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Carlotta Caciagli

carlotta.caciagli@polimi.it

**The school choices of middle-class: a process of symbolic boundaries construction in gentrified areas. A Case study**

*Abstract*

The article investigates the school choices of middle-class families, aiming to understand the social construct underlying them. Specifically, it explores the process of preferences' formation of highly educated parents living in gentrified areas of western cities for the primary school. Specifically, it shows the results of a two-years ethnographic research conducted in Affori, a neighbourhood of Milan (Italy) targeted by middle-class adults as suitable area to live in. The argument is twofold. Firstly, article argues that parental choices are mainly driven by the desire to share school experience with parents that are considered to have a similar approach to the school. Secondly, this desire is mostly informed by the attempt to construct relations among parents that are perceived as part of the same social group. Instead of exclusion mechanisms school choices turn to be related to the consolidation of week-ties. This process can be understood through the concept of *symbolic boundaries* developed by Michèle Lamont. The research contributes to the study of school segregation by shedding light on one of its main drivers, namely parental choice. Moreover, it adds analytical insights to interpret the process of middle-class formation in contemporary times. The research hopes to pave the way for other ethnographic studies in different socio-spatial contexts.

**Keywords:** symbolic boundaries, gentrification, school choices, middle class, ethnography

## Introduction

In market or quasi-market arrangement of schooling, parental choice is one of the main drivers of segregation (Benson et al. 2014). That is why scholars are extremely interested in understanding the process of preferences formation of families. In the last decades an increasing number of studies have enlightened the variegated ways through which school choices mirror class-based differences and reproduce social stratification between classes. Nevertheless, school choices play a core role not only in reproducing, but also in structuring social groups differences. By choosing one educational path instead of another, families give origin to distinction mechanisms that are largely understated by the existing literature. In particular, until today, the great variety that exists within social classes has been underestimated. This article aims at contributing to understand what is at stake preference formation around school by focusing on a subset of middle-class: the highly educated parents living in gentrified neighbourhoods of contemporary cities. Notably, it aims to understand the social construction underlying decision-making and the types of class-based relationships that are formed.

The link between school choices and class-based inequalities always emerges as a crucial point in school segregation studies. Existing studies made emerge how one of the main reasons of polarization of specific profiles of pupils in some schools (Van Zanten 2009) is due to parental choice. According to many studies, often parents put in place avoidance strategy, producing what have been termed “white flight” phenomenon (Cordini et al. 2019, Pacchi and Ranci 2017), that is the widespread decision among middle and upper classes to reach school with high social homogeneity (Botermann 2013). Nevertheless, the relationship between school choices and school supply is hard to be unpacked (Bueno and Bonal 2023) because of the variegated behaviour of different families. In any case, what scholars agree on is that resources for preference formation and selection are unevenly distributed among social classes, race, and household habits. So, topic should be approached focusing on the *patterns* of choice instead of the *reasons* for choosing. Two distinguishing trends emerge from the existing literature.

On the one hand, scholars focused on the patterns of information driving to school choices. They investigated how different types of parents get informed (Ball and Vincent 1998, Fossey 1994; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Hastings et al 2007), through which channels (Holme 2002, Schneider et al. 1998, Teske et al. 2006) and how these differences contribute to segregation (Olson Beal and Hendry 2016; Reay and Lucey 2003). From these studies emerged that middle-class families are more likely to do quality- base choices. Indeed, their high social and cultural capitals allow them to disentangle complex information and to be inserted in social networks that provide them inputs and suggestions to do a better-informed choice. Scholars who explored the different approaches of middle and working classes described the former as actors with long-term perspective, more incline to exit from the catchment areas to attend the most performing school (Oberti 2007), while the latter like “disconnected users” (Haylett 2003), locally oriented (Van Zanten and Obin 2010) and mainly accounting the home-to-school distance (Reay and Ball 1997).

