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FREE PRIMARY SCHOOL CHOICE, PARENTAL NETWORKS, AND THEIR IMPACT ON EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES AND SEGREGATION

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… an alle, ohne deren Unterstützung ich diese Arbeit nicht hätte schreiben können.

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Abstract

After decades in which access to primary schools had been regulated through catchment areas, free primary school was implemented in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, in 2008. Starting seven years later, this dissertation examines parents' choice practices and their impact on primary school segregation in the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr. Against the backdrop of the few existing studies on parents' school choice strategies in Germany, this dissertation aims to investigate the impact of the policy reform on the divergent ways in which parents make use of their new freedom of choice and why. It seeks to examine the potential differences in choice practices and their underlying value systems between parents with different levels of educational attainment, and to that end, it focuses on the role played by (childcare-related) parental networks in informing, shaping and pre-structuring these choice strategies.

This dissertation consists of three academic articles (sub-studies), with an introductory section illustrating the study's theoretical background, its methodological approach and a discussion in which the results of the three sub-studies are presented in relation to each other. The dissertation mainly draws on a qualitative empirical approach. Thirty-five qualitative interviews with the parents of 5- to 6-year-old children attending the last year in a childcare centre constitute the empirical basis of this dissertation. The interviews include a network analysis to assess the interviewees' ego-centred social networks and, thus, the significance of (childcare-related) networks for parents' choice strategies. Additional empirical elements serve to complement, undergird, and reflect the information gathered by the parent interviews. These elements include a quantitative data analysis, participatory observations in childcare centres and primary schools, and expert interviews with the heads of childcare centres and primary schools as well as with (former) politicians and staff of the Ministry of Education in North Rhine-Westphalia.

This study demonstrates that the (socially selective) choice of a primary school outside the former catchment area increased significantly after 2008. By deliberately trying to avoid schools with a disadvantaged composition, parents' socially selective choice practices have consequently led to a reinforcement of primary school segregation. Based on a dearth of official and objectifiable information, varying levels of social and cultural capital required to access and interpret this information, and different levels of economic and practical constraints, free school choice provides an option from which, in particular, parents equipped with a higher level of different forms of capital can benefit (see sub-study I). At the same time, however, it fuels uncertainties and concerns. In particular, the reform seems to exert pressure on some higher-educated parents, and it intensifies the feeling that only a 'choosing parent' is a 'good parent'. While lower-educated parents attribute less significance to this early stage of schooling, many higher-educated parents interpret the introduction of free choice as a clear instigation to choose. Thus, free choice is not solely perceived as an opportunity; rather, it increasingly becomes a duty. Therefore, rather than diminishing them, the policy reform perpetuates the existing inequities in choice, and thus, it reinforces the social divisions between primary schools.

Apart from the differences in choice practices between social groups, this dissertation points to variations within these groups. In doing so, it reveals a somewhat surprising tendency of certain higher-educated parents to opt out of the mainstream by deliberately avoiding highly reputable schools (see sub-study III). Based on concerns about competition, stress, and social pressure, these parents try to search for a 'good enough' school – which is quite striking in light of the high sensitivity of education, particularly for groups with a higher social status. The comparative analysis with data from a Finnish study on parents' school choice practices shows that in educational transitions where there is no need to attend the 'best' school to securely proceed to the next level, there are even higher-educated parents – although with very different motivations – who would support more egalitarian education policies. This knowledge could be skilfully integrated into urban education policies.

Moreover, this dissertation illustrates the significant role that parental networks play in the primary school choice – although based on different motivations and constraints – of both higher- and lower-educated parents (see sub-study II). Parental networks provide both inevitable information and reassurance for choice and give the prospect of social integration at school and, thus, of an accumulation of social capital. Therefore, school choice is strongly influenced by the anticipation of (children's and parents') networks resulting from choice. Since childcare-related networks often guide parents' choices, childcare centres – to which less attention has been paid to date – constitute a crucial step in the local geography of education. However, this

study's focus on parents' interactions in socially mixed childcare centres illustrates that having the shared experience of being a parent does not necessarily seem to be enough to produce common group-crossing social norms of school choice. In light of the complex and difficult processes of inclusion and exclusion in mixed institutions and the partly deliberate practices of dissociation, childcare-related networks also have the potential to pave the way for segregation in later educational stages. Having more in-depth knowledge of these complex processes in pre-school might thus be a first step towards mitigating primary school segregation.

Thus, it has been shown that the image of primary schools in Germany as 'one school for all' offering equal opportunities to all children has started to crumble – at least on the level of symbolic prestige and reputation in the imagination of parents. Although there is no direct institutional link between primary and specific secondary school types in Germany, these divisions can nevertheless have severe consequences – in terms of the potential compositional effects on educational achievement and the risk of declining social integration and cohesion in cities. Therefore, this dissertation enables deeper insights into parents' school choice practices that might provide valuable and useful indications for other cities as well – for cities both with and without catchment areas.

VORABVERÖFFENTLICHUNG VON DISSERTATIONSERGEBNISSEN

Artikel I (sub-study I)

Ramos Lobato, Isabel & Groos, Thomas (2019). Choice as a duty? The abolition of primary school catchment areas in North Rhine-Westphalia/Germany and its impact on parent choice strategies. *Urban Studies*. DOI: 10.1177/0042098018814456

Dies ist das akzeptierte Manuskript (post-print) eines Artikels, der in der Zeitschrift Urban Studies veröffentlicht wurde: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0042098018814456

Stellungnahme zum eigenen Beitrag: Die Analyse der quantitativen Daten des Artikels (siehe Kapitel 4.1, Unterkapitel „Development and scope of school segregation in Mülheim“) wurde vom Zweitautor, Thomas Groos, durchgeführt. Die Erstautorin ist verantwortlich für die Erhebung und Analyse der qualitativen Interviewdaten, auf denen der Artikel hauptsächlich beruht, sowie für die alleinige Erstellung der gesamten schriftlichen Abfassung.

Artikel II (sub-study II)

Ramos Lobato, Isabel (submitted): Mixing or matching? Families' childcare-related networks and their impact on primary school choice.

Dies ist das Manuskript (pre-print) eines Artikels, der in der Zeitschrift Children’s Geographies eingereicht wurde (April 2019).

Stellungnahme zum eigenen Beitrag: Sämtliche Arbeitsschritte – Datenerhebung, -auswertung sowie die schriftliche Abfassung – wurden von der Autorin übernommen.

Artikel III (sub-study III)

Ramos Lobato, Isabel; Bernelius, Venla & Kosunen, Sonja (2018). Looking for the ordinary? Parental choice and elite school avoidance in Finland and Germany. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 4(3), 156–167. DOI: 10.1080/20020317.2018.1548239

Dies ist das akzeptierte Manuskript (post-print) eines Artikels, der in der Zeitschrift Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy veröffentlicht wurde:
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20020317.2018.1548239

Stellungnahme zum eigenen Beitrag: Während die Erhebung und Analyse der qualitativen Interviewdaten der Fallstudie in Espoo, Finnland, von Venla Bernelius und Sonja Kosunen durchgeführt wurden, geht die Fallstudie Mülheim an der Ruhr auf die Erstautorin, Isabel Ramos Lobato, zurück. Für die Erstellung des gemeinsamen, vergleichenden analytischen Rahmens sowie die anschließende gemeinsame Analyse und Interpretation der Ergebnisse aus beiden Fallstudien sind nahezu ausschließlich Isabel Ramos Lobato und Venla Bernelius verantwortlich (die Reihenfolge wurde hier gemäß der Verteilung der Verantwortlichkeiten gewählt). Die schriftliche Abfassung des gesamten Artikels wurde in einem ersten Schritt komplett von der Erstautorin, Isabel Ramos Lobato, übernommen. Einzige Ausnahme ist ein Kapitel, in dem zusätzlich Ergebnisse einer quantitativen Datenanalyse vorgestellt wurden, das auf Anraten der Gutachter jedoch für die finale Version des Artikels entfernt wurde. Für die Überarbeitung des Erstentwurfs sowie für weitere Überarbeitungen auf Basis der Gutachterkommentare sind Isabel Ramos Lobato und Venla Bernelius verantwortlich (auch hier wurde die Reihenfolge gemäß der Verteilung der Verantwortlichkeiten gewählt). Für die Erst- sowie für die finale Abgabe des Artikels wurde dieser von Sonja Kosunen kritisch gegengelesen.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2008, free primary school choice was implemented in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Germany. After decades in which access to primary schools had been regulated through catchment areas – which is still the case in almost all other federal states in Germany[1] – the decision to abolish them marked a shift within the political and public perception of primary education. Primary schools are the only comprehensive schools in the German education system where all children within one age group are taught collectively. Traditionally, they have a very local character: Catchment areas should both enable efficient planning and guarantee short distances between home and school so that young children can move independently. Therefore, in contrast to the highly segregated secondary school tracks in Germany, primary schools have for a long time been perceived as the "egalitarian basis" (Breidenstein et al. 2014 166) of the German school system. However, this 'one school for all' ideal has started to crumble. Primary school profiles have become more diversified (Altrichter et al. 2011) and private education is – despite being a still comparatively small sector in Germany – expanding (Ulrich/Strunck 2012). At the same time, particularly higher-educated parents in Germany have become more strategic in selecting the 'best' primary schools for their children (Breidenstein et al. 2014). These strongly interrelated processes have increasingly cultivated doubts about primary schools' egalitarian reputation and their image as a homogenous group of institutions.

In NRW, this development culminated in the abolition of primary school catchment areas. The political reform was advertised as a tool to reduce inequity in choice by giving all parents the same opportunity to apply for a primary school according to their own preferences – since some higher-educated parents had previously managed to circumvent the catchment areas, as already illustrated by Riedel et al. (2010, 117) for Wuppertal. Moreover, free choice was intended to induce competition between primary schools, with the expectation that such competition would lead to quality improvements in education (MSW NRW 2005; Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019).[2] However, intervening factors, such as persisting constraints minimising disadvantaged parents' real choice options and the new enrolment policy's interrelationship with residential segregation and spatially varying educational provision were not taken into account. Therefore, the question arises as to what actual effects the reform has had and whether it has really led to more equity in choice. While the initial quantitative studies have been able to show that school choice

[1] NRW and Hamburg are the only federal states in which primary school catchment areas were abolished.

[2] For more background information on the policy reform, its underlying intentions and explanations and the opposition's critique, see chapter 2.4.

has become socially selective since privileged parents use this freedom more often than do disadvantaged families (Groos 2015; Schneider et al. 2012), qualitative insights into parents' school choice strategies are consequently needed. Against the backdrop of the new enrolment policy in NRW, this dissertation thus seeks to analyse the impact of free primary school choice on parents' choice strategies and consequently on primary school segregation.[3]

In recent years or even decades, access to high-quality education has become a main priority of (higher-educated) parents in many countries. In light of economic uncertainty and the strong competition for access to universities and prestigious jobs, parents have increasingly become pressured to actively frame their children's educational career and to guarantee their success. In contrast to their lower-educated counterparts, however, it is mainly higher-educated parents who know how to 'play this game' and to manage to gain access to the perceived 'best' schools for their children (Ball et al. 2004; Boterman 2013; Butler/Hamnett 2007; Butler/Robson 2003a & b; de Graaf et al. 2000; Lund 2008; Noreisch 2007a; Rangvid 2007; Raveaud/van Zanten, 2007; Reay et al. 2011; Vowden 2012; Yoon/Gulson 2010); thus, parental school choice often feeds into growing school segregation, sharpening the already existing inequities across different education systems (Ball/Vincent 2007; Bernelius/Vaattovaara, 2016; Butler/Robson 2003a; Bunar 2011; Karsten et al 2006; Kristen 2003; Musset 2012).

This tendency has also become visible in Germany, where educational achievement is still strongly dependent on children's social background and where the selection of pupils into different secondary school tracks to prepare for different educational and occupational pathways occurs at a very early age. Therefore, for a long period of time, educational inequalities have predominantly been investigated by focusing on the various institutionalised transitions in the German education system – particularly the transition from primary school to the different secondary school tracks (Baumert et al. 2003; Ditton 1992; Maaz et al. 2006; Merkens/Wessel 2002); however, it is only within recent years that research has started to pay attention to earlier educational stages. Nonetheless, regarding the transition between childcare centres[4] and primary schools, the question regarding the extent to which childcare centres might already prepare the floor for segregation at later educational stages is still absent in the German and international debate around school choice.

[3] This dissertation started in the year 2015 – several years after the policy reform.

[4] Due to the variety of English terms (e.g. kindergarten, nursery school, crèche) and their varying definitions in the UK, the USA or Australia, the term childcare centre is used throughout this dissertation. Here, it is defined as an establishment where children below the age of compulsory education play and learn (in German, the *Kindertagesstätte* or *Kindergarten*) – predominantly for children between the ages of three and six. However, the number of places in childcare centres reserved for children below the age of three has increased tremendously in recent throughout Germany.

There is still little in-depth research into parents' primary school choice strategies and their impact on school segregation in Germany. Moreover, some of the few existing studies focus on a different institutional context – federal states in which primary school catchment areas still exist (see Breidenstein et al. 2014; Krüger 2014; Noreisch 2007a). Therefore, this dissertation aims to show how parents relate to free primary school choice, taking the example of the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr, NRW, Germany. Thus, the main objectives of this dissertation are to investigate

a) the policy reform's impact on (spatially varying) parents' choice practices and the divergent ways in which parents make use of their new freedom of choice and why,
b) the potential differences in choice practices and their underlying value systems between parents with different levels of educational attainment, and
c) the role played by parental networks (in childcare centres) in informing, shaping and pre-structuring choice strategies.[5]

These main research objectives are – to a varying extent and with a distinct focus – analysed and discussed in three different, but strongly linked, sub-studies.[6]

The city of Mülheim an der Ruhr was chosen as a case study based on an existing quantitative study on school choice and educational segregation after the abolition of catchment areas (Groos 2015) and the city's exceptional data base.[7] Parents' school choices, their underlying deliberations and value systems, their concerns, uncertainties and strategies, and their opportunities and constraints are captured via a qualitative empirical approach based on 35 qualitative interviews with parents of 5- to 6-year-old children attending the last year of a childcare centre. All the parents were recruited in three carefully selected, socially mixed childcare centres located in two inner-city neighbourhoods, where – according to previous data analyses (Groos 2015) – a higher share of parents made use of free choice than in other parts of the city. Thus, the policy reform's impact on primary school choice seems to be the highest in these neighbourhoods.

With the three research objectives outlined above, this dissertation seeks to contribute to the international discussion on parents' school choices in different local and national contexts (e.g.

[5] It should be emphasised that the order of the research objectives does not imply any ranking in terms of their significance.

[6] To avoid misinterpretations, it should be emphasised here that it is *not* the case that each sub-study refers to one research objective. Although this dissertation is divided into three different sub-studies, it still is a coherent research study. The three sub-studies are thus tightly interwoven and all three research objectives are considered in each sub-study – albeit to a varying extent.

[7] For more detailed information on the selection of the case study city, Mühlheim an der Ruhr, see chapter 3.2.3.

Bosetti 2004 for Canada; Boterman 2018 for the Netherlands; Burgess et al. 2014 for an international overview; Kosunen 2016 for Finland; Maloutas 2007 for Greece; Söderström/Uusitalo 2010 for Sweden; van Zanten 2007 for France; Vincent et al. 2010 for the UK) by shedding light on the interplay of the social, institutional and spatial space of parental choice of primary schools. This dissertation draws attention to the effects that a policy reform can have on parents' norms of schooling and concrete choice practices; it illustrates the extent to which these strategies are influenced not only by the city's wider socio-spatial structure, but also by local (childcare-related) social networks; and it points to varying choice practices both between and within different social groups. This dissertation thus demonstrates the significance of considering all three dimensions – the social, the institutional and the spatial – to analyse and understand parents' school choice strategies.

First, despite the vast amount of research investigating the interrelation between educational and residential segregation (Andersson et al. 2010; Ball/Vincent 2007; Bunar 2011; Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Butler/Robson 2003b; Hamnett/Butler 2013; Nieuwenhuis/Hooimeijer 2015; Oría et al. 2007), research focusing on the local level and examining both the real choice options and limitations of parents is still needed (Bunar 2010; Kosunen 2016). This study thus considers the urban dimension[8] embedded in choice, and additionally, it points to the policy reform's spatially varying effects on both parents' choice practices and primary schools' reputations (through their divergent composition and registration numbers); thus, it also contributes to the discussion on the influence of the institutional context on parents' choices (Bosetti 2004; Östh et al. 2013; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Riedel et al. 2010; Söderström/Uusitalo 2010). The changed enrolment policy in NRW – from decades of catchment areas to free primary school choice – constitutes an interesting institutional context for research, clearly illustrating that policies not only provide the institutional framework of rules and sanctions but also can have a powerful effect by influencing and shaping parental discourses on the norms and values of schooling (see sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019 and sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018).

Second, while research to date has mainly focused on middle-class parents (with few exceptions, e.g. Ball et al. 1996; Reay/Ball 1997; Vincent et al. 2009), this study specifically includes the perspectives of parents with a low educational attainment[9] and pays attention to the divergent value systems and constraints of parents equipped with varying levels of capitals (see sub-

[8] In light of the lack of schools and longer distances, choosing primary schools is not a realistic option for families living in most rural areas in Germany.

[9] For more detailed information on the classification of parents' educational attainment, see chapter 3.4.2.

studies I and II). Paying attention to different social groups might be particularly interesting in this context, where, based on both the scarcity of official and objectifiable information on primary schools and the tuition- and ranking-free provision of education in Germany (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019), the process of transferring and investing different forms of capital is expected to be not only subtle but also quite sophisticated. Consequently, parents' ability to successfully 'play the school choice game' seems to be strongly dependent on their social position, particularly on the cultural and social capital they possess. Nevertheless, this study additionally points to varying choices within groups: It reveals an interesting but not yet extensively discussed choice practice of a minority of higher-educated parents who deliberately seek to avoid the most reputable schools. These findings are contrasted with the findings from a research project studying parental school choice practices in the city of Espoo, Finland (see sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018). By analysing these parents' strategies both against their own background and from a comparative Finnish-German perspective, this dissertation not only reveals the motives behind these parents' 'unusual' choice strategies but also contributes to the international debate by gaining a deeper understanding of the similarities in school segregation patterns at an international level (see sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018).

Third, despite the vast amount of literature on parents' school choice and the impact of parental networks on choice strategies, little attention has been paid to the effect of preschool education and the networks within childcare centres on school segregation. Moreover, while the impact of such networks on choice is primarily acknowledged by providing access to information, the anticipation of (local) social capital through school choice seems to be a crucial but nevertheless less examined aspect of choice-making thus far. However, since school choice is a social act (Kosunen 2016; van Zanten 2013) and is treated as such in this dissertation, this study seeks to pay attention to the role of (childcare-related) networks in choice – both as a source of information and reassurance and as an opportunity to accumulate (local) social capital (see sub-study II | chapter 4.2). By focusing on socially mixed childcare centres, this study examines whether group-crossing networks emerge in these childcare centres, and it analyses the ways in which parents' (group-crossing) preschool networks produce common norms of schooling or reinforce segregating choices.[10] This dissertation points to the significant role that childcare centres can play in segregation in later educational stages, and therefore, it can bring new insights into the academic debate about segregated educational pathways.

[10] Since 93% of children between three and five years of age in Germany attend a childcare centre (DESTATIS 2018a), focusing on this early stage of education seems to be particularly relevant in the German context.

This dissertation is positioned in the fields of urban geography and educational and urban sociology. The analysis predominantly relies on the theorisations and conceptualisations of Pierre Bourdieu; however, they are also critically discussed in regard to their limitations in understanding and explaining the experiences and subjectivities of parents apart from the 'dominant' group, that is, parents with a lower social status (see chapter 2.2.1). Instead of relying on rational choice theory, which treats educational choice as any other consumer choice, this dissertation – similar to others – seeks to capture the complexity of educational choices, treating them as a special choice (van Zanten 2013). It tries to deconstruct the unequal opportunities and capabilities in education markets and to focus the emerging inequalities and social divisions (Ball 2003; Billingham 2014; Kosunen 2016; Power et al. 2003; Reay 2001; Reay/Lucey 2004). The main concepts used in this dissertation – which are presented and discussed more in depth in chapter 2 – are school choice and space, social class, social differentiation and dissociation, educational policies and school segregation.[11]

On a more applied level, the relevance of this dissertation is based on the still insufficient knowledge of changing parental school choice practices after the abolition of primary school catchment areas in NRW. Deeper insights into parents' school choice strategies might be particularly interesting for local school development planning, which shall ensure the provision of primary schools in the immediate surroundings of families' homes (MSB NRW 2018, 11) and is therefore directly affected by changing school choice patterns. Moreover, more in-depth knowledge of not only the underlying reasons and motivations but also the potential constraints of choice might be valuable for primary schools themselves – regardless of whether they are particularly affected by choice.

This dissertation consists of this introductory part and three sub-studies analysing parents' school choice strategies from different perspectives. All three sub-studies refer to the three main research objectives – albeit to a different extent and with a varying focus – and are related to the social, institutional and spatial dimensions of choice.[12] The results of the three sub-studies

[11] As additional factors affecting choice, gender and ethnicity were not the main focus of this dissertation. However, to further investigate the intersection of class and ethnicity – a need to which this study points to (see chapter 5.5) – a more systematic approach controlling for migration backgrounds in the sample is required. Although several hints regarding parents' intersectional work emerged during this study, the sampling strategy did not allow an in-depth analysis.

[12] The order of the sub-studies is partly related to the three research objectives. While sub-study I refers mainly – but not exclusively – to the research objective a and b, sub-study II focuses predominantly on the research objectives b and c. With its comparative international approach and by focusing solely on a small group of higher-educated parents in this sample, sub-study III widens the (spatial) focus of this dissertation and deliberately seeks to deepen the knowledge on a rather unexpected finding of this dissertation – the quite 'unusual' choice practices of a specific section of higher-educated parents.

are jointly discussed in chapter 5 but are already introduced and quickly mentioned in chapter 2 in relation to other empirical studies on parental school choice in different national contexts.

The **first sub-study** focuses more on the institutional and spatial dimensions of parental choice and their varying impacts on different groups of parents. It seeks to understand how being raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system affects parents' understanding of the policy reform and impacts the choice strategies of parents with different social backgrounds. Thus, this sub-study predominantly, but not exclusively, refers to research objectives a and b (the policy reform's impact on choice and the differences between the choice practices of parents with different levels of educational attainment).

Sub-study II analyses more in depth how these strategies emerge and thus draws attention to the social dimension of choice. It illustrates the role played by parental networks in school choice and explores the extent to which (childcare-related) parental networks produce common norms of schooling or reinforce segregating school choices. Thus, the second sub-study mainly focuses on research objective c in combination with objective b (parental networks' role in choice and the differences between the choice practices of parents with different levels of educational attainment).

The **third sub-study** focuses on a minority of higher-educated parents actively avoiding the most reputable schools. In a joint re-analysis of the interview data with interview data from a Finnish study on parental school choice, this sub-study seeks to understand the logic behind these parents' avoidance strategies and examines them in relation to the different societal, cultural and institutional contexts in which they are observed. The third sub-study refers to the social and institutional dimensions of choice. It is related to all three research objectives, but by re-analysing and comparing the findings of this research with those of research conducted in a different societal, cultural and institutional context, sub-study III goes one step further. The comparative approach opens up new ways of analysing persistent patterns and varied dynamics (Ramos Lobato et al. 2018; Steiner-Khamsi 2009) and helps understand the complex relationship between all dimensions of choice (Kosunen 2016; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Ramos Lobato et al. 2018).

In the following chapters of this dissertation, relevant empirical research on school choice is reviewed, divergent approaches to school choice mainly applied in the research areas of urban geography and educational and urban sociology are discussed, and the applied key concepts are defined (chapter 2). Moreover, the particular German and North Rhine-Westphalian educational context for school choice as well as national studies on choice policies and practices are discussed and reviewed in sub-chapter 2.4. Chapter 3 focuses on the research design and the

methodological approach of this dissertation and introduces the case study on Mülheim an der Ruhr. The following chapter (chapter 4) comprises the original articles/sub-studies partly published in international research journals. A review of the study's main results, my analytical reflections and a discussion and references to the need for further research constitute chapter 5, while chapter 6 draws a final conclusion and points to potential policy implications resulting from this dissertation.

2 SCHOOL CHOICE AS A SOCIAL AND SPATIAL PRACTICE

Within the last decade, geographical research on education has grown extensively – in both volume and scope. There are different strands of research evident in the current literature on the geographies of education that build upon a relatively long history of research in this area (Ball et al. 1996; Butler/Robson 2003; Hanson Thiem 2009; Power et al. 1998; Reay et al. 2001; Vincent et al. 2004). One key interest of research focuses on the (spatial) inequalities of school provision and consumption and, thus, on the different levels of access to education and on the geographical variations in educational attainment. Within this research line, the impact of parents' school choice strategies and their linkage to residential choices, resulting in a "geography of education" (Butler/Robson 2003a), constitute one major strand.

Parents' school choices and urban educational processes have been studied from various perspectives since educational reforms across many countries liberated education markets and opened the door for parental choice. The main research interests in the field of school choice across different national and local contexts can be divided into three different areas: i) school choice as a socio-spatial and urban phenomenon, ii) school choice as a class strategy and iii) school choice policies. This chapter seeks to describe and discuss the divergent approaches to parental school choice that have mainly been applied in the research areas of urban geography and educational and urban sociology. It follows the main research areas by reviewing and discussing the literature on school choice and the role of space (chapter 2.1), on school choice as a class strategy (chapter 2.2), and on the role of educational policies in enabling parental school choice (chapter 2.3). Moreover, the chapter discusses the German and North-Rhine Westphalian educational context for school choice and reviews national studies on choice policies and practices (chapter 2.4).

2.1 School choice and the role of space

The debate on school choice in both the public and academic arenas in various countries has long been dominated by research on school segregation (Ball/Vincent 2007; Butler/Robson 2003a & b; Bunar 2011; Bernelius 2013; Karsten et al. 2006; Kirsten 2003; Maloutas 2007; Oría et al. 2007). School segregation – the unbalanced distribution of children over schools – is both an important manifestation of and a cause of educational inequality and has been identified as one of the key challenges in education (Musset 2012; Tammaru et al. 2017). The growing polarisation between schools "segregating students by ability and socio-economic-

background" generates "greater inequities across education systems" (Musset 2012, 10) – a tendency that is also visible in Germany. In addition, the increasing separation of children living different social lives in childcare centres and schools might induce a self-enforcing dynamic.

There has been extensive research on the question of whether (ethnically or socially) polarised school intakes lead to stronger inequalities of opportunities and affect overall pupil performance once individual effects have been controlled for (Alegre/Ferrer 2010; Baumert et al. 2006; de Fraine et al. 2003; Ditton/Krüsken 2007; Dronkers/Levels 2007; Musset 2012; Stanat 2006).[13] Making sense of the extensive empirical findings is quite difficult since the results vary significantly. There seems to be a consensus that the effects of school contexts contribute substantially to educational inequalities. However, the mechanisms through which school contexts influence the achievements and educational opportunities of students has not yet been conclusively answered (Ditton 2013).

Nevertheless, several reviews and meta-analyses have been able to confirm these effects and to identify a significant relationship between school intake characteristics and learning opportunities (Alegre/Ferrer 2010; Karsten 2010; Sykes/Kuyper 2013; Thrupp et al. 2002; van Ewijk/Sleegers 2010). This means that a disadvantaged composition of school classes – with a high share of pupils having socially less privileged backgrounds – can have an effect on pupils' performances that exceeds the effects of pupils' individual characteristics. In their study in Berlin and Brandenburg, Ditton and Krüsken (2007) also identify these so-called compositional effects of students' social background on educational achievement for Germany.[14] The positive effects of mixed schooling are additionally illustrated by a recent study in Germany. The study asks why some disadvantaged pupils are successful at school despite their difficult starting conditions, and the results illustrate that these pupils perform well at school when they attend schools with a high level of social mix (OECD/Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2018).

The mechanisms that might be responsible for these compositional effects vary. They cover teachers' adjustment of instructions and expectations, classroom dynamics, and the peer group, which might have a negative or positive impact on pupils' motivation and aspirations. The effects may also be based on different parental resources, aspirations and demands regarding schools, processes of parental control, and parents' willingness to invest their individual capital (social, cultural and economic) to improve the conditions at school. The different facilities of

[13] However, research on context effects has mainly focused on secondary schools, whereas the state of research on primary schools is still deficient (Nikolova 2011, 172).

[14] This compositional effect refers to schools' social composition. However, the relationship between achievement and the schools' ethnic composition, particularly when the students' socio-economic background is taken into account, seems to be less clear.

schools based on their economic resources might also play a role (Lupton 2004; Nast 2013; Thrupp 1999). A recent study in Berlin (Helbig/Nikolai 2019) illustrates that there is a significant relationship between school social composition and school quality (measured by a shortage of teachers, the consequent share of cancelled lessons, the share of lessons taught by a substitute teacher, and the share of 'newcomers' (people who work as a teacher without being trained to be a teacher)). The socially most disadvantaged schools are thus characterised by the most unfavourable conditions (Helbig/Nikolai 2019, 25). Thus, depending on the school's capabilities to cushion and compensate for these potentially negative compositional effects, school segregation can – but does not necessarily – produce different conditions of learning, consequently contributing to the reproduction of unequal opportunities for educational success.

Research across many countries has been able to illustrate that residential patterns are central for understanding school segregation. Where children live still largely determines where they go to school. To a certain extent, school segregation is thus the manifestation of the spatial dispersal of different social and ethnic groups. The specific demographics of cities are thus key ingredients in the mix of school populations. However, depending on the social stratification and ethnic diversity of urban populations and how segregated they are in urban space, the same groups might be exposed to segregation in various ways in different urban contexts. The school segregation patterns of Black Americans are different in cities of southern and western states compared to other states in the USA (Logan et al. 2008), and children with a Turkish background have different segregation patterns in The Hague than in Utrecht (Boterman 2018). The link between residential and school segregation is thus particularly noticeable in urban areas where a neighbourhood's socio-economic structure determines the initial selection of pupils at a school and potentially even their educational outcomes (Andersson et al. 2010; Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Nieuwenhuis/Hooimeijer 2015).

Residential segregation and school segregation are thus tightly interlinked in a "geography of education", whereby the latter is usually higher than the former (Burgess et al. 2005; Butler/Robson 2003a; Karsten et al. 2003; Rangvid 2007). Their influence is mutual: Neighbourhoods with more reputable schools attract more middle-class residents. A changing school composition might improve their educational performance, which successively increases the schools' attractiveness. While high levels of residential segregation are usually accompanied by segregated schools, low levels of residential segregation do not necessarily result in mixed schools. As demonstrated by Helbig and Jähnen (2018) in a recent study investigating the development of socio-spatial segregation in 74 German cities, socio-spatial segregation is lower in cities with a high share of private primary schools – an effect that is particularly visible in

cities with a high share of both poor and highly qualified people. Private schools thus seem to cushion residential segregation by giving parents with a higher social status the opportunity to live in mixed neighbourhoods but, simultaneously, to "keep distance to other social groups through school choice instead of relocation" (ibid, 115).

The close relationship between neighbourhoods and schools illustrates that residential mobility behaviour is often additionally informed by school choice considerations (Barwick 2013; Butler/Hamnett 2007). In education systems where, based on the existence of catchment areas, residential mobility is – among other partly illegal strategies – the principal way to ensure access to the 'right' school, the interaction between school segregation and residential segregation is particularly strong (Rangvid 2007; Reay et al. 2011). In these contexts, catchment area mobility, thus moving to specific neighbourhoods to be close to the 'right' schools, is a common phenomenon and is, as shown later, predominantly driven by class-based considerations of dissociation and matching with peer groups. However, even in contexts with a large degree of parental choice, such as the Netherlands, the majority of pupils still attend a nearby school. This can be ascribed to the fact that the spatial proximity between home and school is still a crucial factor in many parents' choices – particularly for younger children attending primary schools (Karsten et al. 2006). In other contexts, such as the UK, parental choice has resulted in even stricter catchment areas – the maximum distance between home and school enabling a certain chance to access good schools decreased tremendously (Hamnett/Butler 2013). Therefore, the growing residential segregation across many European cities is reflected in local school environments.

In Germany, there is still comparatively little in-depth research into the interplay between residential and school segregation (Groos 2015; Noreisch 2007b; Schneider et al. 2012). Moreover, the few existing studies on parents' primary school choice strategies in Germany mainly focus on a different institutional context than in NRW – that is, federal states in which primary school catchment areas still exist. In most federal states, primary school enrolment is organised by catchment areas. It can thus be assumed that primary school segregation largely reflects residential segregation. However, while some studies show that educational segregation is still highly influenced by the school catchment areas' delineation and the city's socio-spatial structure (Suter 2013), others discuss the additional effects of choice on school segregation (Groos 2015; Riedel et al. 2010). They illustrate that despite the long tradition of primary school catchment areas, there is nevertheless limited room for parental choice: by applying for exceptions by stating severe personal reasons, by moving or arranging false addresses through a subletting

contract, by pretending to 'split' or by registering their children at freely selectable private schools (Noreisch 2007b).

Based on the introduction of free primary school choice, such (illegal) strategies have become obsolete in NRW – which is likely to impact parents' choice practices, and, as shown later, parental discourses on choice as well (see sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019). This dissertation thus seeks to analyse the scope and development of parental choice and its impact on primary school segregation, and it sheds light on parents' underlying motivations and deliberations (see sub-studies I and III | chapters 4.1 and 4.3 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019 and Ramos Lobato et al. 2018). The implementation of free primary school choice in NRW demonstrates that apart from the crucial impact of residential patterns, both parents' choice strategies and the degree to which parents are able to choose and the set of options they can realistically choose from are basically conducive to segregation. Thus, parents' (selective) choice strategies and the institutional context in which they operate strongly matter. Therefore, the theoretical approaches to parental school choice and its underlying motivations are outlined in the following chapter (see chapter 2.2). Educational policies and the different ways in which they shape parents' school choice strategies are the focus of chapter 2.3, while the specific educational context in Germany or, more specifically, in NRW and the political decision to abolish primary school catchment areas in NRW are outlined in chapter 2.4.

2.2 School choice and social class

School choice research predominantly focuses on cultural reproduction theory or the theorisation of social capital. Within the cultural reproduction theory literature, most explanations for choice and its mechanisms draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who sought to explain the persistent inequalities in education between different classes despite educational expansion during that time (Bourdieu/Passeron 1977). There is an enormous amount of research on parental school choice that leans intensively on Bourdieu, drawing on his conceptualisations of social class, different forms of capital, and their role in social reproduction (Ball et al. 1996; Ball/Vincent 1998; Byrne 2006; Power et al. 1998; Reay et al. 2011). Following this tradition, these explanations also constitute the theoretical basis of this dissertation. However, they are critically discussed in regard to their limitations in understanding and explaining working-class experiences and subjectivities (see chapter 2.2.2). This chapter thus focuses on the content and use of the main concepts, focusing on the role of cultural and social capital as being particularly important for the German educational context.

2.2.1 Different forms of capital and their transmission in education

In Bourdieu's model of social reproduction, social classes[15] are distinguished by the amounts and combinations of different forms of capital that actors possess: economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Different capital endowments define actors' relative position in social space – a multidimensional space of relation and relative positions (Bourdieu 1984 & 1996; Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992). Within this social space, there are different competitive social fields, such as the education system, in which social actors strive to maintain and improve their positions through a continuous investment of all different forms of capital (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992). Depending on the social field, the significance of the different forms of capital varies; thus, in different social fields, different capitals are accepted as resources of power. The distinct positions in social space are closely related to the positions in a symbolic system of differences related to actors' practices and tastes. Social classes can thus be distinguished by the space of their positions in both systems. Occupying a similar position in social space implies similar conditions, which consequently leads to similar dispositions and interests and, therefore, results in similar practices (Bourdieu 1985). These similar practices are part of the habitus, a "system of schemes structuring every decision without ever becoming completely and systematically explicit" (Bourdieu 1976, 119). The habitus is defined by producing as well as differentiating and appreciating different practices and tastes. In particular, it is determined by the amounts and combinations of the possessed capitals (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992), and thus, it connects them to social class. Differences in lifestyles are therefore presented as being distinctive for social classes.

It is important to note that Bourdieu's social classes are solely theoretical constructions and should not be treated as real classes and separate entities (Bourdieu 1991). Social classes are defined as a struggle for positions rather than as constituting a real group. They shall help make abstractions about social relations, explain social practices, and predict actors' properties (Kosunen 2016). Similar to these explanations, the production of and differentiation between different social groups in this dissertation also followed analytical purposes trying to understand

[15] Due to changing occupations, labour markets and income distributions, defining class has become increasingly difficult (Devine et al. 2005). Given the range of different theoretical and practical applications of class schemes, it seems to be impossible "to identify particular schemes which are 'right' or 'wrong'; different schemes are rather more or less appropriate for particular tasks" (Crompton 2008, 68-69). Class is often defined in terms of occupation or income. The quantitative data available in the statistics of the city of Mülheim includes information only on parents' educational attainment. However, class is becoming more cultural (Bennett et al. 2009), and parents' cultural capital is crucial for school choice (Lareau 1987). Thus, defining parents' social status solely based on their educational attainment might be a good approximation (Blokland/van Eijk 2012) – particularly in Germany, where it plays a crucial role in social positioning. In this dissertation, due to the missing information on the interviewees' economic capital (and occupations in regard to the quantitative analysis), I try to avoid the term 'class' when referring to my own empirical data.

and explain parents' varying choice practices in the social field of education. Thus, the social groups constructed in this dissertation do not exist as real groups, nor are they completely consistent. Rather, they demonstrate the relational positioning in the field of education and thus constitute a space of relationships (Bourdieu 1985).

Most studies on educational choice have focused on the interrelation between Bourdieu's (1986) three forms of capital and how they are transformed from one to another, which is particularly helpful in understanding how parents try to maintain and reproduce existing class positions (Kosunen 2016) – which is thus part of this dissertation as well. Among the three forms of capital, cultural capital is particularly important for educational research.

Cultural capital is institutionalised through educational qualifications, titles and certificates. Bourdieu (1986) differentiates between three different forms in which cultural capital exists: in the embodied state (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body), in the objectified state (cultural goods such as paintings or books) and in the institutionalised state (in the form of educational qualifications). Cultural capital cannot be easily lost, nor can it be bought completely by economic capital. Under certain conditions, however, it can be converted into economic capital. To reach its full efficacy, cultural capital needs to be validated in the education system, which makes it interesting to study the relationship between different (groups of) families and their educational choices (Kosunen 2016). The process required to transform cultural capital from the embodied to the objectified state disguises its transmission, but it also makes the transmission riskier than in terms of economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) – which might explain the concerns and anxieties (middle-class) parents feel when choosing a school for their children.

The accumulation of cultural capital takes time, which must be invested personally and presupposes a process of incorporation. The "most powerful principle of the symbolic efficacy of cultural capital no doubt lies in the logic of its transmission" (Bourdieu 1986, 49). Cultural capital is continuously transmitted in the family and is therefore predominantly shaped by the cultural capital of the whole family. Due to these specific forms of acquisition and duration, it plays a crucial role in class reproduction and class distinction (Bridge/Wilson 2015), particularly since it is strongly connected to institutionalised forms of educational provision. This "synergy between the cultural capital of middle-class parents and the cultural dispositions of the schools" (Bridge/Wilson 2015, 497) constitutes a key mechanism in class advantage and social reproduction. It demonstrates that instead of being the just reward of personal merit in education, educational achievement is a social construct. The domestic transmission of cultural

capital can therefore be seen as the best hidden and, at the same time, the most determinant investment (Bourdieu 1986).

Social capital is defined by affiliation with social groups, which can be institutionalised through memberships or networks and is incorporated as acceptance and prestige as well as knowledge about ones's own appreciation and reputation (Hillebrandt 2012). The volume of the possessed social capital is dependent both on the size of the actor's networks and on the volume of different forms of capital that can be mobilised through these networks (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu defines social capital as the aggregate of resources being tied to membership in social networks, which can consequently provide access to other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1983). Therefore, the conversion of social capital into other forms of capital is quite complex. However, the maintenance of a network once constituted is not given. Social capital comprises social obligations and connections. It is the product of a continuous and arduous effort "of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term" (Bourdieu 1986, 52).

Economic capital, the third form of capital, is an essential but not necessarily determining part of class formation (Weininger 2005). In its institutionalised form, economic capital can be understood as currency, prices or property rights, and in an objectified form, it can be understood as money, property and wealth (Bourdieu 2001). While it is "immediately and directly convertible into money" (Bourdieu 1986, 47), its transformation into social capital takes time and effort since pure economic exchange follows different logics than social relationships.

The main aim of transforming different forms of capital – either in a direct way or in a somewhat subtler way – is the reproduction of social positions. The reproduction strategies of individuals or families are thus intended to maintain their assets, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. Their strategies vary according to the amount and composition of capital they possess and according to the social field in which they are applied (Bourdieu 1984). If the surrounding structures do not allow a straight transmission of capital – which is often the case for cultural capital – these obstacles are circumvented by investing in more hidden forms of circulating capital. Due to this somewhat subtle transmission of capital, cultural capital develops into a key element in the reproduction of the social structure (Kosunen 2016). Independent of the amount and composition of capitals, however, these strategic choices do not follow specific rules but, rather, are dependent on actors' habitus. Thus, although these strategies significantly affect actors' decision-making, they are not really deliberate or conscious. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe them as a 'feel for the game'. Based on the closeness between both the culture that the educational system transmits and the dominant culture (of middle-class actors), the educational

system is quite effective in allowing the 'dominant' classes to reproduce their social positions (Bourdieu 1978 & 1986).

Bourdieu's approach is mainly constitutive of the experiences, perspectives and strategies of the middle class. It describes how the middle class knows 'how to play the game' and how the game is structured to provide middle-class advantage. However, it falls somewhat short in providing insights into the experiences of the working class and helping understand its specific subjectivities and values. While Bourdieu's approach emphasises the crucial role of the middle class in deploying educational strategies and creating distinctions (Kosunen 2016), it explains the working class mainly as being unable to inhabit entitled dispositions. However, representing the working class only as a lack or as a negative experience of the dominant symbolic seems inadequate. As Skeggs (2004a) critically asks, "if the working-class are only evaluated through the dominant symbolic and read both through methodology and theory as trapped by their habitus positions embodied as value-less dispositions then how do we represent them with value?" (ibid, 90). Despite being important and interesting for educational research (particularly for research on educational choice), by drawing on Bourdieu's approach, researchers have to be careful that their insights are not trapped by the same dominant symbolic. To explain the educational choices of all parents – and not only those of middle-class parents – understanding both middle-class entitlement and working-class relations with the dominant symbolic is indispensable (Skeggs 2004a). Instead of evaluating working-class parents' practices based on this dominant symbolic, research needs to pay attention to the different value systems that exist beyond – which is taken into account and which this dissertation tries to implement (see sub-studies I and II in chapters 4.1 and 4.2).

2.2.2 School choice as a class practice

Cultural capital and its transmission, acquisition, and deployment are seen as key mechanisms responsible for the differences in school choice strategies and educational attainment between different social groups, and therefore, it constitutes one key dimension in studies on educational choice (Ball et al. 1996; Butler/Robson 2003a; Byrne 2006; Crozier et al. 2008; de Graaf et al. 2000; Jaeger/Holm 2007; Sullivan 2001 & 2007; Vincent et al. 2010; Vyonides 2007). Research on school choice investigates the role of cultural capital in encoding and decoding knowledge of schools, the emphasis on reproduction and social closure and the risks and fears involved in school choice for different social class groups (Gewirtz et al. 1995; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Vowden 2012). Since in most studies the (lacking) ability to make well-founded decisions is directly associated with parents' social status, research has tended to focus on middle-class

parents (with few exceptions, e.g., Ball et al. 1996; Reay/Ball 1997; Vincent et al. 2009), who are generally characterised by carefully considered choice-making that seeks the 'best match' among the available options.

