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Social class and educational decision-making in a choice-driven education system: a mixed-methods study

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ABSTRACT

Social class differences in educational decision-making form an important explanation for persisting educational inequalities, particularly in choice-driven systems with early tracking. Nevertheless, little is known about the process preceding these choices, especially when school and track choice are interrelated. Building on school choice literature, this study aims to explore how parents from different social backgrounds shape their decision-making process at the transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders (Belgium). To this end, we adopt an explanatory mixed-methods design. Quantitative findings from a parent survey conducted in 36 primary schools were complemented with 32 in-depth interviews with parents. Our findings show two parental profiles regarding educational decision-making, which can be traced back to differences in social and cultural capital. Although effective navigation of the complex field of educational decision-making proved to be strongly class related, parents' educational and immigrant biographies led to specific approaches, transcending the middle class versus working class binary.

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KEYWORDS

Educational choice; educational inequality; social capital; cultural capital; mixed-methods research

Introduction

There is widespread consensus among sociologists that inequality in educational attainment is the result of differences in achievement according to social background (primary effects) and social differences in educational choice net of achievement (secondary effects) (Boudon 1974; Erikson and Jonsson 1996). Secondary effects have received widespread attention in European stratification research, as choice is a crucial determinant of educational attainment in European societies (Jacob and Tieben 2009). Early tracking is a common feature of many European educational systems, confronting parents and their children with a choice between mutually exclusive educational tracks that lead to distinct educational outcomes. Track choice leads to self-selection because pupils from working-class backgrounds are less inclined to enrol in academically oriented education than their middle-class peers (see, for example, Boone and Van Houtte 2013; Jaeger 2009). The effects of self-selection are greater in choice-driven systems with early tracking (Jackson and Jonsson 2013). Although the occurrence of secondary effects is well established, less is known about how social and

ethnic background impacts on parental decision-making processes (Kleine, Paulus, and Blossfeld 2010). The literature on school choice has nevertheless expanded our understanding of how social class affects decision-making. Multiple studies reveal that, despite their egalitarian premises, the education policies stimulating free school choice are tailor-made to suit middle-class educational decision-making (Ball 2003; Van Zanten 2005; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995). Instead of fostering social integration in secondary education, these policies lead to growing social and racial segregation, as middle-class parents use them to reproduce their relative advantage (Roda and Wells 2013; Ball 2003). More recently, taking into account the interplay between parents' economic, social and cultural capital, scholars have stressed the importance of a multidimensional approach (Savage 2015) for a profound understanding of social reproduction in today's societies.

Building on the school choice literature, this study aims to explore how parents' social and cultural resources shape the process of parental educational decision-making at the transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders (the northern part of Belgium). To this end, an explanatory mixed-methods design is used. The Flemish educational system provides a unique setting for investigating class differences in the decision-making process, as it combines free school and track choice with early and rigid tracking.

Theoretical framework

Social class and educational decision-making

This study draws on Bourdieu's (1972, 1986) concepts of field and capital to relate parental class background to school and track choice. According to Bourdieu, a field is a configuration of objective relations between the positions occupied by individuals. An individual's position within a field depends on his/her relative possession of economic, social and cultural capital. Whereas economic capital refers to financial and material assets, social capital consists of resources that can be accessed through membership of social networks. Cultural capital can exist in three forms: an embodied state in the form of long-lasting dispositions or ways of thinking and doing; an objective state in the form of cultural goods like books, paintings and the like; and an institutionalised state in the form of educational credentials. However, the value accorded to these different forms of capital depends on the specificities of the field in question, or, as Grenfell (2009, 19) puts it, 'capital is the currency of the field' and it is the field that determines 'the rules of the game', what has value or not. Like Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz (1996), we conceptualise school and track choice as a (sub)field, since it follows the overall logic of the (educational) field but is undeniably shaped by specific internal regulations (Thomson 2014). Educational decision-making requires access to specific forms of social, cultural and economic capital. A subtle knowledge of the educational system (cultural capital) and access to people (social capital) who can provide inside information about schools and the differences between tracks is especially important in this respect (Reay 1998; Van Zanten 2009).

Studies on the relationship between social class and school choice in the United Kingdom have demonstrated the importance of parents' cultural, social and economic capital in their search for a school and in securing access to the school of their choice (Ball 2003; Devine 2004; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995). Drawing on their cultural capital, middle-class parents know how to deal with educational professionals and how to extract and evaluate crucial

information about schools. Moreover, middle-class parents rely on their social networks for additional information about schools. Some studies even indicate that these parents mostly rely on 'hot knowledge' – informal, interpersonal information – and do little research on secondary schools (Ball and Vincent 1998). Finally, middle-class parents' economic capital comes into play, since they can move to live near their preferred school or pay tuition fees.

The importance of the three forms of capital in the field of school choice differs according to the institutional context. In continental Europe, economic capital is less essential, as the divide between public and private schooling has fewer consequences. However, this means that cultural and social capital carry even more weight in this context. Research in France and Spain does indeed show the importance of parents' knowledge of the education system and especially the information parents gather through their social networks in deciding which school to choose (Van Zanten 2009; Reinoso, 2008). Research by Van Zanten and other scholars in France has inspired Draelants (2014) to coin the concept of insider (*initié*) as an extension to Bourdieu's concept of inheritor (*héritier*). In the current context of mass education, Draelants believes that knowledge of which schools to attend and which optional courses to opt for matters as much as family education. Insiders are those parents who are not only able to access and decode publicly available information about schools, but who can also supplement this information with reliable, unofficial information from their informal networks.

