of research and policies.

Local features such as ideologies, policies, and urban contexts greatly affect the shape, the intensity and the outcomes of school segregation, as well as the way this issue is discussed in the public debate. While studies have proliferated in the United Kingdom, France and Nordic countries, in Southern Europe only a timid interest has recently emerged (Oberti, 2007b).

Despite country differences, Oberti (2007b) found out that a binary distinction between urban/education, qualitative/quantitative, social/ethno-racial studies is valid in both European and North American cases. This paper takes this distinction as a starting point to discuss the current literature on school segregation. Its main aim is to start reconciling different streams of literature in order to get a better understanding of such a phenomenon. If school segregation has become a relevant issue in increasing unequal and ethnically different urban contexts, we need to understand it by paying attention to institutional processes, urban dynamics and socio-cultural changes at the same time.

This topic has in fact been addressed by different scientific disciplines that have adopted distinctive theoretical perspectives, focusing on specific aspects of the problem. In order to reduce such complexity, in this review I will focus primarily on the urban-territorial approach, considering school segregation as a spatial phenomenon. This approach has especially focused on the link between residential and school segregation (Burgess & Wilson, 2005; Butler & Hamnett, 2011; Hamnett, 2013; Musterd, Ostendorf, & De Vos, 2003; Quillian, 2002). This analysis can be race-based (mostly in the USA) or class-based (mostly in Europe). A plurality of measures of segregation and dissimilarity has been developed to define the degree of segregation in schools and surrounding territories, and to understand whether schools harshen or soften residential segregation.

Secondly, I will adopt an educational perspective focused on the impact of segregation on school trajectories. Scholars adopting this approach have paid attention especially to the effective consequences of school segregation on levels of attainment and achievement (Baysu & de Valk, 2012; Dronkers, Van der Velden, & Dunne, 2011; Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Warrington, 2005).

Finally, I will take into account contributions from economists and social stratification studies, which highlight the role played by social inequalities as drivers of segregation. These scholars have highlighted the need to assess the effectiveness of the educational system, 'not only in terms of skills and in terms of qualification that are produced, but also in terms of stratification that is generated through educational policies' (Checchi & van de Werfhorst, 2014, p. 2; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008).

Considering these strands of literature, three main factors emerge as the milestones in determining segregation dynamics in schools: the institutional context, the residential distribution of the population, and the agency of households. As the paper will show, the combination of these three drivers contributes to determining the shape, the intensity and the outcomes of school segregation dynamics. In this paper, I will try therefore to discuss the role of these drivers in shaping the school segregation mechanisms, with the aim of suggesting a comprehensive approach that explains how these three drivers are combined together.

2. The role of the institutional context and school systems

Many scholars have highlighted how diverse institutional settings can result in diverse segregation dynamics, both in terms of the intensity of the phenomenon and its consequences. Comparative studies have especially contributed to this field of research, comparing different educational systems. These works usually draw their analysis on two main dimensions. The first one is allocation criteria, which refer to the institutional norms that regulate the allocation of students to schools. These norms usually span from a residence-based to a free-market choice-based criteria: on this continuum diverse grades of freedom are allowed to households in their choice of schooling. The second dimension regards the tracking system: the common distinction recognized by the literature lies between early-tracking and compulsory systems (Checchi & Brunello, 2006). The allocation rules have direct consequences on the spatial distribution of pupils, while the tracking mode reveals how the spatial segregation is followed and confirmed by an educational segregation during the upper phases of the educational pathway.

Institutional setting is fundamental because it defines the framework within which households make their choice of schooling. In other words, it determines the borders of their agency. It is noteworthy to underline that the institutional context is not limited to the definition of a set of rules and the organization of the educational system, but also includes the idea of school, the trust and the value given to education.

The institutional setting, which is very often established at a national level, interacts with local features producing diverse social effects not easily predictable. Despite this diversity in outcomes, comparisons between countries have often provided insights into the way school systems effect segregation mechanisms and their consequences.