This strategic and careful choice-making can be ascribed to the democratisation of education, which transformed the relationship between jobs and qualifications and has led to an enormous increase in social mobility. This massification of (higher) education in combination with the growing significance of education as a prerequisite to participate in today's society initiated an increasing competition for access to universities and prestigious jobs. Therefore, education not only is crucial for upward social mobility but also has become increasingly significant to reproduce and legitimise existing class differences (Bourdieu 1984; Boterman 2013). Consequently, access to high-quality education has become a sensitive topic, particularly for middle- and upper-middle-class parents, driving them to search for the 'best' schools for their children (Bourdieu 1984; Butler/Hamnett 2007). Nevertheless, educational choices cannot be interpreted simply as consumerist 'shopping' for the best available options, nor are they solely based on rational and intentional decision-making (Bowe et al. 1994; Reay et al. 2001). As shown later, being in a position to choose not only provides opportunities. Due to its importance and long-term consequences, educational choice also includes duties and responsibilities, "encouraging parents to become 'active choosers' in the education market" (Kosunen 2016, 11).

Based on a changing view on parenthood, growing standards and demands in parenting and decreasing trust in the German education system's capacities and performance (Krüger 2014; Merkle/Wippermann 2008; Trumpa 2010), this 'pressure' can also be observed in Germany. Parents are increasingly seen as key players in shaping their children's educational career, being responsible for providing access to suitable childcare and schools, and, consequently, for guaranteeing their children's (educational) success. At the same time, parents who are unable to make these strategic and informed decisions for their children seem to be regarded as risk factors for their children (Becker 2010; Mierendorff et al. 2015). Based on the introduction of free primary school choice, it can be assumed that the pressure that parents in NRW feel to make informed decisions has even intensified. Choosing the nearest primary school and justifying this choice by pointing to the legal limitations set by the admission policies might no longer be possible – which is analysed more in depth in sub-study I (see chapter 4.1).

In both popular and academic discourses, educational choice is mainly constructed as an implicit middle-class norm. In the well-established "typology of choosers" (Ball et al. 1996; Gewirtz et al. 1995) classifying parents based on their capacities and willingness to choose, most middle-class parents constitute the 'highest' of three different categories – the

"privileged/skilled choosers" (ibid, 92), who combine both the inclination and ability to 'play the game'. They mostly choose on behalf of their children, make long-term and strategic choices, take full advantage of the market, and possess the resources necessary to ensure educational success for their children (Ball 2003; Bathmaker et al. 2013; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Kosunen/Seppänen 2015; Rangvid 2007; Reay/Lucey 2003; Reay et al. 2011; Vincent/Ball 2001). Analysing various stages of education, many of these studies illustrate the process of "making-up the middle-class child" (Vincent/Ball 2007). This engagement in choosing schools for their children can also be observed in Germany, where some groups of parents increasingly consider that their children's educational careers as not working automatically and thus, instead, try to actively pave the way for them – already in the early stage of moving from preschool to primary school (Breidenstein et al. 2014; Krüger 2014; Trumpa 2010). Middle-class parents in various countries are thus capable of using their higher cultural capital both to transmit it to their children – operationalised as a comparative advantage in the education system – and to deploy it in choice-making. As Ball et al. (1995) illustrate, "knowledge of the system is part of the cultural capital that immediately separates middle-class parents and orients them differently to school choice" (ibid, 57).

However, working-class parents' intentions, based on limited information networks and dominated by practical thoughts and family organisational constraints, have often been contrasted to this degree of strategic planning (Ball et al. 1995; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Oría et al. 2007; Reay 2001; Reay 2004; Reay/Ball 1997; van Zanten 2005). Working-class parents are mostly assumed to be more passive, to be less mobile, to make less ambitious choices – in which they are strongly led by their children – and to lack the cultural, economic and social capital necessary to make and implement the best choices for their children. Nonetheless, in their study on class differences and similarities around the choice of school and childcare, Vincent et al. (2009) identify significant differences among non-middle-class parents' choice practices, differentiating between three different types of choosers. While some types of choosers are described as not interested and as refusing choice due to their perception of school as a homogenous public service ("default chooser") or as being solely guided by personal links with the locality and local schools ("community chooser"), "willing choosers" are quite strategic and active in school choice. Nevertheless, despite their aspirations, they are often tempered by fatalism and are unable to access their own preferences (Vincent et al. 2009).

However, ascribing the varying choice practices of different social groups only to asymmetries in information and capabilities just marginalises choice criteria deviating from middle-class norms. As clearly shown by Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) in their study on education

professionals' constructions of 'appropriate' aspirations, the low educational aspirations that are often ascribed to parents in low-income areas are primarily a result of being evaluated by using middle-class practices as norms. By concentrating on the child's happiness and basic literacy and numeracy skills, these parents do not conform to normative expectations of 'appropriate' educational aspirations. These approaches present working-class parents as being "without value, resigned and adjusted to their conditions, not being able to play the game, closing off the positive, affective, justifiable experiences of anger and exclusion" (Skeggs 2004a, 87). According to Boyne (2002), the possibility of the genuine social exclusion of the working class for exactly these reasons is completely neglected. Thus, what initially appears to be working-class apathy and fatalism can also be redefined as a refusal to engage in a game where the stakes are often too high for working-class players (Reay/Ball 1997). Thus, the categorisation into skilled and less-skilled choosers, which associates the 'good parent' with a 'choosing parent' (Noreisch 2007a; van Zanten 2013), seems to primarily be a result of evaluating working-class parents' practices by using normative constructions based on middle-class choice-making (Reay/Ball 1997; Skeggs 2004b).

Moreover, instead of seeing working-class 'unusual' practices as part of a 'class struggle', lacking knowledge and refusing to play the game are interpreted as an individual moral fault and a bad choice (Skeggs 2004a). Thus, as already emphasised, research needs to consider these dominant norms and this dominant symbolic. It should seek to pay attention to different value systems, which have already been unfolded in some studies on parenting practices, such as that by Lareau (2011), who illustrates how working-class families rely on the "accomplishment of natural growth" instead of engaging in the "concerted cultivation" practised by their middle-class counterparts; or by other studies on motherhood and childcare, illustrating that working-class mothers operate with an ethical value system strikingly different from the prevailing system (Holloway/Pimlott-Wilson 2014; Lawler 2000; Reay 1998; Skeggs 1997; Stefansen/Farstad 2010). Thus, this dissertation tries to follow Skeggs' (2004) call "to produce a subjectivity from alternative-use values, not just based on necessitarianism, suffering and subject-to forces, but on living life with a very different set of values" (ibid, 91). Since research to date has predominantly focused on the middle classes neglecting "the visions of the other social, racial and cultural groups that coexist in schools" (Hernández 2018, 17-18), this dissertation deliberately tries to fill this gap by including the perspective of parents with a lower social status. Thus, this study seeks to illustrate how parents from different social backgrounds cope with their new freedom of choice.

Despite the crucial influence of class and social status, identities and practices do not seem to be reducible to just one dimension. While research on parental choice has traditionally focused on the role of class in choice practices, more recently, the relationship between class and ethnicity (and gender) has come to the fore (Gillborn et al. 2012; Lucey/Reay 2002; Reay et al. 2011; Vincent et al. 2012). In the field of education, ethnicity tends to mainly be discussed in relation to schools' composition and, thus, as one crucial characteristic through which schools become 'demonised' and should be avoided (Boterman 2013; Byrne 2006; Karsten et al. 2003; Reay 2004; Vowden 2012). Schools' ethnic composition is also a prominent aspect discussed in the German debate about school segregation (Kristen 2005; Radtke 2007; Morris-Lange et al. 2013; OECD/Vodafone Stiftung 2011). In this study, it is mainly discussed in sub-study I, illustrating the significant role played by schools' ethnic (and social) composition in parents' choice strategies (see sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019).

Some studies additionally point to the need to examine ethnicity within the middle classes, focusing on how class and race interact in different contexts (Vincent et al. 2012). They mainly draw on intersectionality theories emphasising that individuals do not solely occupy a single, unitary identity but, rather, a complex identity comprising different dispositions and subjectivities. Authors such as Bilge (2010) point to the important interplay of "the great axes of social orientation" (ibid, 8) – gender, class, race, disability and sexuality – in producing and reproducing social inequalities and securing privilege (Hooks 2000; Nash 2008). In their study on Black middle-class parents and their encounters with schools in England, Vincent et al. (2012) illustrate the intersectional work that these parents carry out in trying to defend their children and themselves from racism, stereotyping and low expectations by investing time and energy in their children's development. By examining interview material from other studies, Byrne (2009) even argues that viewing parents' practices through the lens of both class and race "is imperative for an understanding of the complexities of class and white middle classness in particular" (ibid, 424). Therefore, focusing solely on one dimension might be too simplistic and may thus lead to misinterpretations of parents' practices.

Considering the persistent and strong inequalities between immigrant and non-immigrant pupils in Germany (OECD 2016), there are some studies that (explicitly) analyse the differences between the choice practices of native Germans and parents with a migration background[16] – mainly by focusing on parents with a Turkish migration background. They illustrate that the

[16] The term ‚migration background' has slightly varying definitions in public statistics throughout Germany. In Mülheim an der Ruhr (and within this dissertation's own empirical data), a migration background is defined by a child's or her/his parents' place of birth: If the child or one of the parents was not born in Germany or if one of the three persons does not have a German passport, a migration background is assumed (Groos et al. 2018, 32).

latter are more likely to choose a childcare centre or school with a larger proportion of foreign nationals (Becker 2010; Groos 2015; Kristen 2008). Rather than originating from ethnic differences, the varying choice patterns are predominantly ascribed to the parents' social status and their access to information and (partly) to their (un)familiarity with the German school system (Becker 2010; Dollmann 2010; Kristen 2005; Kristen 2008) – which illustrates the strong correlation of social and ethnic criteria in the German context.

In this study, intersections between social status and migration background can be observed – mainly through the experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation guiding parental choice; however, they were not originally intended to be a main research focus. Nonetheless, to analyse these intersections and their impact on parents' choices more in depth, a more systematic empirical approach is needed. It is likely that different migration backgrounds lead to different experiences of integration or exclusion and stigmatisation in German society, thus influencing parents' practices to a varying extent and direction; for instance, coming from a country that is highly stigmatised in the German context, such as most Arabic countries or Turkey, is likely to produce different experiences than coming from an EU country such as Norway or the Netherlands. However, with the empirical approach taken in this study, it was not possible to control the sample in regard to migration backgrounds (for more details on the recruitment of interviewees, see chapter 3.4.1). Hints on intersections are thus briefly described in chapter 5; to completely understand and explain the underlying mechanism of intersections impacting parents' school choices, however, a more in-depth analysis in future research is required.

While there are at least a few studies focusing on parents with a migration background, very little attention has been paid exclusively to the motivations and choices of parents with a lower social status – who are explicitly considered in this research. However, the tuition- and ranking-free provision of education in Germany provides an institutional context in which the transfer and investment of different forms of capital in the process of school choice are likely to be not only sophisticated but also hidden and quite subtle. Therefore, parents' capacity to 'play the game' is strongly dependent on their social position, particularly on their educational attainment. Moreover, due to the extraordinary opportunity of building upon the (in Germany) very exceptional database and the extensive quantitative analyses on the school choice strategies of parents with different social statuses that have already taken place in Mülheim an der Ruhr, this study mainly focuses on the social differences in choice practices. This was – particularly in regard to qualitative empirical research – still an understudied area in German research on school choice when this dissertation process started in 2015.

2.2.3 School choice strategies, cultural capital and the dominant norms of schooling

A common element of parental choice across different contexts is the search for the 'right' school (Power et al. 2003). As already mentioned, however, parents' capacities to ensure access to the 'right' schools depend on the different forms of capital they possess and are thus related to their social background. Independent of allocation regulations and other institutional constraints, middle-class parents usually manage to 'work' the system – by moving to the school's catchment area or by applying strategies that are not based on household mobility, such as going private, 'colonising' local schools and getting involved to raise their performance, getting involved in churches to ensure access to high-performing denominational schools, pursuing appeals in case the child is rejected by the first choice, or circumventing (mainly illegally) allocation regulations and thus accepting greater distances between home and school (Ball et al. 2004; Butler/Hamnett 2007; Butler/Robson 2003a; de Graaf et al. 2000; Lund 2008; Noreisch 2007a; Rangvid 2007; Raveaud/van Zanten, 2007; Reay et al. 2011; Vowden 2012; Yoon/Gulson 2010). In Germany – and other countries (see, for instance, Kosunen 2014 for Finland) – another, more subtle way of producing segregated streams within comprehensive schools is the provision of special classes, such as bilingual or natural science-oriented classes or gifted programmes for high-performing pupils (Morris-Lange et al. 2013; Nast/Blokland 2014).

Definitions of the 'right' or 'best' school vary tremendously between and within social groups. Based on the increased significance of education, particularly the search of middle-class parents is based on quality criteria, such as pupils' educational performance. In addition, school choice appears to be increasingly driven by parent preferences in regard to the school's social and ethnic composition, and thus, it contributes to the increasing levels of school segregation across different countries (Boterman 2013; Burgess et al. 2014; Byrne 2006; Karsten et al. 2003; Kristen 2005; Noreisch 2007b; Rangvid 2007; Riedel et al. 2010; Vowden 2012). Concerns about social reproduction have led to the fear of social or educational 'contamination' or, as Butler and Hamnett (2007) put it, "the exposure […] to children from class or racial groups who may be seen to exert a detrimental effect on their own performance" (ibid, 1165). Moreover, middle-class parents are worried about the social backgrounds and behavioural tendencies of their children's classmates and, thus, about their children's exposure to the 'wrong' types of socialisation. Thus, although some middle-class parents celebrate the mix of their neighbourhood, it may be perceived as a threat in regard to their children's education (Boterman 2013).

A certain selectivity of parental choice, leading to an increase in school segregation, has also been revealed in the German context – despite the existence of primary school catchment areas in most federal states (Breidenstein et al. 2014; Groos 2015; Krüger 2014; Krüger et al. 2016;

Noreisch 2007a & b; Riedel et al. 2010). However, in contrast to the publication of official rankings or test scores, such as in the UK, there are no official data on schools' performance in Germany. Moreover, while the cultural profits of the secondary school tracks in terms of educational and occupational pathways is obvious, primary school choice is even exacerbated by the fuzzy distinctions between comprehensive primary schools, which lack a 'clear cultural coding' (Bourdieu 1986). Despite their long-standing image as the 'egalitarian' basis of the German school system (Breidenstein et al. 2014, 166) (for more information, see chapter 2.5), the increasing development and advertisement of school profiles is likely to induce a vague perception of differences between primary schools (Altrichter et al. 2011) – which might consequently increase the pressure that at least some parents feel to choose carefully. In the free-choice context of NRW, parents' practices are thus likely to be driven by schools' composition.

While educational performance, schools' atmosphere and their composition are mainly associated with middle-class parents' choices, working-class parents' choice criteria are merely reduced to spatial proximity between home and school. In a dominant political and scientific discourse, where only the 'choosing parent' is seen as being a 'good parent' (Noreisch 2007a; van Zanten 2013), applying to the local school is mainly conceived as a non-choice reflecting parents' lack of desire, knowledge and capabilities instead of as deliberate and careful choice-making. Thus, choice criteria deviating from middle-class norms – such as economic or practical constraints managing everyday life and combining family and work life or concerns about a child's ability to fit in at high-reputation schools – seem to be somewhat marginalised (Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Reay/Ball 1997; van Zanten 2005). The dominance of middle-class norms of choosing can be observed in NRW as well, where the abolition of catchment areas was advertised as a tool to decrease inequality of choice by just removing the bureaucratic barriers for socially disadvantaged families. Not applying for schools other than the nearest school is thus automatically ascribed to disadvantaged families' lack of desire and capabilities to implement choice. The possibility that this 'choice' is based not only on bureaucratic hurdles but also on practical and/or economic constraints – which are not removed by the abolition of catchment areas – seems to be completely neglected (see sub-study 1 | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019).

As already illustrated, differences between parents' choice practices can be observed not only across but also within social classes (Bourdieu 1984; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Vincent 2001; van Zanten 2003). Several studies have demonstrated that depending both on parents' different levels of economic, cultural and social capital – and, thus, on their habitus – and on the different value systems and (educational) ideals partly reflecting national and societal ideologies, choice

strategies vary among middle-class parents. Apart from the well-reported strategies of dissociation, there are a growing number of studies focusing on certain middle-class groups or fractions that deliberately seem to choose socially and ethnically mixed schools (Hernández 2018). Although not yet quantified in size and scope, by actively dissociating themselves from the most reputable schools and their 'elitist' socio-economic composition, some middle-class parents deliberately opt out of the mainstream and enrol their children in mixed state schools (Billingham/McDonough Kimelberg 2013; Byrne 2006; Bloomfield Cucchiara 2013; Bloomfield Cucchiara/McNamara Horvat 2009; Kosunen 2014; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Reay et al. 2011; Vowden 2012; Wilson 2013a). This active dissociation from the most reputable schools can also be observed for parents with different social backgrounds in this dissertation. Thus, although emphasised by most international studies of educational policy, the quest for educational 'excellence' or selective peer groups does not always seem to be the primary concern in school choice – at least not for a minority of parents (for more information see sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018).

Apart from their preferences for an urban lifestyle 'forcing' certain parents to just accept the 'good enough' state school within the city (Billingham/McDonough Kimelberg 2013), many parents highlight the benefits of (culturally) mixed schooling for their own children, mentioning traits such as intellectual and cultural enrichment or participation in local peer group networks (Kosunen/Rivière 2018; Hollingworth/Williams 2010). Moreover, many of these decisions reflect parents' appreciation of diversity and a progressive political ideology that tries to contribute to the public good and social justice. These parents' view of 'good education' involves not only intellectual development and academic results at the individual level but also a concern for equality and integration at the collective level (Bloomfield Cucchiara/McNamara Horvat 2009; Hollingworth/Williams 2010; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Reay et al. 2011).

However, the compatibility of social ideals and individual concerns when choosing mixed schools produces tensions and moral dilemmas. The contradiction between individual and communal values in educational choice forces parents to decide between "putting the family first" (Jordan et al. 1994) or choosing in favour of the common good (Kosunen 2016 after van Zanten 2009). They have to decide between being a 'good citizen', by avoiding socially selective choices and contributing to social and ethnic segregation, and being a 'good parent', by ensuring the 'best' for their own child (Breidenstein et al. 2014; Crozier et al. 2008; Frank/Weck 2018; Kosunen/Carrasco 2016; Oría et al. 2007; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007). To cope with this contradiction, these parents are likely to pursue different strategies of using cultural and social capital to limit the anticipated risks of mixed schools, such as the anticipated lower learning level. As research has been able to show, some parents strive for a controlled and managed form

of difference, a so-called ‘good mix’, which thus includes the presence of parents ‘like us’ who provide a certain kind of safety and reassurance when making such a ‘risky’ decision (Posey-Maddox et al. 2014). Others tend to participate in home-school interaction and the development of the local school to improve its quality, promote their children’s distinct friendship groups outside the school or try to actively offset the schools’ ‘negative’ effects through family resources – such as time and cultural and economic capital to support their children personally or through tutoring (Crozier et al. 2008; Hollingworth/Williams 2010; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; van Zanten 2003). Therefore, the desire for mixed schools strongly depends on parents’ capabilities to protect their children from such schools’ ‘undesirable’ effects on their own educational goals.

These dilemmas and contradictions seem to vary between different educational systems – depending on their level of selectiveness and competition, as shown in chapter 2.3. While the idea of not applying to the most selective schools would appear absurd to most parents with the necessary economic capital in extremely segregated educational and societal systems such as Chile, it seems to be ‘normal’ in other, more egalitarian systems such as Finland (Kosunen 2014; Kosunen/Carrasco 2016). The educational system’s impact on parents’ choice practices and on shaping the discourses and values of choice is further discussed in chapter 2.3 and is the main research focus in the sub-studies I and III (chapters 4.1 and 4.3 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019 and Ramos Lobato et al. 2018).

2.2.4 School choice and social capital

Research on the choice of school and childcare shows that parental choice is not as individualised and rational as is often assumed and is not based exclusively on the goal of reproducing the own social position. Rather, it is infused with emotions, framed by (national and local) norms and strongly influenced by (local) social networks (Ball/Vincent 1998; Byrne 2006; Holloway 1998; Noreisch 2007b; van Zanten 2013; Vowden 2012; Vincent et al. 2009; Vincent/Ball 2001). Drawing on personal impressions and the experiences of friends, acquaintances or relatives – defined as a “grapevine” or “hot-knowledge” (Ball/Vincent 1998) – is used as a way to compensate for missing or untrustworthy (official) information about the provision of childcare and schools. However, as demonstrated by Ball and Vincent (1998) in their well-cited study on the role of grapevine knowledge in school choice, there are different – more or less helpful – grapevines, and access is unevenly distributed across different social classes. “Where you live, who you know and what community you belong to are vital determinants of the particular grapevine that is open to you” (Ball/Vincent 1998, 381).

Social networks and the knowledge transferred within them seem to be particularly important in the German context, where almost no official and objectifiable information on primary schools' performance exists and, at the same time, distinctions between comprehensive primary schools are somewhat fuzzy. In this context, where parents have been given free choice without being provided with the necessary formal information, grapevine knowledge is very likely to be an indispensable and reliable substitute for parents (Krüger 2014). However, as access to grapevines is inconsistent, this dissertation seeks to analyse how different social groups deal with the new freedom of choice.

Apart from its function as a source of useful information, grapevine knowledge is used as confirmation and provides a medium for social comparison "with others 'like us' and 'others' not 'like us'" (Ball/Vincent 1998, 393). Choice strategies are often framed by local social norms and values, making (most) parents feeling pressured to conform to these dominant norms (Butler/Robson 2003a; Byrne 2006; van Zanten 2013). However, parents seem to use grapevine knowledge to a different extent. Research illustrates that their diverging responses range from the suspicion of more skilled choosers to the unconditional trust of parents with less cultural capital (Ball/Vincent 1998; Reay/Lucey 2004; van Zanten 2007). Nevertheless, the opportunity to make a socially embedded choice leads to a situation where, despite all the doubts or suspicions about grapevine knowledge, only a few parents can entirely resist.

Because parents feel pressured to conform to these – mainly local – norms of school-related social matching, place plays a significant role in shaping parents' attitudes towards childcare and schooling. As Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) demonstrate in their study on parents' attitudes towards parenting education, parents of different social classes express significantly similar attitudes towards parenting depending on their socio-spatial environment – in this case, the school their children attend. The impact of setting-specific norms on parents' attitudes can thus even lead to 'parenting cultures' (Holloway 1998) that are not neatly confined to members of a specific social class. However, resource exchange is setting specific. "People bridge class gaps in certain contexts, for fixed periods and for specific resources" (Nast/Blokland 2014, 483). Small (2004) even argues that people's social capital greatly depends on the organisations with which they are regularly involved (ibid, 5). Thus, to understand how space structures like chances, the neighbourhood seems inadequate. Neighbourhood organisations, such as childcare centres, which enable regular encounters, might affect network formations to a much greater extent.

Despite the vast amount of literature on parental school choice, little attention has been paid to childcare centres and their impact on parents' choice strategies. However, as effective brokers

of organisational and social ties (Small 2009), childcare centres consequently constitute one of these "settings that draw people together" (van Eijk 2010, 43). Demanding a very high level of parental involvement, childcare centres are a unique site for establishing parental networks (Ball/Vincent 1998; Beißwenger/Hanhörster accepted; Byrne 2006; Holloway 1998; Small 2006 & 2009; van Zanten 2013). Based on the routine and repetition of interaction, they have the potential to facilitate (group-crossing) resource exchange and parental networks. They connect people who have the shared experience of being a parent (Wilson 2013) and thus "highlight the value of identifying common ground" (Wilson 2014, 642). Childcare centres might thus constitute one important setting where educational strategies are shaped, and consequently, they might serve as a suitable setting to analyse (the impact of parental networks on) parents' school choices. Considering the positive effect of socially mixed childcare centres on children's mental and physical development (Groos/Jehles 2015), the question of the extent to which the social composition of childcare centres also influences group-crossing parental networks and the transfer of resources, such as information or support, arises. Thus, while the impact of (socially) homogenous networks on framing parents' choices is acknowledged, this study particularly focuses on mixed settings, trying to analyse parents' potential interaction in socially mixed childcare centres. It seeks to analyse the extent to which childcare centres serve as a place where (group-crossing) local norms of schooling emerge and the extent to which they impact parents' choices (see sub-study II | chapter 4.2).

Apart from being mediated by social networks, school choice simultaneously mediates social networks. Although hardly addressed in studies on school choice thus far (except for Kosunen/Rivière 2018), by providing mutual support to make families' everyday life more feasible, the accumulation of (local) social capital through both childcare- and school-mediated networks might be a crucial aspect in parents' decision-making. A considerable number of studies have demonstrated the important implications of families' social networks for their well-being and their ability to cope with parenting (Attree 2005; Barnes 2007; Ghate/Hazel 2002). Their children's developmental needs and their own needs for social support induce parents to work hard at establishing parental networks (Holloway 1998; Talbot 2013). Parenting groupings, playgrounds or childcare centres can provide the basis for parents' friendships and thus compensate – if needed – for the lack of nearby grandparents or other siblings with whom their children can interact and from whom they might receive support (Jupp 2013). Serving as a socialising place in different urban contexts, primary schools seem to have a similarly crucial role in shaping (parents' and children's) social networks in the neighbourhood as childcare centres (Karsten 2011; Posey-Maddox et al. 2014). Hoping for mutual support in everyday life – such as picking the children up from school or taking care of them after school – in the matter of choice, parents

might thus consider not only the already established networks in childcare but also the networks that a particular school brings.

As previous research shows, however, spatial proximity does not necessarily lead to social proximity (Blokland/van Eijk 2010; Savage et al. 2005), and social capital does not necessarily dissolve social inequality. In their study on white middle classes in London comprehensive schools, Hollingworth and Williams (2010) point to conflicts and exclusionary tendencies that lead to a quite complex and difficult interaction between privilege and disadvantage in mixed contexts. In her study on early parenting cultures in a neighbourhood in London, Talbot (2013) illustrates that parents' search for association and friendship through playgroups was often accompanied by tensions and social exclusion expressing divisions not only of class/status but also of ethnicity, age or geographical location. Being known and accepted seemed to be closely linked to "a range of issues related to status – professional occupation, a bright, well-dressed and engaged child, social confidence and an expression of attitudes around parenting" (ibid, 238). Thus, the previous assumption that the 'common ground' of being a parent might reduce practices of dissociation, increase parents' commitment to socially mixed education, and promote common (group-crossing) norms of schooling that contribute to mitigating school segregation might not necessarily be the case. Rather, the potential inequalities and exclusionary tendencies playing out in childcare centres might reinforce socially selective choice practices, thus paving the way for segregation in later educational stages. Instead of being a crucial reason for choosing a school, parental networks might therefore have a deterring impact on choice – an aspect that was carefully considered during this analysis. Thus, in contrast to most other studies, this dissertation takes one step back in children's 'educational career' and examines the role of childcare-related networks in choice – both as a source of information and as an opportunity to accumulate (local) social capital.

2.3 Educational policies and parents' school choice strategies

Social selection is rooted in quite intricate and context-dependent ways in national education systems. In principle, a national curriculum applying to all secondary schools, as found in most Scandinavian countries, is less selective. In contrast, the German and Dutch systems of slotting pupils at a very early age into different educational tracks (Bellenberg/Forell 2012; van de Werfhorst/Mijs 2010) or the privileged paths to elite professions, as found in France (Felouzis 2009 after Maloutas/Ramos Lobato 2015) leads to comparatively strong educational inequalities. While some countries, such as most Nordic welfare states, deliberately aim to reduce

inequality by explicitly promoting the educational performance of comparatively disadvantaged groups (Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Kosunen 2014; Östh et al. 2013), more marketised education systems, such as in the USA, the UK or Chile, promote a very large differentiation in school quality, often – but not exclusively – along private/public divisions.

Policies thus provide the institutional context in which parents operate and set the framework of rules and sanctions enabling certain practices and exacerbating others. Therefore, they have a significant effect on parents' choice practices (Raveaud/van Zanten 2007). Educational provision and its regulation are the two main policy elements impacting parental choice. Thus, in countries where provision is diverse – including state, private and independent schools – the academic discussion on school choice differs tremendously from that in countries with a predominantly public education system. In mixed systems, such as the UK or the USA, high-profile and well-reputable institutions may be free to choose their clientele among those who are able to afford their services. Based on tuition fees and private education, school segregation is thus strongly tied to parents' economic capital. In contrast, in mainly public systems, middle-class parents' education strategies produce more complex forms of school segregation (Ball 2003; Boterman 2013; Kosunen 2016 after van Zanten 2009; Power et al. 2003) – and, thus, more hidden forms of transferring capital. In terms of educational regulation, schools' autonomy within the admission process and allocation regulations are further elements impacting parents' choices and, consequently, school segregation (Ball 1990; Ball 2003; Gewirtz et al. 1995; James et al. 2010; Jennings 2010; Karsten et al. 2006; Merry/Driessen 2005; Morris 2015; Seppänen 2003; Taylor 2002).

Since the latest wave of educational policies across various countries has strengthened parental school choice, research on school choice policies and their impact on school segregation has been conducted in many national and local contexts, particularly in the UK (e.g., Allen 2007 for England; Bernelius/ Vaattovaara 2016 for Finland; Bosetti 2004 for Canada; Boterman 2018 for the Netherlands; James et al. 2010 for the UK; Logan et al. 2007 for the USA; Maloutas 2007 for Greece; Oberti 2007 for France; Riedel et al. 2010 for Germany; Söderström/Uusitalo 2010 for Sweden; van Zanten 2007 for France). Free-choice policies were often advertised as a tool to support disadvantaged families in accessing other and potentially 'better' schools outside their immediate neighbourhoods and, thus, to entitle these families with the same opportunities as more privileged families. Even USA President Donald Trump justified his call for a school-choice bill with the provision of "school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African American and Latino children" (Trump 2017 after Makris 2018), who should be free to choose the school "that is right for them". However, the false rhetoric around school choice

cannot belie that while low-income families are exploited to gain political support (Makris 2018), in many countries, free-choice policies are a reaction to the middle classes' (actual or presumed) political support for more 'consumer choice' in education (Maloutas/Ramos Lobato 2017).

Free-choice policies reflect a paradigm shift from policies of state intervention to those promoting public choice, shifting the 'burden' of decision-making from the government to the individual (Makris 2018). Free choice is assumed to induce a higher level of competitiveness among schools, which is expected to promote improvements in education (Ball 2003; Forsey et al. 2008; Lauder et al. 1999; Makris 2018). Introducing these performance- and market-oriented approaches is part of a broader neo-liberalisation of education, which can be discerned across most national contexts. This can also be observed in NRW, Germany, where the introduction of free primary school choice was implemented by drawing on exactly the same arguments – it was advertised as a tool to induce competition between primary schools, with the expectation that such competition would improve their educational performance (MSW NRW 2005; Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019).

The idea of including choice and market mechanisms in areas such as education has already been questioned, blaming them for exacerbating inequalities within and between schools (Ball 2003; Chubb/Moe 1990; Gillborn/Youdell 2000; Harris/Ranson 2005; Hursh 2005; James et al. 2010; Makris 2018; Power et al. 2003). Introducing market theories into education automatically applies to education concepts of consumption that assume that people tend to make rational choices. However, as already illustrated, educational choice is not a routine choice and cannot be treated like any other consumer choice. Educational choice is a special choice because it is being emotional – since it concerns one's own children – because it has long-term consequences for children's future education and occupation and because it is engaging since it implies social relations via school (Kosunen 2016 after van Zanten 2009). Moreover, being entitled to free school choice involves responsibilities (Bowe et al. 1994) – not only for making the 'best' choice for one's own children but also, as already illustrated, for making an ethically sustainable choice considering the societal consequences, which simultaneously leads to tensions and dilemmas.

Moreover, neoliberal reforms in education depend on the assumption that all participants start from the same position and have access to the same information, which however, is not the case (Ball 2003; James et al. 2010). As already illustrated, (official) information is often limited and is not equally accessible to and decodable by different social groups (Reay/Lucey 2004; van Zanten 2007). Choice reforms thus do not provide open access to a variety of options for all

parents. Rather, they include considerable constraints – at least for some parents – creating unrealistic expectations that often lead to dissatisfaction and discontent based on the lack of agency that parents feel (Makris 2018). Since "choice is a particularly middle-class way of operating in the world" (Skeggs 2004a, 139), enabling parental choice in an educational market clearly reinforces the competitive advantage of middle-class parents by benefiting their abilities to play the game (Ball et al. 2003), and thus, it is likely to have differentiating and segregating effects. As Makris (2018) concludes in her study on school choice in a gentrified urban context, "school-choice policy is creating a system of stress and discontent for some, learned helplessness and exclusion for others, and elation for the school-choice 'winners'" (2018, 14). By theoretically holding the door to social mobility open for all parents, the class-based nature of this idealised choice and the necessity of middle-class dispositions and resources to play this game remain hidden (Reay 2008; Holloway/Pimlott-Wilson 2011).

Apart from parents' role in this game, free choice policies create a system in which schools and head teachers are even encouraged to play an additional role in reinforcing, as opposed to alleviating, school segregation (Herbert 2000; Hursh 2005; Jennings 2010; Ramos Lobato 2017; van Zanten 2005 & 2007). Open enrolment in combination with the "heightened surveillance of schools, and increased competition for resources" (2000) seems to discourage schools from reducing inequalities, as Gillborn and Youdell (2000) illustrate in their study on educational reforms in the UK. Thus, the situation seems to be more intricate and complex than is often presented by free choice supporters.

Apart from providing the institutional framework enabling parental choice, policies can have an additional powerful effect by shaping discourses on values and ideas, as Raveaud and van Zanten (2007) illustrate in their comparative study on parents' school choices in Paris and London. A case study from Berlin, where primary school catchment areas still exist, shows that choice depends on parents' interpretation of the rules regulating school enrolment and is therefore a question of whether parents think they have a right to choose (Noreisch 2007a). Although they are aware of how to circumvent enrolment rules, some parents defend their 'choice' of the catchment area school by upholding the state's right to allocate pupils. Consequently, choice "is affected by both personal means to do so and the extent to which choice is valued" (Noreisch 2007a, 1325). Parents raised in a catchment area system thus seem to be less willing to unconditionally accept illegal choice.

In the case of NRW, however, the question of how being accustomed to primary school catchment areas affects parents' understanding of the policy reform and impacts their choice strategies arises. Thus, how do they react to the formalisation of choice? In NRW, where admission

policies have changed, traditional choice strategies have become obsolete. Consequently, it can be assumed that parents are more likely to use this option and that the infusion of more market-oriented mechanisms exerts a certain pressure impacting their choices. While the few existing studies on school choice and segregation in Germany (with exception of Groos 2015; Riedel et al. 2010) mainly focus on federal states in which catchment areas still exist (Breidenstein et al. 2014; Krüger 2014; Noreisch 2007a), this dissertation provides an interesting context for analysing how the policy reform frames local norms of choice and how it consequently impacts parents' choice practices and primary school segregation. While sub-study I (chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019) illustrates how the introduction of free choice in NRW shaped the parental discourse around primary school choice, which developed from being a long-awaited opportunity to being a perceived 'duty', the comparative approach of two quite distinct education systems in sub-study III (chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018) enables to demonstrate in a more broader sense how the institutional context in which parents operate makes certain practices possible and/or acceptable and others not.

2.4 Setting the context: The education system and school choice in Germany

Primary school – in contrast to secondary school – choice has a comparatively short history in Germany and exists only in the federal states of NRW and Hamburg. The aim of this section is to briefly introduce the educational system in Germany and to illustrate the particular context in terms of educational choice in which parents in NRW operate. It seeks to outline the reasoning and underlying motivations for the policy reform in 2008 and tries to elaborate the relationship between social class, school choice, and educational inequality in Germany.

In Germany, education is a prerequisite for an individual's opportunities in life, for occupational success and for social, political and cultural participation in German society. Therefore, the lack of educational success is one of the crucial determinants of the intragenerational accumulation of social disparities within the life course (Möller/Bellenberg 2017). At the same time, an individual's educational success is – stronger than in other countries – highly dependent on the social background in Germany. The German education system thus plays a crucial role in the reproduction of social inequalities. Nevertheless, it is only with the publication of international comparative studies on education, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), that the strong social disparities within the German education system and the lacking equality of opportunities have taken centre stage. The results of such studies illustrated the significant impact that social

and socio-spatial factors and the highly segmented education system had on educational participation and success (Baumert et al. 2006; Baumert/Schümer 2002; Becker/Reimer 2009; Maaz et al. 2008; Stanat/Baumert 2002). Although the major influence of a child's social background on his or her educational success has been significantly lowered in recent years (OECD 2016), the German education system is – by contrast – still known for its comparatively high level of social selectivity and inequality.

In Germany, the legislative purview in the field of education – with few exceptions – belongs to the sixteen federal states. They are thus essentially responsible for education policy, including the regulation, planning, design, and supervision of the whole school system (Burkhart 2009; West et al. 2010; Wolf 2008). Due to the abundant use of these exclusive legislative competencies in the past, the educational systems differ in many ways. In Germany, education is compulsory for children from the age of six. After four (in some states six) years of joint schooling, pupils are assigned to different educational tracks. Regulations for the transition from primary to secondary education also differ between the federal states. In all states, the decision is based on the recommendation of the primary school according to the pupils' level of achievement and progress in primary school and their aptitude for certain types of primary schools (KMK 2017). While the primary schools' vote is often binding, the final decision can be left up to the parents (such as in NRW), or it lies with the school based on the fulfilment of specific performance criteria (e.g., Bavaria). The different secondary school tracks prepare pupils for divergent educational and occupational pathways, and consequently, they have broad implications for a child's educational career. The *Gymnasium* is the highest track, preparing students for tertiary education, while the highly stigmatised *Hauptschule* is the lowest track.[17] The significance of the transition is even intensified by the low level of permeability of the education systems, where switching from a lower to a higher track remains highly uncommon (Bellenberg/Forell 2012).

The primary schools in all federal states are the only comprehensive schools where all children of one age group are taught collectively. Traditionally, they have always had a very local character and enable short distances between home and school. "This aim is ascribed to a rejection based on a welfare- and egalitarian-democratic ideology to classes, status groups or other stratifications" (BVerfG 2000). Therefore, in all federal states, for decades, access has been organised through primary school catchment areas. In contrast to the highly segregated secondary

[17] Pupils graduate from *Gymnasium* after 13th grade or, in some federal states, after 12th grade, thus, approximately at the age of 18/19 or 17/18, respectively. They then earn a higher education entrance qualification allowing them to enrol in university. In addition, there is a mixed school type, the *Gesamtschule*, where a higher education entrance qualification can be earned.

school tracks, primary schools were thus perceived for many years as a "refuge of social indifference" and as the "egalitarian basis of a school system whose selectivity starts at secondary school" (Breidenstein et al. 2014, 166). Consequently, for a long period of time, the unequal educational opportunities in the German education system have predominantly been analysed by focusing on the transition from primary school to the different secondary school tracks. There is still widespread agreement identifying the various institutionalised transitions in the German education system as being responsible for the development and cumulation of educational inequalities (Baumert/Schümer 2001; Baumert et al. 2003; Ditton 1992; Maaz et al. 2006; Merkens/Wessel 2002; Schnabel 2002). Since these transitions do not always and exclusively depend on a performance-based distribution, parental school choice and its role in reinforcing social inequalities have moved to the centre of attention. In this context, the question of who is able to use these 'options' becomes interesting.

However, the perception of primary school as a haven of equal opportunities, as an alternative concept to the highly segregated secondary schools, has come under pressure. In many federal states, (illegal) parental practices of circumventing primary school catchment areas came to the fore. The broad implications of the transition between primary and secondary school in combination with the systems' low permeability seem to increase (some) parents' perception of primary schools as being a crucial first step and as a necessary preparation for their children's future educational career. In this context, studies in the German context, although few in number, have begun to focus on earlier stages in children's educational career and, thus, on the choice of primary school or even childcare centre, illustrating that parents feel increasing pressure to shape their children's educational biographies and that these early stations in a child's educational career are already increasingly being perceived as risky (Becker/Reimer 2010; Breidenstein et al. 2014; Krüger/Roch 2016; Lange 2010; Mierendorff et al. 2015; Noreisch 2007a). By analysing the impact of parental choice on school segregation, the research fields of sociology of education and urban studies have come closer together.

Even before the abolition of primary school catchment areas in NRW, parents had the legal opportunity to choose. Although a catchment area usually included only one primary school and children were legally obliged to attend this school, parents could legally circumvent the catchment area school by choosing a denominational school.[18] Since denominational schools do not have a fixed catchment area, they induce a certain competition between them and

[18] In NRW, denominational primary schools are completely publicly funded. Except for NRW and Lower Saxony, they were abolished in all other federal states in Germany. In 2016/2017, apart from 1,894 state primary schools, there existed 89 Protestant, two Jewish and 826 Catholic primary schools in NRW (MSW NRW 2017, 26).

municipal primary schools – especially those nearby Based on their specific admission criteria, which give children with the same faith a priority claim for admission based on the NRW constitution (Landtag NRW 2016), they have always offered a loophole to avoid state primary schools with their comparatively high shares of children with a migration background – who are predominantly Muslim children – and were therefore to a very high degree responsible for school segregation (Riedel et al. 2010). At present, children with a migration background remain particularly underrepresented at denominational schools. This cannot be ascribed solely to the schools' capacities to reject pupils; it is additionally influenced by parents' choices. Since children are allowed to be admitted to a denominational school only if their parents unconditionally acknowledge the teaching and education of their children according to the main principles of the faith (BVerfG 2017), parents with a different faith are often discouraged from applying to denominational schools. In the 2014/2015 school year, 19.2% of all pupils at state primary schools in NRW were Muslims; however, the shares at Catholic (10.4%) and Protestant (10.6%) state schools were only half as high (Möller/Bellenberg 2017, 52).

In Germany, private education – as an additionally, and in other countries, very frequently used strategy to avoid the 'wrong' schools – is growing, but with a total share of 9%, it is still less common than in many other countries. Private schools in Germany are not exclusively but predominantly publicly funded (on average 75%) and tuition-free (Klemm et al. 2018, 29).[19] The shares of private education differ tremendously between the different educational tracks: While almost 12% of all pupils within the *Gymnasium* and 22.1% in special-needs schools attend private schools, the share in primary schools is only 3.5% (Klemm et al. 2018, 19). For primary school, parents' selective choice strategies therefore (still) predominantly focus on state school alternatives.

After decades in which access to primary schools had been organised through primary school catchment areas, in contrast to most other German federal states, they were abolished in NRW in 2008. Enabling free parental choice was one main motivation of the ruling coalition, consisting of the conservative CDU and the liberal FDP, in NRW at that time. The reform was advertised as a tool to give parents the opportunity to apply to a primary school according to their preferences – e.g., a suitable (pedagogical) profile, a location, not necessarily the nearest one, with the best fit for organising everyday life, or just a perceived 'better' primary school (MSW

[19] Based on the so-called segregation ban (*Sonderungsverbot*) guaranteed by the German Constitution (Article 7 Paragraph 4), they are not allowed to claim excessive tuition fees that would promote a segregation of pupils by their parents' economic capital – which, however, seems to be ignored in most federal states. There is empirical evidence that private primary schools in many German cities have a comparatively high socially selective composition (Helbig et al. 2017; Klemm et al. 2018; Wrase/Helbig 2016).