Within the field of school choice, middle-class parents' cultural and social capital seems especially helpful in choosing a school and securing enrolment. While much research has been devoted to class differences in school choice processes, research examining choice in systems in which school and track choice are intertwined is almost non-existent.

Intersectionality and class fractions

Recently, scholars have started to question the legitimacy of a binary focus on social class, opposing working class to middle class, as it risks overlooking new class fractions and the intersectionality of class and race (Vincent 2017; Byrne, 2009). Regarding intersectionality, Heath and Brinbaum (2007) argue that ethnic differences in educational attainment can be explained by typical class attributes like a low socio-economic and educational background, although this relationship varies according to the specific features of the national welfare and educational context. In Flanders, Phalet, Deboosere, and Bastiaenssen (2007) have shown how ethnic differences in educational attainment are strongly class related, but accumulative ethnic and social disadvantage does exist. Furthermore, multiple studies have demonstrated that, at given performance levels, immigrant families have higher educational aspirations than their native counterparts (for Belgium, see Teney, Devleeshouwer, and Hanquinet 2013; for the Netherlands, see Van de Werfhorst and Van Tubergen 2007). Some literature suggests that both striving for upward mobility and anticipated discrimination in the labour market can account for this (Heath and Brinbaum 2007).

Regarding class fractions, Savage (2015) argues that despite growing individualism, class still matters in contemporary society, albeit in changing and more diverse ways than a simple divide between working class and middle class. In order to allow for a more differentiated ordering, Savage reaffirms class as the specific interplay of economic, social and cultural capital. The so-called 'against the grain choices' of the white cosmopolitan middle class, for

example, reveal fractions related to the relative possession of cultural versus economic capital, as opting for local schools becomes a new form of social distinction (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007).

Despite differences within the middle class, power and privilege remain persistent features of middle-class identity, and a strong commitment to education lies at the heart of middle-class cultural reproduction (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). Like Reay, Crozier, and James (2011) and Ball (2003), we are concerned with class practices more than with the redefinition of class categories, but we take into account examples of intersectionality between class and ethnic background and class fractions. In this study we will focus on the way parents from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds shape and experience the process of educational decision-making at the transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders.

Study context

In Flanders, compulsory education starts at the age of six and usually consists of six years of primary, followed by six years of secondary education (Figure 1). Whereas primary education is comprehensive, secondary education is rigidly stratified, comprising three two-year grades, characterised by increasing differentiation. The first grade is divided into two streams: A-stream and B-stream. The B-stream is aimed at students who have not obtained their primary education certificate. The A-stream provides a general curriculum for all students, complemented with optional courses such as Latin, modern sciences, technology or arts. In the second grade, students choose between general, technical, artistic or vocational education (see Figure 1).

Despite the official policy of a comprehensive first grade in the A-stream, tracking already starts in the first grade, for two reasons. First, early tracking is due to curricular differences between the different options in the A-stream. Second, most secondary schools are organised along track lines. Therefore, at the transition to secondary education school choice often implies straightforward tracking, as many secondary schools adapt their curriculum in the first grade to the tracks offered in the subsequent grades. Hence, in Flanders, school and track choice are interrelated, and choices made at the start of secondary education determine pupils' future educational trajectories. Furthermore, secondary schools are free

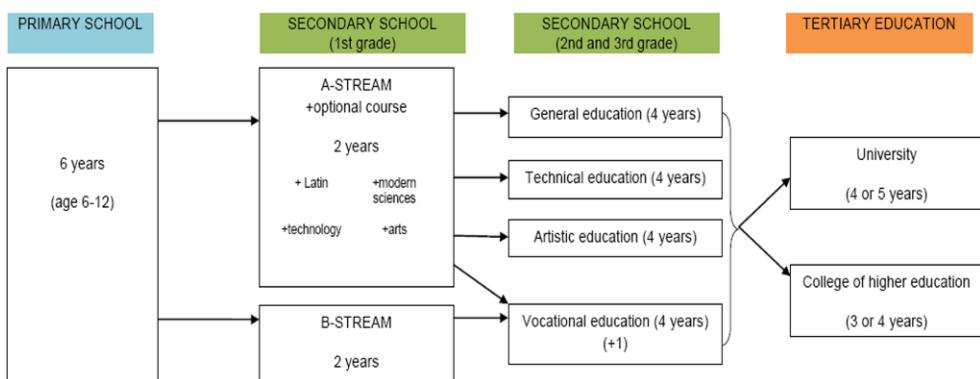


Figure 1. Flemish education system.

as to how they organise their curricula, leading to a proliferation of options within the first grade in secondary education.

Method

Design

This study, uses an explanatory mixed-methods design: a two-phase design in which qualitative data complement the initial quantitative findings (Creswell et al. 2003). First, we determine class differences in the process of educational decision-making based on survey data. We examine social class and ethnic differences in decision-making and information gathering at two points in time. In a second phase, the quantitative findings are used for the purposive sampling of participants for a qualitative follow-up study. In-depth interview data are used to gain insight into the mechanisms behind the observed social and ethnic differences. This model typifies what Creswell and Plano Clark (2006) describe as the participant selection model, in which the qualitative phase is emphasised.