On the other hand, drawing from the cultural reproduction theory (Bourdieu 1979; 1980), scholars explored the patterns of social distinction underlined to the decisions around education. They enlighten that school choices of middle-class are not primarily oriented toward the quality of education, rather toward the attempt to assure the reproduction of class privileges through pupils (Ball 1993). This process is not forcibly guaranteed by exclusive and high-quality schools. Instead of looking for the academic achievements on the websites, middle-class families search information drawing from informal and spatially based networks (Vincent and Ball 1998; Weininger 2014). Accordingly, extra-curricula factors and users’ profile, if fitting middle-class values and tastes could shape middle-class choices more than school quality.

Despite uprising contributions, many aspects of the parental choices' patters are still fuzzy. Firstly, literature has often taken for granted the distinction between middle and working class, assuming they act differently between them but homogenously among them. Nowadays only few studies have unpacked the differences among the middle-class families (Cordini 2019). For example, recent studies highlight how different school choices rationalities are put in place on the base of different local education market and changing urban scenario (Bonal et al. 2024). This lack is odd because middle-class is far away from being a uniform subject: the way social, cultural, economic and educational capitals combine paves the way to different behaviours. Secondly, middle-class choices have been mainly analysed as something made by parents for the future of their children. Notably, scholars accounted how through school parents assure the reproduction of class-privileges or attempt at achieving a better positioning in the social field. Nevertheless, they mainly left underexplored whether school has a role in structuring class-based relationship of groups of parents in the present. The research at the base of this article contribute to the debate in two main ways: by exploring the school choices for primary school of a specific subset of middle-class families in specific urban settlements; and by considering the role of school choices in structuring ties and boundaries among social groups of parents.

The article presents the results of an ethnographic research on the school choices of middle-class families, conducted in the *Affori* neighbourhood of Milan. The argument of the paper is twofold. Firstly, I argue that highly educated parents living in inner city neighborhoods are driven to the school choices mainly by the desire to share school experience with parents that are considered to have a similar approach to the school. This is one of the main path through which they recognize the community of parents they aim to be part of or they feel o be part of. Secondly, I argue that this process should be interpreted as an attempt by parents to consolidate symbolic ties with people belonging to their same social group. In summary, this study has shown that, in times of social and political fragmentation characterizing contemporary cities, school choices play a leading role in class structuring even before class reproduction.

The article is organized as follows. The next section explains the rationale behind the selection of the case study and the methods used for data collection. The third section delves into the theoretical framework, while the fourth section discusses the empirical material. The fifth section outlines to what extent the notion of symbolic boundaries helps interpret the process involved in middle-class school choices. The final section provides some conclusions, paving the way for further studies.

### **Case selection and methodology**

Data at the base of the paper comes from a two-years ethnographical research conducted during 2020 and 2022 in Milan (Italy)<sup>1</sup>. The research represents an in-depth study of *Affori*, a neighbourhood in the northern area of Milan which is passing through gentrification process. Because of its architectural, spatial and infrastructural features it has been targeted by middle-class young adults as a good place where to live and to move in. Indeed, this area benefits of dense public transportation net, green areas, pedestrian zones and enjoyable houses. Additionally, *Affori's* educational offer for primary school is quite rich. Besides many nursery-schools there are three-public schools and two private ones. Also, the surrounding neighbourhoods are well-served and plenty of educational services. The quasi-market regime of Italian schooling system allows parents to enrol their children to a different school from the one of the catchment area. Looking at *Affori's* schools, data shows that in 2020 and 2021 many pupils flow from the school of the catchment area to another one. Due to this, the three public schools have different user profiles despite the social mix featuring *Affori*. However, when parents opt for dropping out, in most of the cases they select a neighbouring school (*author* 2024). Therefore, even if *Affori* is a socially mixed area, we can witness polarization of students with similar socio-economic and ethnic profiles in the three public

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schools. The current flows testify parents' decision-making approach, making this neighbourhood a good place to investigate the mechanisms of school choice.

In this paper are present excerpts of eight interviews with parents of children attending the primary schools of the neighbourhood. Parents have been selected through my participation in online groups of parents, through the intermediation of privileged witnesses and through snowball technique. I targeted parents ascribable to the category of intellectuals already explored by Agnes Van Zanten (2009) because they are considered the most active choosers by the literature. Nevertheless, I add some specificities. I decline the category of intellectuals as people with high cultural and educational capitals working on creative or intellectual sectors, no matter their economic capital. Families I report here are composed by at least one person with a master's degree (in most families both parents hold a university degree). In many cases the two parents have high-skills jobs. In two cases just one member of the family does not work but however he/she has a qualification. In three cases they are mixed-race families.