In the last few decades, several countries in Europe have undertaken a liberal turn promoting educational reforms aimed to introduce free market criteria with the scope of promoting more freedom of choice. One example is the Education Reform Act in the UK, issued in 1988, that introduced four quasi-market criteria into school: open enrollment, formula finding, local management of schools and a facility for schools to opt out from local authority control (Le Grand, 1991). Thanks to open enrollment, parents are allowed to enroll their children at any school of their choice. Under formula finding criteria, schools will receive a funding allocation based on the numbers of pupils they intake. In addition, the local management of schools permit them to choose how to spend this allocation. Finally schools can choice to opt out from local control and receiving a grant directly from the central government. France in 2008 issued the ʻ*assouplissement de la carte scolaire*', a reform that softened the constraints of school choice for parents (Oberti, 2007a; Ben Ayed, 2009). Even if the French system remains a residence-based one, nevertheless a greater mobility has been allowed according to some scholars. Together with a slightly greater mobility, these reforms have also confirmed 'the perpetuation of inequality and, in particular, the on-going middle class advantage in education field' (Benson, Bridge, & Wilson, 2015, p. 2). Being the mechanisms of choices spatially and socially differentiated, these measures have strengthened educational inequalities favoring those households who are already acknowledged of the rules of the game and able to take advantage from this knowledge (Ben Ayed, 2009). In addition, these kinds of policies have contributed to the 'ethnicisation' of school context as well as to an institutional construction of the ethnicity (Audren & Baby-Collin, 2017).

However, the empirical evidence is not so sound. Scholars report cases in which the introduction of free market criteria in education has not increased levels of segregation (Merrifield, 2001), as well as cases in which, on the contrary, racial segregation has been exacerbated (Lankford & Wyckoff, 2001; Saporito, 2003). According to Le Grand and Bartlett (1993), the introduction of a quasi-market education system has worsened and expanded socio-spatial divisions (Warrington, 2005). For those who advocate the freedom of choice, this could increase racial and ethnic separation only when a major academic specialty areas is highly correlated with racial, ethnic or socioeconomic characteristics or if the composition of the student body matters more to parents than any other difference among school. Merrifield (2001) for instance indicates these cases as extremely rare in reality. On the contrary, some evidences from empirical research (Saporito, 2003) indicates the avoidance of diverse people as the main driver for school segregation, despite all the other school characteristics. They conceive school segregation as a result of the same dynamics of social reproduction that create residential segregation. The debate on the effects of these reforms in worsening or softening the social stratification is still ongoing and more studies are surely needed. Nevertheless, scholars have already developed some theories. Egalitarian arguments against the marketization of schools have for instance elaborated a polarization theory: market criteria are more likely to advantage schools already well performing and to undermine the weakest one (Gibson & Ashtana, 2000).

A wide range of case studies developed in the 1990s supports this theory, especially with regard to the British context (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). With one exception: in 1998 a large-scale study by Gorard and Fitz contradicted this thesis, proving that market forces did not have a necessarily polarizing effect, especially when imposed on an already stratified system. They also demonstrated that an educational market-based system has less a polarizing effect than the so-called 'mortgage-based' (residence-based) process of choice, meaning the educational systems where the student was automatically allocated to the school of the detachment area of residence. Gibson and Ashtana (2000) then criticized this thesis arguing that the unit of analysis should have been the local contexts within which schools actually operate, while Gorard and Fitz (1998) focused on aggregate levels of social stratification at regional and national scale. According to Gibson and Asthana (2000, p. 304), 'the geography which matters' to understand whether exist or not a polarizing impact of the quasi-market education is local.

As Warrington (2005, p.799) highlights, Gorard reviewed his previous thesis, suggesting that 'although overall segregation in the school system has declined since the introduction of extended choice, increased segregation is occurring in areas with considerable diversity in the type of schools'.

This debate shows that the local context really matters when we want to evaluate policies' outcomes on segregation dynamics. The institutional framework is usually established at wider scales than local, but it can have very diverse consequences according to very local-based features. Introducing quasi-market criteria in education seems to expand the influence of locality. This especially counts for those populations inhabiting deprived areas where the chances of mobility are reduced (Boterman, 2017; Danhier & Devleeshouwer, 2017). In other words, neighborhoods with low levels of socioeconomic deprivation will have well performing schools thanks to students' mobility, while disadvantaged neighborhoods will experience an exacerbation in their schools of the

negative effects deriving from segregation dynamics, such as low levels of attainment, downward assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996), namely a socialization to deviant behaviors, and entrapment in vocational tracks.

Quite ironically, reforms claiming more freedom for all have produced more inequality, producing a sort of 'ghettoization' of schools, avoided by middle- and upper-class households and attended forcedly by lower-class children. The introduction of market criteria reinforces middle-class chances of social reproduction (Gewirtz et al., 1995).

A second feature of the institutional setting that considerably affects the outcomes deriving from school segregation is the structure of the educational system. The variety of institutional contexts in Europe can be simplified through the distinction between comprehensive and selective school systems (Baysu & de Valk, 2012; Checchi & Brunello, 2006). Comprehensive schools provide the same curricula of studies to all students up to the end of secondary school, as happens in Sweden, England and Finland that adopted this structure between the 1960s and 1970s. Other countries, such as Germany, Italy and Switzerland still retain a selective system, based on tracks. Nevertheless, the age at which students are called to make their choice in terms of tracks varies across these countries. The literature seems to agree in stating that comprehensive school systems tend to soften school segregation, while tracking based systems appear to enforce it.