Data

We use quantitative data collected in the framework of a research project on the transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders. Data collection started from a disproportionately stratified sample based on school sector (private [Catholic and government dependent] versus public schools) and the percentage of pupils with a poorly educated mother. Primary schools were selected in two cities, Antwerp and Ghent. The urban context was deliberately chosen for its substantial ethnic diversity. Two waves of data collection were conducted in 36 schools. In the first wave (May–June 2014), 960 parents whose children were in the fifth year of primary education administered a questionnaire. During the second wave (May 2015), 915 parents filled out a questionnaire when their child was at the end of the sixth (final) year of primary education.

After the quantitative study, we conducted qualitative fieldwork. Schools and parents were selected through purposive sampling guided by the quantitative findings. Exploring social differences in the process of educational decision-making is the central aim of this study. To this end, we selected four Ghent schools out of the 18 from the quantitative sample: three with a mixed population in terms of social and ethnic background, and one with a population of only working-class families of non-Belgian descent. Within these schools, a sample of 32 parents was chosen for an in-depth interview on the basis of three criteria: socio-economic and ethnic background; timing of decision-making; and the children's achievements (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents: social class and ethnic background.

Social class	Non-Belgian background (<i>n</i> = 19)	Belgian background (<i>n</i> = 13)
Middle class (<i>n</i> = 13)	3	10
Working class (<i>n</i> = 19)	16	3

In September 2015, at the beginning of the sixth year of primary education, all pupils in the project schools were given a survey about their educational choice and their socio-economic background. We combined information from the pupils with an observation of the first parent–teacher conference of that school year, held between October and December 2015. After the parent–teacher conference, parents were asked to participate in a face-to-face, semi-structured interview. Between November 2015 and January 2016, 32 interviews were conducted before the start of enrolment in secondary education, mostly at the parents' homes. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVivo software.

Variables

The timing of educational decision-making was assessed by asking parents two questions about whether they had already made a decision about school and track choice during both waves of data collection. At the end of the fifth year of primary education, 44.5% of the parents had already decided (Table 2). By the end of the final year of primary education, almost all parents had chosen a school. With regard to track choice we found that, at the end of the fifth year, only 33.8% of the parents had decided, 62.7% were undecided and 3.5% indicated they did not know what a track was. At the end of the final year, 83.8% of the parents had chosen; only 2.2% of parents indicated they did not know what a track was and 14% were still undecided.

Information gathering was measured by asking parents a series of questions about whether they had obtained information about secondary education, and if so, through what channels. Parents could indicate whether they gathered information from other people, through information sessions, from open days or from the Internet. Social class was

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all variables at both time points.

	T1: May 2014	T2: April-May 2015
School choice (%)	(N = 940)	(N = 933)
Undecided	55.5	8.8
Decided	44.5	91.2
Track choice (%)	(N = 932)	(N = 917)
Have not decided yet	62.7	14
Do not know what a track is	3.5	2.2
Decided	33.8	83.8
Information gathering (%)	(N = 942)	(N = 927)
Asked for information	37.6	56.3
Had not asked for information	62.4	43.7
Channels for information (% affirmative answers of those who asked for information)	(N = 352)	(N = 515)
Open days	52.6	57.1
Information sessions	37.8	45.6
Internet	53.1	39.2
Social class (%)	(N = 928)	(N = 790)
Working class	30.1	24.8
Lower middle class	23.8	24.6
Middle class	18.9	21.4
Upper middle class	27.2	29.2
Ethnic background (%)	(N = 928)	(N = 790)
Belgian or North-Western European	58.6	62.4
Non-Belgian and non-North-Western European	41.4	37.6

measured by asking the current or previous occupations of both parents, or whether they were unemployed. Answers were recoded in accordance with Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero's (1979) class scheme. Scores ranged from 0 to 8 (0 = long-term unemployed or never employed; 1 = unskilled manual labourers; 2 = specialised manual labourers; 3 = skilled manual labourers; 4 = employees; 5 = self-employed artisans and agricultural workers; 6 = lower middle management, 7 = higher middle management; 8 = managers, professionals and company directors). To determine family social class, the higher of the two scores was used. To provide a more informative picture, we recoded social class into four categories: 1 = working class and unemployed (originally categories 0–3, 30.2%); 2 = lower middle class (categories 4–5, 23.8%); 3 = middle class (category 6, 18.9%); 4 = upper middle class (categories 7–8, 27.2%).

Ethnic background was assessed by asking parents about the country of birth of their child's maternal grandmother. If this was Belgium or a North-Western European country, the parent scored 0; otherwise, the value was 1. The sample comprises 41.4% of parents with a non-Belgian and non-North-Western European background. There is a very strong association between the social class and ethnic background variables (Cramer's $V = 0.652$; $p < 0.001$), so we constructed an additional variable combining ethnic background and social class. We then repeated all of the analyses using this composite variable to ascertain whether the associations had altered when taking into account parents' ethnic background.

Results

Figures 2 and 3 show the association of social class with school choice and track choice at the end of the fifth year of primary education. There is a moderate although clear association between social class and choice. Whereas slightly more than half of the upper middle-class parents had already chosen a school, among working-class parents this figure was only 35.8%. Taking into account parents' ethnic background had no effect.

With regard to track choice, we find that at the end of the fifth year 42.6% of the upper middle-class parents had already decided, while among working-class parents this figure was only 26.2%. Taking ethnic background into consideration does not alter the pattern substantially. Early school and track choice seem to be more prevalent among middle-class and upper middle-class parents.