Along the interviews, I conducted an urban ethnography, a specific mode of conducting participant observation (Burawoy 1998; Balsiger and Lambelet 2014) set on a specific geographical area and done with the aim of grasping socio-spatial relation and daily habits of urban population (*author* 2021). I spent nine months in the neighbourhood, frequenting the areas around the schools, local shops and markets. I took part as volunteer in an after-school activity and in a self-managed summer school, both located in the neighbourhood. This allowed me to get in touch with different types of families, exploring relationships beyond the limits of the interviews and understanding the extent to what school realm and related ties count in parents' daily life.

Some words deserve to be spent on the territorial dimension I addressed for my study. Even if the relationship between school choices and neighbourhood is not at the core of this paper, spatial proximity always deserves to be considered when exploring preference formation around school. The changing urban landscape opens up new possibilities and anxieties for parents when choosing schools (Bonafant et al., 2024). Moreover, as confirmed by existing literature, when parents avoid the school in their catchment area to enrol their children elsewhere, they tend to choose schools that are not too far from their place of residence. This means that choices are not made at a city-wide level, but rather at a territorial or district level. In other words, school choices always involve spatial proximity boundaries.

The space-based approach of this research represents its added value as well as its limits. By one side, local-scale and single case study allows to explore the rooted mechanisms of school choices within specific socio-spatial contexts that would probably not emerge at broader scale and comparative analysis. At the same time, it certainly limits the possibility to generalize the results. Indeed, the spatial characteristics of *Affori* could have a crucial role in shaping the parental approach to primary school. That is why this research is thought as a piece of a broader puzzle on the study of school choices and contemporary cities.

### **Theoretical framework: school choices between class distinction and school segregation**

Parental preferences regarding schools have been addressed by scholars studying processes of social distinction and stratification among social classes, as well as by those investigating processes of school segregation. However, the two fields of study have often proceeded along parallel paths, occasionally resulting in comprehensive explanations. This is why many aspects of the social construction underlying school choices are still poorly explained.

With the culturalist turn, the analysis of social classes has been systematically intersected by the analysis of cultural and educational practices. Alongside the economic dimension, the social and cultural dimensions have also been recognized as determinants in defining social groups. Therefore, classes have emerged as complex processes of collective identity formation rather than mere occupational categories. Consequently, school and education have increasingly been analyzed as battlegrounds where middle and upper classes strive to distinguish themselves from the working class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970,

Bourdieu 1979; Wacquant 1991). Practices, styles of consumption, expectations, and preferences are tools for accumulating the symbolic capital necessary to assert and maintain privileged positions in society (Lamont and Lareau 1998).

As highlighted by Bourdieu (1979), for the middle class, the cultural field is more crucial than others: lacking high economic capital, cultural capital is distinctive. Indeed, scholars agree in considering the middle class as the most attentive and combative with respect to cultural productions. However, the varied and aleatory notion of the middle class makes it difficult to identify a common and shared approach to the different cultural subfields, such as the educational one is. Given the difficulty in defining what the middle class is, scholars have focused on listing and describing the different educational practices implemented by various middle-class profiles (Savage et al. 2013) to convert cultural advantages into symbolic capital to use in different social fields. One of these strategies involves the attempt to reach or construct homogeneous social groups. In its distinguishing heterogeneity, the middle class is united by the attempt to engage with people perceived as "like us" (Byrne 2009). This is interpreted as an attitude aimed at creating contexts that do not threaten the social position and related privileges. The literature on class stratification and distinction has mainly considered educational pathways as expressions of a broader cultural consumption attitude. The patterns through which preferences around schools develop have had little space in the overall framework aiming at understanding how social classes structure and distinguish themselves., choice is a core topic in the literature on school segregation.