NRW 2005).[20] It was argued that the old catchment area system reproduced inequity in choice since even before the reform, not all children attended the catchment area schools, with mainly well-educated parents knowing how to enforce this exception.[21] The abolition of catchment areas was part of a paradigm shift in North Rhine-Westphalian education policy towards an educational market with more competition, more transparency and more choice intended to "fundamentally improve the quality of education" (MSW NRW 2005; Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019). Therefore, it was only one element in a whole series of amendments within the NRW education act in 2006, such as encourage schools to develop specific profiles or introducing independent quality assessments (MSB NRW 2018). Introducing free primary school choice was thus supposed to reinforce conscious decisions by parents, with the intention of inducing competition between primary schools and, consequently, with the expectation that such competition would result in quality improvements in education.

While being welcomed by some parent organisations supporting the idea that parents have to have the choice without acting illegally (Ausschuss für Schule und Weiterbildung 2006, 27), the reform was predominantly criticised. The opposition parties – the social-democratic SPD and the Green Party – reproached the government for political patronage and for unilaterally favouring the interests of (upper-)middle-class and well-educated parents. Together with education unions, municipalities and researchers, they predicted a socially selective use of school choice and warned about the subsequent aggravation of school segregation, the growing differences between schools and the increasing stigmatisation of some disadvantaged schools (Ausschuss für Schule und Weiterbildung 2006; Brügelmann 2006; SPD-Landtagsfraktion NRW 2006). They all condemned the introduction of competition and market mechanisms in education on the grounds that they lacked one crucial requirement – equal conditions for competition. In addition, cities and municipalities criticised the federal state's decision for abandoning a key element for steering local school development and for increasing red tape due to the lack of valid admission criteria (Städte- und Gemeindebund NRW 2005; Städtetag NRW 2006; Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019).

[20] According to official documents and interviews with politicians from several parties responsible for education policy at the time when the policy reform was implemented (all conducted by myself) the study was *not*, as perhaps expected, intended to alleviate residential segregation by enabling parents to stay in mixed neighbourhoods but to maintain a distance from other social groups in school by choosing a school outside their immediate living environment.

[21] According to politicians and staff of the former Ministry of Education – interviewed by myself – the rising number of parents applying (illegally) for an exception to circumvent the catchment areas and the increasing discontent articulated by cities and towns that had to deal with these exceptions were one reason why this issue began to be discussed at the federal state level.

The abolition of catchment areas introduced new allocation regulations in NRW and largely widened parents' choice options. It enabled parents to register their children at any primary school without being forced to (illegally) justify their decision and to apply for an exception, as they 'had to' in the past. Nevertheless, there is still a legal claim for a place in the nearest primary school in accordance with the schools' predefined capacities (MSB NRW 2018; Schulgesetz NRW §46 Absatz 3). Thus, spatial proximity still plays a certain role in terms of admission, especially since travel expenses are reimbursed only when the nearest primary school is attended (MSW NRW 2005). This is likely to affect the choice preferences and to limit the choice options of parents with less economic capital compared to those of more affluent parents. Thus, this dissertation tries to analyse who makes use of the freedom of choice.

There are no concrete admission criteria; rather, there are guidelines, but their implementation is not controlled for – which is another highly criticised aspect of the reform.[22] This loophole widens the leeway of primary school choice both for schools in admitting pupils and for parents in using their social and cultural capital to increase their chances of gaining access. According to the law, the final decision on the admission of pupils rests with the head teachers, who are also allowed to reject pupils if their capacity is depleted (MSB NRW (§46 Absatz 1)). Although not intentionally implemented as a way to expand the autonomy of schools, the abolition of catchment areas consequently tremendously widened the head teachers' scope of discretion in regard to the admission process, shifting from having almost no competences in the former catchment area system to – within lawful limits – a comparatively large amount of space to manoeuvre.

After the North Rhine-Westphalian elections in 2010, in which the former opposition parties, SPD and the Green Party, won, many amendments of the education act decided in 2006 were completely revoked – except for the abolition of catchment areas. The incoming SPD and Green Party coalition enabled the reintroduction of the primary school catchment area; however, the decision is left up to the municipalities. Equipping parents with the right to choose "opened a Pandora's box and generated needs difficult to withdraw", as claimed by a leading social-democratic (SPD) politician in NRW. This might explain why the former opponents of the reform did not dare to completely roll it back but, rather, preferred to 'pass the buck' to the local level – which predominantly kept free parental choice.

[22] Spatial proximity is one of these 'flexible' criteria.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Based on the previously specified theoretical approaches (see chapter 2), this chapter illustrates the methodological approach of this dissertation. First, the following section presents the research task and the main research objectives more in depth (see also chapter 1). Then, the selection of the case study city, Mülheim an der Ruhr, is explained, and the local context in which the empirical analysis was conducted is described in detail. Afterwards, the different methodological elements of this dissertation are illustrated. The processes of data collection and data analysis are discussed, followed by a critical reflection on the study's reliability. At the end of this chapter, the study's ethical standpoints are illustrated.

3.1 Research task and research objectives

Chapter 2 illustrates the previous research on parents' school choices and urban educational processes as well as the main research interests in this field. Research has been able to show that access to high-quality education has become a sensitive topic, particularly for middle- and upper-middle-class parents (Boterman 2013; Butler/Hamnett 2007; van Zanten 2013). It illustrates the different strategies that (middle-class) parents pursue to gain access to the perceived 'best' schools for their children, which contributes to the increasing levels of school segregation across different countries (Burgess et al. 2014; Byrne 2006; Vowden 2012). Previous studies demonstrate that these strategies are influenced by the institutional framework and its corresponding rules and sanctions (Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Boterman 2018; James et al. 2010; Logan et al. 2007; Söderström/Uusitalo 2010) and are additionally tightly interwoven with the city's residential patterns (Burgess et al. 2005; Butler/Robson 2003b; Karsten et al. 2003; Rangvid 2007). Moreover, they point to the crucial role that parental networks and grapevine knowledge play in informing parents' school choice strategies (Ball/Vincent 1998; Byrne 2006; Holloway 1998).

Despite the enormous amount of research on parental school choice, there are still some gaps that need to be filled: First, while research has illustrated that education policies determine the institutional framework and make certain practices (officially) possible and others not, less attention has been paid to the different ways in which education policies impact parental discourses on the values of choice and education, which consequently shape parents' choice practices (Raveaud/van Zanten 2007). Second, while research has predominantly focused on higher-educated parents' school choice strategies, less attention has been paid to the perspectives,

motives and potential constraints of their lower-educated counterparts. Third, the impact of parental networks on choice through the provision of access to information is already acknowledged; to date, however, the potentially crucial impact the anticipation of (local, childcare-related) social capital through choice might have is a somewhat less examined aspect of choice-making (see Kosunen/Rivière 2018). Thus, little attention has been paid to preschool networks and their impact on parents' choice strategies to date.

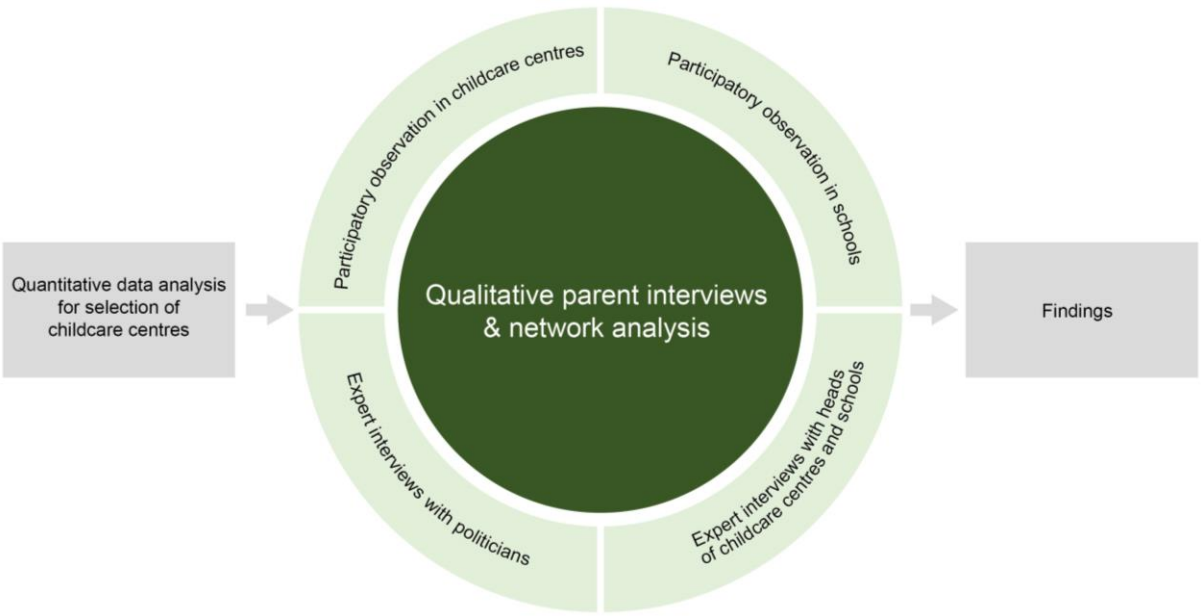
While a study in Berlin, Germany (Noreisch 2007a), where catchment areas still exist, illustrates that choice depends on parents' interpretation of the rules regulating school enrolment and is therefore a question of whether parents think they really have a right to choose, this question has become obsolete in the North-Rhine Westphalian context; here, there arises the question of how parents would react to the formalisation of choice. Since NRW is one of the only two (out of 16) federal states in Germany in which primary school catchment areas were abolished, it constitutes a perfect context in which to study parents' primary school choice practices. Consequently, the three main research objectives addressed in this dissertation are as follows:

a) To what extent and why do parents (raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system) make use of free primary school choice, and to what extent are their choice strategies informed and influenced by the formalisation of free choice?
b) Are there any differences in choice practices and their underlying value systems between parents with a different educational attainment, and if so, why?
c) What role do parental networks (in childcare centres) play in informing, shaping and pre-structuring choice strategies?

As already illustrated in chapter 1, the empirical analysis focuses on socially mixed childcare centres, which is crucial in light of the dominant focus on middle-class families' strategies that "may lead us to overlook inter-group processes" (Nast/Blokland 2014, 485). As effective brokers of organisational and social ties (Small 2009), childcare centres constitute an important setting for facilitating and maintaining relationships between parents and for influencing their views on schooling. Therefore, they – particularly in the case of socially mixed childcare centres – might either promote group-crossing networks and common norms of schooling that contribute to mitigating school segregation or might reinforce social distinctions and thus lay the foundation for segregation in later educational stages. Consequently, this study explicitly takes one step back in children's 'educational career' and focuses on preschool-related networks and their impact on school choice practices.

To answer the research questions, this dissertation draws on several empirical elements that will be explained more in depth in this chapter. All elements are strongly intertwined and complement each other (see Figure 1): a) qualitative interviews with parents, including a network analysis, b) participatory observations in childcare centres and primary schools, c) expert interviews with the heads of the childcare centres and primary schools as well as with (former) politicians and staff of the Ministry of Education, all involved in the decision to abolish primary school catchment areas in 2008, and d) an analysis of quantitative data. The first element mentioned – the qualitative interviews with the parents of 5- to 6-year-old children attending the last year in childcare centres – constitutes the empirical basis and, thus, the most important data basis of this dissertation. The interviews include a network analysis that was conducted to assess the interviewees' ego-centred social networks. All other methodological elements serve to complement, undergird, and reflect the information gathered by the parent interviews. Each of these additional empirical elements supported the analysis with regard to the different research objectives.

Figure 1: The study's methodological elements



This dissertation was conducted between 2015 and 2019. The first empirical work that took place started in October 2015. In this first step, quantitative data were analysed to select three suitable childcare centres for the empirical analysis (for more detailed information on the available data base, see chapter 3.3.1). After the final selection of the childcare centres suitable for this study was completed, the main fieldwork started in autumn 2016. Between September and

December 2016, all parent interviews were conducted (for more detailed information on the interviews and the interviewees, see chapter 3.4). They were embedded in a stay in the childcare centres lasting several weeks; thus, they were framed by participatory observations of both parents and staff in these centres. In combination with the network analysis, this observation provided deeper insights into parental interactions in childcare centres and helped to link the narratives of the parents gained by the interviews with their concrete practices (see research objective c; for more detailed information on the participatory observations, see chapter 3.5). To complete the picture, parental school choice was additionally reflected from a different perspective – the institutional perspective. Participatory observations at almost all the primary schools' open days and information events served to gain an impression of how free school choice and the expected competition between primary schools is interpreted and internalised by the primary schools (September/October 2016). In combination with additional expert interviews conducted with the heads of the childcare centres and primary schools (March/April 2017) and with (former) politicians and staff of the Ministry of Education of NRW (June/July 2018), these additional elements made it possible to obtain background information on both the formation and implementation of the policy reform (for more detailed information on the expert interviews, see chapter 3.5); thus, they helped to embed the parents' narratives and their strategies and concerns in the specific institutional context (see research objective a).

3.2 Mülheim an der Ruhr as local context

Similar to most other countries, primary school choice is an urban phenomenon in Germany. To analyse and understand parents' school choice strategies, it is thus crucial to relate these strategies to the local context in which they are pursued and to illustrate the local context's specific socio-spatial characteristics and educational provision (Kosunen 2016 after Seppänen 2006). Therefore, based on the latest data, the main socio-economic and spatial characteristics of the case study city, Mülheim an der Ruhr, are briefly described in the following section. When referring to the city's educational infrastructure, however, the following explanations draw on statistics and data from previous years to present the context in which this dissertation's main fieldwork was conducted (2015-2016) and the data on which this dissertation draws (such as the quantitative data used to select the childcare centres in 2015 and that served as background information on the local educational landscape for the interviews in 2016).

3.2.1 The city's socio-spatial characteristics

Mülheim an der Ruhr is located in the federal state of NRW, which is the most highly and most densely populated state in Germany. With its 171,072 (2018) inhabitants, Mülheim an der Ruhr is part of the Ruhr area, an old industrial polycentric urban area with a total population of approximately five million inhabitants.[23] The city is located within commuting distance of Düsseldorf, the capital of NRW. Its high share of high-income inhabitants means that the city is nevertheless one of the wealthier middle-class cities in NRW (especially in the Ruhr area) (MAIS NRW 2016, 408). Based on its significance as an (international) commercial city, where large companies still have their headquarters, the income level in Mülheim an der Ruhr is comparatively high (the highest within the Ruhr area) (MAIS NRW 2016, 133), and the city is the most expensive city in the Ruhr area with respect to rental prices (MAIS NRW 2016, 96). At the same time, however, Mülheim an der Ruhr is severely affected by an above average share of poverty, which has increased significantly in recent years, especially among children. Social polarisation is therefore even more pronounced in Mülheim an der Ruhr than in its neighbouring cities. As in most other larger North-Rhine Westphalian cities, the share of poor people living in Mülheim an der Ruhr is higher than the NRW average. In 2017, the share of people depending on social welfare was 15%, whereas child poverty was significantly higher: 25% of children under 15 years of age[24] and 26% of children under the age of six depended on social welfare (Mülheim an der Ruhr n.d.).

These disparities also become spatially visible through the city's polarised social geography.[25] As illustrated by Figure 2, the shares of people depending on social welfare differ tremendously between the statistical districts: While in the most privileged – mostly southern – neighbourhoods, no one depends on social welfare, in the most disadvantaged northern neighbourhoods,

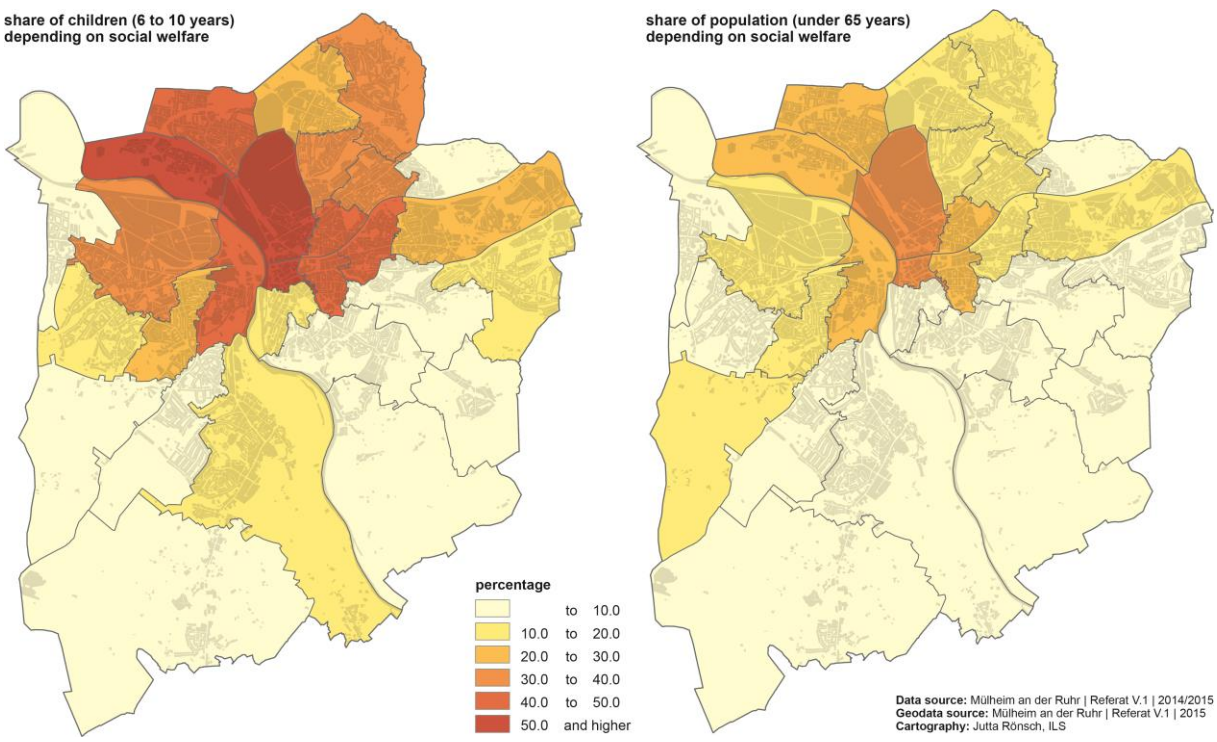
[23] The Ruhr area consists of 15 formerly industrial cities and counties that have grown together into the largest urban agglomeration in Germany. Due to its industrial past, the Ruhr area is a comparatively poor area in Germany. Being a famous supplier of coal and steel in the first part of the 20th century, as a result of which the area became a destination of international labour immigration, the Ruhr coal and steel industry began to enter into sharp decline in the 1950s. Numerous coal mines had to be closed, and many workers were made redundant. Although a long-lasting process of structural change followed, in comparison with the major dynamic agglomeration areas in Germany (Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, and Frankfurt am Main, as well as the closely located Rhine region, including the cities of Düsseldorf and Cologne), the Ruhr region is still lagging behind in terms of employment growth rates and knowledge-intensive sectors of the economy. Moreover, the disposable income within the Ruhr district is clearly lower than that at the state and national levels; the unemployment rate and child poverty are still high and above the state and national average. The non-German population is one of the population groups that is most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, partly as a legacy of its industrial past. In particular, the low-qualified immigrant workforce was hit hardest by job losses in manufacturing industries.

[24] The share of children under 15 years of age depending on social welfare has increased tremendously in recent years, from 20.4% in 2007 to 29.0% in 2018 (Mülheim an der Ruhr n.d.).

[25] With a social dissimilarity index of 24% (Groos 2015, 32), the extent of socio-spatial segregation in Mülheim an der Ruhr is nevertheless similar to the average level in German cities – even slightly lower (Farwick 2012, 388; Helbig/Jähnen 2018, 28).

almost 64% of people below the age of 65 and more than 66% of children between the ages of 6 and 10 depend on social welfare (Mülheim an der Ruhr/Referat V.1 2015).[26] The spatial division within the city can also be described along ethnic and demographic dimensions, which are all strongly interlinked and, thus, spatially overlap.[27] The neighbourhoods affected by the highest shares of people depending on social welfare are the neighbourhoods where most foreigners live and, at the same time, those where most children are growing up (Farwick 2012; MAIS NRW 2012; Strohmeier/Zimmer-Hegmann et al. 2003). Therefore, the polarisation of Mülheim an der Ruhr into a privileged south and a disadvantaged north corresponds to other cities within the Ruhr area whose socio-spatial structure was shaped by the northward migration of the coal mining industry (Bogumil et al. 2012).

Figure 2: Socio-spatial polarisation in Mülheim an der Ruhr



In 2018, 23.6% of the inhabitants of Mülheim an der Ruhr had a migration background – 15.2% were foreigners who did not have a German passport, and 8.4% were Germans with a second nationality (Mülheim an der Ruhr/Referat V.1 Stadtforschung und Statistik 2019, 12). In terms of their area of origin, the highest proportion of immigrants (17.5%) came from Turkey, the

[26] Unfortunately, small-scale data on the inhabitants' educational attainment are not existent.

[27] Thus, the share of children with a migration background additionally varies significantly between the different statistical districts (from 22% to 86%) (Groos et al. 2018, 11).

second highest (12.5%) came from the former Yugoslavia, and the third highest (10.0%) came from Syria (Mülheim an der Ruhr/Referat V.1 Stadtforschung und Statistik 2019, 13).

3.2.2 The city's educational infrastructure

The city of Mülheim an der Ruhr is divided into 28 statistical districts, which constitute the most commonly used administrative unit. On average, each statistical district comprises approximately 6,000 inhabitants (Groos 2015, 31). There are 19 state primary schools and three Catholic primary schools in Mülheim an der Ruhr.[28] As already indicated (see chapter 2.4), both state primary schools (*Gemeinschaftsgrundschulen)* and Catholic primary schools are completely state funded. The crucial difference is, however, that the latter are allowed to select children independent from their home address, which enables them to prioritise Catholic children living in neighbouring cities, rather than accepting children with a different faith living next door (Landtag NRW 2016). Thus, while each state primary school had its own catchment area before 2008, the denominational schools did not. Parents could apply for these schools independently of their address.

In Mülheim an der Ruhr, in 2014 – the year before this dissertation started – there were 86 childcare centres with a total of 4,985 places. Almost 20% of these places were reserved for children below the age of three (Groos et al. 2018, 25). The 86 childcare centres were run by different providers – public, denominational, private, and private/non-profit.[29] In comparison to the average distribution of childcare centre providers in NRW, there was an over-proportionate share of places in public childcare centres (39 childcare centres with more than 50% of places) and an under-proportionate number of denominational childcare centres (16 Catholic centres with 18.8% of places and 15 Protestant childcare centres with 12.9% of places) (Groos et al. 2018, 25). While childcare attendance differed tremendously between children below three years of age with different social and ethnic backgrounds, the shares in the group of four-

[28] Since, in 2014, two denominational primary schools were combined into one state primary school, the number of primary schools changed during the time period to which the quantitative data refer (the school years 2008/09 to 2015/16).

[29] In general, the providers of childcare centres in Germany can be provided into a) public providers, which are predominantly the municipal youth welfare service, b) denominational providers (Catholic or Protestant churches and their welfare organisations, *Caritas* and *Diakonie*), c) private non-profit providers, such as the Workers' Welfare Association (*Arbeiterwohlfahrt*) or the German Red Cross, and d) other private for-profit providers, often so-called parent initiatives (*Elterninitiativen*). In 2017, most children in NRW – both below and above three years old – attended a denominational childcare centre (35.6% | 42.1%). More than one-fourth (25.0% | 30.3%) attended a municipal state childcare centre, 26% | 18.9% a private non-profit centre and 13.4% | 8.7% a private for-profit centre (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 79f).

year-olds converged, with 90% of these children attending a childcare centre in Mülheim an der Ruhr (Groos/Jehles 2018, 30).[30]

The 86 childcare centres were (and still are) evenly distributed throughout the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr, and thus, they offer a provision of childcare close to home. Nevertheless, most of the time, the nearest childcare centre is not the one that is attended. The social and ethnic segregation in most childcare centres in Mülheim an der Ruhr corresponds to the residential segregation patterns.[31] For some childcare centres, however, both patterns clearly deviate from each other.[32] These deviations can be ascribed to small-scale patterns of socio-spatial segregation, the selective choices of parents (Groos et al. 2018, 33), and the childcare centres' full autonomy regarding the selection of children. In combination, all three aspects lead to highly differentiated patterns of segregation already in preschool education in Mülheim an der Ruhr.

These segregation patterns are particularly pronounced along the different providers of childcare: While Protestant and Catholic childcare centres in Mülheim an der Ruhr have shares of children depending on social welfare and children with a migration background that are significantly below the average, the opposite is the case in many state childcare centres (Groos et al. 2018, 41).[33] Consequently, the social composition varies significantly between childcare centres with different providers, which should be considered for the selection of childcare centres for this dissertation (see chapter 3.3.2). Denominational childcare centres are not fully but are still predominantly funded by the municipality (in Mülheim an der Ruhr, only 12% of the budget must be financed by the church).[34] Nevertheless, they are allowed to decide their selection criteria independently.

[30] While 11.1% of all one-year-olds not depending on social welfare attend a childcare centre, only 3.3% of children depending on social welfare do (48.9% of all two year-olds not depending on social welfare and 34.3% of all two-year-olds depending on social welfare) (Groos et al. 2018, 31). This social division with regard to children's attendance is almost identically reflected by the attendance of children without and with a migration background (Groos et al. 2018, 32).

[31] The shares of children below the age of six depending on social welfare vary between 0% and 64% across the statistical districts and between 0% and 71% across the 86 childcare centres. The patterns are similar with regard to the shares of children with a migration background: The shares vary between 22% and 86% across the statistical districts and between 8% and 91% across the childcare centres (Groos et al. 2018, 11).

[32] In some statistical districts with high levels of children depending on social welfare, there are childcare centres with very low levels of poor children and vice versa.

[33] Although the denominational childcare centres are predominantly funded by the municipality (only 12% of the budget must be financed by the church), they are allowed to decide their selection criteria independently.

[34] The share differs between the municipalities in Germany.

3.2.3 Mülheim an der Ruhr as a case study

The city of Mülheim an der Ruhr was chosen as a case study for this dissertation based on several reasons. First, since the dissertation seeks to analyse the impact of free primary school choice on parents' choice practices, only cities located in NRW were considered for the analysis – since primary school catchment areas still exist in almost all other federal states in Germany (see chapter 1). This is also crucial since this dissertation seeks to analyse lower-educated parents' choice practices – and one obstacle for their choice might be the existence of catchment areas. Thus, to gain deeper insights into all parents' choice strategies and their underlying value systems and constraints, a free-choice context providing – at least theoretically – equal choice options for all parents is likely to produce more valuable findings.

Second, to analyse parents' school choice strategies and their underlying motivations affecting school segregation more in depth, knowledge about the existence and development of school segregation is not only useful but also indispensable. There were (and still are) only two quantitative studies on school choice and school segregation in NRW when I started this dissertation in 2015 – one of these studies was conducted in Mülheim an der Ruhr by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Regional Studies (ZEFIR) as part of the larger "No child left behind (*Kein Kind zurücklassen*) research project run by the government of NRW and the Bertelsmann Stiftung.[35] The ZEFIR study analyses the development and scope of primary school segregation after the abolition of catchment areas in 2008.[36] It illustrates the impact of the social selectivity of parents' school choices and the subsequently growing level of primary school segregation in Mülheim an der Ruhr. Moreover, it reveals important factors influencing parents' choices, such as the distance to schools, the parents' educational attainment, and the schools' social and ethnic composition. While the regression model estimated can explain almost 60% of the variation in parents' choice behaviour (Groos 2015, 28) – which is quite high for logistical regression analyses – it nevertheless also points to the existence of other, additional factors influencing parents' school choice practises that were not captured by the quantitative analysis. Therefore, the need for more qualitative insights into parents' choice practices becomes obvious.

Third, the quantitative analyses not only provide a useful basis for my subsequent qualitative empirical study but also point to the enormous – and, German-wide, quite unique – data base that exists in Mülheim an der Ruhr (for more information on the existing data, see chapter 3.3). This data base contains detailed information on the composition of both primary schools and

[35] The second study was conducted by researchers from the Bergische Universität Wuppertal in the city of Wuppertal).
[36] The quantitative analyses in Mülheim an der Ruhr were led and mainly conducted by Thomas Groos. The city of Mülheim an der Ruhr provided the required data and the workplace in the city's closed statistical department.

childcare centres. On the one hand, these insights provide a useful overview of the educational landscape in Mülheim an der Ruhr that helps in better understanding the parents' narratives and explanations within the interviews. On the other hand – and this is perhaps most important – they allow an informed and careful selection of the childcare centres suitable for my analysis (for more information on the selection of childcare centres, see chapter 3.3.2).

Fourth, the previous quantitative analyses by the ZEFIR on school choice and school segregation were co-initiated and supported by the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr. The city had been paying particular attention to education, the (social) development of children, and the evaluation of childcare in children's development for several years. The idea of a qualitative empirical study on parents' school choices that explicitly builds on the already existing analyses thus attracted strong interest within the city's former education department (*Dezernat V – Bildung, Soziales, Jugend, Gesundheit, Sport und Kultur*) as well as among the researchers and administrative staff of the city's statistical department. In contrast, the other cities in NRW that I additionally had in mind when searching for a case study were less interested. Claiming that parents' choice practices had not changed at all after the abolition of catchment areas, it was thus pretended that primary school segregation was not an issue in these other cities I contacted. Thus, the combination of the strong political and administrative interest by Mülheim an der Ruhr, the already existing quantitative analysis, the pledged support of my dissertation, and the pledged access to the already existing individual data offered the perfect conditions for a more in-depth qualitative analysis of parents' school choices. Additionally, the city's support of my dissertation opened the door to the different childcare centres and the parents within – and this door would definitely have been closed without the official advocacy.

3.3 The quantitative data base and the selection of childcare centres

This dissertation is based on a predominantly qualitative empirical approach (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, the selection of the three childcare centres in which the empirical analysis took place is based on a careful evaluation of the existing quantitative data. Therefore, the existing data base in Mülheim an der Ruhr – on which my own analysis to select the childcare centres builds – and the existing analysis by the ZEFIR are described in the first section of this chapter. Afterwards, the selection of the three childcare centres and the criteria used for this selection are discussed, and the final selection of three childcare centres is presented.

3.3.1 The existing data base and quantitative data analysis in Mülheim an der Ruhr

As already mentioned, Mülheim an der Ruhr has an enormous and quite unique data base in terms of education. The most important data source for both the previous quantitative analysis by the ZEFIR and my own data evaluation is the school entrance examination. This is a compulsory physical and psychological examination of all children in Germany who are in their last year in childcare – thus, the following year's first-formers. In total, the data base provides access to the individual data of almost all first-formers (approximately 11,000 children) for the school years 2008/09 to 2015/16. The school entrance examination exists throughout Germany. However, the examination is conducted by the local public health department, and in most cities, the data are not collected systematically, nor are they used for analyses in other departments, such as urban planning or educational administration.

In Mülheim an der Ruhr, the health-related data are enriched by a questionnaire for the parents – prepared by the ZEFIR in cooperation with the statistical office of the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr – that is distributed during the examination and has an average response rate of more than 90%. Consequently, not only are there data on the children's individual (health-related) development (such as language deficits, deficits in eye-hand and body coordination, over-weight), but there is also additional information on the children's social and ethnic background (such as dependence on social welfare, nationality, parents' educational attainment, parents' employment status), their families (such as the number of siblings, single parents), and the children's early childhood education and care (such as the number of years spent in a childcare centre, the last attended childcare centre, regular attendance of paediatric preventative medical check-ups, being a member of a sports club, media consumption) (Groos 2016).

In addition, Mülheim an der Ruhr is one of only 108 cities in Germany that manage the tasks of social welfare for job seekers without any involvement of the local employment agencies (so-called *Optionskomunen*).[37] Consequently, in contrast to most other cities in Germany, the statistical department of Mülheim an der Ruhr possesses a special division in which the individual data of all welfare recipients in the city exist. These data can be linked to the municipal register of residents to identify the addresses of welfare recipients. To analyse school segregation, the list of welfare recipients is linked to the school entrance examination data via the children's address, which provides information about each child's social background that is usually not available in most other German cities.

[37] More concretely, this means that apart from granting money, the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr is responsible for the consultancy, job service and employment promotion for all job seekers depending on social welfare throughout the city.

Based on the existing individual data, the different indicators were aggregated into three thematic dimensions within the ZEFIR project. Based on this aggregation, three school indices were calculated that served as a basis for the subsequent quantitative analysis of school segregation. For each index, four to seven indicators were combined by a factor analysis. These indices illustrate a) the primary schools' socio-economic composition, b) the parents' attempts to promote their children and c) the children's cognitive and physical individual resources. Based on all three indices, one central index – the so-called "index of social privilege and disadvantage" (Groos 2016) – was calculated to characterise the primary schools' social composition. Since all three indices (although composed of several indicators) highly correlate with the share of children depending on social welfare, social welfare – for the sake of simplicity – is increasingly used as the only indicator of schools' level of social privilege and disadvantage.

3.3.2 Selection of the three childcare centres

As already mentioned, the extensive quantitative data available in Mülheim an der Ruhr were used for a careful selection of suitable childcare centres for this dissertation. For this purpose, I was given access to and a workplace in the closed statistical department of the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr, where I spent two weeks with the data analysis.[38] I had access to an enormous set of individual data, which combined the individual data collected by the school entrance examination and the data on social welfare recipients provided by the employment agency. Due to data protection regularities, I was allowed to work with only the individual data in the closed statistical department and had to aggregate the individual data for primary schools and childcare centres for the selection of childcare centres that I carried out at home. The information on the composition of primary schools and childcare centres, the transition patterns between childcare centres and primary schools, and the socio-spatial data on the statistical districts in Mülheim an der Ruhr allowed me to carefully select the childcare centres for this dissertation.

Only those parents whose children attended the last year in a childcare centre before going to primary school were considered for interviews. Therefore, it was not sufficient to recruit parents solely in one childcare centre because the number of interviewees would have been too low. Weighing between a minimum number of interviews required for the study and the time

[38] A closed statistical department is defined by being separated, spatially, technically, organisationally and in terms of personnel, from all other municipal departments and tasks. Thus, in terms of data protection, it needs to carry out work based on very strict regulations. Municipalities that do not have a closed statistical department, which is the case for the majority of municipalities in Germany, are not given access to individual data, such as the individual data of welfare recipients or individual census data (IT.NRW 2009, 5). These municipalities are dependent on the preparation and evaluation of data conducted by the statistical offices on the level of the sixteen federal states.

resources available for a longer stay in each childcare centre, I chose three different childcare centres to guarantee an adequate number of potential interviewees. The childcare centres were selected based on the strategy described by Flyvbjerg (2006). In his article, he reacts to the frequent critique, posed by many natural scientists working with quantitative statistical methods, claiming that to validate hypotheses for subsequent theory generation, the results of (singular) qualitative case studies are not generalisable or suitable. In contrast, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that "it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur" (ibid, 229). Therefore, he emphasises the significance of a strategic selection of qualitative case studies. More specifically, he argues for the selection of so-called "critical cases". These so-called "most likely" or "least likely" (Flyvbjerg 2006, 231) cases are settings in which previous assumptions or hypotheses can most likely be confirmed or falsified, therefore enabling assertions about other cases.

This dissertation seeks to analyse parents' primary school choices, the impact that (group-crossing) childcare-related networks have in shaping parents' strategies, and the role that childcare centres play in segregation in later educational stages. Therefore, the main aim was to select childcare centres where it is most likely that they – based on their composition, location, and organisational structures – enable and even promote (group-crossing) parental interaction and networks and, subsequently, information exchange about parenting, school choice and educational strategies. In case they do not enable parental interaction and networks and/or in case the parental networks in the selected childcare centres do not have any impact on parents' school choice strategies – despite the quite conducive conditions – according to Flyvbjerg (2006), it can be assumed that this is likely to be not the case in childcare centres with significantly less conducive conditions as well. For the selection of suitable childcare centres that enable (group-crossing) parental networks, several criteria were thus considered.[39] The selection process was conducted as a cascade – after each step, those childcare centres that did not correspond to the criteria were removed from the list (see Figure 3).

Location: The previous quantitative analysis by the ZEFIR revealed that parental school choice patterns vary throughout the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr. While in the city's most privileged – mostly southern – neighbourhoods, most parents still register their children at the nearest primary school, in the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods, where schools with a quite dissimilar

[39] The school entrance examination between the years 2008/2009 and 2015/2016 served as main data basis for the selection of childcare centres. Since these data refer only to children who transition to primary school in the following year, the indicators represent only an approximation within the observed time course and do not allow for statements referring to the whole composition of each childcare centre.

composition are located not very far from each other, parents seem to be less willing to 'accept' the nearest primary schools. Consequently, free primary school choice impacts schools to a very different and unequal extent – and these effects are more severe for schools located in mixed inner-city neighbourhoods. Against this backdrop, the empirical analysis of this dissertation was deliberately conducted in these inner-city neighbourhoods.[40]

Provider: To avoid an additional influencing factor, only childcare centres of one provider were considered for selection. Based on their higher number and their more diverse composition (in terms of the parents' educational attainment), only public childcare centres were considered for the selection process.[41] Furthermore, more pragmatic considerations played a role in the choice of public childcare centres – the municipality's support of this dissertation, including the mediation of contacts and the provision of access to public childcare centres.

Composition: Since all interviewees were recruited in the three selected childcare centres, the sample's quality is strongly determined by the composition of the childcare centres. The childcare centres' mixed composition was indispensable for both recruiting parents with a different educational attainment for interviews and for examining group-crossing parental networks; thus, it was an important selection criterion (which was already considered when choosing state childcare centres). Therefore, the selection of suitable childcare centres considered the anticipated constellation of parents in the centres. Based on previous studies highlighting parents' cultural capital as a key mechanism in social reproduction and to 'feel the school choice game' (Ball et al. 1995; Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992), educational attainment was used as the main criterion for assessing the childcare centres' composition. The main aim was to find childcare centres with preferably the most similar shares of parents with low, medium and high educational attainment – thus, to guarantee a sufficient number, I particularly considered the share of lower-educated parents. Consequently, all public childcare centres with a share of parents with low educational attainment between 15% and 40% were selected. Among them, three

[40] Consequently, the selection comprises one slightly disadvantaged statistical district (22%) in which the share of people depending on social welfare is above the city-wide average (15% – ranging between 1.3% and 42.9%) and one neighbourhood that is quite average in terms of social disadvantage (a 14% share of people depending on social welfare) (Mülheim an der Ruhr n.d.). Despite the former being slightly more disadvantaged than the city-wide average, not only does this selection make it possible to build directly on the quantitative analysis and to examine the parental choice patterns in those areas, where they changed the most, but it also makes it possible to analyse parents' choices in an area where primary schools with a quite different (social and ethnic) composition are located and, consequently, where choice is more 'necessary' or, at least, more likely.

[41] While the average share of parents with high educational attainment in state childcare centres is 38%, it is more than 50% in denominational and almost 70% in private childcare centres. Correspondingly, the average share of parents with a low educational attainment is comparatively higher in the state childcare centres (21%) than in denominational (6%) or private centres (10% (own calculations based on Stadt Mülheim, Referat V.1, SEU 2008-2015). These shares are based on a classification carried out by the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr in which parents are divided into three different groups: high, medium and low educational attainment (for more detailed information on the classification and its criteria, see chapter 3.4.2).

childcare centres were removed due to their unbalanced composition (e.g., very low share of higher-educated parents).

Catchment area: Primary school choice still has a very local character, and previous research points to the fact that parents tend to perceive local networks as the most reliable source of information (van Zanten 2013). Moreover, it can be assumed that children attending childcare centres located far away from their homes will not attend the same primary school afterwards. While a more general exchange of information on primary school choice between parents whose children attend the same childcare centre is likely independent of their residence, it is unlikely that parents whose residence, and thus also the area where they will probably search for primary schools, is far away from each other talk more in depth about specific schools or even consider these schools for choice. However, since Groos et al. (2018) illustrate that most of the time, the nearest childcare centre is not that one that is attended in Mülheim an der Ruhr,[42] only childcare centres with a comparatively narrow catchment area were considered for the analysis.[43]

Primary school landscape: As demonstrated by the quantitative analysis by the ZEFIR, spatial proximity is still a crucial factor influencing parents' choice practices – particularly those of lower-educated parents (Groos 2015, 27f). For an analysis of parents' school choice strategies, the availability of different choice options in a certain spatial proximity to each other and to the selected childcare centres (and therefore – due to their small catchment area – to the parents' residence) thus seems to be indispensable. Apart from focusing solely on the number of choice options, the schools' composition was considered within the selection process. The existence of schools located in spatial proximity but having a quite dissimilar composition might be a result of selective choice patterns – which, for this analysis, is more interesting. Therefore, childcare centres surrounded by several primary schools that have a very similar composition (privileged or disadvantaged) were not considered for this dissertation.

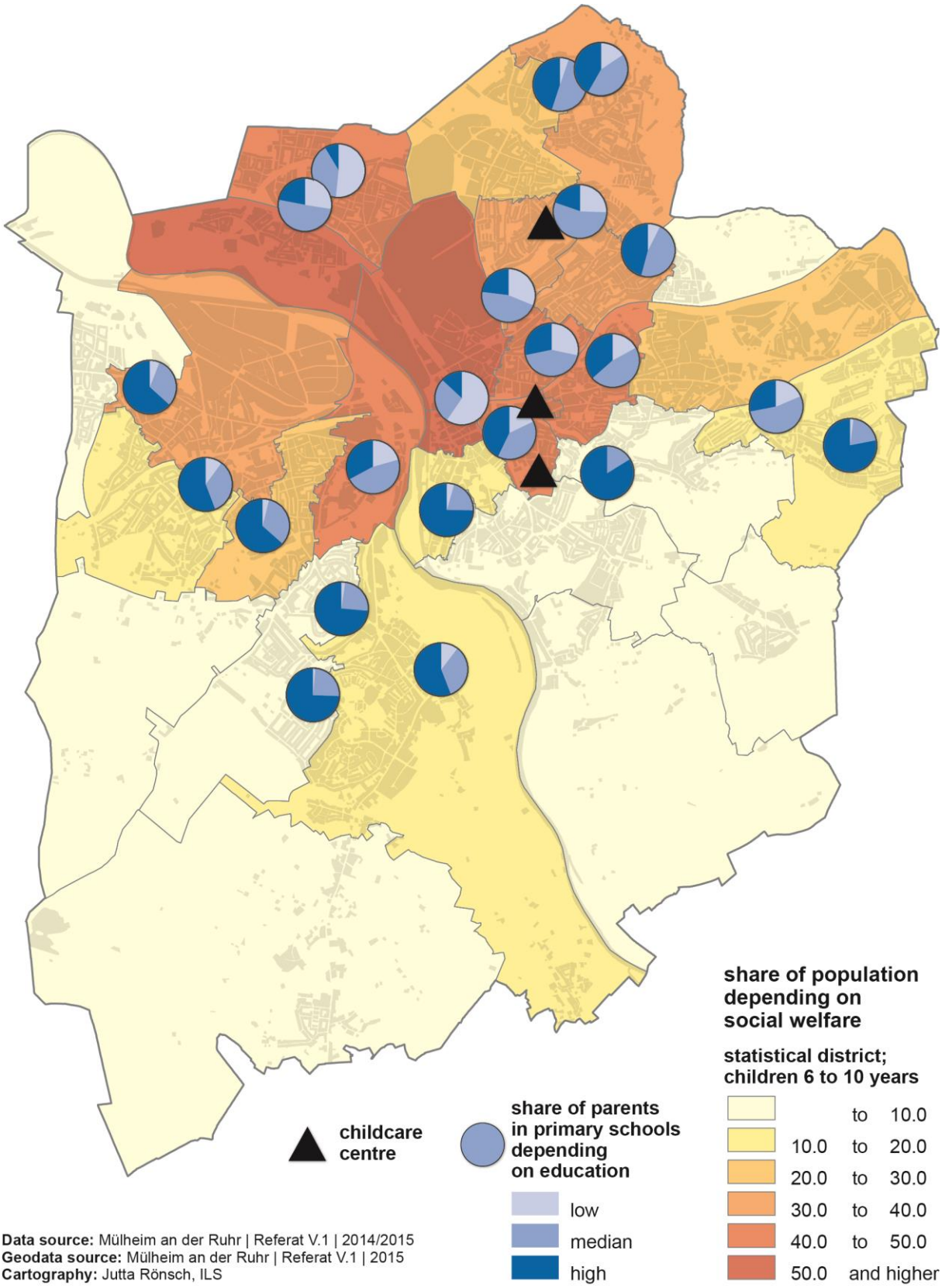
[42] The perhaps lower significance of spatial proximity for childcare centres than for primary schools can be ascribed to the lower age of the children who cannot – independently of the distance – walk alone to the childcare centres. Moreover, to combine family life and work, some parents might prefer a childcare centre located close to their work instead of their homes.