We find no clear class differences with regard to whether parents asked for information about the transition to secondary education at the end of the fifth year of primary education or not. However, we do observe differences regarding the information channels used by parents (Figure 4). Middle-class and upper middle-class parents indicated that they had already attended open days and searched the Internet for information more often than working-class parents. However, additional analyses showed a clear ethnic dimension to attending open days. In fact, working-class and middle-class parents of non-Belgian and non-North-Western European descent were less likely to have attended open days by the end of their children's fifth year of primary education than working-class and middle-class parents with a Belgian or North-Western European background. The picture with regard to attending information sessions is less clear-cut, but suggests that early attendance at information sessions is more typical of middle-class decision-making.

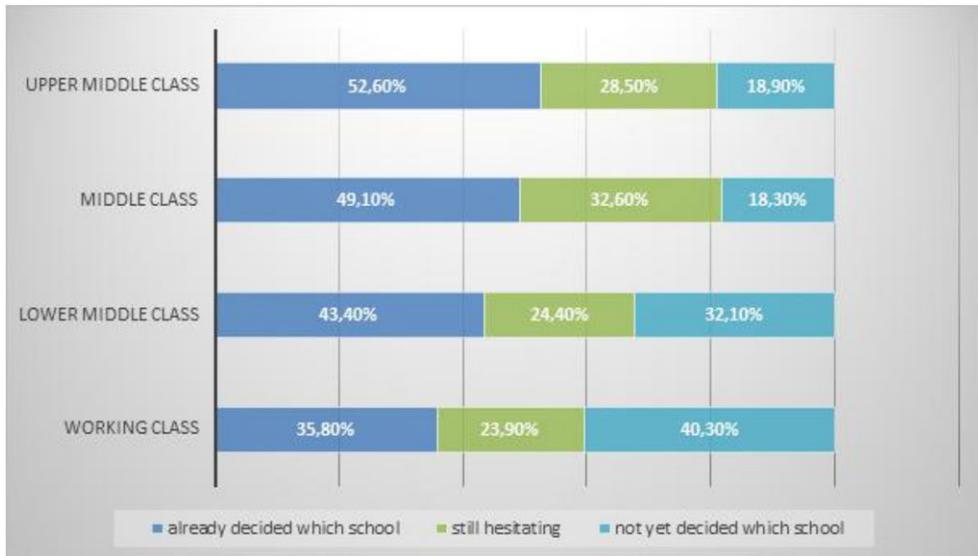


Figure 2. Choice of school at the end of the fifth year of primary education by social class ($N=913$). Note: Cramer's $V=0.134$, $p=0.001$.

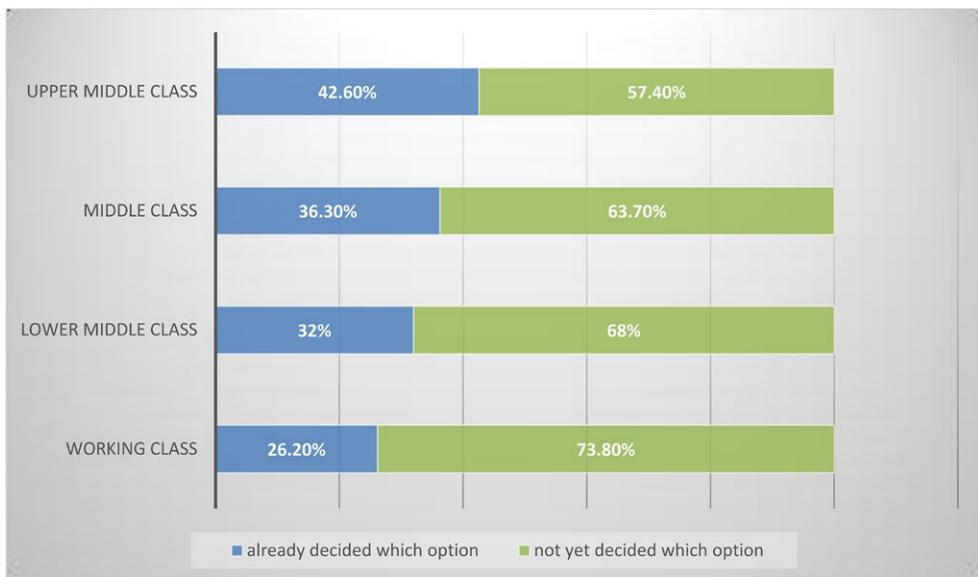


Figure 3. Track choice at the end of the fifth year of primary education by social class ($N=902$). Note: Cramer's $V=0.133$, $p=0.001$.