Strategies of school selection of middle class have been extensively studied under the perspective of their impact on educational segregation (Ball 2003, Botermann 2013, Vowden 2012). Generally speaking, scholars agree in saying that middle class invests in education (Butler and Hamnett 2007), determining more than other classes, school inequalities. Contrary to working class that is considered to be more incline to stay put in the catchment area, middle-class are active choosers mobilizing different forms of capitals (social, cultural, educational capitals). While upper classes tend to opt for the private market, the distinguishing values of middle-class people push them to stay put in the public-school market, competing with the lower classes (Van Zanten 2009, Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007). Nevertheless, despite the shared belief of the main role played by middle-class in leading school inequalities, scholars provided different interpretations of what are the values, desires, expectations and mechanisms shaping the school choices.

Nevertheless, middle-class choices are not only about developing an exist strategy. While a large part of middle-class families is more likely to exit from the neighbourhood looking for high-performing schools and innovative learning approach, we can also observe the opposite trend (Lobato et al. 2018). In areas where primary schools are perceived as "good enough", middle-class parents are likely to decide to stay put in the neighbourhood. Instead of avoiding socially and ethically mixed schools, some groups of parents stay put in the catchment area, even when they would have all the resources and possibilities to opt out. In cases where numbers of migrant or fragile population are kept under control, the search for multicultural environments turns to be a distinguishing value (Botermann 2013) orienting choices. This trend can be explained through the refusal of middle-class to be "elitist" (Vowden 2012).

The non-academic side of schooling has not always been taken into account by studies on school segregation, nevertheless in some studies it emerged as a very important cleavage around which decisions are made. Indeed, middle-class parents often approach school as an extension of local communities (Ribbens 1993), a context of socialization and interpersonal relations, rather than a mere educational institutions. Therefore, the identification of the school attended by people perceived to be "like us" turns to have a crucial role in decision-making. For parents, school is the occasion to construct social capital (Bagnall et al. 2003) and not only as a proxy to increase (or maintain) their class position in the future. Nevertheless, to recognize "people like us" is a matter of class identification and the analysis of how this notion embodies in different social groups is far from being exhausted. In this paper I wants to get in

depth in the understanding of what people considered to be “like us” and what is its role in social group structuring.

### **People like us in neighbourhoods like us: recognizing members of social groups.**

The expression “people like us” has been used by most of the interviewees. Parents addressed the desire to find users perceived to be like them as one of the main reasons for selecting a school instead of the other. This feeling is not merely understandable as the attempt to distinguish themselves from working-class people. Indeed, from the interviews emerged clearly as middle-class parents feel to be different both from elitist parents choosing homogeneity and highly performing schools as well as from parents they perceive as not investing in children education. They feel to be different from “the bumpkin who vote for the right parties but also from the upper-class parents who go to the private school because they do not want to meet immigrants around” (int. 1, L. employee in a publishing company). This sort of antagonism toward those who are considered to have higher social economic status resembles what Jarness identifies like “mutual antagonism” (2017), that is the aversion of people with high cultural capital toward people with high economic capital who are considered to be the rich, the economic elite. Quoting “people like us”, parents in *Affori* refer to a not-better specified group of parents who have interest in school activities and who care about schooling as they care. To a certain extent, what they look for is a group of people with similar values and participatory style. Therefore, the cleavage between who is and who is not “like us” does not configure as a clear-cut dividing the middle and upper classes from the working class. It is rather like a scalpel cutting out in many different directions until a small but sufficiently homogenous group emerges.

While in some part of the conversation this is justified through the desire to let their children be comfortable, in most of the cases it is explained as the desire of parents to be themselves involved in a school in which they feel to fit in (Vowden 2012), or better said, to be part of a sort of community of parents. This issue is addressed by using similar sentences:

Relationship with other parents is a determinant factor to me. I saw it with my older son. School has been a really great experience, we constructed very good relationship with other parents that are still going on...» (Int. 2. A., social media manager)

I'm very happy about this school. I find the associative capability of parents very important and in this school there is a good relationship among parents, high degree of associative capability (int.3. R., employee).