[43] To check the childcare centres' catchment areas, I produced a map for each childcare centre visualising all children who attend the childcare centre with one dot. Since these dots correspond to the children's residence, I am not allowed to publish these maps.

Figure 3: Childcare centre selection process

After applying all five selection criteria, a list of ten different childcare centres was obtained. Although they all passed the selection process, they nevertheless still varied in terms of their size and composition (e.g., share of children depending on social welfare or share of lower-educated parents). Since my empirical approach included 'not only' interviews with parents but also six weeks of participatory observations in each childcare centre, the approach required not only a certain kind of receptiveness and openness but also additional capacities by the head of the childcare centres and their staff. In a joint meeting with the local department for children, youth and schools (*Amt für Kinder, Jugend und Schule der Stadt Mülheim an der Ruhr)* and the head of the statistical office in Mülheim an der Ruhr, we commonly discussed the list of child-care centres. Thus, apart from numbers and statistics, the final selection (from ten to three) considered inside information – which I did not have – on the potential challenges that the childcare centres faced during this time that might have made it difficult for them to include a researcher in their everyday work. Figure 4 illustrates school and residential segregation in Mülheim an der Ruhr. It shows the three selected childcare centres and the primary schools' social composition in terms of the educational attainment of the parents whose children attend the schools.

Figure 4: School and residential segregation in Mülheim an der Ruhr



The heads of the three selected childcare centres were informed by the department for children, youth and schools and invited to a joint meeting; this meeting not only facilitated my work but also was perhaps a prerequisite making my approach possible in the first place.[44] In this meeting, we discussed the feasibility of the approach for each childcare centre. The heads informed me about the childcare centres' composition and drew attention to potential difficulties in addressing the parents (e.g., language deficiencies, scepticism). Based on the specific composition of the childcare centres and, in part, the scepticism of disadvantaged parents with regard to 'strangers' and any disturbances in the childcare centres' daily routines, it turned out that staying at the childcare centre for several weeks, supporting the staff in their daily work, and, consequently, gaining the parents' trust were required by the heads to grant me access. Before each stay started, I was also asked to visit each childcare centre and to present my work to the staff.

To allow for more detailed insights, Table 1 illustrates some socio-economic characteristics of the three selected childcare centres. The intention to guarantee both a balanced composition of parents with different levels of educational attainment and a sufficient number of interviewees in the group of lower-educated parents resulted in a selection of three childcare centres that, in socio-economic terms, are more disadvantaged than the city-wide average (see Table 1). Moreover, they differ in some characteristics. While the portion of children depending on social welfare is much lower in childcare centre III (23.5%) than in childcare centres I and II (52.2% and 57.6%), this variation is not directly reflected in the shares of cultural capital that the parents whose children attend the three childcare centres possess. While, as might be expected, the share of lower-educated parents is the lowest in childcare centre III (16.8%), the highest share of higher-educated parents can be found in childcare centre I (39.6%, see Table 1). In addition, this childcare centre has the highest share of lower-educated parents (31.6%). Nevertheless, in terms of parents' educational attainment, all three childcare centres can be defined as being quite mixed. Apart from their composition, the three childcare centres differ in terms of their size.[45] Consequently, the number of children moving to primary school in the following year also differs. While in childcare centre I, only 13 parents were eligible for interviewing, in childcare centres II and III, there were 18 and 22 parents who were eligible, respectively.[46]

[44] However, the head of childcare centre III was not able to attend the meeting. Therefore, we had a separate meeting in the respective childcare centre.

[45] While childcare centre I has a somewhat small number of places compared to the average size of state childcares in Mülheim an der Ruhr (63 places), childcare centres II and III are attended by a significantly higher number of children.

[46] In childcare centre I, there were 14 children moving to primary school. However, since two were twins, only 13 parents were eligible for an interview for this study.

Table 1: The selected childcare centres and their main characteristics

	I	II	III	Average of state childcare centres	Average of all child-care centres
Share of social welfare recipients (statistical district)[1]	21.2%	21.2%	12.7%	24.6%	24.6%
Numbers of places[2]	47	68	84	63	114
Share of social welfare recipients (childcare centre)[3]	52.2%	57.6%	23.5%	36.6%	24,75%
Share of parents with low educational attainment[2]	31.3%	27.5%	16.8%	21,4%	14,8%
Share of parents with medium educational attainment[2]	29.2%	43.1%	51.6%	39.7%	n.a.
Share of parents with high educational attainment[2]	39.6%	29.4%	31.6%	38.9%	n.a.

Sources:
[1] Mülheim an der Ruhr/KECK-Atlas, 2014
[2] School entrance examination 2010/2011-2012/2013
[3] Mülheim an der Ruhr/Referat V.1, 2014

3.4 The parent interviews

This dissertation seeks to allow for qualitative, more in-depth insights into school choice strategies, their underlying motivations and constraints, and the concerns, information sources, and value systems of parents with different levels of educational attainment. Therefore, before the additional methodological elements (the participatory observations and the expert interviews) and their specific intention and function are explained in more detail, this chapter focuses on the main empirical data base of this dissertation – the qualitative interviews with the parents of 5- to 6-year-old children attending the last year in a childcare centre. Thus, the following section introduces the interview sample, that is, the parents, explains their recruitment and the interview situation, and discusses both the specific form of the interviews chosen for this study and the subsequent analysis of the interview data.

3.4.1 Recruitment of interviewees

This study draws on interviews with 35 parents whose children were attending the last year in a childcare centre and who, therefore, were directly concerned with primary school choice. All interviewees were recruited and invited to participate in an interview during my stay in each of the three selected childcare centres. I tried to interview all parents who had to register their children for primary school at that time. Based on the specific preferences and practices of each head of the childcare centres, however, the recruitment process differed among the three childcare centres.

In childcare centre I, I was informally introduced to the respective parents by the head of the childcare centre in the mornings or in the afternoons, when the parents – often, but not always, mothers – brought their child (or children) or picked them up. In childcare centre II, before my official stay, I was invited to one of several meetings organised by the centre dedicated solely to parents whose children were moving to primary school the following year.[47] At the beginning of this meeting, I was given the opportunity to introduce myself and to present my study. Therefore, when beginning my stay in this centre, I already knew by sight most of the parents 'suitable' for an interview for this study. In both childcare centres I and II, I regularly tried to catch the respective parents in the short moments when they brought their children in the mornings or picked them up in the afternoon and consistently tried to convince them to agree to an interview with me. Since the head of childcare centre III refused a longer stay in her childcare centre, she organised a special meeting with all parents – only mothers – whose children were attending the last year of preschool to give me the opportunity to introduce myself and to present my study.[48] Afterwards, the mothers had the opportunity to put their names on a list of potential appointments for an interview. Although the recruitment in this childcare centre was thus much easier, I was dependent on the number of parents attending the meeting since this was the only opportunity to persuade them to complete an interview with me.[49] Moreover, the inability to spend a longer period of time in this childcare centre – in contrast to the other two childcare centres – did not allow for frequent and regular talks or the opportunity to observe parental interactions in this childcare centre.

[47] During these meetings only for parents whose children were in their last year of pre-school, the parents were regularly given useful information on the transition to primary schools, such as the cognitive skills that the children need to have and how the parents could practise them with their children.

[48] The reasons for her reluctance were not given.

[49] Unfortunately, only 11 out of 22 mothers attended the meeting.

3.4.2 The parents

The above-mentioned differences in the recruitment process resulted in varying shares of parents willing to complete an interview for this study. While in childcare centre I, almost 80% of the parents whose children were attending the last year in the childcare centre agreed to complete an interview, in centres II and III, 83% and only 50% of such parents agreed. Nevertheless, in total, the empirical data contain interviews with the majority of parents with children moving on to primary school in the selected childcare centres. In addition to a few parents who openly refused an interview, it was not possible to conduct interviews with some other parents mainly due to language difficulties or lacking contact.[50]

In total, 31 individual interviews were conducted, and four were conducted with a couple. In the latter case, it was nevertheless always one partner responding to almost all questions.[51] The gender-neutral term 'parent' used throughout the whole dissertation obscures an important detail in my sample that resembles previous studies on parents' choice of school and childcare: The interviewees are predominantly women. My sample contains 31 mothers and four fathers (see Table 2), and only one of the individual interviews was conducted with a father.[52] During my stay at the childcare centres, I mostly had contact with the mothers since it was mostly the women who brought their children to the childcare centre, picked them up or attended the parent cafés or other meetings for parents. Even if it was the fathers bringing their children and thus being asked for an interview, they either passed the interview to their wives/partners or completed the interview together with them. In this context, it was certainly the mothers who bore the responsibility for researching and arranging childcare and the education of their children. Even in regard to the final choice, not all mothers really described the decision for childcare and primary school as a shared one. The predominance of mothers in the sample can thus be justified.[53]

[50] Some parents who refused an interview were fluent in German but rejected the interview due to a lack of time or interest. Although several times I tried to offer an interview at a different place or time (e.g., during the weekend), it was not possible to convince them to complete an interview with me. Other parents neither brought their children to the childcare centre nor picked them up themselves; rather, they sent their children's older siblings. Although I tried to explain my work to the older siblings and tried to convince them to ask their parents for an interview, I was not successful in these cases.

[51] In all interviews conducted with a couple, the partner dominating the interview is the one listed as the interview partner (see Table 3 in section A of the appendix).

[52] For more detailed information on the interviewees, see Table 3 in section A of the appendix.

[53] Moreover, in light of previous research illustrating fathers' more limited access to parental gossip based on their (often) lower levels of engagement and time consumption in relation to the children's schooling (Ball/Vincent 1998, 384; Kosunen 2016, 11 after van Zanten 2009, 134-135), it might even be more valuable to conduct interviews with mothers to analyse parental networks and their impact on school choice.

The sample included four single mothers, while the majority of the interviewees lived in a heterosexual partnership (see Table 2). Sixteen interviewees had no migration background, and 19 interviewees did – six of the former had a partner with a background other than a German background. Nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees (31) attended the German education system themselves. In fourteen cases, the interviewed parents had older children already in primary school or even secondary school. Thus, they already had had to make this decision on primary school before, which – as became apparent – influenced their choice process.[54] In these cases, I asked them to remember what they did and thought when choosing for the first time. In two cases, parents decided to send their child to a private school – in both cases, a *Waldorf* school. Since applying for private schools, such as *Waldorf* or *Montessori*, is not part of the official enrolment process organised by the municipality and usually – particularly if the children had not attended a *Waldorf* childcare centre before – requires a quite time-consuming application process that lasts several years, those parents had already made their decision long before their counterparts. These two interviews consequently differed from the others, particularly regarding the choice and application process, the information sources, and the role that parental networks played in their choice.

One main aim of this dissertation is to analyse the differences in choice practices between parents with different levels of educational attainment. Moreover, since I do not have access to parents' economic capital, that is, their income, 'solely' different types or levels of cultural capital were used as background information to place the interviewees in different social categories.[55] Cultural capital is considered in its institutionalised form, that is, by the interviewees' academic qualifications. The classification into three different types of educational attainment (high, medium and low) is – to facilitate the 'comparability' of results – based on the classification used in the previous quantitative analysis conducted by the ZEFIR: The 'high educational attainment' category consists of all parents with a university degree or, at least, a higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*); the 'low educational attainment' category consists of all parents without a successfully completed vocational training (*Berufsausbildung*) – except those with a higher education entrance qualification. All other parents are subsumed by the 'medium

[54] In most cases, choosing primary schools for the second time allowed the parents to feel less stressed about the choice. Based on practical reasons, most of them, though not all, chose the same primary school for their second or third child as for his/her older siblings.

[55] As already mentioned, as class is becoming more cultural (Bennett et al. 2009) and parents' cultural capital is crucial for school choice (Bourdieu 1986; Lareau 1987), defining parents' social status solely based on their educational attainment might be a good approximation, the missing information on income notwithstanding (Blokland/van Eijk 2012). This is particularly true in Germany, where educational attainment is a prerequisite for an individual's opportunities in life and plays a crucial role in social positioning.

educational attainment' category.[56] Coincidently, all three groups are equivalent in size. Regarding their occupational status, the majority of interviewees were employed, while nine were unemployed, and six mothers were on parental leave (see Table 2).

Table 2: Main characteristics of the 35 interviewees

Gender	Civil status	Educational attainment	Employment status	Migration background
31 women	30 in partnership	12 high level	19 employed	16 without m.b.
4 men	4 single mothers	10 medium level	9 unemployed (or not working)	19 with m.b.
	1 not assignable	11 low level	6 on parental leave	
		2 not assignable	1 not assignable	

3.4.3 The interviews

The interviews took place during my stays at the childcare centres between September and December 2016.[57] This time period was deliberately chosen for the fieldwork since each year, parents must apply for a primary school at the end of October in the children's last year at the childcare centre. Thus, the interviewees had either already registered their child for primary school shortly before the interview or had to do it only shortly thereafter. Therefore, when conducting the interviews, primary school choice was a very present topic for all the parents interviewed. Since parents are usually informed of the final decision only at the beginning of the next year, they did not know whether their application was successful when conducting the interviews. This time period was thus deliberately chosen to avoid 'sugar-coating' in the parents' school choice narratives. Since they were still hoping for their number one choice, they had not yet started to come to terms with the (potentially) non-selected school – which would be likely to influence the parents' narratives on specific schools.

[56] Gathered by the network analysis, there is also information on the parents' occupations. However, to make the results of this dissertation consistent with the previous quantitative analyses conducted by the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr, which could draw only on parents' educational attainment to distinguish between different social groups of parents, the same classification is used here.

[57] In early spring 2016, I had already conducted four interviews with friends, colleagues and acquaintances to test the interview guidelines and the interview situation.

So-called episodic interviews were chosen for this analysis. This interview form was deliberately designed to gain access to the social construction of reality and is therefore predominantly used in studies focusing on group-specific differences in daily experiences (Flick 2014, 245). Apart from their theoretical background, episodic interviews were chosen due to their (in this case) very helpful combination of so-called narrative and guided interview forms. Episodic interviews, in contrast to guided interviews, place more emphasis on the interviewees' narratives but simultaneously allow the interview to be structured more than would be possible in narrative interviews (Flick 2014; Kruse 2015) – however, a good overview and a certain level of sensitivity by the interviewer are also required (Patton 2002, 223). Gaining deeper insights into parents' school choice practices seemed to be possible only through longer narrations in which the parents themselves decided which aspects of school choice they wanted to emphasise (Patton 2002, 194). At the same time, targeted questions and predefined central topics guaranteed a basically comparable structure for each interview. Moreover, the predefined topics and the subsequent division of the interview into several parts facilitated the interview for interviewees who had more difficulties in narrating (Flick 2014, 244). To address specific previously chosen topics in the interviews while at the same time allowing for longer narratives, this interview form seemed to be most suitable for my dissertation.

The main interview topics (see interview guideline in section B of the appendix) concerned the parents' choice of childcare, social networks and parental interactions within the childcare centre, and primary school choice (information sources, choice criteria, conceptions of schooling, parental involvement, parental networks, school reputation, and peer-group composition). General educational values as well as hopes and fears regarding the child's (educational) future were also discussed. All interviews started with a more general question on how the parents 'ended up' in the specific childcare centre, which was intended to trigger a longer narration. The subsequent topics were similarly introduced with an open-ended question intended to stimulate longer narrations. The chronological order of the topics (first, the choice of childcare care and, then, the choice of primary school) was deliberately chosen to illustrate educational pathways and to analyse the impact that each step has on the subsequent steps. Moreover, talking about the parents' experiences within the childcare centres at the beginning of the interviews was indispensable to understanding the potential influence of childcare-related parental networks on primary school choice.

At the end of each interview, a network analysis with name generators was conducted to systematically assess the interviewees' ego-centred social networks and (group-crossing) resource

transfer (Burt 1984; Hennig 2008; McCallister/Fischer 1978).[58] The network analysis was intended to assess the significance of (childcare-related) networks for parental primary school choice strategies (see the guideline of the network analysis in section C of the appendix). The parents were asked three questions: with whom they discuss parenting issues, spend leisure time and talk about primary school choice. In contrast to other network analyses, which often capture the potential transfer of resources instead of those that are really accessed (Lin 2001), this study explicitly focused on activities and discussions that had already taken place and information, advice, and support that had actually been received or given. The main aim was thus to assess only the kinds of resources and parental networks that were really mobilised. By doing so, I tried to avoid one central methodological trap of qualitative research – mistaking what people say for what they actually do (Jerolmack/Khan 2014).

In the first round, the parents were asked to mention whomever they were thinking of when listening to the three questions. Only family members living in the same household, such as partners, were not allowed to be mentioned. Since only four network partners, so-called alteri, were allowed to be mentioned per question, it was likely that only family members and close friends were mentioned within the first round. Therefore, a second round of questions, in which the parents were asked the same three questions again, was carried out. This time, however, the parents were told to mention only parents whose children attend the same childcare centre. The second round should thus ensure that childcare-related networks – which might consist of those who are not necessarily very close alteri – were not left out in favour of the family members or close friends likely to be mentioned first. In the third round, intended to identify further local settings that might be relevant for parental interactions and the transfer of information, the parents were asked to think of more loose contacts with whom they nevertheless talked about school choice, such as people they met at the playground. Thus, in this round, they were asked only two of the three questions: with whom they discuss parenting issues and with whom they talk about primary school choice. However, since the majority of parents misunderstood the third round and mainly named people whom they had already referred to before, the third round was not considered for the subsequent analysis. In all rounds, the parents were not pushed to name someone – if they could not think of anyone (within or outside the childcare centre) with whom they discussed parenting issues, spent leisure time or talked about primary school choice, then the respective field was not completed. At the end of the network analysis, more

[58] Due to different reasons, it was not possible to conduct the network analysis in six cases. In some cases, there was no time left for the network analysis or the baby started to cry and the interview had to be interrupted immediately. In most other cases, the parents were sceptical with regard to giving more in-depth information on their family and friends – even though I explained that the whole analysis is anonymous and that I do not ask for names, addresses or similar information.

information on the alteri (such as gender, educational attainment, and occupation) and their relationship with the interviewee (such as kin, friend or colleague, where they first met or whether their children attended the same childcare centre) as obtained. This information was additionally gathered for the interviewees and their partners.

All interviews took place in the three childcare centres – in a separate room that guaranteed a quiet and anonymous interview situation. The interviews differed in their length; they lasted between 45 minutes and 1.75 hours – the average duration was approximately one hour. All interviews except for one were conducted in German; one was spontaneously conducted in English. Therefore, all quotes throughout the whole dissertations (including the three sub-studies) are translated by the author. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed by student assistants working for the ILS – Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development. Informed by an extensive information exchange with the ILS data protection official, data protection regulations were painstakingly implemented during the whole study (for more information on data protection and the study's ethical approach, see chapter 3.6).

3.4.4 The analysis

The analysis of the parent interview data gathered in this dissertation followed so-called theoretical coding, a three-stage coding approach based on the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1996). Grounded theory is not an evaluation method in the narrow sense; rather, it is a "research style" (Breuer 2009, 150), a basic strategy of interpretative social research (Lueger 2010, 220) that seeks to discover explanatory theoretical models through empirical data. Therefore, the data analysis usually does not follow a strict procedure; rather, it iterates between data production and analysis. Consequently, the three-stage coding process – consisting of 'open, axial, and selective coding' – describes different coding strategies rather than strictly divided sequential stages of the analysis (Flick 2014, 387; Kruse 2015, 394f; Strübing 2004, 19). The process of coding is defined by the abstraction of data, which should lead to the development of theoretical assumptions or theories. Specific categories, or codes, are linked to the empirical data. While they stay close to the text at the beginning of the process, they successively become increasingly abstract (Flick 2014, 388; Kuckartz 2010, 57).

In the first step of the analysis, each interview was treated as an individual case and coded according to so-called *open coding*, the analytical process in which relevant concepts are identified and developed in terms of their dimensions and attributes (Strauss/Corbin 1996, 54f). Each transcript was thus divided into separate units of meaning – sometimes paragraphs,

sometimes only single sentences – and associated with relevant codes. As described by Strübing (2004), open coding thus separates various pieces of a puzzle, which then must be re-categorised and put together with the subsequent axial and selective coding procedures. These codes are developed by asking specific questions (Flick 2014, 392; Strauss/Corbin 1996, 57), such as what happened? Who is involved? Which strategies are used, why, and what for? On the one hand, I used codes generated inductively through the text – so called in vivo codes – and with which I deliberately tried to capture the formulations used by the interviewees themselves (such as "gut feeling", "wellbeing" or "competitiveness"). On the other hand, I used deductive codes based on previous assumptions (such as "schools' social composition" or "way to school") (Flick 2014, 391). The main aim of this open coding was to gain a more in-depth understanding of each interview, trying to identify and reveal the subjective meaning of each interviewee. Therefore, it was important to analyse and understand each interview through the interviewee's specific context.

The coding process was conducted with the MAXQDA software. To be consistent throughout the whole analysis, each code was clearly defined by writing notes for each code. While the list of codes increased continuously at the beginning of the process, after a while, the list stayed basically the same. Thus, so-called theoretical saturation could be clearly identified. At the end of this process, a list of about 100 codes associated with 2,700 text codes was generated. While coding the empirical data, I continuously wrote down noticeable, striking and/or surprising aspects as well as preliminary thoughts that I expected to be potentially relevant for the subsequent analysis in memos – which partly related to specific codes and partly to specific text units. These memos turned out to be particularly valuable for the subsequent abstraction of my interview data.

Within the *axial coding*, the generated codes were then grouped, or better, categorised, with regard to phenomena specifically relevant for my research questions (for instance, "school choice criteria" or "information sources"). After dividing the empirical data into different parts within the first phase of the analysis, the axial coding now served to re-categorise these codes to combine, modify, differentiate and abstract them further (Kruse 2014, 396; Kuckartz 2010, 77f). The re-categorisation of codes served to reveal relationships between different categories and between categories and their sub-categories. According to Flick (2014, 394), in this phase, the researcher increasingly moves between inductive (development of codes, categories and their relationships) and deductive thinking by reviewing these codes, categories and their relationships. One main aim of this phase was to identify the similarities and dissimilarities between

the interviews. I thus started to contrast and compare the different categories and sub-categories, renamed and differentiated them further.

In the final step of my data analysis – the *selective coding* – the main categories defining parents' school choices were identified; these categories turned out to be valuable and explanatory dimensions playing a crucial role in all interviews: the parents' cultural (and economic) capital, the significance that the parents' attribute to primary school choice, the conclusions that they draw from the policy reform and their embeddedness in parental (preschool related) networks. In this process, several categories were 're-coded' based on a further abstraction and selection of data to relate them to the main categories. As parents' cultural capital, as already assumed in the beginning of this dissertation, was confirmed to be one main category influencing parents' choice practices, I additionally started to analyse the interview material in relation to the parents' background. Thus, after seeking to understand each interview in itself, I assembled the parent interviews into the predefined groups of high, medium, and low educational attainment, seeking to reveal the similarities and dissimilarities both between and within different groups of interviewees.

The questionnaires of the network analysis were analysed separately. In the first step, the interviewees' responses were transferred to a table (an Excel file). In the second step, simple frequency counts were conducted, such as the size (both within and outside the childcare centre) and composition of networks, the embeddedness of network partners (such as family or childcare-related contacts), the frequency of contacts, and the resources transferred. Afterwards, the data were evaluated to identify specific patterns, such as the similarities and differences between networks of parents with varying educational attainment or between the three childcare centres.

For sub-study III (see chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018) – the comparative article – some interviews were re-analysed. This sub-study is based on two independent studies (my dissertation and a research project in Espoo, Finland) that, initially, were not designed for a comparative analysis but nevertheless pursued similar research objectives, were based on a similar theoretical path, and followed a similar methodological approach. The sub-study refers only to the minority of higher-educated parents deliberately avoiding the 'best' schools in practice. Its aim was to portray and understand the logic of these 'unusual' parental choice practices in both cities by analysing each case in its own background. Therefore, the respective interviews in my sample were re-analysed within a joint framework that was jointly developed with my Finnish colleagues. Afterwards, the main categories and dimensions relevant to understanding these parents' choices were presented and comprehensively discussed during a joint workshop in

Helsinki. The similarities and differences between their choice practices and explanations were identified, portrayed against their particular backgrounds, and, in the last step, collectively discussed and jointly structured.

3.5 Complementing methodological elements: The participatory observations and expert interviews

To enrich, undergird, and reflect the interview data and to embed the parents' narratives in their local and institutional context, this dissertation involves additional empirical elements. First, the parent interviews were complemented by extensive participatory observations in each childcare centre (except for childcare centre III). On average, I spent three days a week for six weeks in each childcare centre and stayed the whole day from 7 am to 4 pm. In the mornings and afternoons, I tried to focus on the parents, to observe their interactions and to chat with them. In the meantime, I was asked to help with the daily routines in the childcare centres. Playing with the children – although not my research focus – was quite helpful since it let them talk about me with their parents at home. This seemed to significantly reduce some parents' scepticism, prejudices and concerns and made them more open for my research. Moreover, in childcare centre II, there was a weekly parent café which I attended regularly.

The participatory observations had three important functions/intentions: First, they sought to gain deeper insights into the organisational structures of the childcare centres, the level of parental involvement, and subsequent parental networks. These insights helped to understand how organisational structures might add to processes of social and educational inequality within (mixed) childcare centres. Second, the frequent and regular contacts and conversations with both the parents and the staff enabled a more in-depth assessment of parental narratives and thus tremendously increased the analysis's intensity and reliability. They offered the opportunity to not only listen to the parents' narratives but also to observe their practices (Jerolmack/Khan 2014).[59] To capture the daily experiences and observations, they were regularly written down in a research diary. Third, since the participatory observations required a longer stay within the childcare centres, they simultaneously offered the opportunity to become more familiar with the parents, which was expected and hoped to facilitate their willingness to agree to complete an interview. Ultimately, gaining the parents' trust seemed to be particularly

[59] For instance, one mother told me during the interview that she was not influenced at all by childcare-related networks and would not choose the school most other parents in the childcare centre choose because it did not have a feasible location for her. During my stay at the childcare centre, however, I heard her talking to other parents, telling them that her daughter would join the other children.

important for the lower-educated parents. While the higher-educated parents quite often agreed to an interview directly at the beginning of my stay, many lower-educated parents hesitated and agreed to complete an interview only at the end of my stay.

However, further results of the participatory observations were limited. On the one hand, this is related to the lack of access to childcare centre III, which exacerbated a comparative analysis of all childcare centres. On the other hand, parental interactions, particularly in childcare centre I, were not that intense when the parents brought and picked up their children,[60] and due to a shortage of staff in both childcare centres during that time, I was often torn between pursuing my own goals by observing and chatting with the parents and helping the staff, who asked me to look after the children – especially in the early mornings when the staff shortage was the highest.

To reflect parental choice from the institutional perspective, I attended almost all open days[61] and information events organised by the primary schools in September and October 2016 to inform parents about the schools' specific profiles.[62] The open days and information events are mainly advertisement events and thus seem to be a direct result of the introduction of free primary school choice and the consequent competition for children. Both events differed tremendously between the schools with regard to their concrete arrangement, the activities offered, the information provided, and the families interested in these schools and thus attending the events. Therefore, attending the open days and information events offered the crucial opportunity to form an own impression of the schools – apart from the statistical data – and helped to gain an impression of how free school choice is interpreted and internalised by the schools themselves.

Apart from the ethnographic elements, expert interviews served to embed the parent interviews in their institutional and political context. Three interviews were conducted with the heads of the selected childcare centres and thirteen with the head teachers of local primary schools. These interviews supported the observations at the schools, helped to embed the parents' narratives and gossip, and enabled additional insights into the schools' enrolment procedures and practices. In addition, these interviews served to gain more background information on the

[60] The parents had a time slot of almost two hours in which they were allowed to bring and pick up their children; thus, some parents never even met. Moreover, especially in the mornings, the parents stayed only for a few minutes and then immediately rushed to work. Both aspects decreased the parents' interactions (at least their interactions in the childcare centres, where I was able to observe them) tremendously.

[61] Before attending the open days, I checked the transition rates between the childcare centres and primary schools and thus left out the open days organised by primary schools that are located very far away from the three selected childcare centres and that are very seldom attended by children attending the three childcare centres.

[62] While the open days usually lasted the whole day and took place on Saturdays and Sundays, the information events were mostly reduced to two hours in the evening to give parents a more concise overview of the school. However, most primary schools organised both types of events.

childcare centres and the transition patterns between childcare centres and primary schools. Furthermore, twelve interviews with both the (former) politicians responsible for education policy for their political parties and the (former) staff of the former Ministry of Education, all involved and active at the time when the policy reform was implemented, were conducted. While the interviews with the heads of the childcare centres and the primary schools were all conducted in spring 2017, the interviews with the politicians and staff of the ministry were conducted in summer 2018. They made it possible to obtain background information on the implementation process of the policy reform, the underlying motivation and related expectations, and political discussions and controversies with regard to the reform at that time.

Therefore, the additional empirical elements provided crucial and valuable background information, and thus, they tremendously enriched and improved the analysis and interpretation of the interview data. They did not, however, play a central role in meeting the research objectives of this dissertation and will therefore be analysed more thoroughly and intensely in subsequent publications.

3.6 Reliability and research ethics

Quality assurance is a challenge that often confronts qualitative empirical research. The classic criteria of standardised research – reliability, validity, and objectivity – seem to fall short of the specific attributes of qualitative data and the different aims of qualitative empirical research. There are different suggestions for alternative criteria, but they have not yet solved the challenge of a suitable assessment of quality in qualitative research (Flick 2014, 509).

Regarding reliability, it does not seem appropriate to evaluate the quality of qualitative empirical research by validating whether the same methodological approach leads to the same stereotyped narratives and observations. However, there are ways to increase the reliability of qualitative empirical data and interpretations regarding both the data collection and its analysis, such as training in the conduction of interviews and the analysis of interview data, pre-test interviews, and/or a critical reflection on the results. Throughout the whole process of this dissertation, I attended several trainings in qualitative empirical research, the interview guideline was critically discussed with my supervisors and colleagues, and I conducted some pre-test interviews to review the guideline. Understanding research as being a “collective enterprise rather than the burden of the lone academic” (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992, 36), I have paid particular attention to reflexivity throughout the whole study. Additionally, I have deliberately and continuously pursued embedding the findings within the research community. Preliminary

findings have been presented to academic audiences at various conferences, seminars and PhD colloquia, and the received feedback has been reflected in the subsequent analysis by sharpening and strengthening this dissertation's results. All this – in combination with the different empirical elements making it possible to obtain background information and thus serving as a 'corrective' of the interview data – has contributed to the credibility of this study and the reliability of the results.

Due to the different institutional context – since primary school catchment still exists in most federal states in Germany – and the specific socio-spatial patterns, the (quantitative) findings might not be representative of most other German cities. However, according to grounded theory, it can be assumed that the deeper insights into parents' school choice practices, their underlying motivations, and the impact that preschool-related parental networks may have on segregation at later educational stages provide valuable and useful indications for other cities – both for those cities that already abolished primary school catchment areas and for those where they still exist but in which parental pressure and lobbying activities might have already started a debate on free primary school choice. Placing these findings in dialogue with previous studies and thereby incorporating them into wider discussions were consistently done throughout the whole process of this dissertation, which might also be considered one way of generalising the findings obtained in qualitative empirical research (Kosunen 2016, 62).

Regarding the validity criterion, attempts to reformulate this concept to make it applicable to evaluate qualitative empirical research remain somewhat fuzzy and similarly inadequate. According to Flick (2014, 498), a common tendency of these approaches is to focus less on the evaluation of each single step and, instead, to guarantee transparency throughout the whole research process. One main challenge with regard to the 'validity' of qualitative data lies in data production. Qualitative research seeks to adequately capture the processes in which meaning is set and to understand the subjective perspective of the researched actors (Kelle 2007, 35). In contrast to quantitative data analyses, qualitative research thus enables a more direct form of access to actors and their perspectives. However, this additionally requires considering the specific context in which practices occur, and it draws attention to the different subjectivities and social backgrounds behind actors' varying perceptions and practices (Flick 2014, 29). The responses of interviewees are influenced by both the interviewer and the interview situation; therefore, a critical distance is required (Tilly 2006, 47). Thus, in data production, there is the risk of the social desirability of answers. I am well aware of this risk; nevertheless, I am confident that the atmosphere during the interviews – partly supported by the frequent contacts in childcare centres I and II – was trustful enough to allow the interviewees to talk openly and

honestly about their thoughts and concerns. This confidence is based on the fact that the more sensitive questions regarding school choice and the significance that the parents' attach to the education of their children were not asked at the beginning of the interviews. Moreover, the parents did not seem to conceal existing negative opinions, for instance, their deliberate avoidance of ethnically and socially non-desired schools.

The risk of the social desirability of answers is additionally related to a further crucial requirement in qualitative empirical research, which is a critical reflection on the researcher's own position in the research process and in relation to the studied phenomenon and on the ways in which the researcher's own experiences influence the understanding of the interviewees' narratives (Flick 2014). In this study, not having children might be the most obvious difference between my own background and those of my interviewees. However, there are other categories that might be much more influential in this specific field, such as differences between social and ethnic backgrounds. As a white, higher-educated woman who grew up in German and does not have a visible migration background, I am not claiming to understand the concerns and anxieties that parents with a (visible) migration background, parents not knowing the German education system and/or lower-educated parents feel when choosing a primary school for their children. Moreover, I am well aware of the social distance that might separate me from these parents and that, therefore, might also influence the responses and the openness of the parents during the interviews. However, since parents with a migration background talked openly about stigmatisation and discrimination, since parents not knowing the German education system directly criticised the low level of support and information that might have helped them in making their decision, and since lower-educated parents referred honestly to the (economic) constraints that they faced in terms of school choice and their negative experiences with the snobbery and arrogance of higher-educated parents – doing all of this before me, a higher-educated member of the ethnic majority in Germany – I am confident that the interviewees did not withhold their opinions.

Furthermore, I have taken into account the regulations of "Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice" of the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (2013)) and paid particular attention to data protection, research ethics, the documentation and storage of data, and information and the protection of the participants of this study.[63] To secure the anonymity

[63] All interviews were transcribed in the ILS. Since I never mentioned the parents' family names during the interviews, the parents stayed anonymous even for the student assistants. All first names – mostly those of the interviewees' children, their friends and the parents' friends – mentioned during the interviews were deleted before saving the transcript. After finalising the transcription, the student assistants deleted the audio files, which are thus solely saved on my personal folder at ILS, to which no one else has access. According to the rules of data protection, the pseudo-anonymised audio files and transcripts are saved in a folder different from the table making it

of the interviewees, I removed all names of individuals, childcare centres, and primary schools. The names assigned to the interviewees are first names explicitly chosen to indicate the gender of the parent. All interviews were voluntary, and the parents were equally informed about the project and the interview in advance. They knew that they were participating in an interview as part of a research study on parents' primary school choice strategies. The interviewees were able to define what kinds of information they wanted to share and what kinds they did not – some of them, for instance, refused to perform the network analysis with me. All interviewees were informed about the protection of their data both throughout the study and afterwards, and they have all signed a declaration indicating that they agree to this approach (see section D of the appendix).

possible to link the audio files and transcripts with the list of interviewees, consisting of their names and other personal information. The interviewees were all informed before the interviews about this dissertation's data protection approach. They all signed a declaration providing their agreement with the recording, transcription and storage of both their interview and personal data (see section D of the appendix).

4 THE SUB-STUDIES

The dissertation's main aim was to examine parents' primary school choice strategies and their impact on educational segregation in the city of Mülheim after the abolition of primary school catchment areas. Divided into three different sub-studies, the following chapter illustrates the empirical results of this analysis. **Sub-study I** (chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019) illustrates parents' diverging choice strategies and criteria as well as their underlying motivations and deliberations by particularly focusing on how these strategies are influenced by the recent policy reform and the new freedom of choice it provides. It thus seeks to understand how being raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system affects parents' understanding of the policy reform and impacts their choice strategies. **Sub-study II** (chapter 4.2 | Ramos et al. 2018) takes one step back in children's educational career and allows deeper insights into the role of parental networks in preschool in shaping and pre-structuring parents' choice strategies. It thus seeks to analyse the extent to which preschool networks produce common norms of schooling or rather reinforce segregating choices and thus pave the way for segregated educational pathways. While the research questions dealt with within sub-study I and II were the starting point of this dissertation, **sub-study III** (chapter 4.3) gives deeper insights into one interesting aspect that only appeared throughout the analysis: It focuses on a minority of higher-educated parents who opt out of the mainstream by deliberately avoiding the 'best' primary school and tries to understand the logic behind their 'unusual' choices. Based on a re-analysing of the interview data in a comparative approach with colleagues from the University of Helsinki/Finland, the explanations and motives behind parents' choices were discussed not only against their own background, but compared with findings from a research study in Helsinki/Finland and thus additionally examined from a comparative Finnish-German perspective.

4.1 Sub-study I: Choice as a duty? The abolition of primary school catchment areas in North Rhine-Westphalia/Germany and its impact on parent choice strategies

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Abstract

In 2008, primary school catchment areas were abolished in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)/Germany. Written several years later, this paper's main aim is to provide insights into the impact of the policy reform on parent choice practices and subsequently on educational segregation. Based on a mixed-methods approach, it seeks to understand how being raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system affects parents' understanding of the policy reform and impacts their choice strategies.

We demonstrate that the (socially selective) choice of a school outside the former catchment area increased significantly after 2008, leading to a higher level of school segregation, though affecting schools to very different extents. The study clearly reveals that the differences in choice strategies are shaped by the dissimilar conclusions parents from different educational backgrounds draw from the policy reform. While less-educated parents attribute less significance to this early stage of schooling, many well-educated ones interpret the introduction of free choice as an instigation to choose – a perception triggered and intensified by the policy reform. For them, choice is no longer only perceived as an opportunity; through its formalisation it rather seems to become a duty. Thus, by one-sidedly favouring well-educated parents' interests and benefiting their abilities to play the game, the reform seems to perpetuate existing inequalities in choice rather than to alleviate them.

Introduction

In 2008, in contrast to most other German federal states, primary school catchment areas were abolished in North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW). The motivation of the ruling coalition in NRW at that time – consisting of the conservative CDU and the liberal FDP – was to fundamentally improve the quality of education 'through an increased focus on performance and competition' (MSW 2005). One crucial element of this performance- and market-oriented shift in educational policy was to strengthen parental choice. Similar to explanations in other countries (Forsey et al. 2008), it was argued that all parents – and not only the well-educated parents who managed

to access schools outside the catchment area even before the reform (Riedel et al. 2010) – should have the opportunity to apply for 'an allegedly "better" primary school' (MSW 2005) and/or schools with a suitable profile. Introducing free choice was thus expected to induce competition between primary schools, leading to quality improvements in education.

Welcomed by certain parent organisations, the reform was criticised by the opposition parties (reproaching the government for political patronage), education unions, town councils and researchers. They all predicted a socially selective use of school choice – also due to the fact that travel costs are only reimbursed when the nearest primary school is attended (MSW 2005) – and warned about aggravating school segregation and stigmatisation (Ausschuss für Schule und Weiterbildung 2006; Brügelmann 2006; SPD-Landtagsfraktion NRW 2006). At an administrative level, the reform's opponents criticised the loss of a key element for steering local school development and the increase of red tape.

In a context of economic uncertainty and fierce competition for access to universities and prestigious job positions, access to high-quality education has become one of the main priorities of middle- and upper-middle-class parents (Boterman 2013; Butler/Hamnett 2007; Vowden 2012; van Zanten 2013). In Germany in particular, a country known for the strong relationship between a child's social background and its educational achievement, where the selection of pupils into different educational tracks sets the direction for divergent educational and occupational pathways at a very early stage, parents are increasingly coming under pressure to frame their children's educational careers. Consequently, access to the 'right' childcare and primary school is already considered high-risk (Becker/Reimer 2010; Mierendorff et al. 2015).

Little in-depth research into parents' primary school choice strategies exists in Germany, with the few existing studies focusing mainly on a different institutional context – federal states in which catchment areas still exist (see Breidenstein et al. 2014; Krüger 2014; Noreisch 2007a). In this context, some parents try to illegally circumvent the catchment areas, while others justify the 'acceptance' of the local school with their egalitarian ideals and the credence of existent rules (Noreisch 2007a). Such deliberations, however, have become obsolete in NRW following changes in primary school admission policies and the formalisation of parental choice. Since policies not only allow or sanction certain practices, but also influence discourses on values and ideas (Raveaud/van Zanten 2007), the crucial question arises: How are parents reacting to the introduction of free choice?

Based on a mixed-methods approach, the paper's main aim is thus to provide insights into the impact of the policy reform on parent choice practices and subsequently on educational segregation. It seeks to understand how being raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system

affects parents' understanding of the policy reform and impacts their choice strategies. Mülheim an der Ruhr[64], a city in NRW with an exceptional data base and a socially and ethnically diverse population, serves as an interesting case study. In a first step, the reform's impact on the development and scope of choice is analysed on the basis of quantitative, individual data. Since the analysis illustrates that choice patterns and the effects on schools vary throughout the city, the subsequent qualitative analysis was deliberately conducted in the area where the policy reform's effects on parental choice are the strongest – the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods. Interviews shed light on parents' underlying motives and deliberations, showing how parents from different social backgrounds cope with their new freedom of choice.

School choice and the role of space

The growing segregation in cities across Europe is reflected in local school environments. The link between residential and school segregation is particularly noticeable in urban areas where a neighbourhood's socio-economic structure determines the initial selection of a school's pupils and potentially even their educational outcomes (Andersson et al. 2010; Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Nieuwenhuis/Hooimeijer 2015). Although the significance of the effects differ, research could show that polarised school intakes lead to stronger inequalities of opportunities and affect overall pupil performance, once individual effects have been controlled for (Musset 2012; Sykes/ Kuyper 2013; Thrupp et al. 2002). Residential and school segregation are thus tightly interlinked in a 'geography of education', whereby the latter is shown to be generally higher than the former (Burgess et al. 2005; Butler/Robson 2003a; Karsten et al. 2003; Rangvid 2007). Being (provenly) socio-economically selective, however, parental choice often acts as a driver of school segregation (Allen 2007; Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Östh et al. 2013).

In Germany, little in-depth research into the interplay between residential and school segregation exists. First research studies show that, although in most federal states primary school enrolment is organised by catchment areas, there is still limited room for choice through applying for an exception or choosing a denominational school, or illegally, by giving a false address (Noreisch 2007b; Riedel et al. 2010). With the policy reform in NRW making such (illegal) choice practices obsolete, this paper seeks to analyse the development of parental choice and school segregation.

[64] For the sake of simplicity, Mülheim an der Ruhr is hereinafter referred to as 'Mülheim'.