Figure 5 shows the association between social class and track choice at the end of the final year of primary education. We find clear class differences with regard to the choice of a track by this time. Whereas virtually all upper middle-class parents had chosen, 30.9% of working-class parents had not. Lower middle-class and middle-class parents are situated between these two extremes. Additional analyses taking into account parents' ethnic

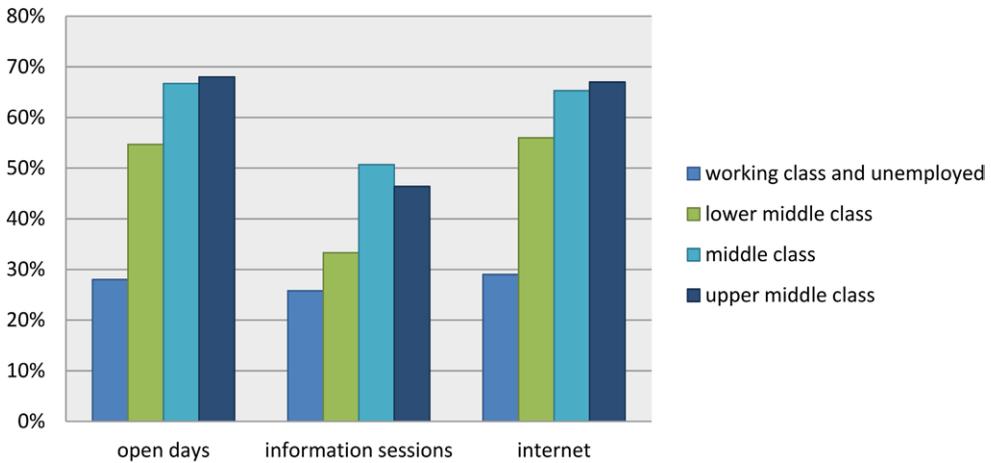


Figure 4. Use of information channels at the end of the fifth year of primary education by social class. Note: Open days, Cramer’s $V=0.334$, $p<0.001$; information sessions, Cramer’s $V=0.205$, $p<0.01$; Internet, Cramer’s $V=0.316$, $p<0.001$.



Figure 5. Track choice at the end of the sixth year by social class ($N=777$). Note: Cramer’s $V=0.296$, $p=0.001$.

background show that the picture is somewhat less clear-cut for lower middle-class and middle-class parents of non-Belgian and non-North-Western European origin than for lower middle-class and middle-class parents of Belgian and North-Western European descent. Among the former, a much higher proportion of parents had not yet chosen a track.

Again, we find no class differences with regard to whether parents had obtained information about secondary education by the final year of primary education. However, we observe differences with regard to the use of information channels (Figure 6). These differences were less pronounced than by the end of the fifth year (Figure 4). Attending the open days and information sessions at secondary schools was still more common among

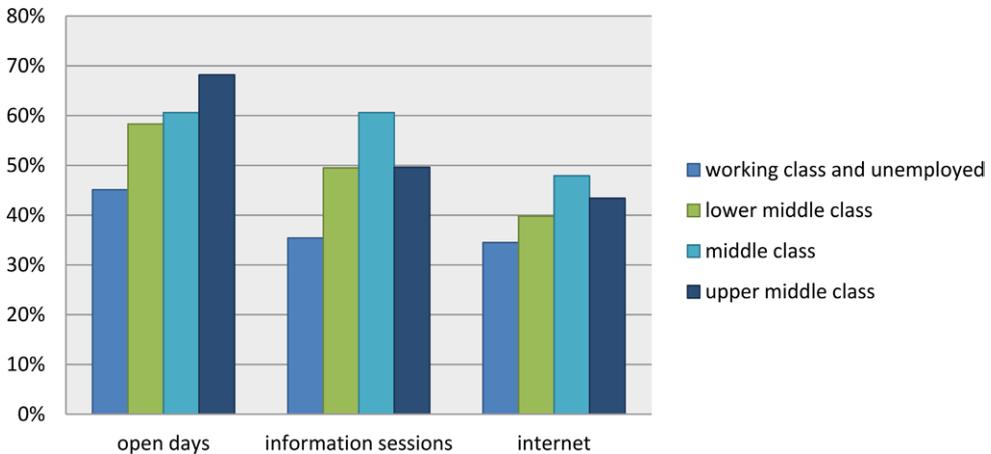


Figure 6. Use of information channels at the end of the sixth year of primary education by social class. Note: Open days, Cramer's $V=0.175$, $p<0.004$; information sessions, Cramer's $V=0.175$, $p<0.01$; Internet, Cramer's $V=0.079$, p = not significant.

upper middle-class and middle-class parents than among working-class parents. Additional analyses show a clear ethnic dimension. In fact, we find that a lower proportion of working-class and lower middle-class parents of non-Belgian or non-Western European descent had attended open days. By the end of the sixth year, class differences with regard to searching the Internet for information were no longer significant.

Based on these bivariate analyses, we can conclude that early decision-making is mostly a middle-class phenomenon. Late decision-making, on the other hand, seems to be more prevalent among working-class families. In addition, the analyses also revealed class differences with regard to the use of information channels. Attending open days and information sessions is more common among upper middle-class parents than among working-class parents. Moreover, we find a clear ethnic dimension to attending open days. Working-class and middle-class parents of non-Belgian and non-North-Western European descent were less inclined to attend open days than were working-class and middle-class parents with a Belgian or North-Western European background.

The qualitative results expanded upon these findings. Our interviews revealed the way in which the parental approach to educational decision-making was determined by the parents' relative possession of social and cultural capital and their skills in turning this capital into educational benefits. Within a choice-driven and complex educational context like Flanders, effective preparation for educational decision-making was strongly related to parents' skills in accessing and decoding relevant information.

The parents' narratives revealed a distinct social divide between parents who were familiar with the education system and could easily access and decode crucial information, on the one hand, and parents who did not, or did to a much lesser extent, on the other. The former was most typical of middle-class parents and the latter of working-class parents.

However, parents' individual biographies, especially among those from lower socio-economic and immigrant backgrounds, generated a specific approach that blurred the binary between middle-class and working-class educational decision-making.