Although national systems differ also with respect to other features – such as parental involvement in schoolwork, the educational role of community institutions, amount of time children spend at school (Alba, Sloan, & Sperling, 2011) – the organization of tracking and the age of choice (as well as the rigidity, namely the irreversibility of this choice) seem to be the more significant as a driver of segregation.

In the European countries, 'tracking takes the form of well-defined separate segments in the education process, typically specializing in general and vocational education' (Checchi & Brunello, 2006, p. 4). How the segregation related to tracks is expressed tends to vary across the countries, but the outcome is quite similar: children from disadvantage households or immigrant families are more likely to end up in tracks offering fewer chances to improve their social condition and the worst job opportunities, regardless of their school attainment.

The reviewed literature indicates, for instance, that in Italy children from less privileged social backgrounds display much lower transition rates to 'licei' (preparatory high schools for universities, with humanist or scientific curricula) and much higher probability of enrolling in professional schools or training (Azzolini & Vergolini, 2014; Colombo & Santagati, 2014). The same entrapment mechanism has been found for migrant and disadvantaged children in Germany: segregation into specific tracks happens both for ethnic (Sohn & Ozcan, 2006) and socioeconomic reasons (Kirsten & Granato, 2007; Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007). Choices related to tracking significantly affect further steps into the education pathway as well as professional chances, having direct effects on individuals' social mobility. Ending up in a track depends on selection processes that can take different forms, from self-selection, test-based selection or depending on teachers' recommendations.

Research shows that the early tracking system advantages middle-class families since it strengthens the role of family's background, even when the selection is based on a test (Checchi & Brunello, 2006) or on the teachers' advice (Bonizzoni, Romito, & Cavallo, 2016). Overall, the message conveyed by this literature is that early school tracking is likely

to not promote equal opportunity, because it reinforces the role of household privileges in the quality and quantity of accumulated human capital (Checchi & Brunello, 2006).

From a comparison between 15 European countries, utilizing PISA data, Gorard and Smith (2004) conclude that systems with more differentiation lead to greater gaps in attainment between social groups: early tracking systems seem to improve school performance but at the same time magnify inequalities. On the other hand, nationally comprehensive systems (Sweden, Finland, England) tend to produce narrower social differences in intake and outcomes, to reduce educational inequalities, and provide more second chances (Baysu & de Valk, 2012).

Within this general trend, the practical organization of tracking varies across countries according to its level of formality, the degree of separation among different streams of study, and its rigidity, i.e. the degree to which students are unable to change tracks (Alba et al., 2011). For example, from a comparison between Germany and Italy, considered quite similar systems, Checchi and Flabbi (2007) found that the effects of early tracking can be very different. In fact, the organization of tracks significantly affects the impact of a family's background on school choice. In fact, they found out that the sorting mechanism do not necessarily reinforces social immobility, or at least not to the same extent in the two compared cases. They prove that in Germany, despite a higher degree of institutional rigidities than in Italy, individual ability plays a significant role in increasing the probability of selecting an academic track. It is, in fact, the combination of individual ability and parental education that affects the choice of a track. On the contrary, Italy, having an apparently more flexible system (later selection, the possibility to ignore teachers' advice), tends to reduce any 'institutional' tracking by ability, reinforcing parental influence on educational choices, leading to an entrapment effect into some tracks depending on parental educational backgrounds (Checchi & Flabbi, 2007). Another study takes into consideration the orientation advice given from teachers (Bonizzoni et al., 2016) showing how Italian families, compared to foreign ones, are advantaged also with regard to the ability to negotiate with teachers or to ignore their suggestions because of a will of social reproduction. Even when children are advised to take oriented or vocational tracks, Italian and better-off parents' students disregard more easily teachers' recommendation or are able to negotiate with them. The same study highlights, in addition, how preconceptions and parental involvement (that it is usually greater among middle-class and native households) affect teachers' orientation advice, perpetrating segregation dynamics also in the following tracks.

Tracking, thus, 'can be designed in various ways, leading to maintain the social stratification or to reduce mismatch and increase intergenerational mobility' (Checchi & Flabbi, 2007, p. 28).

As for the institutional norms that regulate the allocation of pupils to school, also in the case of tracking, it is noteworthy how inner and micro mechanisms can soften or reinforce segregation and its effects. These results are mainly observable at a local level.