School choice and the role of class

With educational achievement determining access to university and good jobs, it is crucial to 'maintaining and legitimising class differences' (Boterman 2013, 1132). Access to high-quality education has thus become a sensitive topic especially for middle- and upper-middle-class parents (Butler/Hamnett 2007).[65] Based on a changing view on parenthood and decreasing trust in the education system (Krüger 2014), this development can also be observed in Germany. Parents are increasingly seen as key players responsible for their children's educational success and simultaneously as risk factors when unable to make informed decisions (Becker 2010; Mierendorff et al. 2015). In NRW, where 'hiding' behind admission policies to justify choosing the local school is no longer possible, pressure to make informed decisions might even have intensified.

Both in popular and academic discourses, educational choice is mainly constructed as an implicit middle-class norm, where the (lacking) ability to take well-founded decisions is directly associated with parents' social status. In research on school choice, class is therefore one key dimension (Ball et al. 1996; Butler/Robson, 2003a; Byrne 2006; Vincent et al. 2010). Middle-class parents are generally characterised by rational, carefully considered choice-making, who do not only possess the social and cultural capital needed to take full advantage of the educational market, but are additionally greatly inclined to exercise choice (Ball 2003; Gewirtz et al. 1995). Working-class parents seem to be the opposite, often characterised as unknowing and uncritical, assumedly placing less value on choice and lacking the capital needed to implement it (Gewirtz et al. 1995; Reay 2001; van Zanten 2005). As some researchers argue, however, different choice practices are not only dependent on asymmetries in information and capabilities. The categorisation into skilled and less-skilled choosers is also a result of evaluating working-class parents' practices using normative constructions based on middle-class choice-making (Reay/Ball 1997; Skeggs 2004b).

[65] Due to changing occupations, labour market and income distribution, defining class has become increasingly difficult (Devine et al. 2005). Given the range of different theoretical and practical applications of class schemes, it rather seems to be impossible 'to identify particular schemes which are "right" or "wrong"; different schemes are rather more or less appropriate for particular tasks' (Crompton 2008, 68-69). Class is often defined in terms of occupation or income. Our quantitative data base only includes information on parents' educational attainment. However, class is becoming more cultural (Bennett et al. 2009) and parents' cultural capital is crucial for school choice (Lareau 1987). Thus, defining parents' social status solely by their educational attainment might be a good approximation (Blokland/van Eijk 2012) – in particular in Germany, where it plays a crucial role for social positioning. Nevertheless, due to the missing information, we decided to avoid the term 'class' in our data.

Choice criteria

In contrast to the secondary school tracks with their obvious relationship between 'cultural profits' in terms of educational and occupational pathways, distinctions between comprehensive primary schools are fuzzy in Germany, lacking a 'clear cultural coding' (Bourdieu 1986). As no data exists on primary schools' performance, parents are forced to use proxies to evaluate school performance.

As shown in several studies, the definition of the 'right' school is increasingly dependent on its composition: on the one hand, because composition is assumed to be strongly linked to school performance; on the other, because middle-class parents in particular are worried about their children's exposure to lower standards of education or the 'wrong' types of socialisation (Boterman 2013; Rangvid 2007; Vowden 2012). While performance, atmosphere and composition are mainly perceived as middle-class parents' choice criteria (Byrne 2006; Reay 2001), spatial proximity is merely associated with working-class parents' choices. Choosing the local school is often conceived as a non-choice reflecting lacking desire, knowledge and capabilities. Reasons deviating from middle-class norms, such as concerns about a child's ability to fit in at high-reputation schools, seem to be rather marginalised (Ravead/van Zanten 2007; Reay/Ball 1997; van Zanten 2005).

In NRW, touting the policy reform as a tool to decrease inequality of choice by removing the bureaucratic barriers for socially disadvantaged families reveals similar patterns of middle-class norms. Not applying for schools other than the nearest one is interpreted as a deliberate choice of highly-educated parents, but is conversely ascribed to lacking desire and capabilities in disadvantaged families. Choice constraints other than bureaucratic hurdles seem to be neglected.

The role of (informal) information

Introducing choice and market-oriented mechanisms into education assumes that all participants start from the same position and have access to the same information (Ball 2003; James et al. 2010). However, information is often limited and not equally accessible and decodable for different groups (Reay/Lucey 2004; van Zanten 2007). Informal information, so-called 'grapevine knowledge' (Ball/Vincent 1998), is consequently a way of compensating for missing information or complementing 'untrustworthy' information. Additionally, it is used as confirmation and serves as a medium for social comparison, since choice is not only rational and individualised, but also influenced by emotions, concerns and moral dilemmas (Ball and Vincent 1998; Frank/Weck 2018; Kosunen/Carrasco 2016; Oría et al. 2007; Vincent et al. 2010; Vowden 2012). With choice strategies thus framed by social values, parents often feel pressured

to conform to dominant norms regarding school-related social matching (Butler/ Robson, 2003; Byrne 2006; van Zanten 2013).

Research illustrates the diverging responses to grapevine knowledge: from suspicion to unconditional trust in its reliability (Ball/Vincent 1998; Reay/Lucey 2004; van Zanten 2007). In our case, where parents have been given free choice without being provided with the necessary formal information, grapevine knowledge is likely to be an indispensable information substitute for *all* parents (Krüger 2014). However, as access to grapevines is inconsistent, we are interested in how different groups deal with free choice.

Educational policies and choice strategies

School choice is not only influenced by social networks, but also framed by existing rules, incentives and sanctions. We are thus interested in the impact of educational policies and the institutional context on parent choices. 'Policies exert a powerful effect, both because they provide institutional arrangements that make certain practices possible and others not, and because they contain discourses on values and ideas' (Raveaud/van Zanten 2007). Thus, in free choice contexts, it cannot only be assumed that parents are more likely to use this option, but also that the infusion of more market-oriented mechanisms is likely to exert a certain pressure, impacting parents' choice strategies.

As studies show, the impact of educational policies on choice strategies also depends on parents' values and the way they interact with contexts and resources (Raveaud/van Zanten 2007). A case study from Berlin, where primary school catchment areas still exist, shows that choice depends on parents' interpretation of the rules regulating school enrolment and is therefore a question of whether parents think they have a right to choose (Noreisch 2007a). Although aware of the ways to circumvent enrolment rules, some parents defend their 'choice' of the catchment area school by upholding the state's right to allocate pupils. Consequently, choice 'is affected by both personal means to do so and the extent to which choice is valued' (Noreisch 2007a, 1325). Parents raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system might thus be less willing to unconditionally accept illegal choice. But how would they react to the formalisation of choice? At this point, our case study steps in. The new NRW context, where admission policies have changed and traditional choice strategies have become obsolete, therefore provides an interesting context to analyse how the policy reform impacts local norms of choice and subsequently parent choice practices.

Research design

The case study Mülheim an der Ruhr

With its 170,000 inhabitants, Mülheim is part of a polycentric old-industrial area, the Ruhr, with about five million inhabitants. Hit by increasing (child) poverty, while at the same time the home of a comparatively high number of high-income citizens, social polarisation is even more pronounced than in neighbouring cities. This polarisation is also reflected in the city's social geography with its quite privileged southern and disadvantaged northern neighbourhoods – the latter being the home of many migrants and featuring high shares of benefit recipients (up to 63%). With shares between 20% and 40%, the inner-city neighbourhoods are socio-economically more mixed.

Data and methods[66]

Based on a research cooperation between the Ruhr-University Bochum and the city of Mülheim, an exceptional data base on children in childcare and primary schools was generated. It was built around the school entrance test, a compulsory physical and psychological test for all children changing to primary school and enabled access to the individual data of almost all first-grade schoolchildren between 2008 and 2016 (approx. 10,500 children). It was enriched by a detailed parents' questionnaire providing information on their social and ethnic backgrounds.

The study is based on a mixed-methods approach: The quantitative analysis examined the development and scope of school segregation as well as the social selectivity[67] of choice. Since it revealed that choice patterns changed predominantly in the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods, this area was chosen for the subsequent qualitative analysis designed to give insights into parents' underlying motives and considerations. Three comparatively mixed kindergartens were chosen to recruit parents with children in their last year in kindergarten from different social backgrounds (35 in total). The interviews were conducted within the period in which parents had to apply for primary school. Half of the interviewees had a migration background, though all but six had grown up in Germany. All but four interviewees were female.

[66] While the quantitative analysis was prepared by Thomas Groos, the qualitative analysis – including a 7-week ethnographic fieldwork in three kindergartens, interviews with parents and heads of primary schools and kindergartens – was done by Isabel Ramos Lobato.

[67] The data analysis is based on a classification of parents according to their educational attainment used in the statistics of the City of Mülheim. There are three groups: The category 'high educational attainment' comprised all parents with at least a higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*) or a university degree, 'medium' all with a school-leaving qualification below *Gymnasium*, but with completed vocational education. All parents without any completed vocational training (and not having *Abitur*) are classified as 'low educational attainment'.

Setting the context: The German and North Rhine-Westphalian school system

The German education system is known for its comparatively high level of social selectivity and inequality. In all federal states – the political level responsible for education in Germany – primary schools are the only schools where all children of one age group are taught collectively. They traditionally enable short distances between home and school. Access is mainly organised through catchment areas, whereas there has always been room for (illegal) choice; in NRW even legally by applying to attend a denomination school.

After four (in some states six) years of joint schooling, pupils are assigned to different educational tracks preparing for divergent educational and occupational pathways. Transition regulations differ between the federal states, but predominantly depend on the primary school's recommendation. In NRW, however, the final decision is left up to parents. The *Gymnasium* is the highest secondary track leading directly to university, while the highly stigmatised *Hauptschule* is the lowest one. Since switching from a lower to a higher track remains the exception (Bellenberg/Forell 2012), the transition to secondary school has broad implications for a child's educational career. The choice of primary school is thus seen as a crucial first step. However, official information on school performance, such as rankings or test scores, is non-existent. Little information can be accessed through schools' websites or their open days, and in any case is not objectifiable and often fuzzy to interpret.

Development and scope of school segregation in Mülheim

As our analysis clearly shows, parents' choice patterns changed significantly after the introduction of free school choice. Whereas before 2008, just 10% of first-grade schoolchildren in Mülheim were sent to a primary school outside their catchment area, this share tripled to almost 31% in 2016/2017. Almost half of parents making use of free choice were well-educated (also the biggest group in numbers). When measuring the shares within each group (parents with a high, medium and low educational attainment), the latter were most likely to select the school within the former catchment area, though differences were small.

The data analysis also reveals the social selectivity of choice: When the primary school in the former catchment area had a high share of children of benefit-recipients / with a migration background,[68] only 33.8% / 31.2% of well-educated parents enrolled their children there. The shares increased according to a school's composition: 60.1% / 42.1% enrolled there when the

[68] According to the official statistics of the City of Mülheim, children with a 'migration background' are defined as such when they or their parents were not born in Germany or one of the three does not have a German passport.

composition was average and 66.8% / 76.8% when the school had only low shares of such children (see Figure 5). Thus, these parents gave preference to the nearest primary school, but only if it had the 'right' composition. Less-educated parents were more inclined to select the nearest primary school, with more than 60.3% enrolling their children there even if it had high shares of children of benefit-recipients / with a migration background. We are aware of the endogeneity problem in the figure resulting from the *ex post* analysis of school choice and its relationship to a school's composition without excluding the single choices and their impact on composition. However, this analysis is based on the data of *all* first-grade schoolchildren over four consecutive years (approximately 4,700 in total and 200 on average per school), during which the schools' composition changed constantly, but only slowly. We therefore consider the problem as statistically negligible. Moreover, we checked this effect in a different, multilevel analysis measuring the impact of the social context of the neighbourhood and kindergarten on a child's abilities: Excluding each child's own social background had no significant effects on the model's results.

Our analysis shows that school choice is socially selective and depends both on parents' educational attainment and a school's social and ethnic composition. These rather descriptive results were also confirmed by a multi-level regression analysis.[69] The relationship seemed stronger for a school's ethnic composition, though this might also be a result of the higher numbers of children with a migration background and a subsequently more balanced distribution. Moreover, the indicators for the schools' social and ethnic composition correlate highly (0.95/Pearson).

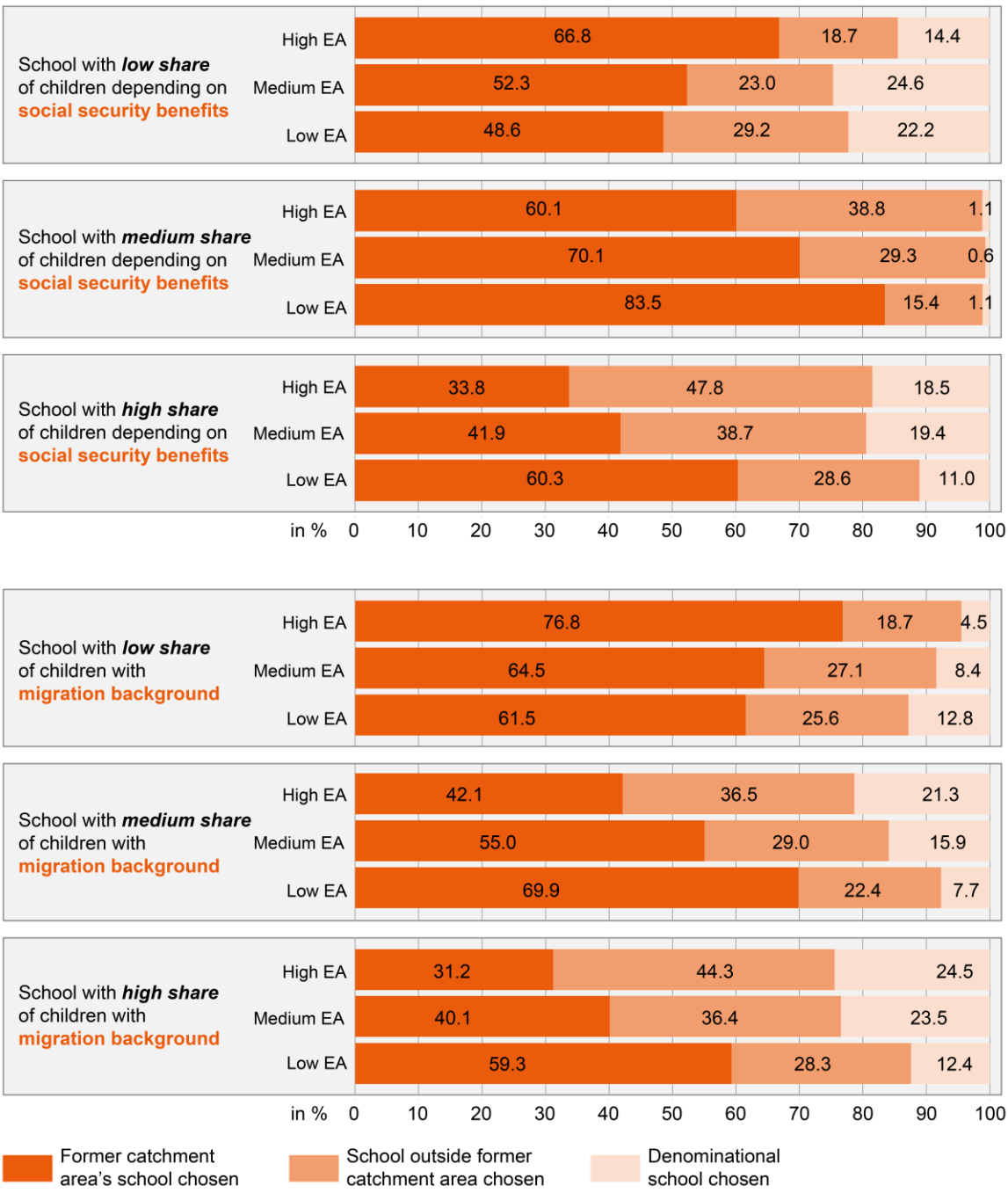
To analyse the scope of school segregation, the dissimilarity indexes were calculated. They are based on data from 2012/13 through to 2015/16, though it had to be combined due to the low number of pupils in some schools. The indexes indicate the share of the observed minority (here: children whose parents have a low educational attainment and children with a migration background)[70] who would have to be redistributed to achieve an equal distribution of all children throughout the schools. The actual dissimilarity indexes are subsequently compared with the hypothetical ones, reflecting the distribution if every child attended the nearest primary school. The results revealed an 11-percentage-point difference between the hypothetical (35%) and the actual social dissimilarity index (46%). Primary school social segregation would thus be considerably lower if school catchment areas still existed. Ethnic segregation was lower,

[69] The authors are able to provide the results of the multi-level regression analysis as technical appendix, if requested.

[70] The total shares are 11.7% and 45%.

with the hypothetical dissimilarity index (30%) and the actual one (33%) only differing by three percentage points. Whereas the latter has slightly decreased over the last years, social segregation has grown significantly (almost 10 percentage points). The dissimilar development might be explained by the increased integration of immigrants and the heightened segregation along poverty lines or.

Figure 5: School choice according to parents' educational attainment and primary school social and ethnic composition (2012/2013-2015/2016)



Source: School entrance test 2012/2013-2015/2016 and Referat V.1, Mülheim an der Ruhr]

Analysing the average, city-wide effects of choice, the dissimilarity index gives no indication of the impact on individual schools. We therefore compared the actual registration numbers and the actual composition of each school with the hypothetical scenario. The comparison reveals that choice patterns vary spatially and that the reform affects schools to a very different extent: On the one hand, the schools located in the city's most privileged – mostly southern – neighbourhoods are hardly affected by changing choice patterns. Being surrounded by highly reputable schools with a privileged composition, parents living in these neighbourhoods have no need to opt out of the local school; choosing a primary school other than the nearest one would not lead to any 'improvement' and is thus unnecessary. By contrast, in the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods the effects of free choice are comparatively strong, exacerbating the situations of already disadvantaged schools with shrinking registration numbers and increasing shares of children of benefit-recipients.[71] In these neighbourhoods where schools with a quite dissimilar composition are located not very far from each other, parents seem to select carefully. Thus, while residential and school segregation are very much linked in the more privileged areas, the latter tends to exceed the former in more mixed inner-city neighbourhoods. Against this background, the qualitative analysis was conducted in the inner-city neighbourhoods where the effects of the policy reform are the strongest, trying to gain deeper insights into the underlying rationalities and motives of choice.

Making use of free school choice: Parents' strategies and their interpretation of the policy reform

Parental narratives illustrated that, while they all appreciated the new right to choose, choice criteria differed. Interestingly, it was not only the choice criteria that varied, but also the conclusions parents drew from the policy reform and the significance they attributed to primary school choice: two aspects strongly interlinked with parent choice practices.

Choice criteria and practices of distinction

As already illustrated by the data analysis, most parents still appreciated spatial proximity between home and school. For less-educated parents it was by far the most crucial criterion – not based on lacking desire and knowledge (Ravead and Van Zanten, 2007) – but rather as a result

[71] Moreover, these schools are additionally hit by the highest shares of children unable to speak German at all, in most cases refugees. Even though the unequal distribution of these children can often be explained by the refugees' residence, it nevertheless exacerbates the already demanding situation in some Mülheim primary schools.

of economic and organisational constraints in managing daily life and combining family and work life, as Serkan illustrates:

> *"The first criterion is spatial proximity since the child has to walk to school. If you have time, money, a driving licence and a car, for those parents it doesn't matter how far the school is away. They can attend any school they like. But we cannot. We don't have a car, I work shifts and my wife has no driving licence.*" (Serkan, home carer, low educational attainment) [72]

For highly-educated parents, however, spatial proximity was appreciated, but not pursued at any price. They rather strove for school performance. However, as official and objectifiable information is lacking, proxies, perceived to be associated with school performance and gathered arduously through informal information, are used instead. The main performance proxy was a school's composition: ethnic composition based on the association that children with a migration background have insufficient German language skills and a subsequent need for additional support (Noreisch 2007b; Vowden 2012), and social composition by the simple avoidance of the 'wrong' types of socialisation, namely children with bad manners and diction, possibly rubbing off on their own children. A school's composition was often evaluated by 'passing by' and observing visible indicators of children's backgrounds – besides being 'informed' by other parents. Another important performance indicator was the transition rate to the *Gymnasium*, accessed through grapevine knowledge and – although officially not allowed to circulate this information – headteachers, who nevertheless often downplayed their promotional role in advertising or canvassing (Ramos Lobato 2017). Additional information on schools, such as the offer of afternoon care for children – an aspect playing a crucial role for almost all parents – was accessed through school websites and open days.

School performance was also a key concern for less-educated parents, though assessment criteria tended to be rather abstract, mainly based on gut feeling and on other parents' often unquestioned recommendations – whereby a significantly smaller number of parents were asked.

> *"The other mother said the teachers are good. The school is good. The children will learn well."* (Avan, on parental leave, no school-leaving qualification)

A school's composition played an important role for choice; less in terms of a performance indicator, but more as a matching criterion. Apart from avoiding schools with a high share of children with a migration background assumed to show deviant behaviour and bad manners,

[72] Since all interviews (with exception of one) were conducted in German, all quotes in this paper were translated.

less-educated parents also tended to shy away from highly reputable schools. Boundary-drawing is thus also exercised vis-à-vis parents with a higher social status, as Sophie explained:

> *"This school is out of question since it's only attended by children with parents […] from a higher social class. […] Many think 'I am better than you.' It's about the character of the people there. There are unfortunately only well-heeled ones. And I guess you just don't get in contact with the parents there."* (Sophie, saleswoman, low educational attainment)

These schools – located outside the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods – were thus not, as perhaps expected, the number-one choice. As Sophie's quote illustrates, shying away from these schools was less due to concerns about their *children's* prospects at that school and the concern of setting them up to fail (Reay/Ball 1997; van Zanten 2013), but rather related to parents' own compatibility and self-esteem. These concerns were partly based on experiences with well-educated parents' haughtiness and rejection in kindergarten, aspects to be avoided in primary school. Interestingly, the avoidance of highly reputable primary schools also applied to a small group of highly-educated parents (for more information on this specific aspect see Ramos Lobato et al. forthcoming).

As illustrated, the absence of official, objectifiable information makes it not only difficult and arduous to make an informed decision, but additionally requires a certain level of cultural capital to decode available knowledge. Since not all parents had access to the same level of information, not all of them were able to take full advantage of the educational 'market' that the policy reform initiated. Apart from the differences arising from information asymmetries, the analysis additionally revealed divergent 'logics' of choice. The disinclination to choose highly reputable schools pointed to lower-educated parents marginalised position in official debates, revealing the contradictions between the reform's intentions and parental reactions. While politicians also touted the reform as an opportunity for socially disadvantaged families to access schools outside their immediate surroundings, their economic and organisational constraints as well as emotional concerns to do so were not really considered. Despite all differences, one common element of choice – albeit based on different reasons and concerns – was matching with the children (and their parents) attending these schools. Both groups' matching preferences thus exacerbated primary school segregation.

Perceived significance and evaluation of free primary school choice

Well-educated parents. These parents highly appreciated their freedom of choice since, in their opinion, parents knew their children best. At the same time, however, due to the lack of information on school performance, many felt uncertain and forsaken in their decision-making. To

make the 'right' choice, they thus tried to get as much informal information as possible, sometimes even leading to greater confusion. Apart from missing information and support, parents' uncertainty was ascribed to the great responsibility they felt. Primary school choice was often seen as an important step to the *Gymnasium* – and subsequently, to university – and thus perceived as the cornerstone for a child's future educational career.

At the same time, however, many parents who had grown up in a system where almost everybody attended the nearest primary school and in which primary schools had always been a symbol for equality in teaching and comprehensive learning were doubtful about the existence of school performance differences and consequently about the significance of choice per se. Nevertheless, schools' obviously different compositions and rumours about dissimilar transition rates to the *Gymnasium* – both perceived as strongly interrelated with performance – nourished parents' vague impression that choosing a specific primary school might make a difference, as the following quotes exemplarily illustrate.

> *"I guess that the primary schools have strict curricula, meaning that it's not that important which school the child goes to. […] I don't think there will be any great differences between the schools; but perhaps between the clientele who attend the school."* (Dana, management assistant, high educational attainment)

> *"And the headteacher also mentioned the share of children going to the Gymnasium. Many children attending this school go on to a Gymnasium. She said, there are only few, very few, who now attend a Hauptschule."* (Kim, physician, high educational attainment)

Parents were thus torn between their (traditional) belief in similar curricula on the one hand and their perception of differences on the other. Even though some parents, as Julia, viewed the hype about primary school choice as exaggerated, the risk of making the 'wrong' decision was perceived as being too high to evade.

> *"I sometimes wonder if parents hype primary school choice too much. […] At the same time, I am concerned that when you live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, teachers spend too much time managing certain things instead of teaching. And that's a pity for the children who are smart enough to learn more."* (Julia, physician, high educational attainment)

The described uncertainties also revealed the interplay between parent choice practices and the formalistion of choice. Parents started to question their own experience in times when it was absolutely normal to attend the nearest primary school.

> *"For me, it was very difficult to choose, since you definitely only want the best for your child. And then I think: 'Oh my god, in former times, my parents just sent me to the nearest*

> *primary school. And nonetheless I developed quite well.'"* (Nadia, civil servant, high educational attainment)

The introduction of free choice, however, has changed the situation and seems to be interpreted as a clear signal or even a request to consciously and carefully choose the primary school instead of just picking the nearest one. Thus, to a certain degree, the policy reform seems to have triggered the implicit pressure parents feel when choosing a primary school. Spatial proximity between home and school – even though still appreciated – was understood as not necessarily being the most important criterion anymore. Parents who nevertheless chose the nearest school frequently justified their decision by emphasising that their choice was built on a careful consideration of the school's performance and matching their child's individual needs. As already illustrated by Noreisch (2007a, 1313), being a 'good parent' is increasingly associated with being a 'choosing parent'.

This pressure was exacerbated by other parents who played a key role in providing informal information about schools. Social comparisons among parents were frequent and choice practices seemed to be intensively framed by social norms and values (Ball/Vincent 1998). Being the only one just accepting the primary school next door without spending time and effort in decision-making could hardly be justified. Thus, local peer pressure was not only effective in forcing parents to conform to dominant norms defining the 'right' school (van Zanten 2013), as Hanna's quote illustrates, but even in forcing them to choose at all.

> *"And added to that, all children from my child's kindergarten went to this school that allegedly had the best reputation. They told me that all kids from this kindergarten went on to that primary school and then directly to Gymnasium. I heard that from many parents. And the same thing happens now with my oldest daughter with secondary school choice. Everyone tells you: 'You have to register your child here at this Gymnasium. It is awesome, the best Gymnasium ever'."* (Hanna, economist, high educational attainment)

Apart from the decision-making, parents felt similarly insecure about their own agency within the choice process. Once the difficult decision to enrol the child at a certain school had been made, concerns arose about the chances of getting into that school. The absence of concrete information about the schools' admission process led to a discrepancy between the pressure and responsibility parents felt on the one hand and their limited room for manoeuvre on the other; thereby fuelling their uncertainty and discontent.

Less-educated parents. These parents appreciated the introduction of free choice, though the underlying rationale often stayed rather abstract.

> *"Yeah, because... You are not forced to register your child somewhere where you don't want to register your child or where the child doesn't want to go. Hm… Like this, you*

> *can at least get an own impression and decide what you think is best*."(Tina, working in a sun-tan studio, low educational attainment)

They did not spend that much time collecting information and attending various school open days, though this was not necessarily due to lacking interest. Apart from deviating choice criteria leading to the choice of the local school, the relaxed way of dealing with free choice was highly dependent on the perception that all primary schools offered the same quality and taught the same topics.

> *"I think all primary schools are the same since in all schools they learn reading, writing and arithmetic."* (Anne, carer in a retirement home, low educational attainment)

Without any doubts about differences between the performance and pedagogical profiles of different primary schools, a careful selection was considered unnecessary. Consequently, such parents seemed to feel hardly any pressure to intensively and carefully choose – neither triggered by the policy reform, nor intensified by (the small number of) other parents asked for their recommendations.

Similar to their well-educated counterparts, they also assessed a child's learning progress in his/her first four years at school as being important for success in secondary school. This was not, however, associated at all with the 'right' primary school, but rather with factors depicted as being outside one's own sphere of influence: teacher performance and a child's willingness to learn and endeavour.

> *"I don't think that the school is so important. The teachers are the important ones. It has nothing to do with the school. If the child is lucky, he gets a good teacher. If not, then it's a catastrophe […] But unfortunately, you don't have any influence over the teacher."* (Omar, unemployed, low educational attainment)

> *"It all depends on the child. If my child is not cooperating, he stays where he is. It's just like that. […] He can go to the best school with the best teachers, if he doesn't cooperate, it won't work out."* (Sophie, saleswoman, low educational attainment)

In both cases, school choice was perceived as largely dependent on the luck of the draw, consequently mitigating parents' perception of the significance of primary school choice.

The more relaxed way of dealing with primary school choice seemed to be additionally based on the low significance attached to this early stage of schooling. This should not be equated with a lack of interest: the interviewed less-educated parents were concerned about their children's success in school and harboured similar hopes. Moreover, aware of the different secondary school tracks and their wider implications for their children's educational careers, they

consequently attached great(er) importance to the choice of secondary school. By contrast, however, they did not seem to establish a link between primary and secondary school choice.

> *"In my opinion, primary schools are all the same. Perhaps they differ a little bit. Thus, for the first four years, it makes no difference. But for secondary school, then I have to choose carefully. […] I would like my child to go to a Gymnasium later."* (Milena, unemployed, low-educational attainment)

Since attending a 'good' primary school was not seen as a direct step towards the *Gymnasium*, primary school choice was not driven by the same level of relevance and responsibility and the subsequent anxieties and concerns.

Conclusion

The paper illustrates that choices of a school outside the former catchment area increased after 2008 and have led to a higher level of school segregation throughout Mülheim, whereby the effects of free choice vary tremendously between schools. Apart from spatial proximity, perceived school performance is a decisive element of choice. Faced with a dearth of official and objectifiable information, parents are forced to collect informal information and to use proxies perceived to be associated with school performance. Since parents possess different social and cultural capital to access and interpret this knowledge and face divergent economic and practical constraints, choice practices vary distinctively. Nevertheless, the social matching of children and parents as well as subsequent dissociation practices seem to be equally relevant – not only for well-educated parents, as the literature predominantly assumes, but also for less-educated ones. Consequently, both groups tend to make choices contributing to higher levels of educational segregation.

Differences between parent choice strategies do not solely result from their differing access to (informal) information and their ability to interpret it, but also depend on the different significance parents attach to this early stage of education and are shaped by their interpretation of the policy reform's intentions. Most parents appreciate free choice; nevertheless, in particular among well-educated parents it also fuels uncertainty and concerns. Their vague impression of the significance of primary school choice for their children's future educational careers seems to have been triggered and intensified by the policy reform, interpreted as a clear instigation to carefully choose between schools.

In this case study, where a reform put an end to any bureaucratic obstacles to free choice, the (illegal) circumvention of catchment areas has become unnecessary. The introduction of free choice seems to put pressure on (well-educated) parents, increasing their feeling of the

‘choosing parent’ being the ‘good parent’. While parents in catchment area systems can evade that pressure by justifying their choice of the local school with their acceptance of rules (Noreisch 2007a), this seems to be increasingly difficult in NRW. Consequently, choice is not solely interpreted as an opportunity, but seems to have also become a duty. However, based on the city’s social geography, choice practices vary spatially. Living in the more mixed inner-city neighbourhoods surrounded by schools with quite different compositions and reputations, parents in our case study might be affected by the reform and the subsequent pressure to choose to a far greater extent than parents living in more affluent neighbourhoods.

Moreover, as ‘choice is a particularly middle-class way of operating in the world’ (Skeggs 2004a, 139), the introduction of free choice seems to pander to well-educated parents’ concerns – although at the same time making them feel insecure about their decision – rather than giving more opportunities to those not so good at playing the game. By solely removing the bureaucratic barriers without offering a solution to the economic and organisational constraints, the reform does not endow disadvantaged parents with the opportunity to choose other than the nearest schools. Moreover, by not providing any adequate information, it additionally frames a class advantage by benefiting well-educated parents’ abilities to play the game. Thus, instead of alleviating existing inequalities in choice, the reform rather seems to perpetuate them. It one-sidedly favours well-educated parents’ interests and, as this case study clearly illustrates, even encourages them to strive for them.

This case study is a clear illustration of how norms of choice and choice practices are shaped by the institutional context parents operate in. Despite all concerns and anxieties, equipping parents with the right to choose ‘opened a Pandora's box and generated needs difficult to withdraw’, claimed a leading Social Democrat (SPD) politician in NRW in an interview for this research study. This might be the reason why, in 2010, the incoming coalition of SPD and the Green Party – the reform’s former opponents – did not dare roll back the reform. The increased share of social and ethnic school segregation in Mülheim illustrates the need for a critical examination of how decision-making decentralisation is producing and reproducing inequalities. However, the responsibility for this development should not be attributed solely to the parents. The case study clearly illustrates that their selective choices have been triggered and even intensified by the policy reform. Thus, it is the political institutions and policies that create both the context and the legitimisation of choice.

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4.2 Sub-study II: Mixing or matching? Families' childcare-related networks and their impact on primary school choice

Ramos Lobato, Isabel (submitted in *Children's Geographies*): Mixing or matching? Families' childcare-related networks and their impact on primary school choice. (pre-print version)

Abstract

While the role of parental networks as an information source is widely acknowledged in research on school choice, less attention has been paid to their influence given the prospect of (local) social capital and integration at schools. Based on qualitative interviews with parents, this article seeks to analyse this two-sided role of parental networks for primary school choice. By focusing on socially mixed childcare centres, the article's main aim is to scrutinise the extent that childcare-related networks might either promote group-crossing interaction or reinforce (socially selective) school choices. This article demonstrates that the shared experience of being a parent is not necessarily enough to bridge social differences. They are partly even reinforced and thus pave the way for school segregation. However, since dissociation practices vary significantly between different childcare centres, the article points to the necessity of considering childcare as a crucial first step in children's educational careers when analysing school segregation.

Introduction

> *"A primary school's reputation is produced at the bakery, and in the childcare centre of course."* (Member of a regional school authority in Germany)[73]

This quote – stated in an interview about the consequences of free primary school choice in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) – points to the role of parents' childcare-related networks in the production and reproduction of schools' local reputations and, subsequently, in parents' school choice. While parental networks' impact on choice by providing access to information and reassurance is widely acknowledged (Holloway/Pimlott-Wilson 2014; Noreisch 2007; Van Zanten 2005; Vowden 2012), this article argues that parents' networks have two functions: first, they influence parents' choices by providing access to information and reassurance. Second, choice is influenced by the anticipation of (children's and parents') networks resulting from choice – this includes both the maintenance of already established (childcare-

[73] Since all (except one) interviews for this study were conducted in German, all quotes in this paper were translated.

related) networks and the prospect of accessing new networks that might be derived from school choice (Kosunen/Rivière 2018). School choice is thus a process that is both mediated by social relationships and produces them at the same time (Kosunen/Rivière 2018).

This anticipation of gaining (local) social capital through choice seems to be a crucial but nevertheless under-examined aspect of parents' choice-making. However, in light of the widespread trend of increasing school segregation, which is particularly impacted by (middle-class) parents' selective choices (Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Butler/Hamnett 2007; Boterman 2013; Vincent et al. 2010) – a tendency that is also visible in Germany (Maloutas/Ramos Lobato 2015; Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019; Riedel et al. 2010) – it is crucial to understand the impact of childcare- and school-mediated networks on school choices and consider them as an additional mechanism that contributes to primary school segregation.

Despite the vast amount of literature on parental school choice, however, little attention has been paid to preschool education and its impact on school segregation. However, as effective brokers of organisational and social ties (Small 2009), childcare centres constitute an important setting to facilitate parental interaction and to influence their views on schooling. Childcare centres might thus either prepare the foundation for school segregation or, particularly in case of socially mixed childcare centres, promote group-crossing networks and norms of schooling, thus helping to mitigate school segregation.

Therefore, this article takes one step back in analysing children's 'educational career'. Based on interviews with parents whose children attend the last year at the childcare centre, it analyses the role that (childcare-related) parental networks play in primary school choice. Thereby, it pays particular attention to the two-fold role parental networks have in primary school choice, which is their role as a source of information and as a provider of local social capital. By focusing on these two key concepts, this article seeks to scrutinise if and to what extent, (childcare-related) networks might reinforce (selective) educational pathways between childcare centres and primary schools that might pave the way for primary school segregation. The empirical analysis took place in Mülheim an der Ruhr,[74] a German city with 170,000 inhabitants located in the federal state of NRW, where free primary school choice was implemented in the year 2008.

[74] For the sake of simplicity, Mülheim an der Ruhr is hereinafter referred to as 'Mülheim'.

School choice and the two-fold impact of parental networks

Research studies on parental school choice have mostly focused on middle-class parents,[75] who are generally characterised by carefully considering their choices when looking for the 'best match' among the available options, while working-class parents have often been contrasted against these parents displaying a high degree of strategic planning (Reay et al. 2011; Van Zanten 2005). The hegemonic discourse around skilled and less-skilled choosers still associates the "good parent" with a "choosing parent" (Noreisch 2007; Van Zanten 2013). This is also true for Germany, where – in light of the decreasing trust in the German education system (Krüger 2014) – parents are increasingly seen simultaneously both as key players responsible for their children's educational success and as risk factors when unable to make informed decisions (Becker/Reimer 2010; Mierendorff et al. 2015).

In an environment where only active and careful choice-making seems to be valued, school choice has been mainly understood as the choice of a pedagogical and social institution. The question of to what extent parents' views of schooling and their actual choice are embedded into their urban surroundings and the local social networks, however, is absent in the whole discussion.[76] This article thus tries to scrutinise this relationship and consider the two-fold role parental networks have on parents' school choices. This article therefore deliberately includes the perspective of parents with a lower social status in order to deepen the knowledge on parents' potential interaction in socially mixed childcare centres.

School choice and grapevine knowledge

Research shows that parents' school choices are strongly influenced by (local) social networks (van Zanten 2013). Personal impressions and the experiences of friends, acquaintances or relatives – defined as so-called 'grapevine knowledge' (Ball/Vincent 1998) – is used as a way of filling in missing (official) information about childcare and schools. This is particularly important in Germany, where little official and objective information on primary schools'

[75] Due to changing occupations, labour market and income distribution, defining class has become increasingly difficult (Devine et al. 2005). Given the range of different theoretical and practical applications of class schemes, it seems to be impossible 'to identify particular schemes which are "right" or "wrong". Different schemes are rather more or less appropriate for particular tasks' (Crompton 2008, 68-69). Class is often defined in terms of occupation or income. In this analysis, only information on parents' educational attainment and their occupation is available. However, class is becoming more cultural (Bennett et al. 2009), and parents' cultural capital is crucial for school choice (Lareau 1987). Thus, defining parents' social status by their educational attainment might be a good approximation (Blokland/van Eijk 2012) – particularly in Germany, where it plays a crucial role for social positioning. Nevertheless, due to the missing information about parents' economic capital, I try to avoid the term 'class' in this article.

[76] Exceptions are the studies by Kosunen and Rivière (2018) and Frank and Weck (2018), which mainly focus on middle-class parents whose interest in accessing local parental networks is likely to differ from those of parents with lower cultural and economic capital.

performance exist and where – in contrast to the quite obvious cultural profits of the secondary school tracks in terms of educational and occupational pathways – distinctions between comprehensive primary schools remain fuzzy and lack a "clear cultural coding" (Bourdieu 1987).

Apart from its function as a source of useful information, grapevine knowledge provides a medium for social comparison "with others 'like us' and 'others' not 'like us'" (Ball/Vincent 1998, 393). Nevertheless, there are different grapevines, and access is unevenly distributed across different social class. Feeling pressured to conform to these mainly local norms of social matching, plays a significant role in shaping parents' attitudes to childcare and schooling (Reay/Lucey 2004; van Zanten 2007). This impact – as shown by Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) in their study on parents' attitudes to parenting education – can even lead to local (parenting) cultures that are not neatly confined to members of a specific social class. This article thus seeks to analyse to what extent childcare centres serve as a place where such (potentially group-crossing) local norms of schooling emerge and to what extent they impact parents' choices.

School choice and parents' (established and anticipated) local social capital

School choice is not only mediated by social networks, but it produces social networks at the same time. By providing mutual support to make families' everyday lives more feasible, the accumulation of (local) social capital through both childcare- and school-mediated networks might be a crucial aspect in parents' decision-making (Kosunen/Rivière 2018).[77] Moreover, as Frank and Weck (2018) demonstrate particularly for employed parents, highly functioning local networks are a prerequisite for managing everyday life – however, not just any network, but those that are solely "reliable", meaning socially and culturally homogeneous networks with shared values (ibid, 28). This study thus seeks to reveal the role of the local social capital, i.e., the locally based networks influencing school choice.

Childcare centres constitute one of these "settings that draw people together" (van Eijk 2010: 43). Demanding a quite high level of parental involvement, childcare centres are a unique site to establish parental networks (Ball/Vincent 1998; Holloway 1998; Jupp 2013; Small 2006 & 2009; van Zanten 2013) and thus serve as a suitable setting to analyse the impact of parental networks on school choices. Based on the routine and repetition of interaction, they connect people who have the shared experience of being a parent and thus "highlight the value of identifying common ground" (Wilson 2013, 642). Primary schools seem to have a similarly crucial

[77] This study refers to individual social capital. This term is influenced by research of Pierre Bourdieu (1987), who contrasts it to cultural, economic and symbolic capital. Social capital is defined as resources being tied to access to social networks, which can also enable access to other forms of capital.

role in shaping (parents' and children's) social networks in the neighbourhood (Freeman 2010; Karsten 2011; Posey-Maddox et al. 2014). Furthermore, hoping for mutual support in everyday life, parents might also consider the networks that come along with a particular school as part of their choice (Holloway 1998; Jupp 2013; Talbot 2013).

As previous research shows, however, spatial proximity does not necessarily lead to social proximity (Blokland/van Eijk 2010; Jupp 2013; Savage et al. 2005). In their study on white, middle-class parents in comprehensive schools, Hollingworth and Williams (2010) point to conflicts and exclusionary tendencies and subsequently a complex and difficult interaction between privilege and disadvantage. Talbot (2013) illustrates that parents' search for friendship through playgroups was often accompanied by tensions and social exclusion and was closely linked to "a range of issues related to status" (ibid, 238). Thus, instead of being a crucial reason for choosing a school, parental networks might also have a deterring impact. Both aspects will be scrutinised in this article.

Research design

The case study

In all sixteen German federal states, which are the political level responsible for education in Germany, primary schools are the only ones where all children of one age group are taught collectively. While access is predominantly regulated by catchment areas, NRW introduced free primary school choice in 2008. In light of the selective tracking system at secondary schools, where only the *Gymnasium*, the highest secondary track, prepares students for university, the transition to secondary school has broad implications in Germany. Consequently, the choice of a primary school – as preparation for secondary school – is already seen as a crucial first step in children's educational careers.

There are different providers of childcare centres in Germany (public, denominational, private and private/nonprofit). In the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr, the majority of places that are available are public childcare centres (Groos et al. 2018, 25). The costs for childcare vary between German cities but mostly depend on the parents' income, while childcare is free for social welfare recipients. Focusing on this early stage of education seems to be particularly relevant in the German context, where 93% of children between three and five years of age attend a childcare centre (DESTATIS 2018a).[78]

[78] While attendance at a childcare centre differs between the under-three-year-olds with different social and ethnic backgrounds, the shares approach in the group of the four-year-olds (Groos/Jehles 2018, 30).

Data and methods

The study is based on 35 semi-structured interviews with parents from different social backgrounds who were classified into three groups based on their educational attainment.[79] Coincidentally, the three groups are of a similar size. The parents were recruited in three socially mixed childcare centres located in two inner-city neighbourhoods of Mülheim, in which the majority of parents who had to register their children for primary school were interviewed. More than half of them had an immigrant background, though all but four had grown up in Germany. All but four interviewees were women.