Experience and insider knowledge

In general, middle-class children are steered almost automatically towards their ‘natural habitat’ – the general tracks and schools in secondary education. Middle-class children follow in the educational footsteps of their parents, giving the latter a competitive advantage with regard to educational decision-making. As the educational pathways of their children are rooted in their own experience, middle-class parents’ educational background provides them with privileged knowledge of secondary education. They are more familiar with the structure of the educational system and the local secondary schools. Moreover, potential school choices are narrowed down to schools for general education, leaving these parents with fewer options to consider. This facilitates and precipitates educational decision-making, as can be seen in Ann’s¹ account:

He’s good at languages, we can see that from his notes, but he’s more interested in mathematics-science than in languages. And therefore we think it’s a shame to opt for Latin just on the basis of his capacity when it is not his field of interest [...]

I had eight hours of mathematics in the last two years of secondary education and he already says that’s what he wants to do as well. He wants to follow the same track as his mother [laughs]. (Ann)

This familiarity with secondary education and self-confidence in educational decision-making is unparalleled among parents with a vocational or technical education background. These parents, all working class, have limited knowledge of the general and most prestigious tracks and schools:

Technical? What actually is ‘Technical’? I don’t know. ASO [general education]? I know that is something difficult. At least for my son it would be. But is that something that follows directly after primary education? Then any child should be able opt for it if he puts some effort into it. And then, technical? And vocational. I know what that is! [Laughs]. (Fatma)

For working-class parents with a recent history of migration, lack of first-hand experience of the Flemish education system created additional vulnerability:

Yes, that’s something else. In my country I know, but here it’s the first time I have heard about this. And I never got this kind of information [...] Or rather [...] nobody tells me [...] how my child can progress to secondary education or how I can choose a track for my child. That is a problem. (Salwa)

This lack of knowledge can have serious consequences, especially when parents place their fate in the hands of educational professionals. Katrina is one example. Shortly after having migrated from Albania and ignorant of the impact of certain educational choices, she followed the primary schools’ advice and enrolled her eldest children in the B-stream – an irreversible choice she now regrets, and one which made her determined to take matters into her own hands, building on the knowledge she acquired later on. Katrina’s account demonstrates the potential of parents to alter their disadvantaged position through the active mobilisation of their own experience (capital) and runs counter to a deterministic interpretation of Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction:

Katrina: Now I have some experience, but before they told me ‘this would be good for the children’, and I followed their advice but not anymore!

Interviewer: Why not anymore?

Katrina: Yes, not anymore ... now I know almost everything; at first I didn't. If you tell me 'this will be best, that school' [vocational school], that's not the best information.

Many parents with an immigrant background displayed a strong distrust towards teachers' track recommendations. Experiences of discrimination were manifold and instilled a form of alienation with regard to school officials. Within a non-transparent educational context, getting valuable information is key. However, fear of discrimination fosters social exclusion (Lareau and Horvat 1999), as precisely those who are most in need of information experience more constraint in getting it. This was mostly the case for working-class parents, although Selma, a middle-class mother of Turkish descent, also brought the subject of discrimination to the fore, suggesting a cross-class phenomenon:

They more often propose it [a vocational guidance test] to foreigners. I don't know if it's true, but that's what I often hear. (Selma)

Preparing for educational decision-making: varying levels of skill and efficacy

Over the past few decades, secondary education has undergone multiple changes. The structure and curricula have changed and the reputations of schools fluctuate. Middle-class parents' feel for the game has helped them anticipate the complexities within the field of educational decision-making. Preoccupied with the need for well-informed decision-making, they therefore proactively engage in an intensive quest for information. When opting for a general track is less self-evident, middle-class parents enter an unfamiliar world that runs counter to their middle-class habitus. As Mieke, a middle-class mother seriously considering a technical option for her child, states:

Of course, everyone in our environment went to general education, and then to college or university, so it's hard to choose another path. (Mieke)

Conscious of the potential pitfalls for their child's future educational trajectory, these parents seize every opportunity to assess the consequences of their choices. This was a practice unequalled by the working-class parents in our sample, in spite of comparable choices. However, as we will demonstrate, motivated by a strong inclination to choose, some working-class parents – mostly migrant parents with a general educational background – actively sought to compensate for their lack of inside knowledge. However, their efforts proved to be less effective.

Like Reay, Crozier, and James (2011), we observed a strong commitment to educational decision-making among middle-class parents, reflecting their habitus as a disposition to choose. This inclination prompted a critical and proactive approach that made them stand out from the rest of our sample. Marc's example illustrates middle-class parents' familiarity with academic standards and exclusion mechanisms in secondary schools and tracks – a common practice in Belgian schools (André and Hilgers 2015):

It would be very hard for us if we had to opt between technical education or general education but not at a top level. Because there are schools where you feel that you will be advised to change [school] if you can't meet the standards. (Marc)

Can and Aygul, two working-class parents with an incomplete trajectory in vocational education, were less acquainted with these differences. This explains their less critical stance towards secondary schools for general education or towards the myth of comprehensive education in the first grade of secondary education:

The school doesn't matter to me. As long as it is general education. (Can)

It seems we don't yet choose in the first and second year, it's mixed. You get a bit of all the subjects on offer and, after the second year, you can choose what you want. (Aygul)

Awareness of secondary-school curricula and practices stems from middle-class parents' personal experience as well as their ability to navigate the educational system effectively. An overarching characteristic of middle-class parents' skilful decision-making is their explicit desire for it to be both deliberate and timely. This sense of urgency triggers the proactive preparation of educational decision-making, guaranteeing access to their school of choice, as can be seen in Ann's account:

It's better to be safe than sorry [hinting at the limited capacity in secondary schools], so we have already been to the open days [during the fifth year of primary education]. Therefore, before January, we'll be sure about what we want to do. We already registered for an enrolment day at the school in March. (Ann)

Working-class parents were less proactive and assumed, like Nathalie, that enrolment only took place in June, whereas it actually starts in February–March:

Interviewer: When do you plan to enrol?