3. Neighborhood and school: what link?

The spatial approach focusing on the relationship between school and residential segregation is widely spread in US (Clapp & Ross, 2004; Orfield & McArdle, 2006) and British contexts (Burgess & Wilson, 2005; Butler & Hamnett, 2011). Although we can find

similarities between these two countries, in general, US cases of school segregation are barely comparable to the European ones. In fact levels of residential segregation differ, as well as the composition of the immigrant population being usually much more heterogeneous, both in nationality and in territorial distribution, in Europe. At the same time, the structure of the education system is deeply diverse.

The causal relationship between residential and school segregation in the US has been proved by several studies (Clapp & Ross, 2004; Frankenberg, 2005; Holloway, Wright, & Ellis, 2011; Rhodes & Warkentien, 2017; Rivkin, 1994). In fact 'racial and ethnic segregation across school districts is partially the result of a system in which access to education is primarily accomplished by an individual household's residential location choice' (Clapp & Ross, 2004, p. 425). Some observers have also highlighted the opposite causal relationship: the racial composition, percentage of poor students and academic quality affect the residential choices of households. Race still plays a pivotal role in influencing households' decisions in the US, especially when it comes to choosing where to live (Massey & Denton, 1998). A correlation, by consequence, has been found also between school performance and housing price, but the causal relationship is not so pure because prices capture the effect of both housing supply and demand (Clapp & Ross, 2004).

In Europe, this relationship between residential and school segregation appears to be as strong as in the US only in some cities. In addition, segregation in EU countries is mostly class-based rather than race-based, even if the presence of ethnic groups in a school has a relevant impact in determining a mechanism of avoidance from native households. Nevertheless, the socioeconomic status seems to be the most significant variable. Scholars often study segregation by measuring the socioeconomic condition of people. Taylor and Gorard (2001), for example, utilize FSM (free school meals) as an indicator to identify pupils coming from low-income families in the UK. The strength of the link between school and housing depends on the rules of school allocation and on the dimensions of the urban area, but also on the attachment of the population to the local community. In the British context, for instance, the neighborhood plays a very significant role in defining households' identity, coming from the historical linkage between urban growth and education reforms. In consequence, as Taylor and Gorard (2001, p. 1835) point out, schools ' … provide significant points of community contact'. For this reason, 'the rising cost of property in desirable school-catchment areas (the school "premium" on house prices) is reinforcing the impact of both private and public housing estates in leading to selection by postcode and, therefore, educational "ghettoization"' (Taylor & Gorard, 2001, p. 1848). A similar link between housing and school market is found also in Paris (Benson et al., 2015; Fack & Grenet, 2010b). Where this link is very strong, scholars have found that school quality is the most important cause of variation in house prices (Haurin & Brasington, 1996).

Institutional rules, alongside the size of the city, seem to define the strength of the relationship between residential and school segregation. In large cities, such as London and Paris, housing and school are strongly intertwined, especially when the first criteria to be allocated to a school is the distance. Butler and Hamnett (2011, p. 37), in fact, observe that 'housing and education markets […] are becoming entwined with those able to access the rapidly inflated house prices in the catchments of popular schools being the ones best able to exercise their choice of school for their children'. Not surprisingly, the distance-based allocation system tends to strongly reproduce the social characteristics

of local residential areas in the schools that serve them, freezing inequalities and preventing social mobility.

As Hamnett (2013, p. 9) states, the most important influence is place of residence: the distance-based criteria serve 'to reinforce and reflect existing patterns of residential social segregation and to undermine indirectly the principles underlying the policy of greater school choice.'

The residential and scholastic link is not so visible in many other European cities, which show high levels of school segregation going side by side with low levels of residential segregation, as occurs in Copenhagen when school choice options are available (Rangvid, 2007). As mentioned in the introduction, Northern European countries have shown an increasing interest in the topic, producing a relevant amount of case studies. Cities such as Amsterdam or Copenhagen do not report a strong link between residential and school distribution of the population. Nevertheless, they show high levels of school segregation of ethnic minorities in scarcely segregated neighborhoods, indicating that school choices are likely to shape a geography of inequalities even when the relationship between territory and school is not so binding. Gramberg (1998) shows how distance in Amsterdam is one of the variables taken into account by parents in choosing schools but not the most relevant, given the relative facility of moving around in this city. Parents in Amsterdam are willing to face long (relatively short compared to London) distances to reach their preferred schools. Short distance, in these cities, encourages the mobility of students for those who can choose regardless the territorial criteria. Thus, the residential choice as a main strategy to access good quality school is likely to be more common in a metropolis such as London rather than in smaller cities, such as Copenhagen (Rangvid, 2007), Amsterdam (Gramberg, 1998) and Stockholm (Soderstrom & Uusitalo, 2004).

Nevertheless, well performing or high quality schools are usually placed where potential pupils matching the social characteristics of the school can be found. At the same time, most non-native and low-educated parents are less willing than high-educated Dutch parents to move to reach particular schools. They usually enroll children in the closest one, regardless of the performance reported.