Also the behavior towards immigrants can be read through these lenses. It is almost never mentioned as a concern. Exception made for one mother, all the interviewees tell me that the school mission is exactly to teach everybody. They say, for example, that:

I know for sure that all children are at the same level at the beginning. At the nursery teachers work well with immigrants for making them learn Italian. When they [immigrant children] start the primary school, they have the same difficulties as the Italian children. The only problem is when a mother or a father does not speak our language. (Int. 4, SJ, employee in a sport company)

Even when it is, it is not framed as a problem for the learning process of children but as a limit for the parents' school experience. Nevertheless, immigration is considered to be a problem when the numbers are too high to prevent parents to meet and consolidate relations among people perceived like them. As these excerpts testify:

The problem of immigration is not about children, not at all! the problem is among parents: if you cannot have a relationship with them, how can you construct a community? For cultural reasons, but also maybe because of economic constraints or because they work hard, they tend to be less engaged in school activities and it could be a problem at the end of the day. (Int. 5, V, responsible facility in multinational company).

If we have parents with serious economic difficulties, they cannot properly follow their children, it is nothing but normal! It is not a nationality issue...however, the point is: how can you construct school community with them? (Int. 6, M., graphic designer)

Also observing the interpersonal relationship among parents and children in front of the schools it emerges a clear difference between the pupils and the parents' behavior. Indeed, the groups of parents result to be much more homogeneous than children's groups. Many parents declared that their children's best friends are Chinese or Muslims, instead they are much more familiar with other local parents.

It has to be noted that the friendly approach to immigration is a cleavage for distinguishing who are parents "like us". It extensively emerged from many interviewees through similar words:

Inclusion is absolutely a value! It is better to have less notion but more of human lessons. I have nothing in common with upper class, not even with some bumkin of Italian parents that maybe vote for the radical right (int.1. L. employee in publishing company).

The discreteness that Jarness identified as a distinguishing value for middle class people with high cultural capital (2017, p. 364) is also a cleavage for middle-class parents to recognize people that have similar engagement to the school as they have. This is testified by those parents who explain why too many immigrants parents could be a problem for their school experience:

The problem is that immigrants do not participate in the school activities. So if you are in a school plenty of immigrants how can you construct a community? That is why it is important to have social mix, but it is also important to have an equilibrium (Int.5, V., facility in a multinational company).

The presence of immigrants is framed as an added value because it represents a "significant pedagogical experience" for their children, indeed a human lesson that parents who care about education would never deny to their children. In this sense, we cannot observe an avoiding strategy. Moreover, the mixed-school could be preferred to other proximal and "whiter" schools if they are considered insufficiently inclusive:

I have always made a countertrend choices: for example, for the older girl I selected the school that nobody wanted because of too many immigrants, they say. Me and other moms we said 'no, we're going there'. To those parents who don't what social mix I said: go to a private school, the public school *must* mirror the social mix existing in the society (Int. 7, G., secondary school teacher).

In this sense, choosing local schools in socially mixed area is a strategy of middle class to distinguish from those parents who are hostile to immigrant population. All the interviewees said to be aware of the presence of the private schools near them but they say to be not in line with values pursued by private-market users. They all define themselves as stronger supporter of public education. To this extent, to give priority to local, public school does not configure as not-choosing approach, rather as a diffuse selection criterion among a subset of urban middle-class. This approach has class-based features in two main ways.

Firstly, as emerged from the interviews quoted above, cultural tolerance is almost always framed as crucial for growing up but also as a value that allows parents to recognize who are part of the social group they feel to be part of. Open-mind and cosmopolitan approach achieves some value when shared and recognized by others. As pointed out by other research, urban middle-class is not featured by "elistist tastes" and exclusive consumption habits. As Peterson and Kern enlightened, we can observe a shift toward an omnivore approach of subsets of middle-class that produce a sort of colonization of tastes and lifestyles previously attributed to lower classes (1996). Secondly, in decision-making social mix of users gives priority over school performance and curricula because parents believe that the high educational and social capital of family could fill the eventual gaps of local schools. It is clearly addressed by parents with these words:

Well, maybe if my daughters had special needs or problems I probably would have done different choices, but I have two sane and capable daughters, so why to look for most performing schools? Moreover, if they need some helps, we [mother and father] are here to help. (Int. 7, G. secondary school teacher).