Parents were asked about their school choice criteria, information sources and conceptions of schooling. The interviews included a network analysis with name generators qualifying egocentred social networks (Hennig 2008). Parents were asked twice about with whom they discuss parenting issues, spend leisure time and talk about primary school choices – first, by referring to their whole network and second by referring solely to people whose children attend the same childcare centre. Since they were only allowed to mention four network partners, so-called alteri, per question, the second round should ensure that childcare-related networks were not hidden behind family members or close friends who were likely to be mentioned first. Afterwards, more information about the alteri was elicited, such as sex, educational attainment, occupation, where they first met or if their children attended the same childcare centre.

The interviews were embedded in a participatory observation for six weeks in each childcare centre, which enabled a more in-depth assessment of parental narratives and interaction and thus greatly increased the intensity and reliability of the analysis.

The childcare centre as place for building social capital

In this study, the parents' disposable social capital differed in terms of their networks' size and social composition. The average network comprised nine alteri, ranging between two and fourteen. Lower-educated parents had slightly smaller networks (an average of approximately eight alteri) than their higher-educated counterparts (an average of approximately eleven alteri). In light of previous research on (middle-class) households' practices of bordering and (s)elective

[79] The study is based on a previous quantitative analysis on school segregation by the city of Mülheim. To make the results congruent to this previous analysis, parents in this study were similarly classified according to their educational attainment. There are three groups: The category 'high educational attainment' comprised all parents with at least a higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*) or a university degree; 'medium', which means a school-leaving qualification below *Gymnasium*, but with completed vocational education; and 'low educational attainment" for parents without any completed vocational training (and not having *Abitur*).

belonging (Blokland/van Eijk 2010; Savage et al. 2005), the social structure of the interviewees' networks was slightly surprising. While the lower-educated parents' networks were socially quite homogenous (on average, more than 70% of their alteri had a low educational attainment), the higher-educated parents' networks seemed to be slightly more diverse (50% of the alteri had a lower educational attainment). Interestingly, the alteri with a lower social status were often parents who met in preschool.

Together with the workplace, the childcare centres were by far the most frequently mentioned places for making new contacts. While most parents appreciated the childcare-mediated social relationships, their significance varied; for lower-educated parents the childcare centre played a significant role for their social network, and consequently, for their disposable social capital, whereas higher-educated parents could draw on a larger social network both within and outside the childcare centre. Moreover, parents' social interaction differed between the childcare centres. In the childcare centres I and III, opportunities for meeting and social interaction were more or less reduced to the short and often hectic moments of bringing the children and picking them up. Here, group-crossing social interaction seemed to be slightly lower than in childcare centre II, where parental involvement and interaction was facilitated by offering parents a room for a weekly parent café and by organising special events for those parents with children in their last year of childcare. Furthermore, the intensity of parents' involvement was also influenced by their life stage (e.g., first or second child), the years they already had been living in Mülheim and in the particular neighbourhood, and on their employment status and corresponding amount of free time.

The role of networks for parents' school choices

Networks as a source of information

In this study's context, where parents are given free primary school choice but lack the necessary official information about schools, parental networks constituted an indispensable information source for all parents. Nevertheless, clear differences regarding the role and impact of parental networks for school choice became visible.

Apart from the family, parental networks often seemed to be the only information source for many parents with less education. The accessed information, however, remained abstract – referring to fuzzy attributes such as "good education". They often referred to just one or two persons they had talked to; however, these few judgements were described as being sufficient for choice, while additional information sources were only partly utilised.

> *"The other mother [at the childcare centre; author's note] said the teachers are good. The school is good. The children will learn well."* (Avan, on parental leave, no school-leaving qualification)

Childcare-related parental networks thus seemed to be more than a simple source of information and instead served as a powerful adviser for lower-educated parents. Their unconditional trust in their alteri's reliability (Ball/Vincent 1998; Reay/Lucey 2004; van Zanten 2007) seemed to be strongly related to the blurred distinctions between the primary schools and the insufficient level of cultural capital necessary to decode and interpret them. Thus, lower-educated parents lacked trust in their own ability to assess schools, which made other parents' information even more valuable. However, since neither they nor the usually 'similar' alteri knew about the existence of schools outside their own immediate living environment, the accessible grapevine knowledge did not increase the perception of parents with less education regarding potential school alternatives.

The conducted network analysis only gathered existing, but not potentially accessible alteri. This is important to emphasise, since parents seemed to carefully parse information sources, and not all accessed information was considered when choosing:

> *"I: Our kindergarten is divided into two groups. There are two different types of parents. […] There are some parents who are similar; we are on the same level. But there are other parents who think they are different. They are arrogant. […] And when I applied for this school, I heard that those parents, who all applied for the other one, tattled among each other: 'How can you seriously register your child at that school?' […] But that didn't worry me. I know these parents and that's why I didn't think about their comments. I just closed my ears and didn't listen."* (Elif, unemployed, low educational attainment)

This quote points to (at least perceived) practices of dissociation, letting parents draw on quite homogeneous networks despite attending a socially mixed childcare centre. In the case of Elif – and other parents – the limited information about schools she accessed through her socially homogeneous networks were not the result of a lack of access. She seemed perfectly aware of the differences between her and some more highly educated parents' school choices. She even seemed to be offended and 'forced' to justify her own choice. Nevertheless, based on experiences of the haughtiness and hubris of higher-educated parents, their negative evaluation was not considered for her own choice. Boundaries were thus also drawn by 'the others' when parents with less education reacted to highly-educated parents' behaviour with aloofness (Nast/Blokland 2014, 488). Aware of the judgements of the 'dominant' (Skeggs 2004, 19ff), some lower-educated parents' perception of difference seemed to induce feelings of exclusion, enabling them to withdraw from social interactions with higher-educated parents in the same

childcare centre and to shy away from schools with a perceived 'higher-status' composition. In this case, the 'common ground' of being a parent did not suffice to establish common norms of schooling. However, it was not uneven access to grapevine knowledge that results in different school choice practices but, rather, the complex and difficult interaction between privilege and disadvantage (Hollingworth/Williams 2010; Bloomfield Cucchiara/McNamara Horvat 2009) that partly guided parents whose children attended the same childcare centre into different school choices.

Although more sceptical, parental networks also constituted the most important source of information for higher-educated parents. However, they strategically complemented grapevine knowledge with other information sources, such as parental online platforms and the schools' websites, and by deliberately asking (head) teachers and the childcare centre's staff for advice. They were not satisfied by other parents' feelings, rather they were interested in 'objective' (quality) criteria, such as transition rates to the *Gymnasium*, afternoon care and the schools' (technical) equipment (Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019). Parental networks were thus less needed to compensate for the own inability to get and to decode information but were rather indispensable to access 'insider' information. Consequently, more highly educated parents were mainly looking for information from parents whose children already attended these schools – who were not necessarily childcare-related contacts.

The strategic collection of information should not disguise their uncertainty and concerns, making them quite receptive to other parents' assessments. Therefore, parental networks were also essential to confirm their own choice – both in a reassuring and flustering way. They pressured parents to conform to dominant social norms of school choice and defining the 'right' school (Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019) and affirmed the parents' choice upon making a socially embedded, compliant choice. This reassuring effect, however, strongly depended on the 'type' of alteri. Although the network analysis illustrated that school choice was also discussed with lower-educated parents at the childcare centre, the information attained from these parents was not truly considered in their final choice.

> *"You ask as many parents you can, but in the end, when it gets down to the nitty-gritty of school choice, you go to those parents with the right chemistry. With whom you are on the same level, who have the same interests. Then you know, they expect the same from their child that I expect from mine. You know, parents who have the same standards so that you can really trust their suggestions."* (Hanna, economist, high educational attainment)

Similar to their lower-educated counterparts, higher-educated parents seemed to distinguish between useful and less useful information sources. Few openly voiced their distrust of more

poorly educated parents' opinions; they rather hid them (intentionally or unintentionally) behind fuzzy formulations, such as "similar" parents "with the same aspirations" and "who are on the same level". Whether these attributes served as synonyms for higher-educated parents was unclear. While their group-crossing alteri seemed to be 'acceptable' for spending free time with the children or for talking about parenting and school choice in general, to 'qualify' as a useful provider of information and reassurance for school choice, a certain level of similarity was required (see also Nast/Blokland 2014).

Dissociation practices varied in their intensity between the three childcare centres, which might arise from the distinct opportunities of parental interaction. They were comparatively high in childcare centre II, where quite dissimilar parents chose the same primary school, and particularly low in childcare centre III, where the social divide seemed to be the highest, leading to more or less separated pathways to school. Despite this 'obvious' relationship, however, there might be other, more influential reasons for parents' school choices, such as their residence or the availability of school alternatives.

Networks at school as a form of accumulating (future) local social capital

Local parental networks impacted school choice by offering the perspective of friendships (for children and parents) and mutual support in the organisation of everyday life. Only few parents seemed to rely exclusively on their family networks and were thus not at all interested in non-kin relationships. The networks' significance, however, varied among the interviewees. For most lower-educated parents, their children's integration at school was seen as pragmatic. Confident in their children's self-reliance and ability to make new friends at school, maintaining preschool relationships by sending them to the same school as their friends was seen as 'nice to have', but not essential. Securing their own networks was far more relevant.

> *"For me, it was important that another mother from kindergarten and my best friend also registered their children at that school. We would also appreciate sending them to the same class, since we can help each other with homework or with picking the children up when one of us has to work longer. It's a bit easier for all of us since we can support each other."* (Tina, working in a sun-tan studio, low educational attainment)

Due to economic and organisational constraints in combining family and work life, parental networks constituted an indispensable source of support, for instance in alternating with other parents in picking the children up and taking care of them in the afternoon. Spatial proximity between home and school and the maintenance of 'solidarity networks' in primary school thus played a crucial role for school choice – an interesting but rarely discussed reason for parents' choice strategies. In addition to support outside the school, few parents considered the prospect

of assistance within the school. Due to difficulties with the German language, few parents deliberately chose schools in which they already knew other parents spoke the same language, and they were hoping for translation and support.

Based on the clear necessity of parental networks to cope with everyday life, the practices of parents with less education were mainly embedded in previous choices and the subsequent desire to maintain already existing networks rather than being guided by the vague prospect of making new (loose) friendships at school. Moreover, some parents with less education even tended to avoid certain schools for this very reason.

> *"This school is out of question since it's only attended by children with parents […] from a higher social class. And I would say, we just are not like that. […] Many parents think 'I am better than you.' It's about the character of the people there. There are unfortunately only well-heeled ones. And I guess you just don't get come into contact with the parents there."* (Sophie, saleswoman, low educational attainment)

Sophie and some other parents were concerned about not fitting in at highly reputable schools that were mainly attended by children with a higher social status. Based on the previously discussed experiences of rejection in preschool, it was more the anticipation of exclusion and isolation than new friendships and relationships that guided their school choice. The (perceived) social divide in some childcare centres thus not only led to a selective consideration of information on schools but also partly reinforced the already selective and dissociating choice practices based on the schools' images and reputations.

More highly educated parents considered networks at school in their choices as well. However, their underlying motivations differed extensively – both in comparison with their less educated counterparts but also within the group. While some higher-educated parents had a similarly pragmatic attitude as regards their children's integration as most of their less educated counterparts, and others considered children's networks as a decisive choice criterion.

> *"The decisive aspect for me was that my daughter was not separated from the four, five children [from the childcare centre; author's note] in order to make it easier for her in the beginning."* (Selma, management assistant in office communication, medium educational attainment)

Maintaining their children's preschool friendships seemed to be so important, that the schools' location even seemed to be partly irrelevant (not entirely though). Some parents thus even considered choosing a school outside the immediate living environment.

> *"One important aspect was that all children from my first child's childcare group applied for this school. […] We unfortunately live more south [thus not very close to the primary school; author's note]. However, I have nevertheless registered her at that school. Like*

> *this, she stays with her childcare group."* (Hanna, economist, high educational attainment)

Similar to their less educated counterparts, they mainly cared about already existing networks. In contrast, however, they could 'afford' to consider these networks, even if their children's friends and families lived outside the neighbourhood. The strong desire to secure their children's preschool networks seemed to be embedded in parents' perception of parenting and schooling and guided by concerns about their children's strength and self-reliance. Some expressed deep concerns about their children's ability to cope with the sharp transition between the sheltered and intimate childcare centre – and a certain kind of "homeliness" (Gallagher 2013, 211) – and the "rough" and performance-oriented primary school. It was therefore hoped that already having friends at primary school would alleviate this big step.

> *"I think that starting primary school is a much bigger step than going to kindergarten. And I guess that when the children are accompanied by other children whom they know and with whom they are familiar, it is easier. I guess it was also important for the children that they knew, 'Okay, these kids are going to the same school'."* (Anna, in parental leave, high educational attainment)

Interestingly, parents' concerns about the children's wellbeing focused almost exclusively on their integration at school and less on the local neighbourhood. Even though almost all parents appreciated the spatial proximity between the home and primary school, by prioritising other choice criteria – and having the social and economic capital to do so – it was not pursued at any price (Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019). Only three (highly- and medium-educated) parents considered school choice as an opportunity to strengthen and establish (mainly) their children's local networks and as offering them a more autonomous social life after school.

> *"I want my child to go to the nearest school so that his friends at school live nearby. […] I wish for my son to just say 'Mum, today I am going there or there.' To friends who live just around the corner."* (Kim, physician, high educational attainment)

For two families who moved quite recently to Mülheim, their own integration played an additional role for choosing the nearest school, as Linda's quote demonstrates.

> *"Actually, the spatial proximity of the school played a role in order to become integrated in the local social environment. […] Since we quite recently moved here, we really wished that our social environment and networks were close by."* (Linda, preschool teacher, medium educational attainment)

Nevertheless, only a few parents (all three with medium educational attainment) emphasised the significance of school-mediated support networks for school choice. Although the majority of parents in this sample frequently mentioned other parents' presence at school while talking

about school choice, choice was not directly equated with it. Thus, the concrete role of parental networks at school and the hopes that might be tied to their presence stayed rather vague. This finding clearly contrasts with previous research demonstrating the significant support of (socially similar) parental networks, particularly for higher-educated, working parents in order to combine family life and work (Frank/Weck 2018).

However, while not explicitly mentioned during the interviews, it can probably be assumed that these networks and the support and friendship they provide do play a role in choice. According to some narratives, knowing other parents at school seemed to be more important than most of them clearly mentioned, and it apparently allowed them to feel more comfortable and integrated.

> *"Then I already had a look at the other school at the school's open day. Basically, they were all very nice, but I could only see new faces. I didn't know anybody. […] And I felt kind of strange and alien. And at the other school's open day, all the parents from childcare were there. […] I guess I have just felt more comfortable with the fact that I already know so many people there."* (Amina, management assistant in office communication, high educational attainment)

> *"At the school's open days, I saw three children whose parents I also know. When you can see parents who you already know […] that plays a role, of course."* (Jasmina, management assistant in office communication, high educational attainment)

Feeling comfortable was tightly connected to 'specific' parents and accompanied by concerns about not getting in with the other parents and being out of place. Similarity – as already illustrated by Frank and Weck (2018) – played a significant role in this research as well. However, while dissociation from lower social status groups was only referred to when talking about their children, it was not mentioned at all when talking about themselves. In contrast, practices of dissociation and boundary-drawing were surprisingly discussed mainly among parents with a higher or even similar social status – who were nevertheless perceived as being "on another level" (Ramos Lobato et al. 2018).

> *"I guess you cannot be that natural when you know that there are physicians who pick up their children. And lawyers, who, I don't know, just are on another level. I wouldn't say they are better […] but I think I wouldn't feel comfortable at that school. I just don't fit in, I don't match. […] I mean, I do not know anybody at that school, but you always hear 'the snobby parents from that school.' I wouldn't fit in. Definitely not."* (Amina, management assistant in office communication, high educational attainment)

Although Amina has a high educational attainment as well – but probably possesses less economic capital – she nevertheless seemed to feel ambiguous about her own status in respect to the "physicians and lawyers". Mocking 'elitist' parents and describing them as being "on

another level" can be interpreted as an opportunity to negotiate one's own position (Nast/Blokland 2014, 488). In light of the strong emphasis on social matching with other parents, it might be assumed that the anticipation of school-mediated parental networks – both desired and undesired ones – were considered for choice, although it was not explicitly mentioned.

Conclusion

The article illustrates the twofold and significant role of parental networks for primary school choice – both as an indispensable source of information and reassurance and by giving the prospect of social integration at school. The concurrent analysis of parents with a different educational attainment allows for a more complete picture of the networks' impact on parental school choice and, subsequently, on school segregation. Although highly important for both groups, the analysis points to clear differences regarding the networks' significance. First, for parents with less education, parental networks are often the only source of information, while higher-educated parents seek to strategically combine it with other information sources. Second, based on concerns about the (sharp) transition between childcare and school, many higher-educated parents predominantly care about their children's integration at school, whereas some parents with less education rather (need to) consider their own networks serving as a gateway to solidarity. Social matching with parents at school, however, is highly significant for both groups' choices.

The networks' importance for school choice often crystallises in the childcare centre. Albeit to a varying extent, childcare-related networks significantly guide parents' choices. Since both groups place more value on the maintenance of already-existing networks than on the vague prospect of gaining new ones at school, childcare-mediated networks become even more important. Childcare centres thus truly are one of those 'settings that draw people together' (van Eijk 2010; Small 2006 & 2009) and should therefore be considered as an important step in the local geography of education when analysing parental school choice and its impact on school segregation.

However, having the shared experience of being a parent seems to not necessarily be enough to produce common social norms of schooling that might help to mitigate school segregation. Social differences are not necessarily bridged in mixed childcare centres but may rather even be reinforced. They partly strengthen practices of distinction and can thus prepare the conditions for segregation in later educational stages. Even though information seems to be spread across different social groups, dissociation partly results in the selective use of grapevine knowledge – a practice which becomes visible in all three observed childcare centres. Thus,

instead of identifying 'common ground' (Wilson 2013), the careful differentiation between valuable and less-valuable information may guide parents' choices in quite different directions. Varying choice practices should therefore not necessarily be ascribed to the unequal access to information, as is often assumed (James et al. 2010; Reay/Lucey 2004; van Zanten 2007). They also depend on the questions of if and to what extent the accessible information is truly considered for choice.

It is difficult to answer the question of whether socially mixed childcare centres promote group-crossing networks and, subsequently, lead to common norms of school choice or instead reinforce segregated choices and educational pathways. While social boundaries and exclusionary tendencies are mentioned clearly within the interviews, the emergence of common, group-crossing norms of school choice is subtle and difficult to identify. Nevertheless, there are signs of both. In childcare centre III, social boundaries seem to reinforce both groups' dissociating school choice practices. This is particularly interesting since research has mainly focused on middle-class parents circumventing less-reputable schools, while less attention has been paid to parents with less education who deliberately shy away from highly reputable schools. By paying attention to childcare, this analysis illustrates that this practice is embedded in experiences with exclusion and rejection in the childcare centre – which highlights the importance of considering preschool as one potential foundation for segregation in later educational stages.

At the same time, however, the fact that socially different groups of parents in childcare centre II predominantly choose the same primary school might not necessarily be ascribed to strong networks and the subsequent emergence of common norms of schooling. The existence of other and/or additional reasons cannot be ruled out in this analysis. Thus, to assess the childcare centres' impact on parents' interaction, the emergence of mutual trust, and the reciprocal (group-crossing) consideration of information on schools, requires further research. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that, for higher-educated parents, the childcare centre is only one of several places where they access information about school choice and establish networks guiding their choices.

Moreover, the analysis clearly illustrates that different choice practices strongly depend on varying levels of practical and economic constraints. To combine family life and work, choosing a school other than the nearest one is not feasible for some lower-educated parents, and the maintenance of parental support networks is indispensable in school choice. While higher-educated parents possess the necessary economic and social capital to maintain their children's preschool relationships at school even though the school is located outside the neighbourhood,

this is often out of question for lower-educated parents. Choice is thus not only about knowing how to 'play the game' but also about having the necessary capital to do so.

Expecting common norms of schooling to emerge in socially mixed childcare centres thus marginalises choice criteria deviating from middle-class norms. By using normative constructions based on more highly educated parents' choice-making (Reay/Ball 1997; Skeggs 2004), this expectation unilaterally and automatically expects lower-educated parents to adapt to the careful and thoroughly considered choice-making of higher-educated parents and ignores the (practical and economic) constraints faced by lower-educated parents. Considering these restrictions, childcare centres have a crucial role in providing a gateway to solidarity networks for those parents who need it – even though they also reinforce socially segregated choices and educational pathways.

This article should not be interpreted as a case against socially mixed childcare centres. In contrast, according to van Zanten (2013), pressures to conform to dominant norms of social matching might be even stronger and more powerful in more homogenous and small middle-class communities where the control over members' practices is higher. More homogenous middle-class childcare centres can thus be expected to have a significantly stronger impact on setting the stage for segregated educational pathways. However, the analysis clearly shows that boundary-drawing and dissociation practices vary significantly between different childcare centres. Even though other explanations cannot be ruled out completely, enabling various forms of parental interaction and involvement in childcare might be helpful for bringing different groups of parents together, since attending these mixed settings simultaneously prevents them from drifting apart and from making segregated choices and taking segregated educational pathways. Thus, in light of the significance of childcare-related networks on parents' school choice strategies, having a more in-depth knowledge about these processes might help to mitigate school segregation.

4.3 Sub-study III: Looking for the ordinary? Parental choice and elite school avoidance in Finland and Germany

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Abstract

Middle-class parents' strategies of reproduction and social closure and their role as a driver of school segregation are already well-reported. Our two independent research projects in Finland and Germany have additionally revealed a somewhat surprising and not yet fully understood tendency of certain middle-class parents to actively avoid the most reputable schools. Using these findings as a starting point, the paper investigates the motives and reasoning behind middle-class parents' avoidance strategies in the cities of Espoo (Finland) and Mülheim an der Ruhr (Germany). The analysis shows that in educational transitions where choice is not constrained by a risk of children being left behind, some families with high educational resources and imbued with a certain ethos give precedence to 'ordinary' schools over highly selective elite schools. If this ethos can be skilfully integrated into urban educational policies, it may help develop effective equality strategies supported by parents and seen as justified by them.

Introduction

In many European countries, educational systems are increasingly affected by school segregation, typically reflecting both the growing socio-spatial differentiation around the schools and the selective choice strategies of highly-educated parents. The massification of (higher) education has led to growing competition for access to universities and prestigious jobs. Education has thus become one of the main priorities of middle- and upper-middle-class parents, driving them to search for the best schools for their children (Bourdieu 1984; Butler/Hamnett 2007). According to a growing body of research, the majority of pupil flows are thus directed towards schools with better educational outcomes and largely driven by middle-class parents' preferences regarding their composition (Boterman 2013; Butler/Hamnett 2007; Byrne 2006; Vowden 2012; van Zanten 2013). Since mainly higher-educated parents find ways to gain access to these schools, parental choice often feeds into growing school polarisation by "segregating students by ability, socio-economic background" and generating "greater inequities

across education systems" (Musset 2012, 10). This tendency is also visible in Finland and Germany.

In line with previous research, parents' narratives in our samples – produced in two independent research projects on school choice in Finland and Germany – confirm the general trend towards increased school segregation. Focusing on both a school's presumed quality of education and its composition – often assumed to be closely linked –, parents in both studies refer to quite selective choice strategies and active practices of dissociation. Depending on the (local) education system and its enrolment procedures, middle-class parents use a variety of strategies to avoid 'undesired' schools with 'undesired peer groups' (Kosunen 2014; Kosunen/Carrasco 2016).

However, apart from well-reported strategies of dissociation, both studies additionally revealed an interesting and as yet not extensively discussed tendency of some middle-class parents to actively avoid the most reputable schools. Describing these schools as too 'elitist' – with regard to both their educational offering and their socio-economic composition --, these parents instead try to find an ordinary, 'good enough', school. Their attitudes do not reflect unsuccessful attempts to gain access to elite schools, as the narratives analysed come solely from families not seeking admittance to such schools. Thus, the quest for educational 'excellence' or selective peer groups – something which international studies of educational policy tend to emphasise – seems not always to be the primary concern in school choice, at least not for a minority of parents. This rather surprising finding produced in two independent studies on parents' school choice practices in two quite distinct contexts, Finland and Germany, is the starting point for this paper.

The paper focuses on the minority of middle-class parents in both studies avoiding the most reputable schools. It analyses and discusses their motives and the explanations given for their strategy of what we call 'elite avoidance' both in Espoo in the capital area of Helsinki, Finland, and Mülheim an der Ruhr, Germany. The paper examines these parents' unusual practices in the context of their local and national backgrounds and additionally seeks to illustrate similarities and differences between parents' practices in both contexts. By exclusively focusing on this minority of parents deliberately favouring 'ordinary' neighbourhood schools – who do not differ from the whole sample with regard to social characteristics –, the paper's aim is to describe and analyse the logic behind the choices in relation to the different contexts in which they are observed. The main research question in this paper is thus: *What school choice motives do well-educated parents in these two different national and social settings express when actively seeking 'non-elite' schools?*

Finland and Germany provide an interesting comparative case due to certain similarities, but at the same time noticeable differences in their educational and welfare systems. Both countries have public education systems including non-fee-paying schools and a comparatively small number of state-subsidized private schools. However, whereas Finland has for years been one of the top-ranking countries in both educational outcomes and educational equality, Germany is known for its selective track system and a strong relationship between a child's social background and its educational achievements (OECD 2016). Moreover, rooted in the strong Nordic welfare state, Finnish schools are among the least segregated in the world (Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016). Considering these quite different contexts, the similarity of our findings produced in two independent research projects – the starting point for this paper – is striking.

Comparative studies open up new ways of analysing persisting patterns and varied dynamics, especially in the case of similar patterns in different contexts (Steiner-Khamsi 2009). They help gain a better understanding of the complex relationship between all dimensions of choice – from educational policies to individual rationalities, values and practices (Kosunen 2016; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007). In our case, while the two studies were not originally designed as a comparison, they were deliberately re-designed as such after noting the striking similarities between earlier findings. While both studies generally confirmed previous research illustrating middle-class' parents' selective choice practices leading to increasing segregation levels, the rather small number of parents bucking this trend at first seemed to be of too marginal interest. However, observing these 'unusual' practices in both studies attracted our attention and – despite the slight differences in parents' reasoning – seemed to point to the existence of persisting choice patterns in different urban, educational or social contexts. Based on the similar research design of both studies – in particular the conduct and content of the qualitative interviews – and the shared theoretical framework on which the original data collection was designed, the interview data of both studies was re-analysed, looking at the explanations and motives behind parents' rather unusual school choices, not only against their own background, but additionally from a comparative Finnish-German perspective.

Starting out from these strikingly similar, but 'unusual' choice practices, this paper explores theoretically interesting aspects of choice patterns with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the similarities in school segregation patterns at international level. This is particularly important since European cities and the educational systems rooted in them are increasingly affected by similar patterns of segregation, while school segregation has been identified as one of the key challenges in education (Musset 2012; Tammaru et al. 2017). Questions of finding ways to manage parental choice and alleviate school segregation are therefore becoming more

pressing. Comparative perspectives like in this paper – even if not originally designed as comparisons – offer particularly fruitful perspectives for developing further research projects and for refining our theoretical understanding of European educational dynamic to formulate sustainable educational policies in urban environments.

Theoretical approaches to school choice in Europe

Middle-class parents' strategies of social distinction and their impact on educational segregation have already been widely discussed in previous studies (Ball 2003; Boterman 2012; Butler/Robson 2003a; Byrne 2006; Vowden 2012). As urban areas across Europe become more segregated, the environment in which schools operate also becomes differentiated. Local variations in educational attainment, employment, crime and other dimensions of (dis)advantage affect the social fabric and reputation of neighbourhoods, which is further reflected in the schools' student bases. A growing body of research has highlighted the link between residential and school segregation in urban areas where the socio-economic structure of the neighbourhood affects the initial selection of a school's student base and may even affect its educational outcomes (Andersson et al. 2010; Bernelius 2013; Harjunen et al 2018; Nieuwenhuis/Hooimeijer 2015; Riedel et al. 2010). This interaction is particularly strong when school allocation is regulated through catchment areas and when residential mobility is the principal way of ensuring access to the 'right' schools (Rangvid 2007; Reay et al. 2011). Through strategies such as circumventing (sometimes illegally) allocation regulations, school segregation is additionally reinforced by parental choice (Noreisch 2007a; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Vowden 2012). Parents in many countries try to 'solve' the problem by opting out of the state school system and applying for private education. In Finland and Germany, however, private education plays a comparatively minor role. Parents' selective choice strategies thus focus predominantly on state school alternatives.

"In an era when a good education means getting the qualifications necessary to go on to university" (Butler/Hamnett 2007), middle-class parents' search for the 'right' school – a school providing all opportunities necessary to ensure social reproduction – is based on quality criteria, measured for instance by pupils' educational performance. At the same time, school choice appears increasingly dependent on a school's social and ethnic composition (Boterman 2013; Byrne 2006; Karsten et al. 2003; Vowden 2012). In addition to parents' concerns about the social backgrounds and behavioural tendencies of their children's classmates, they strongly associate a school's composition with educational quality. Middle-class parents – in contrast to their working-class counterparts – are greatly inclined to choose, knowing how to 'play the

game' and ensure access to the 'right' schools (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Kosunen/Seppänen 2015; Rangvid 2007; Reay et al. 2011; Vincent/Ball 2001). Musset (2012, 34) summarises such behaviour:

> *"Although parents may be concerned about equity and integration and may support their neighbourhood school, they seek at the same time the "best" education for their children. […] Research shows that parents prefer schools with populations ethnically and socio-economically similar to their own family […] As disadvantaged families tend to send their children to their local school, more advantaged families make segregating choices: as a result, the level of segregation in schools is high and exceeds the level of residential segregation."*

Similar to previous studies, a strong social selectivity of parental choice has also been revealed in both Finnish and German urban contexts (Bernelius 2013; Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Groos 2015; Kosunen 2016; Maloutas/Ramos Lobato 2015; Noreisch 2007b; Ramos Lobato/Weck 2017; Riedel et al. 2010; Seppänen 2006 & et al. 2012). As illustrated, the majority of families opting for choice have a higher-than-average educational level and pupil flows are strongly directed towards schools with higher socio-economic composition and educational outcomes. Consequently, in both contexts parents' selective choice has led to an increase in school segregation with regard to educational outcomes and student composition (Groos 2015; Kosunen et al. 2016). By actively dissociating themselves from the most reputable schools and their 'too elitist' socio-economic composition, a minority of parents in our studies prefer to look for 'ordinary' schools. This paper thus seeks to understand their 'unusual' deliberate choice of schools outside this 'elite' hierarchy.

Previous studies show that choice strategies vary among middle-class cohorts, depending on parents' divergent endowment with economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu/Passeron 1976) and their different value systems and (educational) ideals partly reflecting national and societal ideologies (Boterman 2013; Butler/Robson 2003a; Noreisch 2007a; Vincent/Ball 2006). Although not yet quantified in size and scope, some middle-class parents opt out of the mainstream by deliberately enrolling their children in socially and ethnically mixed state schools (Billingham/McDonough Kimelberg 2013; Byrne 2006; Bloomfield Cucchiara 2013; Bloomfield Cucchiara/McNamara Horvat 2009; Reay et al. 2011; Reay et al. 2008; van Zanten 2007; Vowden 2012). Apart from their preferences for an urban lifestyle 'forcing' certain parents to just accept the 'good enough' state school within the city (Billingham/McDonough Kimelberg 2013), many of these decisions reflect parents' appreciation of diversity and a progressive political ideology trying to contribute to the public good and social justice (Bloomfield Cucchiara/McNamara Horvat 2009; Hollingworth/Williams 2010; Reay et al. 2011) – as also

observed in the Finnish case study. However, the compatibility of social ideals and individual concerns frequently produces tensions and dilemmas between being a 'good citizen' – and trying not to heighten social and ethnic segregation – and being a 'good parent' by giving priority to their own child's future position (Breidenstein et al. 2014; Frank/Weck 2018; Oría et al. 2007; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007). Consequently, the presence of parents 'like us' is particularly important "because it engenders a sense of safety and reassurance about a decision perceived by some to be 'risky'" (Posey-Maddox et al. 2014, 449). The comparatively high confidence of parents in avoiding the schools seen as too 'elitist' found in our studies therefore seems somehow surprising.

Setting the context: Finnish and German schools in the city

Reflecting the core values of the Nordic welfare state, the Finnish school system is known as egalitarian and comprehensive. School quality is universally seen as high and stable. At local level, municipalities have the right to decide on allocation policy. In the Finnish context, this paper focuses on a research study conducted in Espoo, a city in the Helsinki metropolitan region with approximately 250,000 inhabitants. Espoo has promoted parental choice through specific geographical and governmental regulations, which, in a way, guide parents in their choices. Parents may express a preference for a general class in one of the neighbourhood lower-secondary schools within the catchment area or apply for a class with a special emphasis – e.g. music or mathematics – in any of the schools in Espoo or in neighbouring cities providing such classes – resulting in differentiation between the parallel classes in one school (Kosunen 2014, 2016; see also Berisha/Seppänen 2016; Seppänen et al. 2015). Urban residential segregation has traditionally been moderate in the whole region, but has grown noticeably over the last three decades (Kortteinen/Vaattovaara 2015; Vilkama et al. 2014), leading to a significant increase in the socio-economic and ethnic differentiation of schools since the 1990s (Bernelius 2013).

Although the major influence of a child's social background on its educational success has been significantly lowered over the last years (OECD 2016), the German educational system is – by contrast – still known for its comparatively high level of social selectivity and inequality. After four years of comprehensive schooling at primary school, pupils are segregated into different educational tracks with different orientations. The *Gymnasium* is the highest secondary track, leading directly to university. Since switching from a lower to a higher track remains the exception (Bellenberg/Forell 2012), the transition from primary to secondary school is a crucial step in a child's educational career. Access to primary schools is predominantly regulated by catchment areas. However, the federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW) – in which our

study city, Mülheim an der Ruhr, is located – introduced free primary school choice in 2008. With its 170,000 inhabitants, Mülheim is part of the Ruhr area, an old industrial polycentric urban area in NRW characterised by a comparatively polarised social geography. Though poverty is increasing, especially among children, its high share of high-income inhabitants means that Mülheim is nevertheless one of the wealthier cities in NRW (especially in the Ruhr area). Moreover, similar to the location of Espoo in relation to Helsinki, it is located within commuting distance of Düsseldorf, the capital of NRW.

The two studies focus on distinct educational stages of children of different ages – lower-secondary school in Finland and primary school in Germany. However, since the stakes in both systems as regards the transition to the next educational stage are similar, the operational logic of choice is comparable. Whereas in the Finnish case, pupil assessment at the end of lower secondary school is done via universal criteria, in NRW, the decision on the secondary school track to be followed is taken by the parents themselves. Thus, in both systems "the risks of making a bad choice" (Kosunen 2014), i.e. choosing a school that might deny access to higher-status schools in the following educational stage, are relatively small. Further similarities enable a comparative perspective: Both systems are public, the comparatively few private schools are almost completely state-subsidized, and schools are feeless. Both educational stages are comprehensive, historically based on the 'one school for all' principle, and in both contexts, access has developed from catchment areas to the current free choice system.

Methodology

The paper is based on two independent studies initially not designed for a comparative analysis, but nevertheless allowing a new, joint analysis of the datasets within a common framework. Avoiding the construction of a de-contextualised comparison or culture insensitivity (Steiner-Khamsi 2009), the paper's aim is to portray and understand the logic of parental choice practices in both cities through analysing each case in its own background. While both studies originally examine (well-educated) parents' school choice practices and their motives in general, this paper concentrates on that minority of middle-class parents whose 'unusual' practice of avoiding the most reputable schools clearly deviates from the 'norm' found in both datasets.

The Finnish study is based on 73 parent interviews conducted as part of a larger research project on parental choice of secondary schools and the construction of symbolic hierarchies of reputation across schools in the city of Espoo (2011) (Kosunen 2014). All interviewees had at least one child transferring to lower secondary education (12 – 13-year-olds). They were invited to

the personal interview after answering a city-wide survey about school choice on Wilma, the online school application system. The sample comprises parents from every lower-secondary school of the city, all having a middle or upper middle-class status, defined by the combination of educational level (tertiary education), occupational status (e.g. managers, engineers, teachers) and income. The tension between pushing for excellence or striving for the ordinary in education was discussed in all interviews.

The German study is based on 35 interviews (12 of them with middle-class parents, defined – due to a lack of information on economic capital – by their educational attainment[80]) conducted as part of a PhD project on parental choice of primary schools and the role of networks at kindergarten for parents' choice strategies (2016). They were recruited and invited to a personal interview during a participatory observation in three kindergartens all located in two inner-city neighbourhoods of Mülheim. Except for three refusals, all parents in these kindergartens who had to register their children for primary school were interviewed. The twelve middle-class parents all had at least a higher education entrance qualification or tertiary education and occupations such as a doctor, tax consultant or assistant manager in office communication. In both contexts, this paper refers only to the minority of middle-class parents deliberately avoiding the 'best' schools in practice (around one in five of the interviews in both contexts), even if related ideas were discussed broadly in other interviews as well.

Both studies originally sought to examine parents' school choice strategies and followed a quite similar theoretical path, building on the European bourdieusian research tradition of the role of class and cultural and social capital for (middle-class) parents' school choice strategies and social distinction (mainly Ball 2003; Reay et al. 2008 & 2011; van Zanten 2007; Vincent/Ball 2006). Within the semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in both contexts, parents were asked about their choice criteria, such as school reputation or peer-group composition, their information sources, their conceptions of schooling, including the significance of active choice-making and their involvement in choice. Thus, both projects pursued similar research questions and followed a congruent research design, including their interview guidelines. In both studies, interviews were mainly conducted with one parent (predominantly the mothers) without their children being present. They lasted on average 1.5 hours, were fully transcribed and analysed. To validate the opportunities of analysing both studies from a comparative

[80] Due to changing occupations, labour market and income distribution, defining class is becoming increasingly difficult (Devine et al. 2005). Often, class is defined by occupation (Ley 1996) or income. However, since class is becoming more cultural (Bennett et al. 2009) and parents' cultural capital is crucial in schools and for school choice (Lareau 1987), defining middle class by educational attainment is seen to be a sufficiently approximate indicator (Blokland/van Eijk 2012; Nast/Blokland 2014).

perspective, the data was reopened and reanalysed within this joint framework. The paper thus builds on a novel analysis of pre-existing datasets. In a second step, the results of this re-analysis were comprehensively discussed during a joint workshop. Similarities and differences between choice practices and explanations for them were both portrayed against their particular backgrounds and afterwards collectively discussed and jointly structured for the paper.

There are two sampling differences between the two studies, which we took into consideration when reanalysing our data for this study. First, the divergent classifications of middle class seem to produce minor differences between the two samples. The additional use of parents' occupational status and their income as classification criteria in the Finnish study seems to result in a sample with a slightly higher level of economic capital, in part affecting parents' motives for avoiding the most reputable schools. This must be kept in mind for further analysis. Nevertheless, the middle classes in the two cities were adjusted to fit the local sphere in which they operated. As the Espoo area also includes the absolute elite of Finland (unlike Mülheim in the German scope), the paper focuses on the middle-class practices in each study and excludes the elite. Consequently, the parents' cultural capital in both samples is comparable. Moreover, since cultural capital in particular is needed to encode / decode knowledge of schools (Lareau 1987; Vincent et al. 2010), the study provides an interesting window for comparative education studies.

Second, the size of both samples differs since the German study did not originally focus exclusively on middle-class parents. However, it contains interviews with (almost) all parents with children moving on to primary school in the selected kindergartens – and not only with a selection of them – and is supplemented by an extensive participatory observation (six weeks in each kindergarten) with frequent and regular contacts and conversations with the parents, enabling a more in-depth assessment of parental narratives and thus increasing the analysis's intensity and reliability tremendously. The datasets have been reanalysed for the purposes of this study, with sensitivity to the contextual differences and case-specific details within each dataset.

Looking for the 'ordinary': Parents' school choice practices and their (similar) motivations

Apart from the "increasing view of parents as consumers shopping for the 'best' schools in a competitive marketplace" (Posey-Maddox et al. 2014 after Chubb/Moe 1990), few parents in either study appear to actively avoid these schools, describing them as too "elitist" and "competitive". The similarity of their practices is particularly striking considering the strong and ingrained differences between the systems in which they occur. The following section thus

illustrates both similarities and differences between parents' motives, analysing them in their specific contexts. The comparative perspective may yield possibilities for developing more inclusive educational policies, as the expressed values, concerns or ideals may be shared by or introduced to other families – even if their actual choices were initially motivated by other factors.

Avoidance of competition and stress

The 'elitist' schools' good reputation is mainly based on their high standard of teaching, extensive curricula and subsequent optimal preparation for the highest level of secondary education, namely the *Gymnasium* in Germany and the academic secondary track, lukio, in Finland. Despite their perceived high educational quality, some middle-class parents in our samples expressed explicit disinterest in these schools, often using the term 'elitist' to describe their perceived high status, outstanding reputation and exceptional educational achievements. One main driver of avoidance were concerns about harmful competition at the 'elitist' schools and the subsequent psychological stress it might provoke.

> *"Yes, I'm really against putting all of them in the same school; then having all the talented in there. That will only create awful pressure that you always have to be even more talented than others; that you always have to get more than full marks in everything. The competition is just so hard in there."* (Linda, Finland)[81]

> *"According to the other parents, this school is the best school in the whole city. It is very much focused on educational achievement. However, we didn't even consider applying for this school because [...] it is too much focused on educational achievement and tests. [...] I would have had serious concerns at that school because of this pressure."* (Sofia, Germany)

Since the presumed high educational quality is feared to be closely related to a high level of competitiveness and pressure to perform, certain parents instead focus more on their child's wellbeing and "blossoming" (Raveaud/van Zanten 2007), looking for schools with a more child-oriented atmosphere. In Mülheim, some parents even completely escape the state school system and apply to a private Waldorf school associated with the absence of any form of competition and educational pressure.

> *"I said then that I'm not letting my kid go into those selective classes [in the school with the most prestigious reputation], because it's far too competitive there, but our own school [with a specialized class] was a good solution. Actually, I also thought that it was*

[81] Since the interviews were conducted in Finnish or German, all quotes in this paper were translated.

> *good because of being close to friends and the fact that it was so close to our house."* (Maria, Finland)

> *"In the other school [the school they actually chose], the children also learn quite well and they have to perform as well. However, from all that I have heard, the teachers are very kind, not that strict, they cater to children's needs; the children just feel comfortable there."* (Helen, Germany)

As illustrated by the last quote, however, implicit pressure to conform to dominant norms of school matching and reputation (van Zanten 2013) seems to make it difficult to resist the mainstream choice and to turn down the reputable 'best' schools. In particular, parents in the German case therefore often tried to justify their choices by emphasising the chosen schools' high educational quality as being comparable to the 'elitist' ones.

Fears of 'elitist' socialisation and social pressure

Apart from their concerns about a high level of competition, parents' avoidance in both studies is additionally related to the expected social pressure at the 'elitist' schools. Fears of children being out of place and bullied at school are known from previous studies, although these predominantly refer to middle-class children attending schools with a high share of lower social class groups (van Zanten 2013; Vowden 2012). In our research, however, parents were more worried about the psychological stress and the social (and economic) pressure emerging in an upper-class environment. Consequently, parents in both studies were worried about their children becoming social outsiders.