Another feature to take into account is the shape and the nature of the residential segregation, which is not obviously the same in each city. In Milan, for instance, the most specific segregation dimension has to be found in the imbalance between the core municipality and the surrounding belt, with effects not so tied to settlement patterns but mainly to the higher popularity of schools in the core city (Barberis & Violante, 2017). In addition, as for Copenhagen and Amsterdam, in Italy it seems that there are fewer associations between residence choice and school because of less restrictive school-attendance areas (Oberti, 2007b, p. 211).

As a conclusion, we can therefore state that, unlike the United States, in Europe we can meet high degrees of school segregation in low segregated neighborhoods, (remembering that residential segregation in European cities is generally lower than in the United States), due to the combination of spatial features (such as residential segregation), institutional rules (such as school allocation criteria) and the migrant population characteristics (such as heterogeneity of ethnic origins). In many European cities, then, the peculiarity is represented by a heterogeneous territory enhancing mobility choices that result in increased levels of school segregation without having a similar impact on residential segregation. This means that softer territorial constraints do not necessarily imply an equal

distribution of diverse population groups in the schools. On the contrary, dynamics of aggregation (middle class) and exclusion (lower class) that look softened in the territory tend to exacerbate in the schools.

4. School choice: a middle-class privilege

Although studies from European contexts have shown important parallels with the practices of the middle class in the US, they also reveal how urban middle class strategies in the field of education are differently shaped in the European context. These differences should be associated with the specific configurations of the local housing market, national and local education policies, and discourses and meaning about social class, ethnicity and race (Boterman, 2013). Before entering into details in the discussion of school choice, it can be useful to recall how Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) explain the unequal relationship between school system and diverse social groups. More specifically, they highlight three dynamics: (1) Strong coincidence between norms, values and skills typically belonging to the upper and middle class and those conveyed by the educational system. This means a continuity between family and school culture; (2) The upper and middle class hold a better knowledge of the scholastic system. This implies a strategic relationship; (3) High levels of economic, cultural and social resources.

Studies considering middle class agency, within the framework of the social reproduction theory, have focused on the dynamics of power within classes and the dominant social structure (Oberti, 2007a). The empirical focus has been here the decision-making process of middle-class households, given their relevant agency in the educational sector (Benson et al., 2015), especially when compared to the power of other classes. The idea of the scope of the education and the trust that in general population gives to the school are likely to considerably affect the kind of investment of parents, in emotional and material terms, in educational strategies. As some British authors pointed out, the 1988 Education Reform Act implied a political discourse, which promoted the 'populist idea' of a responsible parent, a 'notion which emerges from and feeds off a wider ideology of the market and of ideal consumer' (Bowe, Ball, & Gewirtz, 1994, p. 38). It is quite explicit in the British context that education markets can be exploited by the middle class as a strategy of reproduction in their search for social advancement (Ball, 1993). The same pressure regarding school choice seem to operate on German parents. According to Barwick (2013) middle-class households are under pressure since retaining one's middle class and transmitting it to the next generation is no longer as self-evident as it has been. Thus school plays a more significant role than before in assuring the maintenance of the class status. Fostering parental free choice, comprehensive school enrollment, performance league tables and school specialization, these policies have promoted 'an ethical framework that encourages and legitimates self-interest in the pursuit of competitive familial advantage' (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011, p. 7).

It is important to note that, despite the shared and doubtlessly motivated agreement on focusing on middle class, few studies have lingered on a current definition of middle class. This need of understanding contemporary middle class arises especially when we compare countries. In fact, when school choice is addressed, diverse attitudes towards education in general emerge. This could probably indicate diverse habitus, life-style and values. Unfortunately, very few studies on school choice include a reflection on the middle class in their

analysis. As Savage et al. (2013) state, 'classes are not merely economic phenomena, but are also profoundly concerned with forms of social reproduction and cultural distinction'. In addition, he notes with regard to the UK, a blurring of the traditional boundaries between middle and working class. Moreover, within the middle class itself, households have been observed having different values than the traditional ones usually associated with the middle class habitus. Given the influence that the so-called middle class has on the education systems, through the mechanisms of choice and avoidance, affecting the schools' intake, performance and popularity, it is quite unexpected that very few scholars of school segregation take carefully into account an accurate reflection on the middle social class when it comes to their choices.

Reay et al. (2011), for instance, focused their attention on a group of middle-class parents whose choice is quite detached from the middle-class mainstream attitude. In accordance with Savage's theory, they provide a full description of the middle class habitus and practices in order to have a deep comprehension of the choice mechanisms: these middle-class families choose for their children socially and ethnically diverse schools, embracing different values than competitiveness and performance, and promoting 'discourse and practices of civic engagement and democratic citizenship' (Reay et al., 2011, p. 9).