Or also:

We do not think about school performance, I mean if we had the impression that in our neighborhood there are bad schools of course I would consider other options...but they are not badly attended schools, nobody told me “don’t go there, they are awful”. I prefer to stay put in the neighborhood and if they [children] need additional help, we can deal with it. (Int. 6, M. graphic designer)

This makes cultural tolerance approach limited by two factors: by having the educational instruments to replace school role in case of; and by living in area that are perceived as offering good-enough schools. This resonates what Brown termed “educational parentocracy”, or better said the increasing importance played by parents’ desires in children’ education (1990: 66-67). According to the results of this research we can add that “educational parentocracy” turns also to be the indicator of the decision to stay put in proximal, local schools.

As also emerged from Ribbens’ work (1993), school realm gains a crucial importance because it is lived by parents as an extension of the local community. From the words of the interviewees it emerges as a place of the neighborhood to frequent on a daily base, rather than the institution designated for children’ education. For some mothers, school is explicitly addressed as the occasion to create relationships on a local basis:

To share things with other moms is fundamental: to meet other moms and share the inside and outside of school is more important than having an overqualified teacher. (Int. 8, G., employee in an insurance company)

Additionally, somebody told me that to take decision they asked to mothers they daily met in the parks (“I wanted the other moms at park telling me ‘this is a good school, you should go there’” (int. 8)). It has to be noted that nobody told me to have collected information about schools asking friends, or qualified people, such as teachers they know or principals. They all said to have looked for the suggestions of people of the neighbourhood who they meet. To this extent, weak ties count more than strong ties in shaping parental opinion on schools. The centrality of “people like us” in parents’ narratives does not seem to correspond to a core role of these relationship in their daily life.

Interviewees describe a very bare social life and bare social networks. Just two parents said to be part of collective projects, groups or to be engaged in social or political activities. The others report very atomized life. With the “people like us” looked for, parents do not create friendships. Despite the commonly shared attempt to find around school realm a group of parents, interviewees rarely express the desire to construct horizontal ties. These relationships rarely turn to strong ties or to collaboration that help with the highly demanding daily routine of the care work. The management of the school and after-school activities, even when they occur at the local scale, are rarely approached putting in place mutual aid among parents. I took note of this point in my field diary, when I observed what was happening in front of the schools in the morning:

If we focus on what happens at the gate in the early morning, we find out that each mother (or father) brings his/her own children to school. The same is when parents pick them up from school. Waiting for children, parents collect in small groups, that seem to be quite homogeneous. Nevertheless, these groups untie when children exit from school. Mothers and children come back home alone. This makes me think about the absence of collaboration among parents (Fieldnotes, XXX).

What I noted was corroborated by interviews. Most of the parents declared to count just on themselves to bring and bring back children from school or to bring them to after-school activities. This can be also because a lot of these parents are employed in creative works that allow them to have flexible



working hours. They often told me that school and after-school activities are the few occasions to meet other parents and have talks with other adults. Therefore, despite the demanding tasks of daily life, parents live these duties like social life moments. Many mothers said to have attended the parks to meet new people once they moved in the neighbourhood. Others said that they want to find in the school the same people they spend time within the park. To this extent, the local community does not configure as something pre-existing and to be recreated in the school. School emerges as the proxy for creating, more than extending, a community that is not consolidated.

### **Creating ties in untied social field: understanding through symbolic boundaries**

Educational preferences of middle-classes have been often interpreted as shaped by and driven to social exclusion (Parkin 1974; Wright 2009). Accordingly, in the analysis of school choices and inequalities, the notion of social closure has often been called into account. This concept refers to a process put in place by one group who, because of the advantage it has, closes off opportunities to other groups (Murphy, 1988). As pointed out by Jarness, “social closure involves identifying certain attributes of lifestyles as the basis for excluding those without the attributes” (2017: 358). School choices are indeed instruments in the hands of middle-class parents to keep social groups bounded and impermeable to users considered part of lower classes. Literature debated around the distinguishing features of this social group. Varying the profile of middle-class parents, it also varies the lifestyles and preferences considered suitable. As also emerged from this study, intellectual parents demonstrated aversion not just toward working class but also toward upper classes considered too elitist and exclusive, setting the group of “people like us” in a more nuanced way than the one often called into account in school segregation studies.