> *"At least from the friends' kids that are [in these elite schools], we have noticed that there is quite a lot of bullying and such, so it is not always… Actually, it doesn't sound all that nice for the kids. Of course, it is really neat for the parents: Oh, I have my kids [in this elite school], but that's not at all important to me."* (Paula, Finland)

> *"I was educated in a Gymnasium where all parents had a lot of money. Their children all wore clothes from Hugo Boss, Diesel and Levi's. This can put you under pressure."* (Kim, Germany)

Especially in the German study – whose sample mainly comprises middle-class parents with comparatively lower economic capital – the avoidance of the highly 'elitist' schools is strongly linked to the expected high level of economic capital among the families at 'elitist' schools and the subsequent compulsion to "keep up with the Joneses" in terms of clothes, leisure activities, etc. This feeling also applies to some of the parents in the Finnish study. In these cases, the active avoidance of the 'best' schools is often related to the parents' own painful experiences when being a child and not being able to blend in with other well-off children.

Nevertheless, it is too simple to ascribe parents' reluctance solely to their apparently lower economic capital. Their practices also constitute a conscious strategy of avoiding the effects of socialisation in such an 'elitist' environment. Thus, in contrast to previous research illustrating middle-class parents explicitly striving for schools with a higher socio-economic composition, the parents we focus on in this paper expressed serious concerns about their children becoming out of touch with society and losing their sense of the 'real world' (Bloomfield Cucchiara/McNamara Horvat 2009; Hollingworth/Williams 2010). The way 'elitist parents' were presumed to deal with money raised fears among the parents studied of spoiling their own child and of undermining their social values and concepts of education.

> *"We are both products of the public, municipal system and we really didn't see any reason to send our kids to some [elite class]. [Interviewer: Why?] Basically, because those schools produce elitist assholes."* (Johannes, Finland)

> *"Almost all parents with a university degree, who earn good money, really good money, want to send their children to this school. […] Since I've heard stories about how these children behave, I must admit that, although I would be able to drive my son every day to this school, I just don't want to."* (Lara, Germany)

As the quotations above illustrate, concerns are not only related to the risk of not being able to keep up with certain social or economic expectations of the peer group – which is based on slightly different samples particularly relevant in the German study –, but also to children being influenced by negative 'elitist' attitudes and socialised into cultural norms and behaviours perceived as arrogant and haughty.

Embracing the 'good enough' school

Apart from deliberately rejecting 'elitist' schools due to psychological stress, social competition and an overly 'elitist socialisation', some parents simply do not seem to strive for the 'best' schools, viewing local schools as completely acceptable. Although these parents were well aware of the differing reputations of schools - or classes in Espoo - the 'best' school just did not appear to be a necessity.

> *"If you are super talented, then it's different, or if you are otherwise really different from average, then we can try to accommodate special needs, but that's not how it is with us. Let's keep a cool head with this."* (Rasmus, Finland)

> *"I think if the child is smart, then he or she will get the recommendation for Gymnasium anyway – independent of the primary school the child attends."* (Julia, Germany)

Thus, whereas previous studies mainly analysed parents' choice of the local school against the background of their own value systems and the different capital they possess, our studies point

to an additional explanatory factor: the way parents interpret and relate to the institutional context they operate in. In Espoo, the acceptance of local schools seems to be based on a deeply rooted trust in the quality and equality of the Finnish education system; in Mülheim, it can instead be ascribed to the specific stage of education. Differences between the secondary school tracks and, hence, the importance of their careful selection, seem to be completely internalised and not questioned at all. Less significance, however, is attributed to the choice of primary schools – at least by some parents. In addition, particularly for many dual-earner households, the afternoon care options, which differ tremendously between primary schools, are often weighed against the 'quality' or reputational criteria. Thus, evaluating the "hype" around primary school choice as exaggerated allows parents not to strive for the 'best' schools, but to rather use different choice criteria and to choose more 'ordinary' ones.

Finland: Rejection of the 'competition society'

Both studies revealed similar concerns about potential competitiveness, social pressure and an overly 'elitist' socialisation as crucial explanations for parents' rather unusual practice of ruling out the 'best' schools. At the same time, however, the interviews revealed two striking differences between parents' motives. In the Finnish study, parents' avoidance practices were strongly related to their rejection of any kind of perceived introduction of the 'competition society' into schools. They were deeply concerned about a selective education system separating children by their educational achievement and – de facto – by their socio-economic background.

> *"I wouldn't want to make a huge distinction that there are [selective] top schools and so on. These specialised local schools, fine, we should have them, but I wouldn't want any elite top schools, because then it steers the system so that only the really wealthy or really brainy go there."* (Markus, Finland)

Even though parents were well aware of schools or specialised classes that might yield more exchange value for their children's future, they supported the idea of equal education for all. Their view of good education involved a concern for equality and integration (Kosunen 2016). As a consequence, dilemmas between being a 'good citizen' and being a 'good parent', frequently emphasised in previous research studies (Oría et al. 2007; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007), seemed not to exist for this minority of parents in the Finnish study. Their active support of equal education was particularly striking in light of the high sensitivity of education for middle-class families – even for those embracing diversity in other social fields (Boterman 2013; Bunar 2010; Butler/Hamnett 2007; Hollingworth/Williams 2010). As will be discussed, this confidence may be rooted in their trust in the Finnish education system and linked to a general

understanding of social class differences in Finnish society.

Germany: Worries about fitting in

In the German case, by contrast, these egalitarian deliberations were almost invisible. Even though few parents discussed the segregating effects of their choices, their doubts seemed to have hardly any impact on their actual practices – or at least, they did not mention them. For them, matching children and schools was of high significance. In contrast to previous studies illustrating that this social matching is one major issue of parental school choice (van Zanten 2013), parents in Mülheim were predominantly worried about their own belonging or fitting in. Thus, when describing their concerns of being out place or not feeling comfortable at the 'elitist schools', they did not refer to their children, but almost exclusively to themselves. Although parents in both studies tried to protect their children from social pressure and competitiveness, parents in Mülheim were additionally worried about the social pressure they themselves might be exposed to.

> *For instance, I like to joke a lot, but then I sometimes think "Pull yourself together!" I guess you cannot be that natural when you know that there are physicians who pick up their children. And lawyers, who, I don't know, just are on another level. I wouldn't say they are better […] but I think I wouldn't feel comfortable at that school.* (Amina, Germany)

Despite being equipped with high cultural capital, these parents seem to be put off by the reputable 'best' schools due to perceived differences in endowment with economic capital and their fear of not being able to measure up to other parents. Based on their perceived differentiation between different 'types' of middle-class parents, parents at the 'elitist' schools were described as 'elite parents', being – or at least acting as if they were – on 'another level', a level to which the interviewees thought they did not belong to.

Discussion

Our interviews reveal that there is a small group of middle-class parents whose choices are not exclusively focused on the 'best', but rather on 'ordinary' neighbourhood schools. The emergence of such similar, but at the same time quite unusual choice practices in clearly different educational contexts is interesting – in particular in light of the demonstrated overwhelming similarities between middle-class parents' school choice strategies across Europe. Even though some previous studies have already illustrated that parents' school choice strategies are not solely focused on finding the 'best' schools, but on a range of other dimensions as well, parents'

confidence in ignoring norms of school matching and consciously avoiding the 'best' schools in our studies was striking - and noteworthy in such a sensitive social field such as education (Butler/Robson 2003b). The juxtaposition of the two studies and the analysis of parents' preferences both against their own background and in a comparative way reveal motives going beyond parents' individual values and ideals, but which are also a result of the different institutional contexts parents operate in.

The described concerns about competitive school culture within 'elitist' schools or worries about 'fitting in' are likely to be present in other national contexts as well. However, whether these worries translate into school choices steering away from 'elite' schools seems to depend on the educational system's selectiveness and the opportunities and alternatives offered. One explanation for parents' confidence might be that their unusual choice practices are 'underpinned' by the educational system they operate in. Due to the lack of institutional links between the observed comprehensive school stages and the subsequent ones, there is no necessity to attend the 'best' school to proceed securely to the next level – in contrast to countries with high-stakes competition, where the idea of not applying to the most selective schools in an extremely segregated educational and societal system would appear absurd to most parents (for Chile see Kosunen/Carrasco 2016). Therefore, parents' rejection does not mean that they do not also strive for their children to attain elite positions in their educational or professional life later. It instead illustrates that they do not consider competition at this stage to be necessary or even helpful to that end.

In the Finnish study, not seeking the most demanding and selective schools and classes is rooted in parents' trust in the national education system (Kosunen/Carrasco 2016). In the German study, parents raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system still believe in 'no choice' and trust in similar primary school curricula. Moreover, since in NRW parents are not obliged to follow the primary school's recommendation on the specific secondary school track82, primary school choice might still be associated with a low 'risk'. As both systems enable students to achieve the highest levels of education without attending any 'elite' institutions, parents can 'afford' to avoid the most competitive places and not to strive for excellence. With a 'good-enough' school deemed to be adequate (Billingham/McDonough Kimelberg 2013; Bloomfield

[82] Since each of the sixteen German federal states has individual responsibility for education, education systems differ slightly between them, for instance in the transition regulations from primary to secondary school. The transition is generally based on the primary school's recommendation, reflecting a pupil's level of achievement. However, whereas in some federal states the subsequent and thus final decision is taken by the primary school or depends on the fulfilment of performance criteria, in NRW it is taken by the parents themselves.

Cucchiara 2013), parents are in a position to consider additional choice criteria such as wellbeing or spatial proximity.

Despite these similarities of parents' motives to avoid overly 'elitist' schools, the analysis also reveals crucial differences that seem to partly reflect specific national settings. In contrast to their German counterparts, parents in the Finnish study tend to emphasise their worries about a 'competition society' being enforced through the education system and parents' strategic practices. Although increasingly confronted with the trends of individualised responsibility as a consequence of free school choice, the Nordic 'one school for all' ideology seems to remain strong, thus promoting parents' support for social mixing and their rejection of elitism (Kosunen 2016; Simola et al. 2017). Instead of considering school choice in an isolated manner, it appears to be linked to a general discussion about social class differences in Finnish society. This resonates interestingly with a wider debate on current social and political discourses embracing market logic and constant competition. Finnish parents' rejection of competition, social selectiveness and 'elitist' schools appears to be linked to the traditional egalitarian ethos embedded in the educational system and deeply rooted in Finnish society and the Nordic welfare state. However, the fact that parents do not mention the dilemma between being a 'good parent' and a 'good citizen' might also reflect the low risk associated with the Finnish education system.

By contrast, parents in the German study do not seem to be as confident with their decision as their Finnish counterparts. While emphasising the expected similar curricula and equal chances offered by all primary schools to attend any secondary school type afterwards, the introduction of free choice in combination with their knowledge of diverging school compositions and *Gymnasium* transition rates seem to nourish doubts about the potentially serious consequences of their decision. In contrast to their Finnish counterparts, parents in the German study seem to be influenced to a greater degree by a neoliberal market discourse and the trend towards individualised responsibility in the context of educational opportunity, thus not rejecting competition, choice and subsequent inequality as steadfastly. They are accustomed to a selective track system and thus torn between primary schools' (traditional) comprehensive character on the one hand, and the system's overall selectiveness and competitiveness on the other. Less egalitarian and more meritocratic principles are embedded in the more conservative welfare regime in Germany, in which the (lower) social position of people tends to be associated with their individual fates (and failures) than with social inequality and disadvantage. The personal concerns voiced by the parents in the German study about not being able to keep up or not fitting in to elitist schools might be based on social distinctions in a Western European society that tends to uphold rather than iron out distinctions between groups of different social status and where these

distinctions – in particular between middle and upper classes – seem to be clearer than in Nordic societies. However, we additionally need to keep in mind the slightly lower level of economic capital of the parents in the German sample when analysing these concerns. Their less privileged position in comparison to their Finnish counterparts is likely to explain their concerns about not being able to keep up – which the more affluent (upper) middle-class parents in the Finnish context are just not confronted with.

Conclusion

Even though parents across different national contexts often report an ideological interest in inclusive education, their actual practices typically contribute to more exclusive education, in what has been described as "the dissonance created by the clash between liberal values regarding equitable public schools and preference for segregated and advantaged educational circumstances for offspring of affluent mothers" (Brantlinger 2003, x). The quantitatively and qualitatively identified mechanisms of school choice appear to feed into growing segregation between schools like streams running into a steadily flowing river. These tendencies are well documented also in the Finnish and German contexts (Bernelius/Vaattovaara 2016; Groos 2015; Kosunen 2016; Seppänen et al. 2015). However, our interviews draw a more differentiated picture, revealing parental practices helping to reduce segregation in small currents going against the main flow.

'Excellence', an aspect international trends in educational policy tend to emphasise, does not always seem to be the primary concern. Instead, the 'good-enough' school (Simola et al. 2017, 33) often seems to suffice, even to the extent that parents actively rule out schools deemed to be 'elitist'. The findings of our two independent studies do not allow an in-depth comparison of parents' practices. Similarly, our interview data does not allow an estimate of how widespread the described behaviours of 'looking for the ordinary' are, with more research needed into these fine-grained nuances of educational strategies to better understand the phenomenon and relate it to its specific social and educational context. Nevertheless, the similar observations made in both studies and their comparative re-analysis in this paper help in understanding and explaining some of the motivations behind seemingly unusual school choices, providing new elements for developing European educational policies.

The interviews in both studies show that there are families with high educational resources and ethos who are not necessarily focused solely on highly selective elite schools. Our results hint that there may be ways to resolve the conflict between a wish for 'equitable public schools' and to chart a secure educational path for one's own child. In both contexts, the critical questions

relate to the opportunity structure in the educational system and a careful understanding of the nuances of parental concerns. Instead of the increasing perception of middle-class parents as strategically 'shopping' for the perceived best schools and at the same time pushing for higher selectivity and growing differences, there are also social forces and choices leading to greater equality – found in these quite different social and educational contexts. If the differences between schools remain small enough and choice is not constrained by fears of being left behind, there seems to be individual-level support for egalitarian educational policies from various different motivations, even among families with a very high socio-economic status. If this ethos can be skilfully integrated into urban educational policies, it may help develop effective equality strategies supported and seen as justified by parents. To this end, it is important to gain more knowledge about families opting for their own neighbourhood schools or otherwise less competitive environments and more understanding of their reasons to look for the ordinary.

At the same time, our interviews clearly illustrate that constraints in choices may quickly affect people's interpretation of what the risks associated with not attending elite schools might be. If neighbourhood and school segregation grow markedly, the tendency to avoid elite schools may be challenged at any level of education – including (formerly) egalitarian contexts as the Finnish one. Settling for the ordinary is only possible if ordinary is good enough and if it opens the doors to the next tiers of education. Growing segregation, in residential and educational terms, may quickly challenge parental support for educational policies aimed at mixed schools and a relatively non-competitive, egalitarian state school system. This aspect brings educational policies directly into the larger sphere of urban and national policies promoting inclusive communities and carefully supported educational paths.

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5 DISCUSSION

This dissertation's main aim was to examine more in depth parents' underlying motivations and deliberations when choosing a primary school for their children after the abolition of catchment areas in NRW. It sought a) to analyse the policy reform's impact on parents' choice practices and, consequently, on primary school segregation, b) to shed light on the differences and commonalities between choice strategies of parents with different levels of educational attainment, and c) to examine the extent to which these strategies are shaped and pre-structured by child-care-related parental networks. In contrast to most studies on educational choice, emphasis was deliberately placed on including the perspectives of different groups of parents instead of focusing solely on higher-educated parents. This focus appeared to be crucial since the policy reform was explicitly advertised as a tool to increase the choice options of socially disadvantaged parents and was expected to contribute to equity in choice (MSW NRW 2005).

After the abolition of primary school catchment areas in 2008, the choice of a school outside the former catchment area increased, leading to a higher level of school segregation throughout the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr (Groos 2015, 21; Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 7). However, based on its qualitative empirical approach, this study enables deeper insights into parents' choice practices and illustrates their complexity and inconsistencies. While sub-study I (chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019) points to the diverging choice criteria and the concerns and uncertainties particularly felt by higher-educated parents when choosing a primary school for their children, sub-study III (chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018) provides deeper insights into the logic underlying a somewhat unexpected choice practice of a few parents who opt out of the mainstream by deliberately avoiding the 'best' primary schools. Thus, parents do not simply choose the most selective or prestigious schools or just the nearest schools. Depending on a variety of influencing factors, such as endowments of different forms of capital, personal values, parental networks, experiences with diversity and exclusion, trust in the education system's quality, and residence – they tend to choose the best 'match', not only for their own child, as noted by previous studies (see Kosunen 2016; van Zanten 2013), but also for themselves (discussed in all sub-studies).

While each of the presented sub-studies had one particular focus when analysing parents' school choice practices, this chapter seeks to bring together the three different dimensions of choice and to jointly discuss them. In doing so, it aims to illustrate the interplay and the complex interconnection between the social, institutional and spatial dimensions that need to be considered to analyse and understand the parental choice of primary schools more in depth. Thus, the

following chapter particularly focuses on the surprising findings, that is, on the results that I did not expect when starting this dissertation but that – for this very reason – might be a useful and valuable contribution to the existing academic debate around parental school choice practices. Therefore, the chapter tries to draw particular attention to

- not only the **different choice criteria and constraints** but also the divergent role played by parental networks for parents with a lower and higher educational attainment;
- the surprisingly **low level of parental interaction**, the **complex processes of exclusion and disadvantage** and the **selective use of information** that occurs – albeit to a different extent – between parents with different levels of educational attainment in the examined childcare centres;
- the unexpected and **deliberate avoidance of more reputable schools** by higher-educated parents, which cannot – as I would have expected – be ascribed to a more relaxed way of dealing with primary school choice by parents used to primary school catchment areas but to highly complex processes of social matching among parents (not children) that even lead higher-educated parents to shy away from the (perceived) more selective and competitive primary schools;
- and the **surprisingly strong role of the new institutional context** in shaping the norms of school choice and consequently influencing parents' school choice strategies.

On a theoretical level, this dissertation sheds light on the interplay of the social, institutional and spatial space of parental choice of primary schools. The city's socio-spatial structure, the (local) educational governance (new admission regulations, the scarcity of official and objectifiable information), the social construction of both the significance of choice and the schools' reputations (knowledge, personal values and constraints) and previous educational decisions (choice of childcare centres and access to parental networks) all influence the ways in which different forms of parents' capital are transformed and transferred in the field of education and consequently contribute to the reproduction of social and educational inequalities. While political actors advertised free primary school choice as a tool to allow all parents to choose their desired school (MSW NRW 2005; Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 2), this dissertation clearly illustrates that this rhetoric hides the strategic investment of capital that it is still necessary to make use of: the enormous effort that particularly higher-educated parents make to collect information and to make a decision, the social and cultural capital that they invest to ensure, or to better increase the chances, that their children get accepted at the selected school and the economic capital that they are willing and able to transform to implement their choice (to

overcome greater distances between home and school). This rhetoric hides the socio-spatial differences in choice since this strategic investment is particularly 'necessary' – or felt to be necessary – by some parents living in the more mixed inner-city neighbourhoods surrounded by schools with very different compositions and reputations, while parents living in more affluent neighbourhoods surrounded by highly reputable schools with a privileged composition do not need to opt out of the local school and to thus invest all these efforts (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 9). Moreover, it hides and neglects the practical and economic constraints that particularly lower-educated parents face and that still significantly limit their choice options. The highly quite unequal possession of capitals thus affects parents' real choice options in two ways – by determining where families live and by constraining parents' choice-making. However, more surprising and even more alarming than the inequality of choice options – which is nothing really new – is the fact that these strategies are already pursued in primary school, Germany's only comprehensive school type.

5.1 School choice strategies of parents with a lower and higher level of educational attainment

Regarding the differences between the choice practices and criteria of parents with a higher and lower level of educational attainment – as raised by research objective b – the qualitative interviews conducted in this dissertation predominantly draw a picture similar to the previous quantitative analyses: For lower-educated parents, the spatial proximity between home and school is by far the most crucial choice criterion.[83] School performance is considered as well, but assessment criteria remain somewhat abstract. However, due to organisational and economic constraints, lower-educated parents' choices are (spatially) very limited, and choice criteria other than the schools' performance need to be considered with priority. The schools' composition plays an ambiguous role in their choice-making: While some parents tend to shy away from highly reputable schools, others try to dissociate themselves from established stereotypes by deliberately avoiding schools with an 'undesired' composition and by drawing moral boundaries and reproducing negative attributions of disadvantaged children (see also Nast/Blokland 2014) – mainly children with a migration background (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos

[83] Due to the high correlation of social and ethnic indicators in this analysis, the high significance of spatial proximity for lower-educated parents' school choices might also explain why parents with a migration background predominantly choose schools with a higher share of migrant children – since these schools are mostly the nearest schools and have high shares of children with a lower social status as well.

Lobato/Groos 2019, 10-11).[84] Thus, processes of boundary-drawing can be observed not only between but also within social groups, and therefore, they seem to be more intricate than the Bourdieusian perspective of drawing exclusively on class boundaries conveys (Nast/Blokland 2014, 495).

In contrast, for higher-educated parents, spatial proximity is not pursued at any price. The schools' performance and their composition – which are often assumed to be directly interrelated – are the most decisive aspects of choice. To evaluate the former, different indicators, gathered arduously through informal information, are used, such as the transition rate to the *Gymnasium*, special educational profiles or afternoon care. Concerned about high shares of both children with a migration background with insufficient German language skills (see also Vowden 2012 for London) and the consequent need for additional support and children from lower social status households, who are assumed to have bad manners and diction that could possibly influence their own children (Boterman 2013; Rangvid 2007; Vowden 2012), most higher-educated parents aim to avoid the schools with the worst reputations and (socially and ethnically) undesired peer groups. Their choices are predominantly quite selective (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019).

As the interviews demonstrate, not only do the choice criteria vary between different groups of parents. The divergent choice strategies of parents with a different social status are additionally ascribed to the varying significance that parents attribute to this early stage of schooling and, more concretely, to primary school choice. Being confident that all primary schools offer the same quality and teach the same topics, most lower-educated parents attach great(er) importance to the choice of secondary school and do not establish any link between primary and secondary school choice (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 13). This is particularly true for one lower-educated mother with a migration background who had not

[84] When talking about primary schools with a bad reputation, lower-educated parents solely refer to the schools' high shares of children with a migration background (both parents with and without migration background), while higher-educated parents are additionally concerned about the schools' social composition and the consequent 'wrong' types of socialisation. In regard to the schools' ethnic compositions, higher-educated parents are predominantly concerned about children's potentially insufficient German language skills and the consequent need for additional support that might lower their own child's learning progress. Lower-educated parents, in contrast, mainly associate migrant children with deviant and aggressive behaviour as well as bad manners – here, social and ethnic categories become blurred. Interestingly, this refers to lower-educated parents both with and without a migration background. Concerns about potentially insufficient German language skills are also discussed; however, while lower-educated parents without a migration background are 'solely' concerned about their own children being out of place as the 'only' German-speaking child, lower-educated parents with a migration background fear the negative effects on their own child's German language skills and learning abilities. Moreover, it is mostly the latter who use distinctions of lacking 'integration' and lacking language skills (which are assumed to be automatically interrelated) to negotiate the negative attributions to the intersection of ethnicity and social status. As Gans (1995) explains, stigmatised groups often draw moral boundaries that should help define own deservingness. Thus, actively trying to reproduce the negative attributions of migrant parents (and of parents with a lower social status) might be a strategy to dissociate from stereotyped groups (which both migrant and lower-educated parents are).

personally experienced the German school system but who seem to have great confidence in the quality of this system. In contrast, many higher-educated parents' choices are shaped by the great responsibility they feel since they perceive primary school as direct preparation for the *Gymnasium* and, thus, as a cornerstone for a child's future educational career (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 11-12).

One major issue raised in this dissertation involves shedding light on the perspectives and deliberations underlying lower-educated parents' choice strategies. Therefore, the study does not ask why these parents do not act and choose in the same way as their higher-educated counterparts or what hinders them from doing so but, rather, tries to understand these parents' own value system and choice criteria. In doing so, the analysis clearly illustrates that bureaucratic barriers alone are not responsible for 'deviant choice practices, nor is the lack of information. Rather, lower-educated parents' (different) choice practices are strongly constrained by practical and economic issues in combining family life and work (e.g., no car, no money for public transport) (sub-studies I & II | chapter 4.1 & 4.2 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019). These constraints worsen their opportunities to send their children to primary schools outside their immediate living environment and thus clearly limit their choice options. Therefore, although it might be expected that because of the tuition-free provision of education in Germany and the low share of private education parents, cultural capital and social capital play a significantly larger role in reinforcing educational inequalities, this study illustrates that economic capital is not absent in this context. Choice is thus not only about knowing how to 'play the game' but also about having the necessary capital to do so – constraints that are often ignored in the dominant discourse on school choice.

Moreover, as this dissertation demonstrates, school choice has a social dimension, and parental networks are crucial to understanding parents' choice practices – not only those already established in the childcare centre but also the prospect of accessing new networks at school (see also Kosunen/Rivière 2018). Parental networks serve as an indispensable source of information – particularly because of the scarcity of official information on schools – and reassurance. Additionally, they constitute an opportunity to accumulate (local) social capital by 'offering' the perspective of friendships and mutual support networks through school choice – both through the maintenance of already existing friendships from preschool and through the prospect of gaining new friendships through school choice (sub-study II). Interestingly, this is an aspect that has been somewhat disregarded in the academic debate do date. Again, however, their influence varies between parents equipped with different levels of capital.

5.2 Parental networks in the childcare centre and their role in shaping choice strategies

The networks' importance for choice often crystallises in the childcare centre (see sub-study II | chapter 4.2) – thus, the following explanations mainly refer to research objective c. Although less attention has been paid to the impact of preschool education on school segregation, this study demonstrates that at least in Germany, where 93% of children between three and five years of age attend a childcare centre (DESTATIS 2018a), the childcare centre and the networks within it play a crucial role in choice-making.[85] As illustrated, parents' school choices are influenced by the anticipation of school-mediated networks – including both the maintenance of already existing (childcare-mediated) relationships and the prospect of accessing new relationships through primary school. Both lower- and higher-educated parents in this dissertation place significantly higher value on the former – in contrast to Kosunen and Rivière's (2018) research on middle-class parents in Paris, France, Milan, Italy and Espoo, Finland. Thus, in this context, both groups of parents try to maintain already existing childcare-related networks. The difference between them, however, is that many higher-educated parents possess the necessary economic and social capital and can 'afford' to consider their children's integration at school by maintaining their childcare-related networks through school choice – independent of the chosen school's location. In contrast, lower-educated parents (need to) consider their own parental networks, which serve as a gateway to solidarity and constitute an indispensable source of support (sub-study II | chapter 4.2). For both groups, childcare-mediated networks are thus highly significant – albeit for different reasons. However, the direction of these networks' influence – whether they contribute to segregating choices or to facilitating group-crossing interaction and common school choice strategies – remains ambiguous.

On the one hand, the study illustrates that even the shared experience of being a parent (Wilson 2013) in socially and mixed childcare centres is not always and does not necessarily seem to be enough to reduce practices of dissociation and to increase parents' commitment to mixed education. Particularly in childcare centre III, the inequalities and exclusionary tendencies playing out reinforce practices of distinction (Hollingworth/Williams 2010; Nast/Blokland 2014; Talbot 2013). Being aware of the judgements of the 'dominant' (Skeggs 2004b, 19ff), some lower-educated parents' perception of difference seems to induce feelings of exclusion, as a result of which they withdraw from social interactions with higher-educated parents and even shy away from schools with a perceived 'higher-status' composition. Since research has mainly focused on middle-class parents circumventing less-reputable schools (Boterman 2013; Butler/Robson

[85] The share, however, differs between children with and without a migration background. While 'only' 82% of the former attended a childcare centre in 2018, 99% of the latter did (DESTATIS 2018b).

2003a; Karsten et al. 2003; Noreisch 2007b; Rangvid 2007), this is a particularly interesting finding. This more or less active dissociation in the childcare centre – albeit practiced by both groups – can even result in a quite selective use of grapevine knowledge, inducing socially selective choice practices and thus paving the way for segregation in later educational stages.

A careful differentiation between valuable and less-valuable information (sources) practised by all parents can be observed in all three childcare centres. Different choice practices are therefore dependent not only on parents' access to information but also on the question of whether and the extent to which accessible information is really considered for choice (see sub-study II | chapter 4.2). Thus, although it is mostly the higher-educated parents who contribute to the increasing levels of school segregation by deliberately choosing schools outside their immediate living environment, social matching seems to play a crucial role in almost all parents' choice-making. Thus, they all – but to different degrees – tend to make segregating choices.

On the other hand, in childcare centre II, practices of distinction between different social groups seem to be less common at first glance. In contrast to the other two centres, this particular childcare centre enables various forms of parental interaction and involvement, such as parent cafés or excursions, that might be useful for bringing different groups of parents together and providing common ground. Moreover, the childcare centre offers special activities for parents and children who are in the last year of preschool education. These events, which treat them as a 'special' group, seem to contribute to binding them together (though not all of them) and apparently prepare the ground for conversations and information exchange in regard to primary school choice. These various forms of parental involvement in childcare centre II enable and even encourage parental networks – also between parents with a different social background – and thus also support the exchange of information about parenting and school choice (sub-study II | chapter 4.2). Childcare centre I lie somewhere in the middle – in regard to both the level of involvement and parental interaction and in regard to practices of boundary-drawing and dissociation.

The previous examples from three childcare centres reveal the variety of structures, practices, and levels of parental involvement and interaction in preschool education – even though all three childcare centres were selected as being "most likely cases" (Flyvbjerg 2006) (see chapter 3.3.2). Although the fact that they had similar characteristics – such as location, provider, composition, and catchment area – was expected to make the emergence of group-crossing parental networks most likely, the level of parental interaction differs tremendously between the childcare centres. Thus, attributes such as the mixed composition and the narrow catchment area do not necessarily provide common ground and encourage group-crossing relationships and

common school choice practices. The previous examples rather point to the high scope of discretion that the childcare centre's staff has to (consciously or not) encourage or discourage parental interaction and networking. It can thus be argued that the strongly separated and segregated choices practised in childcare centre III, which guide different social groups of parents into different educational pathways, directly result from the low level of interaction and the distinct processes of exclusion and dissociation in this childcare centre. Moreover, the fact that the majority of parents in childcare centre II choose the same primary school can be related to the high level of interaction, with the strong group-crossing networks leading to common norms of schooling (see sub-study II | chapter 4.2).

Both explanations appear logical and can be true, but this is not necessarily the case. Although the analysis demonstrates the frequent and regular interactions between parents in childcare centre II, there might be other and/or additional reasons for their common choice practices that cannot be completely ruled out – such as spatial proximity and the school's profile. Regarding childcare centre III, interestingly, its head is perfectly aware of the social division in her childcare centre and the different directions these divisions lead to in terms of school choice. However, since she justifies the low level of parental involvement she allows for in her childcare centre in terms of the lack of interest of some parents – who deny this in their interviews – it is difficult to clarify whether the strong dissociation practices are a result of the lack of interaction or whether the lack of interaction is ascribed to the prejudices and stereotypes that existed even before. An in-depth analysis of these processes – and a comparison between all three childcare centres – is hindered by the limited access to childcare centre III (see chapter 3.5); such an analysis would have allowed for more insights into the contradictory narratives of both the parents and the childcare centre's staff. An additional aspect that might influence parental interaction is the divergent composition of the selected childcare centres (see chapter 3.3.2).[86] However, to clearly identify the correlation between a childcare centre's composition, its routines and its level of parental interaction and the direction of this correlation, data from more than three childcare centres are needed. Thus, despite the efforts made in this dissertation to obtain deeper insights into parents' interactions in childcare centres and the ways in which they impact on the parents' choice practices, the results need to be interpreted with caution. While social boundaries and practices of dissociation become easily visible through the parents'

[86] Although all childcare centres have a very mixed composition in comparison with all other childcare centres in Mülheim an der Ruhr – which was part of the selection criteria for the childcare centres in this dissertation – childcare centre III is attended by fewer children depending on social welfare and fewer children whose parents have a low educational attainment than the other two. However, while it can be expected that a lower number of higher-educated parents might increase their practices of boundary-drawing and dissociation, in this sample, the opposite clearly happens: Here, they tend to accept group-crossing relations and networks, while social divisions appear to be much higher in childcare centre III.

narratives and practices, the emergence of common, group-crossing norms of school choice is subtler and is often not clearly identifiable.

Nevertheless, the previous explanations highlight the significance of childcare centres for parents' choice of primary schools. They illustrate that boundary-drawing and dissociation practices vary significantly between different childcare centres. Similar to the study on white middle-class parents in comprehensive schools by Hollingworth' and Williams' (2010), who draw attention to the strong persistence of privilege and social advantage in mixed environments, this dissertation illustrates that segregation and exclusion also occur within mixed institutions (see also Nast/Blokland 2014 on the same topic). It points to the intricate and difficult interaction between privilege and disadvantage between different social groups (sub-study II | chapter 4.2). Thus, to understand what exactly it takes to support group-crossing interaction and to promote a reciprocal consideration of information on schools and to understand the extent to which and the circumstances under which childcare-mediated networks lead to norms of schooling that might either mitigate school segregation or reinforce segregated choices and educational pathways, further, more in-depth research is urgently needed. Gaining a deeper knowledge on the somewhat complex processes of inequalities and of inclusion and exclusion in mixed institutions might help mitigate school segregation in later educational stages.

The analysis thus illustrates the necessity of considering childcare as a crucial first step in children's educational career when analysing segregation at later educational stages – which has been received little attention thus. This is particularly relevant in light of the childcare centres' high level of autonomy in regard to the selection of children leading to highly selective access to childcare and high levels of segregation in preschool (Groos et al. 2018). Since the pressures to conform to dominant norms of social matching are expected to be even stronger and more powerful in homogenous communities where the control over each member is higher (van Zanten 2013, 90), more attention should additionally be paid to more homogenous childcare centres' role in shaping parents' attitudes and pre-structuring segregated educational pathways.

5.3 Unusual' school choices from a comparative perspective

By allowing a more in-depth analysis of parents' practices and their underlying deliberations, the qualitative methodological approach reveals that choice practices vary not only between – as referred to by research objective b – but also within social groups. The mentioned responsibility that particularly higher-educated parents feel does not automatically imply choosing the most reputable schools and striving for excellence and selective peer-groups. An interesting

finding from the analysis is that a small group of higher-educated parents instead tend to opt out of the mainstream by deliberately avoiding highly-reputable schools (Billingham/McDonough Kimelberg 2013; Byrne, 2006; Cucchiara 2013; Raveaud/van Zanten 2007; Reay et al. 2011) describing them as being too 'elitist' – with regard to both their educational performance and their socio-economic composition (sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018). As a result of concerns about competition and stress as well as a potentially emerging social pressure, they try to search for an 'ordinary', 'good enough' school – which is quite striking in light of the high sensitivity of education particularly for groups with a higher social status. In contrast to the Finnish parents in this comparative study, this strategy seems to be less informed by reflections on or moral dilemmas about the segregating effect of their choices – at least, this is not explicitly mentioned in my dissertation's sample. It can be expected that based on the selective tracking system at secondary school, the less egalitarian and more meritocratic principles, and the increasingly individualised responsibility in the context of educational opportunity competition and choice seem to be more familiar to parents in the German context – which might explain their higher disposition towards actively engaging even in primary school choice (sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018, 164).

Moreover, in the German study – in contrast to the Finnish study – parents' 'avoidance strategy' is not solely focused on their children's well-being; rather, it is additionally informed by concerns about their own belonging and social matching. The higher-educated parents referred to in this sub-study explain their reluctance to choose 'elitist' schools in terms of their concerns about not fitting in, being exposed to a certain social pressure or not feeling comfortable (sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018). This might be related to the different levels of economic capital explaining these few parents' concerns about not being able to keep up and their obvious ambiguity with regard to their own social status.[87] Although these parents have a high educational attainment as well, mocking 'elitist' parents and describing them as being and acting "on another level" can be understood as an opportunity to negotiate their own position (Nast/Blokland 2014, 488). On a more abstract level, these personal concerns about not fitting in might be ascribed to the Western society in which they occur: a society in which social distinctions, social exclusion, and the polarisation between different social groups have strengthened (Groh-Samberg 2005, 621), a society in which children's educational success is strongly dependent on their socio-economic background and in which social mobility in terms of educational attainment, income and occupational position is comparatively low (OECD 2018) –

[87] This, however, can only be assumed by referring to those parents' professions; conclusions with certainty cannot be drawn due to the lack of data in regard to the parents' economic capital.

thus, a society that tends to uphold distinctions of status rather than supporting attempts to smooth them out. These explanations might describe why shying away from parents with a (perceived) different social status is quite common in the German context – not only among parents with a higher social status (see sub-studies I & II | chapter 4.1 & 4.2) – and illustrate why these concerns were not present at all in the Finnish context, where social distinctions, particularly between the middle and upper classes, are less marked (sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018, 164). Although it remains unclear how widespread this search for the 'ordinary school' and the parents' reluctance in regard to 'elite schools' are, since this choice might contribute to counteracting segregation, more in-depth research is needed to understand this somewhat 'unusual' choice and to skilfully integrate it into urban education policies.

Juxtaposing the results of this study with the findings of a Finnish study on school choice reveals motives that go beyond parents' individual values and ideals – as previous studies on school choice often conclude. This comparative approach enables us to see that choice practices are also a result of the different institutional contexts in which parents operate (research objective a) and are tightly linked to the structural construction of the two countries education systems, and their relation to the labour market and to societal and cultural norms and values (sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018). In contrast to other countries, where the institutional link between different educational stages (from the childcare centre to university) plays a crucial role and educational and occupational success is highly linked to very early choices in children's educational career (for Chile see Kosunen/Carrasco 2016), in both Finland and Germany, there is no need to attend the 'best' school to securely proceed to the next level. Thus, although parents in other countries might be worried about competitive school culture or not 'fitting in', the extent to which these concerns translate into real choices that seer parents away from 'elite' schools seems to depend on the education system's selectiveness and the opportunities and alternatives offered. Thus, these parents do not have lower aspirations for their children, but since the educational institutions' prestige is not related at all to enrolment in secondary and tertiary education, these parents do not consider competition at this stage to be necessary or even helpful (sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018, 163).

Thus, there are not only higher-educated parents who are shopping for the perceived best schools, but also parents whose choices contribute to mitigating educational segregation. The comparative approach illustrates that if choice is not constrained by concerns about being left behind, there are even higher-educated parents – albeit with very different motivations – who would support more egalitarian education policies. This knowledge could be skilfully integrated into urban education policies. However, growing segregation, in both residential and

educational terms, might quickly reduce this support, which points to the strong relationship between urban and educational development and the consequent necessity of considering both when trying to promote inclusive communities (sub-study III | chapter 4.3 | Ramos Lobato et al. 2018, 164-165). Therefore, this dissertation demonstrates that it is particularly important to gain more knowledge about the motivations and reasons of parents who deliberately opt for less competitive environments.

5.4 Setting the context: Education policies and their impact on norms of school choice

Given the lack of institutional links between primary and secondary school types in Germany, the following question arises: What exactly are most higher-educated parents striving and competing for when 'fighting' for access to certain primary schools? This dissertation illustrates that the policy reform completely changing the institutional context in which parents operate did not solely broadened parents' legal opportunities to choose; it also impacted norms of schooling and school choice (see research objective a). Apart from personal values and constraints, parents' choice practices seem to be shaped by their interpretation of the policy reform's intentions (see also Noreisch 2007a for Berlin). Based on higher-educated parents' perception of the increasing significance of children's early educational steps for their future career, their vague impression of the existing differences between primary schools has been triggered and even intensified by the introduction of free primary school choice. Although almost all parents appreciate the reform, the new freedom of choice in combination with the scare objectifiable information also fuels uncertainties and concerns – however, almost exclusively among higher-educated parents (see research objective b). The reform seems to put pressure on them by intensifying the feeling that the 'choosing parent' is the 'good parent'. The implementation of free choice seems to be interpreted as a request, a clear instigation to carefully choose between schools. Thus, it is not solely perceived as an opportunity; rather, it increasingly becomes a duty (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 14).

This study illustrates the contradiction that some higher-educated parents feel between being used to a system where primary schools have always been a symbol of equality in teaching and comprehensive learning and where differences between primary schools and their impact on social mobility were almost inexistent and the current situation, in which the increasing development and advertisement of school profiles and the vague perceptions of schools' different transition rates to the *Gymnasium* and varying compositions raise doubts about the significance of primary school choice (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 11).

The pressure to choose triggered by the new institutional context seems to even be exacerbated by other parents (see research objective c). As the logic of action in education implies, while seeing some parents actively 'playing the game', others feel constrained to do the same to avoid a relative deficit (Kosunen 2016, 85). Although this relative deficit 'only' means not gaining access to the perceived 'best' primary schools, which would not lead to institutional closure in the German educational context – which means that it would not have any effects on the child's transition to the different secondary school types – the risk of making the 'wrong' decision is assumed to be too high to evade from the 'hype' around surrounding primary school choice. Moreover, since other parents not only play a key role in providing information about schools but also serve as a source of reassurance (Ball/Vincent 1998; sub-study II | chapter 4.2), there seem to be symbolic and/or social consequences for not joining the game. Being the only one to just accept the primary school next door without spending time and effort on decision-making appears to be socially unacceptable (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 12). Thus, local peer pressure not only forces parents to conform to the dominant norms defining the 'right' school (van Zanten 2013, 90) but also to choose in the first place. Thus, in light of the crumbling image of primary schools as the 'egalitarian basis' of the German school system (Breidenstein et al. 2014, 166), it might be assumed that primary school choice will even intensify within the coming years. With the increasing development of primary schools' profiles, distinction (not solely on a symbolic level, as demonstrated by the somewhat expensive activities that some schools offer) rises, and even the most 'reluctant' parents might be less disposed and willing to believe in similar curricula and comprehensive learning.

However, this dissertation also demonstrates that the responsibility for this development should not be attributed solely to parents and their segregating choice practices. By analysing parents' practices in terms of the institutional context in which they occur, it points to the crucial impact of the policy reform on shaping (local) norms of schooling and school choice. By implementing free primary school choice in a comprehensive school track, the reform triggered and intensified parents' selective choices Thus, not only parents use their new freedom of choice to make the 'best' decision for their children (as they perceive they are supposed to). It is the political institutions and policies that create both the context and the legitimisation of choice (sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 15; see also Oría et al. 2007, 103). In addition to changing parents' role in the 'school choice game', by opening the door for increased competition, the reform intentionally impacted the schools' role as well. While attending the schools' open days – events where they advertise themselves and that take place shortly before parents have to register their children for primary school – it became obvious that some primary schools' profiles created (intentionally or not) social distinctions far remove from a symbolic

level. Although not mandatory, expensive and regular activities, such as skiing holidays, which were presented and advertised at these events, are likely to deter parents with low economic capital. Thus, by encouraging schools to create distinct profiles, the policy reform reinforces the emergence of (partly symbolic, partly more than symbolic) social distinctions between schools rather than improving the quality of education.

Moreover, although not intentionally implemented as a way to expand schools' autonomy, the abolition of catchment areas tremendously broadened the head teachers' scope of discretion in regard to the admission process. While having almost no competences with respect to enrolment of students in the former catchment area system, they now possess – within lawful limits – a comparatively large amount of space to manoeuvre. In addition to the head teachers' promotional role in advertising or canvassing (Ramos Lobato 2017), their new (limited) leeway in selecting pupils enables them to avoid the most demanding pupils – in a very subtle way. Pupil enrolment, as practised by (some) head teachers, thus seems to benefit those with more capital and thus additionally contributes to primary school segregation (see also Herbert 2000; Jennings 2010). In light of the enormous number of studies focusing solely on parents' impact on school segregation, the head teachers' new scope of discretion, the extent to which and the different ways in which they use it and the role played by (higher-educated) parents' 'feel for the game' in deploying this leeway for their and their children's own benefit would be a relevant and urgent subject for future research.