Beyond the diversities within the middle class in the same countries, differences among countries also emerge. For example, scholars report high degree of competition between middle-class households in France and the UK in the choice of primary schools, while no similar evidence is found for example in Italy, where the topic is significantly under-investigated.

The investment in education resounds also in the public discourse in some cases. In UK, since the late 1980s, the increasing of choices has been followed by an escalation of anxiety (Reay et al., 2011). Butler and Hamnett (2011, p. 38) speak about a 'fierce competition for schooling' that is the distinctive feature of London compared to the rest of the country. Reay et al. (2011) highlight an 'obsessive race for credentials'. These labels recall the Obama's policy 'Race to the Top', whose k-words are success and growth. Also in France, the topic of school segregation is widely debated, because of the value attached to the education system by this country. As Oberti (2007b, p. 210) highlights '"l'école" is still "the institution" in terms of which the individual's social development and future are conceived and even fantasized about', and it represents a major issue for the people.

In some countries, especially the UK, a new middle class is also emerging among ethnic minorities. This class 'comprises many new entrants, often from minority ethnic groups and often the first in their families to experience higher education, with ambitions for themselves and especially for their children' (Butler & Hamnett, 2011, p. 121). Evidence shows also that these households, seen as social climbers, adopt a wider strategy of upward social mobility, including residential choice (Barwick, 2013; Butler & Hamnett, 2011). This means that the distribution of pupils in schools, and by consequence school segregation, is no more determined only by the established and traditional 'white middle class', but also by other social groups with their burden of culture and values. Nevertheless, this is valid only for a narrow group of households belonging to specific ethnic minorities, characterized by long-term residence, high educational level and integration into the local labor market (i.e. some Bangladeshi or Indian families in London) (Butler & Hamnett, 2011).

On the contrary, children from working-class families are less mobile and the vast majority attend their district middle school (Oberti, 2007b). Middle-class households are then considered active choosers being their choices long-term and strategic, while working class are usually labeled as passive choosers, 'disconnected users' (Haylett, 2003) or 'low interveners' (Vincent, 2001) being their choices more locally oriented and led by children (Van Zanten & Obin, 2010). As Warrington (2005) notes, much of the literature tends to see the working class as an undifferentiated group, similarly disconnected and similarly disadvantaged, with ethnic minorities included, despite their very different backgrounds, qualifications and situations.

Bonizzoni et al. (2016) underlines how children of foreign origin are disadvantaged in the educational system also because of a less strategic relationship with teachers: feelings of inferiority, lack of self-confidence, limited knowledge of the language and of the school system discourage these parents from actively taking part in the school life of their children. Parental involvement has been proved to have positive outcomes on pupils' achievement (Alba et al., 2011).

The successful choice of some parents is therefore balanced by the increasingly unsuccessful choice of others (Mayer, 1997; Warrington, 2005) with working class and immigrant families being disadvantaged through a lack of economic, social and cultural capital. Reay and Lucey (2003) suggest that some working class families do engage in the process of choice, but most research indicates a lack of agency. Distance and locality are almost the only significant variables taken into account by the majority of working class families, with choices made mostly on the basis of 'pragmatic accommodation'.

This link between well performing or high standard schools and the middle class is reinforced by the residential strategy of middle-class households, especially in a metropolis. This is confirmed by the strong correlation between the socioeconomic and cultural profile of a catchment area and its public school (Oberti & Rivière, 2014). In addition, for example in Paris, the private sector develops where the public offer is already rich, widening the supply for the middle class. Thus, there is a problem of territorial inequality and the issue of scarce chances of mobility for pupils living in disadvantaged areas. These areas can also promote the so-called neighborhood-effect, further worsened when the area is segregated. The concentration of social and economic disadvantages can lead to a negative attitude towards education, characterized mostly by a lack of trust (behaviors and beliefs that drift away from the mainstream culture) (Galster, 2010; Gramberg, 1998), which results in a passive attitude of households with regard to school choice.

Nevertheless, Danhier and Devleeshouwer (2017) notice that the mobility of students is not simply explained by their socioeconomic status or their ethnicity, but depends also on the density of the school offer around the student's house: students living in neighborhoods with few schools and far away from other neighborhoods with a great offer are more likely to move. A city that shows a peculiar pattern in this sense is Brussels: 'as the deprived neighbourhoods are concentrated in the centre of Brussels, the students from these neighbourhoods can access more easily a larger school offer. Finally, the way socioeconomic characteristics of schools and neighbourhoods are associated with distance is puzzling' (Danhier & Devleeshouwer, 2017, p. 14). As Maloutas, Hadjiyanni, Kapella, Spyrellis, and Valassi (2013) point out, even if questions about neighborhood effect can be formulated rather clearly, their investigation is quite complicated, because it is difficult to disentangle the complex way in which individuals interact with neighborhoods.