According to this study, the cleavage parents have in mind to distinguish who is and who is not part of their social group is the approach to school. As emerged from the interviewees, parents look for other parents who “participate in the school activities as we do” (Int. 4, int. 5). Trust in public school, attention to moral and human lessons over the academic ones are all values parents want to meet in the school they select. While the elitist approach to school would be to opt out and reach the school mirroring specific features, the urban middle-class approach is rather the one to stay put and forging the school community reflecting their approach. This research testifies that to read process of middle-class school choices mainly in terms of social closure and exclusiveness could limit our deep understanding of what is at stake of educational preferences. This is because of two main shortcomings.

First of all, at the light of our results we can say that high status people are featured by an *omnivorous* lifestyle not only in cultural expression and consumption (Peterson and Kern 1996) but also in school investment. The criterion of distinction is not determined by rules of exclusion (Murphy 1988), rather by the way school is lived, perceived, and conceived by the group of parents. Secondly, the concept of social closure assumes that a social group exists and that through specific practices it needs to be reiterated and defended. It helps in understanding how social classes perpetuate their positioning in different social fields (Bourdieu 1991). Social closure implies the -conscious or not -desire of people to keep a social group bounded. In a nutshell, it implies the existence of an established elsewhere social group. Not by chance the notion found application in studies on stratification between social classes. From this ethnographic studies some new elements can be put on the table that suggest how school choices go beyond the attempt to defend middle-class privileges and has to do with social group structuring. The notion of *symbolic boundaries* can help in interpreting the role played by school choices in this process.

The concept of symbolic boundaries has been developed by Michele Lamont (i.e. Lamont 1992, 2000) to problematize the Bourdieu’s theory of distinction mechanisms between classes. While Bourdieu argued that different lifestyles and habits create hierarchies in social fields, Lamont suggested that it is not an automatism and we need to take into account the perception of “us” and “them” that social classes

have (Bellini and Maestripieri 2020). Michèle Lamont and Viràg Molnàr provided the following definition of symbolic boundaries:

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimension of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications (Lamont and Molnar 2002, p. 168).

They are also defined as constituting a “system of classification that defines a hierarchy of groups and the similarities and differences between them” (Small et al. 2010: 17). They differ from social boundaries that are rather defined like objective forms of social differences coming from unequal distribution of resources among people and groups and that originate stable behavioural patterns (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Even if the link between symbolic and social boundaries is not so automatic, they are deeply interrelated because the former can be considered the “necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of social boundaries” (Lamont 1992). So far as conceived by Lamont, they differ for the permeability. Symbolic boundaries can traduce in restricted demographic relations, mobility and interactions (Bottero 2005). Nevertheless, only when crystallized and corroborated they give origin to process of social group formation and exclusion.

Accordingly, symbolic boundaries are useful to understand how within a social class the different social groups perceive themselves and what is the origin of a further social exclusion.

Symbolic classification is key to the reproduction of class privileges → has to do with lifestyles and tastes.

The role of lifestyles, habits -such as parental approach to schooling, has been largely debated in the literature. As pointed out by Jarness, while social closure implies differentiation through lifestyles and choices, differentiation does not necessarily imply exclusion through social closure (2017, p. 358). any attempt of differentiation through lifestyles is also an attempt of exclusion of those who are not “like us” from the social fields in which people are engaged (Bourdieu 1985). The link between lifestyles and social closure has been questioned by the work of Michele Lamont who problematize the correlation between class stratification and lifestyles. According to Lamont, choices, habits and lifestyles could have to do with the attempt to demarcate a social group symbolically, more than socially. Cit Jarness 359

The differences in lifestyles and decision making processes, such as school choice is, have been related to mechanisms of social closure, meaning a process through which a social group, because of the advantages it gather, ends up by excluding another group from opportunities (Murphy 1988). Indeed, following Bourdieu’s argument, structure of lifestyles is in line with the structure of social fields: to be excluded symbolically, means to be excluded socially, even if it does not occur like sort of automatism (Bourdieu 1985).