Nathalie: When we can.

Interviewer: Do you know when that is?

Nathalie: No, I was going to look it up. But I think it's from June onwards. They will probably have an open house day too, so I can go to that too.

Traditionally, the open days in secondary schools are held only after the start of the enrolment period. Whereas working-class parents seem unaware of this rather inconsistent time lapse between enrolment and open days, middle-class parents attend open days while their children are still in the fifth year of primary education, typifying their critical and proactive attitude. Incentives for these timely visits to open house days often spring from parents' personal networks:

We already attended an open day last year, but that's because you hear: 'you shouldn't wait until the sixth, you'd better attend some open days.' (Lieve)

Moreover, middle-class parents' networks offer access to valuable inside information about schools, tracks and future educational and professional prospects, especially when there is doubt concerning general versus technical education:

A colleague of mine did technical-industrial sciences – exactly the track we are considering for Tijl. So I asked him, how far did it take you and what was your experience of it? That man went on to study Informatics: a bachelor's, and afterwards a master's in Informatics. So that gives us something, like at least you have [...] I mean there are still options. (Mieke)

Working-class parents' networks do not provide this kind of detailed, inside information, and neither do they provide incentives for the proactive preparation of educational decision-making. Working-class parents' networks tended to revolve around kinship and neighbourhood relationships. Some parents – mainly those who had recently migrated – had no other option but to rely almost solely on information from their children:

[I asked] my child, yes. And I sometimes understand what he says and sometimes not. And sometimes I think my child also doesn't understand some things well. And I can't find anyone to give me information; what school is good for my child? I can't find anyone. (Salwa)

Older siblings with a personal experience of secondary education became a valued source of inside information, complementing their parents' limited knowledge. Their active engagement in the decision-making process was a unique form of family social capital in action. We also established a certain form of intergenerational social closure in the architecture of parental networks within primary schools (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). Middle-class parents often turned to other parents for information and assistance. For example, Veerle's daughter was able to join her friend's mother on a school visit:

She went to St. Andrews for a guided tour with Ana, a classmate, and her mother. They went together because I couldn't join them. I had arranged that with the mother yesterday and she said 'I'll take her'. (Veerle)

Working-class parents were generally more isolated within the school. Cross-class or cross-ethnic social support or exchange concerning the transition was almost non-existent. So, despite the presence of valuable information in the school, this social resource did not transcend class or ethnic lines.

In the absence of official league tables, consulting inspection reports is another, strictly middle-class, strategy for assessing the quality of secondary schools. All Flemish schools are regularly evaluated by an official inspection agency and the results are publicly available in the form of an inspection report. Middle-class parents examine these reports in order get a better view of the schools:

The first thing I started to do, for some schools in the Ghent area, which we knew had a good reputation, was to look for the inspection reports on the Internet. We compared them and selected the top three schools we were interested in and then we went to the open days during the last school year [...] According to the inspection reports, their pass rates in higher education afterwards are among the best in Ghent. (Ann)

As with previous research, we noticed that the social and ethnic composition of schools is an important selection criterion (Van Zanten 2003, Noreisch, 2007). Middle-class parents not only use inspection reports to get an overall impression of a school's population, but also to take them beyond the promotional nature of open days:

It gives you an image other than the one promoted by the open day. An inspection report shows a school's strengths and its weaknesses, but also the school's population. (Barbara)

This critical and continuous scrutiny of information requires specific (fore)knowledge, skills and social stimuli. Access to a multitude of information sources and skilful decoding of variations and inconsistencies in the educational structure and local school market are what typifies middle-class decision-making. With no social incentives and less familiar with

official information, working-class parents have a more reactive and less critical attitude towards educational decision-making, as can be seen in the following examples:

Interviewer: Do you know when enrolment is due?

Gülhan: No. But if I'm not mistaken, even when there are no vacancies, according to the CLB [official guidance agency] every school must enrol.

Interviewer: So you assume all schools will have vacancies?

Gülhan: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you discuss your doubts with anyone?

Emel: No

Interviewer: No?

Emel: It's too early, I think [...] You know [...].

In accordance with previous research (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995), Emel's undetailed and suggestive account shows how social differences become apparent not only through what parents say, but even more so through what is left out of the conversation. During the interviews, working-class parents were sometimes stuck for an answer simply because they had not yet thought things over, or had hardly any knowledge of secondary education.

However, some working-class parents, who were instilled with a more middle-class educational aspirational habitus, displayed a strong inclination to choose – an inclination that could be traced back to their own educational biographies. However, despite their tendency for critical engagement in the field of educational decision-making, their efforts were not always as effective, resembling what Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe (1995) refer to as 'semi-skilled choosers'. Hafid, for example, unemployed but with a Moroccan college degree, was very preoccupied with the choice of a school for his daughter. Disillusioned with the information from his restricted network, he turned decisively to forums on the Internet and tried to find the valuable information he was looking for:

Hafid: So, I'm doing some Internet research. But I haven't got very far yet. The problem is the language.