Where freedom of choice is the criteria of allocating students to schools and territorial constraints are weaker, as in medium or small cities, actors' agency is likely to have a wider impact compared to in bigger cities.

Europe shows more hybrid and ambiguous situations, given the lower segregation levels and relatively evenly serviced residential areas, as in the Dutch case (Maloutas et al., 2013; Musterd et al., 2003). In this case, for instance, personal/household characteristics have more weight than neighborhood effect in promoting or preventing social mobility.

To summarize, literature shows a general agreement on the pivotal role of the middle class in shaping the geography of education.

A second and consequent issue investigated by scholars is the criteria adopted by households to choose a school. According to the literature, the main criteria utilized by parents, mostly middle-class, are the following, in order of relevance:

- Social mix or peer group (in terms of social class and ethnicity), usually expressed with the words 'people like us', in order to avoid the 'wrong types of socialization' (Boterman, 2013)
- Popularity of the school (Gibbons & Machin, 2003), which seems to be often confused by parents with the performance of the school
- Academic standards (Allen & Burgess, 2013)
- Ethos, school climate, attention to the child: the atmosphere of the school (Boterman, 2013)

The searching for 'people like us' seems to be always the first criteria regardless of the institutional context.

In order to collect information about the school, parents utilize different means: most of them is included in what the literature calls a *hot grapevine of information* (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Fack & Grenet, 2010a; Van Zanten, 2002) meaning a set of data gathered through informal sources such as rumors and impressions. Parents also refer to official statistics but to a minor extent. Official reports and statistics are especially diffused in the UK, but also there they are considered less trustworthy than informal knowledge. This is why performance is very often confused with popularity.

Discrimination is found also in this step of the choice process. In fact, one of the key component of any school choice system is the information given to parents as the basis for the choice. Hastings and Weinstein (2008), for instance, show that the provision of information on school performance changed the school choice decisions of disadvantaged families towards high-performing schools (Allen & Burgess, 2013) and some authors speak about an informational deficit affecting lower social classes (Allen, Burgess, & McKenna, 2014).

Since public schools can accept only a limited number of students, parents put in practice a wide range of strategies in order to provide their children the education they desire, such as moving house, getting involved in the local church (in case the targeted school is a religious one), pursuing appeals if their children are not admitted to the school of choice, and moving children to private schools. Another strategy in the UK especially, beyond the residential one, is the colonization of local schools in diverse neighborhoods to create safety in numbers (Boterman, 2013).

It is noteworthy that the link between residential and educational choice involves not only *moving in* a neighborhood, but also *moving out* as a mechanism of school avoidance (Benson et al., 2015). This phenomenon, better known as 'white flight' (a term coined in the USA) is one of the major drivers for the spatial distribution and segregation of population among different neighborhoods in a city. The escape of the best-off households from the less disadvantaged areas worsened the neighborhood's social conditions, as well as its representation (*stigma*), affecting also the popularity of neighborhood schools.

5. Conclusions

Educational institutional settings, residential distribution of the population and households' agency are taken into account by the literature as the main drivers for school segregation. While these three dimensions have been mostly observed separately in relation to their impact on the spatial distribution of pupils in schools, the final outcomes in terms of spatial and also social segregation are the results of the interaction between these three drivers. My analysis, which prioritizes the spatial dimension, suggests a comprehensive approach that can help to understand how these three dimensions interact in creating different spatial patterns, with, of course, various social outcomes.

The institutional context provides the constraints in which households can perform their choice. These constraints are given by the modalities in which students are allocated to schools and the organization of the school system especially in terms of tracking. Where the allocation is based on residence criteria, the relation between the territorial distribution of the population and the distribution of students into the schools is very tight. In these cases, the choice is mostly expressed through residential mobility. Well performing schools are located in better-off neighborhoods with a quite exclusive housing stock, making the residential strategy affordable only by middle- and upper-class households. Working-class and immigrant families have just one school choice, usually the one located into their neighborhood. This system promotes a strong residential segregation that is reflected also by school intakes. In this case, schools strongly contribute to shape residential segregation by affecting the housing market.

Where market criteria are applied to the educational system, the opportunities seem to be equal at a first glance, since all households are allowed to choose the school they prefer with no territorial constraints. Evidence shows that while the choice is universally regulated by law, the constraints within which the choice can be taken are not equal for all the households but they are more or less rigid accordingly to the socioeconomic status and more specifically to the cultural, economic and social capital owned by the households.