Albeit the notion of symbolic boundaries encompasses different fields, it has been poorly used in empirical studies because of the difficulties in operationalize it. Symbolic boundaries are hard to be observed for two main reasons: they exist even when they don’t translate in social boundaries that can be better observed, we need to rely mainly on people’s narratives of themselves and their social groups, thus we only can reach discursive frames (Jarness 2017).

Jarness si chiede come questi gusti funzionino come capital. Dalla mia ricerca funzionano come strumenti per riconoscerci come social group in un momento e in una fase storica di debolezza nelle identità collettive.

As said in the previous section, despite the leading role of the search of people “like us”, the relationships created around schools do not translate in friendship or relations of mutual aid, rarely parents frequent other parents out of school or park-time.

School choices cannot be considered directly related to social closure, that imply patterns of social exclusion and class-based segregation (Massey and Denton 1993). Through school choices, middle-class families limit the permeability of their social groups, setting the boundaries of the “people like us” they feel to be part of. Before preventing the others to be part of, the school choices have to do with the preliminary need to construct a group and schooling preferences configure as the proxy for creating it. To this extent, school is not only interpretable as the field in which social class positions are reproduced, rather it is the context of social group structuring through the relationships put in place by parents.

[As already pointed out by Lamont and Molnar, symbolic boundaries are related also to the construction of collective identity.

Quando non ci sono identità collettive forti symbolic boundaries prendono il posto delle social boundaries.

Setting the boundaries of social groups, symbolic boundaries play a role in shaping collective identity. That is why the notion has been used also to explain how people get involved in collective mobilization. How social and political issue are framed largely depends on ties people nurture among them in specific social groups (Gamson 1992). It emerges from the interviews that parents live their lives in a very atomized way. School is the only -or mainly – collective dimension.]

[IMP: Link with collective identity]

## Conclusion

By addressing the results of an ethnographic study, this article proposes insights to investigate school choices of subset of middle-class people who can be considered intellectuals. By one side, the research corroborates that school choices of middle-class parents not forcibly give priority to academic criteria, rather they are informed by the desire to share school experience with groups of parents considered to be “like us”. To this extent, middle-class approach to school is not mainly oriented toward the reproduction in the future but also toward the construction of relationships in the present. By the other side, this study delved into what “people like us” means and what kind of relationships exist among who are part of this social group. Parents “like us” are gathered by symbolic bounded that are needed in the construction and recognition of social groups. It is interesting to note the core role played by school context in times of high fragmentation and individualization featuring contemporary times and, specifically, cities.

The paper suggested the potentialities of combining symbolic boundaries notion with the analysis on school inequalities and segregation. To introduce the analysis of symbolic boundaries in the study of school choices helped to understand better the phenomenon of gentrification and its crucial role in transforming neighbourhoods. Even if gentrification itself is a strategy of middle-class people for creating ties in places (Butler and Robson 2003), this phenomenon has often been study as driver of displacement. This means that we know better what gentrification prevents in places, instead of what it creates. At the same time, to look at symbolic boundaries through educational preferences is a promising way to go in depth in this notion that has been often evoked and just partially operationalized. School choices shed lights on the features of these specific ties, their permeability, visibility and stability (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

As the paper stands on an in-depth analysis of a single case, it has some limits. Firstly, it inquires school choices of parents by high cultural and educational capital, leaving underexplored the school choices of parents a high economic and social capital. Thus, the results cannot be ascribed to the whole middle-class. Moreover, the results at the base of the paper could be place-dependent because they rely

on a single neighbourhood study. Further researches should go in these directions: analysing school choices and symbolic boundaries by enlarging research in space and class.

### List of interviews

**Interview 1.** A. employee in a publishing company, 9 February 2021

**Interview 2.** L. Social Media Manager, 26 February 2021

**Interview 3.** R. Employee, 2 April 2021

**Interviews 4.** S.J. Employee in a sport company, 24 March 2021

**Interview 5.** V. Responsible facility in multinational company, 11 May 2021

**Interview 6.** M. Graphic designer, 25 June 2021

**Interview 7.** G. Secondary school teacher, 16 February 2021

**Interview 8.** G. Employee in an insurance company, 10 June 2021

**Interview 9.**

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