Interviewer: And what are you looking for on the Internet?

Hafid: Everything, the schools ... All they write about the schools, articles but also forums, I've found some forums.

However, caught between a middle-class habitus, impelling him to critically engage in the decision-making process, and the social and linguistic restrictions inflicted on him by his migrant and working-class status, Hafid's endeavours remained unsatisfactory:

I think the mistake we made is that we didn't go to an information session last year. That's a big mistake, but it's done. Therefore, we don't know what schools are good. (Hafid)

Hafid was not the only one who did not fit neatly into the divide between a middle-class skilful and proactive versus a working-class unskilled and reactive profile. Working-class

parents, especially migrants who had seen their own educational trajectories curtailed, had high educational aspirations for their children. However, these parents' individual biographies and social position left them with less valuable resources. Being unemployed or working in isolated jobs meant that their social networks were restricted. Furthermore, lacking inside information and experiencing multiple barriers for accessing and assessing information, they tended to be less effective in navigating the complex field of educational decision-making in Flanders. Clear educational aspirations, combined with feelings of inadequacy as far as achieving these goals, turned the process of educational decision-making into an anxious undertaking. This was most noticeable in non-verbal signals (such as frequent sighing), a humble posture (signalling a sense of despair) or even crying during the interview.

Discussion and conclusion

The specificities of the Flemish context – a choice-driven system combined with a hierarchical and non-transparent educational structure – constitute a challenge for parental strategies in terms of educational decision-making and sets out the logics of the subfield of school and track choice. The aim of this study has been to analyse how parents from different class and ethnic backgrounds both shape and experience their decision-making process at the transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders. An explanatory mixed-methods approach was employed in order to explore the class differences in that process. An analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data revealed two distinct parental profiles regarding educational decision-making. On the one hand, we discerned a group of proactive, well-informed and timely choosers, generally middle class, and, on the other, we found a group of more reactive choosers, generally working class. The latter tended to decide later and were less well informed concerning the transition to secondary education. These profiles could be traced back to differences in the parents' social and cultural capital. For middle-class parents, the interplay between their social and cultural capital proved to be enabling. Conversely, working-class parents were less able to uncover the complexities inherent in the educational structure and the threshold for enrolment.

The intersection between race and class created additional vulnerability. Restricted social networks due to recent migration deprived parents of inside knowledge about schools and tracks. Even well-educated migrant parents with a strong aspirational habitus found themselves in a weaker position due to their lack of social capital and devalued cultural capital.

Unfamiliar with the educational structure, migrant parents tended to rely more on educational recommendations from school officials. Biased teacher recommendations, however, fostered distrust of the guidance offered by educational institutions. Despite this distrust, working-class migrant parents appeared less critical of official information and procedures regarding enrolment and curricula, indicating an ambiguous relationship with formal institutions. Our sample did not allow us to extend this analysis to the intersection between class and race within the middle class, since the number of middle-class parents with a migrant background was limited. However, some echoes of discrimination hinted at a cross-class phenomenon, as none of the white middle-class parents mentioned unfair teacher recommendations.

Furthermore, our data showed that some working-class parents had middle-class aspirations, fostering a strong inclination to choose. However, their engagement was simultaneously fuelled by their own educational trajectories and constrained by class-based realities. These parents strongly resembled Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe's (1995) 'semi-skilled choosers', who displayed an inclination to choose but proved to be less effective in doing so.

Although class fractions provided a more complex picture, the two observed profiles continued to hold. In spite of the largely working-class versus middle-class discourse, the decisive mechanisms behind the observed social disparities were social and cultural rather than structural and material, and challenged a merely occupational notion of social class. In line with Savage (2015), our findings showed that – despite growing individualism – class still matters, albeit in a more fragmented way. A more multidimensional approach to social class based on the relative possession and activation of different forms of capital and the added influence, net of class, of migrant background proved to be most revealing for understanding the social patterns in the complex field of educational decision-making. This study constitutes a challenge to liberal and meritocratic ideas about free choice, as it demonstrates how choice-driven systems create extra exclusionary processes. Despite a substantive amount of discretion on the part of the parents, the almost invisible mechanisms of social reproduction proved to be very persistent. Conceiving of school and track choice as a sub-field, we observed the dialectic between field and habitus (Thomson 2014). Parents' inclination to choose, their habitus, combined with the activation of their capital generated specific practices both produced by and reproducing social order.

Within an opaque, rigid and hierarchical context, those who are insiders (Draelants 2014) and therefore bring the necessary social and cultural resources to the table gain the upper hand. Working-class parents were definitely less informed and proactive than middle-class parents. Deprived of crucial information about exclusion mechanisms and varying academic standards between and within schools and tracks, these parents risk being on the losing end of the game. Nevertheless, we want to avoid an all too deterministic interpretation of these events. Our data show that some parents attempt to alter the structural conditions imposed on them by their immigrant and/or social status. Our results highlight the importance of a multidimensional, intersectional and non-deterministic interpretation of social class for studying the role of educational transitions in social reproduction. We believe that more attention is needed, from researchers and policy-makers alike, for the less tangible but nevertheless pervasive cultural and social constraints that hinder effective decision-making in choice-driven systems – along with special attention to the diversity of individual biographies.

Note

1. The names of the participating parents are pseudonyms.

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