The previous explanations illustrate the closeness and similarity between both the culture of higher-educated parents and the culture transmitted via the education system, which makes the system so effective for those knowing how to play the game (Bourdieu 1978 & 1986). Depending on parents' social status, (head) teachers act differently and give different recommendations to parents (Jennings 2010, 237; Ramos Lobato 2017; van Zanten 2013), and higher-educated parents are able to use this advantage in a more strategic way. This closeness and the dominance of norms based on higher-educated parents' choice-making are also revealed in the North Rhine-Westphalian context, where the policy reform was advertised as a tool to reduce inequity of choice by removing the bureaucratic barriers for socially disadvantaged families. The reform thus evaluates lower-educated choice practices based on higher-educated parents' strategies, and therefore, it neglects choice criteria and value systems beyond this dominant symbolic of the 'choosing parent' as the 'good parent' (see sub-study I | chapter 4.1 | Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 15). However, the practical and economic constraints as well as the emotional concerns de facto guiding lower-educated parents' choices are not removed by the abolition of catchment areas.

5.5 The intersection of social, ethnic and religious categories in the field of education

This closeness of the dominant culture and the culture transmitted via the educational system becomes additionally visible when integrating parents' ethnic background into the analysis. As already mentioned, some studies point to the necessity of analysing the ways in which parents' social and ethnic backgrounds intersect in the field of education (Bilge 2010; Byrne 2009) – for instance, by trying to defend their children from racism and stereotyping (see Vincent et al. 2012, 273). The intersections between social status and migration background were not originally intended to be a main research focus of this dissertation. Moreover, in the analysis of parents' educational strategies, similar choice patterns could mainly be identified along social lines, with parents' educational attainment being the most significant classifier – even though the fine distinctions within social groups point to the existence of different social fractions. Nevertheless, the blurred distinctions between social and ethnic categories that play a role in parents' school choices as well as hints on parents' 'intersectional work', as Vincent et al. (2012, 273) describe in their study on Black middle-class parents and their encounters with schools in England, can be observed in different dimensions.

Parents' migration background impacts their school choice practices through experiences of discrimination. Two mothers (one with a medium educational attainment and Turkish background and the other with a high educational attainment and a German background but a Moroccan husband and family name) clearly attribute their rejection by some primary schools and childcare centres to their own or their children's migration background and consequent racist stereotypes.[88] Some other parents, mainly low-educated parents, refer to school and childcare-centre teachers who explicitly recommend applying to (low reputable) primary schools with a high share of children with a migration background even though these schools are not the closest to their homes.[89] The majority of the latter parents did not attend the German school system, and they have comparatively low knowledge about the local school landscape and the varying reputations of schools. Therefore, most of them do not seem to associate these recommendations with discrimination; however, one mother – the Turkish mother with a medium educational attainment who was rejected at one primary school – did. Knowing about the

[88] Interpreting the rejection ethnically might often be more than a feeling (see Gomolla/Radtke 2007).

[89] The question of whether it is better for children and parents with a migration background and who lack German language skills to attend primary schools with a high share of children with a migration background is discussed controversially among the head masters interviewed after this study. experienced and are therefore better equipped and prepared to teach children who do now know any German, others argue that the opportunities to learn German are much better at schools with low shares of children with a migration background – due to the other children speaking German and the higher capacities that teachers have to support them. Thus, the question of whether recommending low reputable schools is discriminatory, based on stereotypes and low expectations, or is intended to provide better learning conditions for the child cannot be answered.

recommended school's bad reputation, she deliberately ignored the recommendation and applied to the same primary school where almost all other children of the childcare centre registered – a Catholic primary school. At this school, however, she was rejected. This rejection leads to the second dimension where parents' migration backgrounds might impact their school choice strategies – and that intersection with religion as well.

Since some parents with a migration background in this sample are Muslims – such as this Turkish mother – her rejection by the chosen Catholic school is not necessarily a sign of discrimination. It can most likely be ascribed to the legal admission criteria allowing state denominational primary schools in NRW to prioritise children with the same faith (Landtag NRW 2016). While some parents with a different religion – such as this mother – are not discouraged from choosing denominational schools despite the religious differences, other parents in this sample deliberately avoid these schools. However, knowing about the specific admission criteria and the likelihood of being rejected, one higher-educated Muslim mother[90] with a Moroccan background is particularly concerned about her child's chances of being accepted. This fear and lack of agency exacerbate choice-making for her since they even intensify the widespread concerns and insecurity that she already feels, which is similar to almost all higher-educated parents in this sample. This mother's narratives clearly reveal the intersectional work she carries out to defend her children and herself from stereotyping and low expectations. She is particularly aware of the stigmatisation of and stereotypes against Moroccans in Germany. However, instead of drawing moral boundaries and reproducing negative attributions of Moroccans – as described for some lower-educated parents – she deliberately invests a great deal of time and effort in her children's development (at school) and puts exceptional emphasis on good manners and diction to exclude herself from common stereotypes.

These are interesting examples of how the intersection of parents' social, ethnical and religious backgrounds influences their choice strategies and opportunities to 'play the game'. However, as mentioned above, to investigate these intersections and their impact on parents' choices more in depth, a more systematic empirical approach is needed. While the higher-educated Moroccan mother's ethnic background clearly impacts her school choice (and parenting) practices, similar patterns cannot be observed in the case of less stigmatised nationalities, such as the higher-educated Korean and (Catholic) Polish mothers or the medium-educated French mother in the sample. It is likely that different migration and religious backgrounds induce divergent experiences of integration and stigmatisation in German society, which influence school choice practices in different ways. However, to understand and explain the mechanisms underlying

[90] Among the higher-educated parents, there is only one Muslim.

parents' intersectional work, a more systematic approach that controls for the migration backgrounds in the sample – which was not possible with the sampling strategy in this dissertation – is required. In light of the strong and persistent inequalities between immigrant and non-immigrant children in Germany, it would be relevant to investigate the intersection between class, ethnicity and religion in the field of education, particularly in the less examined field of school choice, more thoroughly in future research.

Drawing on Bourdieu and his conceptualisations of social class, different forms of capital and their role in social reproduction bring many strengths and was valuable for analysing the introduction of free primary school choice and the varying ability of parents to 'play the school choice game' and for revealing the divergent opportunities the policy reform provides for parents equipped with different levels of capital. Thus, this theoretical approach offered the opportunity to demonstrate how class is cultured and to identify the dominant symbolic in school choice and its underlying normative assumptions. Nevertheless, this dissertation – like others before (for instance, Lareau 1987; Nast/Blokland 2014; Skeggs 2004a) – also has illustrated the limitations of this approach. By mainly focusing on middle-class subjectivity and advantage, Bourdieu's approach falls short in developing insights into the experiences, subjectivities, and agency of the working class; it is limited in paying attention to the complexity of the school choice game and the ambivalences and 'unusual' strategies deviating from the dominant symbolic; and it is less helpful in understanding the factors impacting parents' choices other than social class, such as cultural norms, institutional settings or ethnicity (as illustrated above).

This dissertation thus contributes to the academic debate around school choice in different ways: first, by paying particular attention to the choice practices of parents with a different level of educational attainment and by trying to understand the (potentially) varying underlying value systems. It points to the constraints of lower-educated parents, which lead to unequal choice opportunities, but rather than solely presenting these parents as being unable to inhabit dispositions, the analysis also illustrates the agency of lower-educated parents and their deliberate avoidance of particular schools – being perfectly aware of the negative judgements of higher-educated parents. Second, the dissertation points to the differences between choice practices not only between but also within social groups. It reveals a somewhat surprising not yet fully understood tendency of some higher-educated parents to actively avoid the more reputable, selective and competitive primary schools. The comparative analysis thus contributes to the international debate by gaining a deeper understanding of the motivations of parents underlying this very 'unusual' choice practice and of the similarities in school segregation patterns at an international level. Third, by focusing on childcare centres – a somewhat less examined step in

educational research thus – this dissertation reveals the complex processes of exclusion and disadvantage within mixed institutions, and, thus, it illustrates the crucial role that this early stage can play in school segregation. Fourth, this dissertation contributes to the discussion on the influence of the institutional context on parents' choices by pointing to the impact of the institutional context on parents' school choice strategies – not only by setting the conditions and rules of the framework but also by shaping the norms of school choice.

6 CONCLUSION

The dissertation clearly illustrated that the abolition of primary school catchment areas did not – as intended – lead to more equity in choice or to a balanced and valuable competition between primary schools. By favouring higher-educated parents' interests in a biased manner and introducing competition between schools, the reform perpetuates existing inequities in choice rather than diminishing them, and it even reinforces the social divisions between primary schools. While the previous chapter sought to discuss the dissertation's contribution to the academic debate, this final chapter tries to discuss the implications that the illustrated development might have and the dimensions that need to be considered for education and urban policies.

Based on the previous quantitative analyses by the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr, this dissertation contributes to a more in-depth picture of parents' school choice practices following the abolition of primary school catchment areas in 2008. It clearly confirms the initial concerns of oppositional parties and others raised even before the implementation of the policy reform: Giving free primary school choice to parents has led to a situation where parents more frequently than before choose schools outside the former catchment areas. By deliberately trying to avoid schools with a disadvantaged composition, parents' practices thus reinforce primary school segregation. Although the level of socio-spatial segregation in Mülheim an der Ruhr is similar to that in other German cities, its specific patterns (the clear division between north and south) seem to be most comparable to those in other cities of the Ruhr area. Therefore, the findings cannot be completely extrapolated to other cities and regions in NRW, where primary school catchment areas no longer exist. In cities where socio-spatial segregation is less polarised and more fine-grained, where socio-economic differences are more pronounced, and where the share of aspirational middle- and higher-middle-class parents is higher, the patterns of school segregation might be even sharper. Apart from the socio-spatial patterns, however, interesting findings regarding parents' choice strategies and their underlying motivations, concerns, and constraints can be derived from this qualitative study.

The study has shown that free parental choice provides an option from which, in particular, parents equipped with a higher level of different forms of capital can benefit. Choice criteria deviating from the dominant 'middle-class norm' – such as economic or practical constraints in managing everyday life and combining family and work life or emotional concerns with regard to not fitting in and experiences of exclusion – were not really considered. Thus, as long as travel expenses are reimbursed only if the nearest primary school is attended and as long as

the significance of social distinctions for school choice is underestimated (and even encouraged), real choice stays a privilege for those who can 'afford' it.

The implementation of market mechanisms in the field of education – which has already been criticised (see, for instance, Bunar 2010; Chubb/Moe 1990; Kosunen 2016) – not only fails in providing equal choice positions for parents but also sharpens the social divisions between schools. Due to socio-spatial polarisation, primary schools are challenged to compensate for context- and composition-related disadvantages to a significantly different degree. However, by introducing competition in the field of education and giving schools more authority regarding the admission process, the policy reform seems to even reinforce these already existing social divisions between schools, and it opens the door to social selection and closure.[91] In addition, it leads to symbolic distinctions and contrasting reputations created and distributed through parental discourses. The strong persistence of schools' reputations – both in terms of negative and positive images – rules out the conditions for a 'fair' and equal competition. It not only impacts parents' choices but also aggravates the opportunities of less reputable schools to improve or recover – for instance, by recruiting (good) teachers (Törner/Törner 2010) – and allows highly reputable schools to become complacent. Instead of improving the quality of education through competition and providing for equal choice opportunities, the implementation of market mechanisms in education thus promotes social distinctions and divisions and encourages a higher level of selection – even within comprehensive primary education.

Although there is no direct institutional link between primary and specific secondary school types in Germany, these divisions can nevertheless have severe consequences. From an educational perspective, in light of the studies pointing to compositional effects on educational achievement (e.g., Alegre/Ferrer 2010; Sykes/Kuyper 2013; van Ewijk/Sleegers 2010) and showing that attitudes towards studying are partly peer-group related (Mazenod et al. 2019; van Houtte/Stevens 2009), segmentation across primary schools might influence children's future educational and occupational trajectories. From a societal perspective, given the role of child-care centres and schools as important institutional settings where children can learn to deal and interact with diversity already at an early age (Amin 2002; Valentine/Sadgrove 2012; Wilson 2014), the emergence of social divisions and the subsequent disconnection of social realities already in primary school might increase the risk of declining social integration and cohesion in cities. As this dissertation clearly illustrates, these processes – although overlooked thus far

[91] Since the numbers of pupils has been rising in recent years (Klemm/Zorn 2017), this competition might be less pronounced than it potentially would be against the backdrop of the risk of being shut down. At the same time, however, the rising numbers of pupils also leads to higher application numbers at highly reputable schools, putting them in the 'privileged' position of being able to select their pupils.

– can already be observed in childcare centres and might thus constitute the first step in selective educational *and* social pathways.

Apart from the various needs for further research to understand the phenomenon of parental choice, the significance of childcare centres and the role of schools in this game more in depth, there arises the question of how to deal with the development presented. How can or should urban education policies react to the increasing levels of inequality and segregation already existing at early educational stages? What does it take to develop effective equality strategies, and what elements are needed so that these policies are also supported and viewed as justified by parents? Of course, this research not the first study to analyse parental choice and point to increasing levels of school segregation and its severe consequences. Consequently, there have already been various attempts to desegregate schools in recent decades in several countries. The most prominent attempts are the intentional mixing of pupils by driving them through schools outside their neighbourhoods ('busing') – predominantly practised in the USA – and the attempt to attract families with a higher social status to schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods by increasing their attractiveness (so-called 'charter schools'). However, both strategies have failed – not only in the USA but also in Germany (Baur 2012; Goldring 2009; Morris-Lange et al. 2013; Weiß 1989).[92]

In light of these unsuccessful attempts to mitigate school segregation, it might be difficult to understand why free primary school choice was even implemented in 2008. Therefore, the most obvious question is probably whether to reintroduce primary school catchment areas. However, although choice does indeed have a crucial impact on school segregation, the relationship between (higher-level) education policies and school segregation at the local level is too intricate to be reducible solely to the implementation or reduction of choice. There are other aspects – partly within, partly outside the education system – that significantly shape local school segregation patterns.

[92] The busing strategy, at least in the USA context, led to a 'white flight' from public schools and encouraged white privileged parents to enrol their children in private schools rather than contributing to social and racial mixing at public schools (Weiß 1989). In Germany, the few busing attempts were abandoned quite quickly not only because of the high financial costs but also because the attempts worked only in one direction – transferring children with a migration background to other schools – while trying the same with children without migration backgrounds was expected to be politically unenforceable (Baur 2012). The second prominent attempt to decrease school segregation, the implementation of magnet schools or schools with a special profile, led to unexpected 'creaming effects'. While privileged parents increasingly enrolled their children in these schools, they withdrew their children from other schools where the shares of disadvantaged children began to rise. Moreover, the increasing attractiveness of magnet schools to more privileged families living in distinct neighbourhoods lowered the chances for disadvantaged children living nearby to be accepted. Similar effects could be observed in Germany, where magnet schools aggravate segregation between or, by offering special classes, even within schools (Goldring 2009; Morris-Lange et al. 2013; Nast/Blokland 2014).

First, the policy reform in NRW not only expanded parental choice but also changed admission policies at the school level. While having almost no competences in the former catchment area system, the right to decide on the selection of pupils has been given completely to the head teachers. Since no clear admission criteria were determined, the reform created a certain kind of fuzziness that significantly increased the head teachers' scope of discretion in selecting pupils. In combination with the increased competition between primary schools, this is likely to have had an additional effect on school segregation patterns. Thus, reducing the direct competition between schools and limiting the scope of discretion in admitting pupils of individual schools would make the admission process more transparent and predictable and might thus be a first step towards reducing segregation levels. The recently implemented new admission policy in Amsterdam illustrates that a centralised enrolment system can increase the transparency and predictability of the admission process while at the same time guaranteeing the greatest possible freedom for parental choice (Boterman 2018).

Second, not only is choice dependent on having the legal opportunity to choose, but it is also a result of the number of options and variations in the supply of schools. In NRW, parents' choice strategies are additionally informed by the growing competition and the rise of increasingly differentiating school profiles. Therefore, reintroducing primary school catchment would not automatically mitigate school segregation as long as (symbolic) distinctions between schools still exist. In addition, primary schools with specific (pedagogical) profiles, such as *Montessori* or *Waldorf* schools, as well as the denominational state primary schools, impact school segregation levels in NRW.[93] While research in the USA has shown that the majority of parents do not choose schools with a specific profile because of the profile itself but, rather, to avoid disadvantaged schools (Möller/Bellenberg 2017, 52), similar tendencies are acknowledged in NRW, where denominational schools have always offered a loophole to avoid state primary schools.[94] Choosing a denominational school was not necessarily a deliberate choice based on religious convictions but, rather, the only legal opt-out option. In light of the strikingly low numbers of children with a migration background at both denominational schools (Möller/Bellenberg 2017, 62) and childcare centres (Groos et al. 2018) in NRW, it might not be enough to appeal to the sense of responsibility of religious communities to play their part in mitigating educational segregation and contributing to a more balanced composition in schools and childcare centres. However, denominational state primary schools, their specific admission criteria and their independence from the catchment area system are anchored in the North Rhine-

[93] Denessen et al. (2005) already illustrated the strong impact of denominational schools on school segregation in the Dutch context.

[94] Similar tendencies become apparent within the childcare centres as well (Groos et al. 2018).

Westphalian constitution. Thus, under the current law, prioritising catchment area primary schools is not possible – and there does not seem to be any political support for changing the exceptional role of the denominational schools in NRW.

Third, apart from the impact of the institutional framework, school segregation is strongly linked to residential segregation patterns. Thus, based on the polarised social geography of the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr, a certain level of school segregation would still exist even if every child attended the nearest primary school. Therefore, the mechanisms leading to the uneven distribution of pupils in schools are not only related to parental choice but, rather, are a result of a complex interplay between urban development, the institutional landscape, and parental choice. Consequently, new modes of governing school segregation may have unforeseen consequences for urban development as well. While introducing catchment areas could positively impact school segregation by raising the significance of residential neighbourhoods for access to schools, it might coincidently lead to an increase in residential segregation. Correspondingly, introducing school choice may also change residential patterns by making it possible for concerned higher-educated parents to stay put in more mixed, or even disadvantaged, neighbourhoods in the city while sending their children to schools outside the neighbourhood.

Interestingly, in contrast to other European countries, the interplay with urban development and issues of residential segregation did not play any role within the political debates about the abolition of catchment areas.[95] However, to deal with educational inequalities – of which school segregation is simultaneously a key manifestation and cause – it seems to be important to consider residential segregation patterns. At the same time, social mix policies at the neighbourhood level should equally be much more aware of their consequences for school choice practices. A reintroduction of catchment areas might offer the chance to tailor them strategically to increase the social mixture at schools.[96] Moreover, these tailor-made catchment areas could be connected and skilfully integrated into the quite closely related discussions on equality and segregation in urban development.

Fourth, educational segregation starts not only in primary school but also already in the childcare centre (Groos et al. 2018). As this dissertation was able to illustrate, even in mixed

[95] Specifically, all additionally interviewed politicians and staff of the former Ministry of Education denied that urban development issues were considered when discussing the implementation of free parental school choice. The interviews were conducted with the former spokespersons on education policies of all political parties in NRW who had this position when the decision to abolish primary school catchment areas was made.

[96] A comparative research project in cooperation with the municipalities of Zurich, Amsterdam and Helsinki is currently working on a tool to optimise school catchment area boundaries within the three cities (involved researchers: Venla Bernelius/University of Helsinki, Willem Boterman/University of Amsterdam, and Oliver Dlabac/University of Zurich).

childcare centres, complex processes of exclusion and dissociation can take place. In combination with the scarcity of information about primary schools, gossip and informal information accessed through (segregated) parental networks additionally contribute to separate forms of knowledge about schools and divided choices, and thus, they lay the foundation for segregated educational pathways already in preschool education. Thus, segregation both between and within childcare centres needs to be considered more carefully. The local discourse about schools and their reputations should not be left to the gossip mill; rather, more information and advice should be provided by official actors. Clearly, it is not enough to combat segregation when it becomes (first) most visible; rather, it must be fought at an earlier educational stage, where the course might already be set.[97]

Nevertheless, to date, no city in NRW has exercised its new right, granted in the 2010 elections, to reimplement primary school catchment areas (Möller/Bellenberg 2017, 51). The most dominant reason for the reluctance of cities in NRW to do so seems to be concerns about political and societal resistance when withdrawing parents' right to choose schools for their children (Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019, 15). However, these concerns might – at least to some extent – be overestimated, as this dissertation illustrates. A certain number of parents, even among families with a higher socio-economic status and educational ethos, is not necessarily and exclusively focused on highly selective and competitive schools. Thus, there is individual-level support for more egalitarian education policies that could be used by politicians and policy-makers – provided, however, that the differences between schools remain small enough and the doors to the next tiers of education stay open (Ramos Lobato et al. 2018). As already pointed out, the increased emphasis on the development of school profiles, the promotion of competition between schools, the public debate around 'ghetto schools' and everything else that draws (symbolic) distinctions and differences between schools are therefore counterproductive in this context.[98] A successful reorganisation of the primary school admission process consequently hinges on the ability to dispel parents' concerns and to actively involve those who still struggle between being a 'good parent' and being a 'good citizen'.

Apart from different enrolment systems and the attempts to balance the composition of schools, the most direct way not only to alleviate the consequences of school segregation but also to

[97] Moreover, it can be assumed that pre-school segregation might even reinforce in the next years with the (pretended) increase of places in childcare centres. Due to the current shortage of places, the opportunity to choose is quite limited and particularly in larger cities, parents tend to accept every place they can get. Nevertheless, also in this case, parents with a higher cultural and social capital (and economic capital in terms of private childcare) are likely to be more successful in getting a place in their preferred childcare centre.

[98] One additional factor might be the unequal distribution of children without any German language skills – in most cases, refugees – which even exacerbates the already demanding situation in some primary schools in Mülheim an der Ruhr (Ramos Lobato/Groos 2019).

mitigate the emergence of school segregation itself is to try to balance the learning conditions at schools. Thus, schools that face difficulties in coping with and compensating for their context-related disadvantages need to be particularly supported.[99] To effectively steer financial resources, a suitable social index measuring the disadvantages and challenges that each single school faces, however, does not currently exist in NRW.[100] It has often seemed to be the case that educational segregation is downplayed or, at least, underestimated in the political discourse. It might therefore be less the missing data and tools, but, rather, the lacking political and administrative will that exacerbates the inability to measure educational inequalities and segregation and even to acknowledge and deal with them. As already stated, it is therefore not only parents who should be blamed for their segregating choices. School segregation is a societal issue, and it is the political institutions that create the conditions that make certain choices possible and others not. Consequently, it is also the political institutions that are demanded to shape the required framework (as illustrated above).

To conclude, it has been shown that, at the very least, the perception of the primary school as one school for all and as the egalitarian basis of the German school system offering equal opportunities to all children has become obsolete (in urban areas). Not only in terms of their composition and pedagogical profiles but also in terms of symbolic distinctions and reputations in parental discourses, clear divisions between primary schools become visible. Different levels of parental capital strongly influence the school choices of parents and partly even those of the schools themselves. The introduction of free primary school choice seems to reinforce a segmentation of primary education through processes of social distinction and even social (and ethnic) closure. Not least because of the insufficient attention and the lack of attempts to counteract primary school segregation in NRW, the question of equal access to ‘good’ education needs to be raised – at least on a symbolic level. At present, the segregation levels in NRW (and Germany) are still lower than those of many other (European) countries. Based on their personal experience of growing up in a catchment area system where almost everybody just attended the nearest primary school, even some higher-educated parents considered the ‘hype’ about primary school to be exaggerated. Thus, not all parents join the trend of shopping for the perceived

[99] However, a recent study by Helbig and Nikolai (2019) illustrated that although schools with a disadvantaged composition in Berlin receive additional financial resources for staff and equipment, their quality (as measured by different indicators, such as the shortage of teachers, the share of cancelled lessons, the share of lessons taught by a substitute teacher) is significantly lower than that in schools with a privileged composition. Additional financial resources thus do not necessarily solve the problem.

[100] As claimed by Möller and Bellenberg (2017) in their recent study on how to combat low educational achievement in schools located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the social index currently used in NRW does not measure social inequality on the school level but only on the municipal level. The subsequent decision with regard to how to distribute the additional money between the schools within one city is thus made according to personal assessment.

‘best’ schools. However, there arises the question of how long can these parents still ‘defend’ this attitude and at what point will even the most reluctant parents deliberately avoiding more competitive and highly reputable school environments feel pressured to ‘cave in’.

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APPENDIX

A List of interviewees

Table 3: List of interviewees

Code	Gender	Marital status	Educational attainment	Attended German school system?	Employment status	Occupation	First school choice?	Migration background	Childcare centre
Marie	f	in partnership	medium	yes	employed	domestic care	yes	French	I
Leyla	f	in partnership	medium	yes	employed	retail saleswoman	no	Turkish	I
Lara	f	in partnership	high	yes	employed	nursery nurse	no	-	I
Serkan	m	in partnership	low	yes	employed	domestic care	no	Turkish	I
Thomas	m	in partnership	medium	yes	employed	secretary	yes	-	I
Clara	f	not assignable	low	no	unemployed	temporary job as a cleaner	yes	Ghanaian	I
Jasmina	f	in partnership	high	yes	employed	assistant in office communication	no	Bosnian	I
Jessica	f	in partnership	low	yes	unemployed	-	yes	-	I
Matilda		in partnership	medium	yes	employed	physician's assistant	yes	Polish	I
Charlotte	f	in partnership	medium	yes	employed	retail saleswoman	yes	-	II
Olivia	f	single mother	medium	yes	unemployed	-	no	-	II
Kim	f	in partnership	high	yes	parental leave	physician	yes	Korean	II
Sarah	f	in partnership	medium	yes	not employed (not searching for a job)	cabinetmaker	no	-	II

Selma	f	in partnership	medium	yes	maternity leave	assistant in office communication	yes	Turkish	III
Hanna	f	in partnership	high	yes	employed	economist	no	-	II
Amina	f	in partnership	high	yes	employed	assistant in office communication	no	Moroccan	II
Omar	m	in partnership	low	yes	unemployed	-	yes	Iraqi	II
Linda	f	in partnership	medium	yes	parental leave	nursery nurse	no	-	II
Dana	f	in partnership	high	yes	employed	merchant	yes	Bosnian	II
Minu	f	in partnership	high	yes	unemployed	university professor of Arabic language	yes	Iranian	II
Sofia	f	in partnership	high	no	employed	tax consultant	no	Russian	II
Vanessa	m	in partnership	medium	yes	employed	mechanic in automotive manufacturing	yes	-	III
Sophie	f	in partnership	low	yes	employed	retail saleswoman	yes	-	III
Helen	f	in partnership	high	yes	parental leave	assistant in office communication	no	-	III
Tina	f	single mother	low	yes	employed	working in a suntan studio	yes	-	III
Nikola	f	in partnership	not assignable	no	not assignable	not assignable	no	Polish	III
Nadia	f	in partnership	high	yes	employed	civil servant	yes	Polish	III
Elif	f	in partnership	low	yes	unemployed	-	no	Turkish	
Julia	f	single mother	high	yes	employed	physician	yes	-	III

Samia	f	in partnership	not assigna-ble	no	unemployed	not assignable	yes	Indian	II
Anne	f	in partnership	low	yes	employed	carer in a retire-ment home	yes	-	II
Alice	f	single mother	low	yes	employed	waitress	yes	-	II
Avan	f	in partnership	low	yes	parental leave	-	no	Iraqi	II
Anna	f	in partnership	high	yes	parental leave	nurse	yes	-	III
Milena	f	in partnership	low	yes	unemployed	-	yes	Serbian	III

B Interviewleitfaden Eltern

– Einleitung durch Interviewerin –

- Persönliche Vorstellung
- Zielsetzung, Vorgehen und Zeitrahmen des Forschungsvorhabens
- Informationen zum Interview (Aufnahme, Vertraulichkeit & Anonymität, Vertrauensschutzerklärung am Ende des Interviews)

– Kitawahl –

Erzählimpuls: Ihr Kind geht ja zur xy Kita. Erzählen Sie doch mal, wie kam es denn eigentlich zur Wahl dieser Einrichtung?

- Entscheidungskriterien (Zusammensetzung, Angebot, Personal, Vorabinformationen über Kita etc.)
- Informationsquellen
- Durchsetzung der Wahl und Einflussmöglichkeiten

– Soziale Netzwerke und Begegnungen in Kitas –

Erzählimpuls: Ihr Kind geht ja jetzt schon seit einiger Zeit in die Kita xy. Erzählen Sie doch mal, wer geht denn hier so hin und sieht denn so der Kontakt zu den anderen Eltern aus?

- Zusammensetzung der Einrichtung
- Kontaktgelegenheiten und -frequenz
- Kontaktpartner
- Inhalte des Austauschs
- Förderung durch die Kita und Personal

– Schulwahl –

Erzählimpuls: Bald steht ja auch die Wahl der Grundschule an. Erzählen Sie doch mal, wo und wie haben Sie sich denn überhaupt über die Schulen und Ihre Möglichkeiten informiert?

- Informationsquellen
- Art der Informationen
- Rolle der anderen Eltern (in und außerhalb von Kita)
- Wichtigste Austauschpartner
- Rolle der Kita und des Personals

– Entscheidungsprozess –

Erzählimpuls: Jetzt haben wir viel über die Informationsmöglichkeiten zur Grundschulwahl gesprochen. Aber erzählen Sie doch mal, haben Sie denn schon eine bestimmte Grundschule im Blick und aus welchen Gründen haben Sie diese ausgewählt?

- Wahlkriterien (Zusammensetzung, Qualität, Angebote, Personal, räumliche Nähe etc.) und Abwägung
- Ausschlusskriterien

- Kenntnis der lokalen Schullandschaft
- Rolle des Wahlverhaltens anderer (Kita)Eltern
- Einbeziehung des Kinds in Schulwahl
- Gerüchte und Ruf der Schulen
- Durchsetzung der Wahl und Einflussmöglichkeiten

– *Schulwahl und Bildung* –

Erzählimpuls: Seit 2008 haben die Grundschulen in NRW keine festen Einzugsbereiche mehr und Eltern können selbst entscheiden, in welcher Grundschule sie ihre Kinder anmelden. Wie denken Sie darüber und wie wohl fühlen Sie sich mit der Entscheidung?

- Bewertung freie Schulwahl
- Einschätzung Aufnahmechancen an gewählter Grundschule
- Einfluss des Grundschulbesuchs auf Erfolg an weiterführender Schule
- Einfluss des Kitabesuchs auf Erfolg an Grundschule

Gibt es von Ihrer Seite aus etwas, das bisher im Interview nicht zur Sprache gekommen ist, Ihnen aber wichtig ist noch zu erwähnen?

– *Netzwerkabfrage* –

Unterzeichnung der Vertrauensschutzerklärung

Anmerkungen nach dem Interview

C Netzwerkabfrage

Einleitende Informationen zur Netzwerkabfrage: Pro Generator dürfen bis zu vier/drei neue Personen genannt werden; für jeden Generator können auch bereits genannte Personen noch einmal genannt werden. Familienmitglieder, die mit im Haushalt leben, werden nicht miterfasst.

Fragenkomplex

Allgemein

Wenn Sie an Ihre wichtigsten Kontakte denken:

NA 1. Mit wem besprechen Sie wichtige Dinge rund ums Thema Kindererziehung?
Welche der eben genannten Personen ist diesbezüglich die wichtigste?

NA 2. Mit wem unternehmen Sie im Alltag mit den Kindern gemeinsam etwas?
Welche der eben genannten Personen ist diesbezüglich die wichtigste?

NA 3. Mit wem tauschen Sie Informationen zur bevorstehenden Schulwahl aus?
Welche der eben genannten Personen ist diesbezüglich die wichtigste?

Kita

Wenn Sie an die anderen Eltern in der Kita denken:

NA 4. Mit wem besprechen Sie wichtige Dinge rund ums Thema Kindererziehung?
Welche der eben genannten Personen ist diesbezüglich die wichtigste?

NA 5. Mit wem unternehmen Sie im Alltag mit den Kindern gemeinsam etwas?
Welche der eben genannten Personen ist diesbezüglich die wichtigste?

NA 6. Mit wem tauschen Sie Informationen zur bevorstehenden Schulwahl aus?
Welche der eben genannten Personen ist diesbezüglich die wichtigste?

Bestimmte Foki

Wenn Sie an andere Orte und Gelegenheiten denken, gibt es eine Reihe von Möglichkeiten mit anderen Menschen in Kontakt zu kommen, z.B. auf dem Spielplatz, am Arbeitsplatz, in der Nachbarschaft, in Vereinen etc. Haben Sie auf diese oder ähnliche Weise Personen kennengelernt, mit denen Sie (vielleicht auch nur sporadischen) Kontakt haben und die bisher noch nicht genannt wurden?

NA 7. Mit wem aus diesem zuletzt genannten Personenkreis besprechen Sie wichtige Dinge rund um die Kindererziehung?
Welche der eben genannten Personen ist diesbezüglich die wichtigste?

NA 8. Mit wem aus diesem zuletzt genannten Personenkreis tauschen Sie Informationen zur bevorstehenden Schulwahl aus?
Welche der eben genannten Personen ist diesbezüglich die wichtigste?

Anlage für Befragte

Nr. / Name
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Namensgenerator

Nr.	NA1	NA2	NA3	NA4	NA5	NA6	NA7	NA 8	Wohnort	Kontakt seit?	Wo kennengelernt	Gleiche Kita?	Kontaktfrequenz	Rolle(n)	Bildungsstand	Beschäftigung	Mig.Hint.	Geschlecht
1.																		
2.																		
3.																		
4.																		
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27.																		

Berufsbezeichnung IP:	Aktuelle Tätigkeit IP:	Wie viele Stunden?				
Berufsbezeichnung Partner/in:	Aktuelle Tätigkeit Partner/in:	Wie viele Stunden?				

Persönliche Lebenssituation □ Alleinerziehend □ In Partnerschaft / verheiratet

1. Wo wohnt die Person?

1 = gleiches Viertel
2 = gleiche Stadt
3 = Deutschland
4 = Außerhalb Deutschlands

2. Seit wie vielen Jahren kennen Sie die Person?

3. Wie/wo haben Sie die Person kennengelernt?

1 = über andere Freunde/Bekannte (falls in Namensgenerator aufgeführt: Nummer von Alteri in Klammern angeben)
2 = in der Kita
3 = sonstiges *(aufschreiben!)*

4. Hat die Person Kinder in derselben Kita?

1 = ja
2 = nein

5. Wie oft haben Sie Kontakt zu der Person, persönlich oder über best. Medien (Telefon etc.)?

1 = häufig (täglich bis einmal pro Woche)
2 = gelegentlich (einmal alle zwei Wochen bis alle drei Monate)
3 = selten (höchstens ein oder zwei Mal pro Jahr)

6. Rolle(n) der Person (mehrere Antworten möglich und erwünscht)

1 = Partner/in
2 = Vater/Mutter
3 = Bruder/Schwester
4 = andere Verwandtschaft
5 = Freund/in
6 = Arbeitskollege/in
7 = Bekannte/r
8= Nachbar/in

7. Was ist der höchste Bildungsabschluss der Person?

1 = Hauptschulabschluss
2 = Realschulabschluss
3 = Abitur oder Fachholschulreife
4 = (Fach-)Hochschulabschluss
5 = Anderer, und zwar...

8. Wie ist der Berufsstatus der Person?

1 = Berufstätig
2 = Arbeitslos/arbeitssuchend
3 = In Ausbildung (Lehre, Schule, Studium)
4 = Rente
5 = nicht erwerbstätig
6 = in Elternzeit

9. Migrationshintergrund

□ Ja □ nein Wenn ja, welcher _____

10. Geschlecht

1 = Weiblich
2 = Männlich

11. Ggf. ergeben sich im Auswertungsprozess noch Fragen zu unserem Gespräch, wäre es möglich, Sie in so einem Fall noch einmal zu kontaktieren?

□ Nein
□ Ja. Der Interviewpartner hat einer nochmaligen Kontaktaufnahme zugestimmt.
Kontaktaufnahme über:_____

D Regelung zum Vertrauens- und Datenschutz & Einverständniserklärung

Promotionsvorhaben Isabel Ramos Lobato

Regelung zum Vertrauens- und Datenschutz

-- Information für die Befragten --

Das Interview erfolgt im Rahmen meines Promotionsvorhabens als wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am ILS – Institut für Landes- und Stadtentwicklungsforschung. Das Forschungsvorhaben untersucht den Einfluss von Kontakten in Kindertagesstätten auf das Schulwahlverhalten von Eltern. Dazu werden leitfadengestützte Interviews mit Eltern sowie mit Kita- und Schulleitungen geführt.

Die Durchführung der Promotionsarbeit geschieht auf der Grundlage der Bestimmungen des Datenschutzgesetzes. Ich unterliege, so wie jede/r Mitarbeiter/in des ILS, der Schweigepflicht und bin auf das Datengeheimnis verpflichtet, d.h. ich darf mit niemanden über personenbezogene Daten aus den erhobenen Interviews sprechen.

Der Datenschutz verlangt, dass ich Sie über mein Vorgehen informiere und Ihre ausdrückliche Genehmigung einhole, um das Interview auswerten zu können. Die Datenschutzbestimmungen verlangen auch, dass ich Sie noch einmal ausdrücklich darauf hinweise, dass aus einer Nichtteilnahme keine Nachteile entstehen und die Teilnahme am Interview sowie die Datenauskunft selbstverständlich freiwillig sind. Sie können Antworten auch bei einzelnen Fragen ohne Angabe von Gründen verweigern sowie das Interview jederzeit unterbrechen und zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt fortsetzen. Ein Widerruf der Einverständniserklärung ist jederzeit möglich.

Ich sichere Ihnen folgendes Verfahren zu, damit Ihre Angaben nicht mit Ihrer Person in Verbindung gebracht werden können:

Erhebung und Verarbeitung der Daten

- Ich gehe sorgfältig mit dem Erzählten um: Die Interviews werden aufgezeichnet und abgetippt (von mir sowie einer studentischen Hilfskraft). Sie können die Abschrift bekommen, sofern Sie dies wünschen. Das Abtippen erfolgt lediglich im ILS, so dass die Audiodateien das Institut nicht verlassen.
- Innerhalb der Abschriften werden sämtliche personenbezogene Daten, wie bspw. Eigennamen oder Namen von Einrichtungen wie Schulen oder Kitas, pseudonymisiert.

Pseudonymisierung bedeutet, dass ich den sämtlichen im Interview genannten Personen oder Einrichtungen in der Abschrift einen anderen Namen gebe. Jedoch lege ich Liste an, mit Hilfe derer ich dokumentiere, welchen Einrichtungen/Personen ich welchen Namen zugewiesen habe, damit ich dies bei der Analyse noch nachvollziehen kann.

- Auch die Interviews als Ganzes werden pseudonymisiert. Das bedeutet, dass die Abschrift keinerlei Informationen zur Ihrer Person enthält, jedoch mit einer ID versehen wird. Auch in diesem Fall lege ich eine Liste an, mit Hilfe derer ich dokumentiere, welche Abschrift zu welchen Personendaten (Name, E-Mail) gehört. Nur mit Hilfe dieser Liste kann ich mich bei potentiell auftretenden Rückfragen noch einmal bei Ihnen melden - sofern Sie dem zugestimmt haben.

Aufbewahrung der Daten

- Die Audiodateien verlassen das Institut nicht. Sie sind auf einem Laufwerk gespeichert, auf das nur ich Zugriff habe. Die Dateien werden nach Abschluss der Auswertung vollständig gelöscht.
- Die Zuordnungslisten werden sicher und getrennt von den Audiodateien und Abschriften aufbewahrt. Niemand außer mir hat Zugang zu diesen Listen. Diese werden nach Abschluss der Auswertung, spätestens aber nach Projektende (voraussichtlich Ende 2018), vollständig gelöscht.
- Die Abschriften werden, auch nach Ende des Promotionsprojekts, für weitere wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen sicher aufbewahrt. Gemäß der Regeln guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis werden die Abschriften für insgesamt zehn Jahre im ILS gespeichert und anschließend vollständig gelöscht. Da spätestens nach Abschluss der Promotionsarbeit die Audiodateien, sämtliche personenbezogenen Daten sowie die Zuordnungslisten gelöscht werden, sind die Abschriften ab diesem Zeitpunkt somit komplett anonymisiert.
- Die von Ihnen unterschriebene Erklärung zur Einwilligung in die Auswertung wird gesondert aufbewahrt.

Nutzung der Daten

- Die Abschrift des Interviews wird nicht veröffentlicht und ist nur mir für die Auswertung zugänglich.

- Sofern Inhalte aus dem Interview später in meiner Dissertation oder in anderen wissenschaftlichen Veröffentlichungen zitiert werden, geschieht dies anonym, d.h. in einer solchen Weise, dass auf Ihre Person nicht zurückgeschlossen werden kann.

Ich bedanke mich für Ihre Bereitschaft, mir ein Interview zu geben! Bei Fragen, nehmen Sie bitte Kontakt mit mir auf.

Kontaktdaten

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Promotionsvorhaben Isabel Ramos Lobato

Regelung zum Vertrauens- und Datenschutz

-- Einverständniserklärung --

Einverständniserklärung

Ich, Frau/Herr _____ bestätige hiermit, dass Frau Isabel Ramos Lobato mich vor dem Interview über die Datenschutzbestimmungen sowie meine Rechte angemessen aufgeklärt hat. Die Regelung zum Vertrauens- und Datenschutz wurde mir ebenfalls schriftlich ausgehändigt. Mit den darin aufgeführten Schritten der Erhebung, Verarbeitung, Aufbewahrung und Nutzung der Daten erkläre ich mich einverstanden.

Ein Widerruf meiner Einverständniserklärung ist jederzeit möglich.

_____

Ort, Datum, Unterschrift

E Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Ich versichere an Eides statt, dass ich die eingereichte Dissertation selbstständig und ohne unzulässige fremde Hilfe verfasst, andere als die in ihr angegebene Literatur nicht benutzt und dass ich alle ganz oder annähernd übernommenen Textstellen sowie verwendete Grafiken, Tabellen und Auswertungsprogramme kenntlich gemacht habe. Außerdem versichere ich, dass die vorgelegte elektronische mit der schriftlichen Version der Dissertation übereinstimmt und die Abhandlung in dieser oder ähnlicher Form noch nicht anderweitig als Promotionsleistung vorgelegt und bewertet wurde.

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Ort und Datum Unterschrift

F Schriftliche Versicherung

Hiermit bestätige ich, dass die digitalen Abbildungen nur die originalen Daten oder eine eindeutige Dokumentation von Art und Umfang der inhaltsverändernden Bildbearbeitung enthalten.

Hiermit bestätige ich außerdem, dass ich keine kommerzielle Vermittlung oder Beratung in Anspruch genommen habe.

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Ort und Datum Unterschrift

G Curriculum Vitae Isabel Ramos Lobato

Persönliche Informationen

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Geburtsdatum:	16.01.1985
Geburtstort:	Freudenberg/Westfalen

Berufliche Tätigkeiten

01/2011 bis heute	Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin ILS – Institut für Landes- und Stadtentwicklungsforschung gGmbH, Dortmund
07/2015	Annahme als Doktorandin an der Fakultät für Geowissenschaften, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Bochum

Ausbildung

10/2004 – 11/2010	Diplomstudium der Geographie an der Philipps-Universität Marburg, Nebenfächer Soziologie und Friedens- und Konfliktforschung (Gesamtabschlussnote: 1,0) Abschlussarbeit: *"Weltkultur ohne Erbe? Stadtverfall und Erneuerungsstrategien sowie ihre sozioökonomischen Konsequenzen in der Altstadt Portos/Portugal"* (1,0)
1996 – 2004	Gymnasium am Löhrtor, Siegen, Abitur 1,9

Dortmund, 12. April 2019