In this case, cultural and social capital play a pivotal role providing middle- and upper-class families with the instruments to avoid low performing schools and to select the most suitable school for their children. Their knowledge of the system and their access to information provide them with a more efficient strategy compared to working class and/or immigrant families, who often choose their closest school.

The territory in this sense represents a constraint for only some classes: disadvantaged households usually experience less mobility in the city and are much more dependent on the local context in terms of service compared to other groups of population. However, as Boterman (2017) observes, tolerance for commuting to a school outside the residential

neighborhood is differentiated across social class and ethnic background. Thus while it is clear that the residence-based criteria reinforce the relation between residential and school segregation, education systems having taken the liberal turn seem to have softened this relationship. Nevertheless, even if the territorial association (segregated school in segregated neighborhood) is softer, the influence of the territorial context is still visible since better-off schools are mainly located in middle-class neighborhoods and pupils from disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to attend low-performing schools (because of the neighborhood effect and the low mobility). This proves that the spatial dimension is still important even in context where school choice is relatively free (Boterman, 2017).

In the light of this reflection, it seems evident that reforms, policies and devices introduced in order to promote equality and contrast segregation have *de facto* favored the already advantaged classes and schools. In the name of universalism and equality, those who were supposed to access greater social mobility through a less segregating educational pathway have instead confirmed their disadvantaged position.

Another way in which the institutional setting shapes the geography of education (Butler & Hamnett, 2007) is through the tracking system. The literature tends to consider an early-tracking system as one that favors segregation, given that the influence of families results to be much stronger when children are younger. Nevertheless, from cross-country analysis it emerges that within similar systems small differences can exacerbate or soften the chances of having segregated schools or tracks. Also, the selection mechanisms, even when they seem to be based on objective measurement, such as text, tend to reproduce social inequalities.

The involvement of parents in school life, their relation with teachers, and the weight of teachers' orientation are factors that can increase or diminish the chance for selection mechanisms to produce inequalities.

Parental choice has been at the center of many education policies also in the US, like G. W. Bush's NCLB (No child left behind) or Obama's RTTT (Race to the top) and the proliferation of charter schools (Patterson & Silverman, 2014). These policies were promoted through the rhetoric of providing everybody with the same educational opportunities thanks to the freedom of choice. On the contrary, as the literature shows, these reforms have had the consequence of confirming and widening the distance between middle- and lower-class educational opportunities. As a further unexpected consequence, they have also strengthened segregation at local level where it was already occurring.

Some general considerations can be derived by this review, about how the three drivers discussed above affect school segregation:

- Institutional reforms promoting the freedom of choice have changed the opportunities for schooling for the middle class, while low-income and immigrant families have not been advantaged from them. Looking at them as the framework in which all households move with regard to school choice means neglecting a whole part of the population. The advantage of the middle class is clearly visible also when we consider the effects of the tracking organization, which results in segregation for disadvantaged children and in social reproduction for middle-class children. The tracking organization seems to be in some way a confirmation of the school segregation occurred in the primary school.
- The spatial dimension still counts, also where the residential criteria to allocate students to school is no more valid. The residential distribution, the chances for mobility, and

the distribution of schools are fundamental to understanding why the geography of school segregation differs so significantly among cities. The link between housing and school should be furtherly investigated especially in a comparative perspective.

From the evidence collected through this analysis, it clearly appears that school segregation cannot be addressed uniquely by school policies. On the other hand, policies supporting families' choices have not achieved the hoped-for results. Individual choices contribute to creating an unequal system, but these choices are more than understandable given the desire of parents to provide their children with what is considered the best education. As Rhodes and Warkentien (2017, p. 185) point out 'potential policy solutions must address the structural context within which parents make such decisions'.

In order to soften or stop the reproduction of social inequalities, school segregation cannot be addressed only as an educational or spatial issue. The variety of studies and approaches suggests the need for the involvement of housing, urban and educational policies in order to act on a structural level and effectively change the diversity of constraints that affect households belonging to different social classes. Treating this issue as a single policy field will lead to marginal, or worse, paradoxical results, strengthening the divide between children at their beginning of the educational pathway on the basis of socioeconomic differences. Moreover, the link between housing and school opportunities is often neglected or under-evaluated while it plays a pivotal role also where the residential-based criteria has been abolished. Finally, given the relevance of contextual factors in shaping the outcomes of school segregation, research should focus on understanding how the three drivers interact on a very local scale. The scale that matters in order to understand the phenomena and, by consequence, to implement effective policies is the local one.

Note

1. See Giroux 2012 for an extensive discussion of the transformations of schooling in USA and their effects on segregation.

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