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In and out of catchment areas

Between avoidance and multiculturalism: exploring the transition to
lower secondary school in Milan

Doctoral dissertation by

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“Nel 2000 ho organizzato un seminario dedicato a questa vicenda, la fuga degli iscritti nativi, cioè quando tu sei in età di primaria, secondaria di primo grado, cosa succede in una città grande come milano? Dove le scuole sono abbastanza vicine l’una all’altra e dove non abbiamo dei veri e propri ghetti...ma abbiamo una presenza più distribuita... a macchia di leopardo. Sta succedendo questo e io urlo come cassandra da anni su questa vicenda, dico le scuole si stanno connotando come “due a due” vicine, scuole vicine, magari fanno addirittura dello stesso comprensivo (...) una scuola si sta connotando di serie A e una scuola di serie B (...).

Che cosa succede quando una scuola comincia a superare una certa percentuale di stranieri? Succede questo, diventa una scuola “ah no qui non si svolgono i programmi perché ci sono gli stranieri”. Come se gli stranieri fossero tutti neoarrivati. Ormai il numero dei NAI è veramente ridicolo rispetto agli incrementi che abbiamo avuto negli anni passati. Però è successo questo a Milano e non ne vogliono prendere atto (...). Quanti anni ci vogliono perché una scuola diventa ghetto? Non è che si diventa ghetto da un momento all’altro, ci vogliono anni di incuria.

Questo discorso tipico che io continuo a fare, forse dovrei essere più brava, non sono abbastanza convincente, la mia idea non è sostenuta da vere ricerche, sto sbagliando. Poi io sono un’insegnante non è che sono una ricercatrice, non sono un’accademica non ho gli strumenti per fare queste ricerche. Bisognerebbe farlo, perché dopo la boutade del tetto del 30% poi il discorso è caduto, è valso solo per un anno, fine. E quando invece a Milano sta succedendo proprio così che le scuole si stanno connotando a due a due come scuola di serie A e scuola di serie B.” (A.M)

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Introduction

In contemporary societies schools are the institutionalized sites in which members of society are *educated* and where children, teens and young adults spend almost every day for a long period of their lives (Brint 2007; Fisher 2003). They are the physical and symbolic place in which socialization process takes place outside the family, and besides peer groups, religion and working places. Moreover, attending a certain school, since the beginning of the educational path, may affect further choices and chances of success, for a combination of several factors that the literature has researched thoroughly. The centrality of schools in individual and their families' lives is also the reason why educational choices have received wide sociological attention, aimed at exploring and analyse different turning points in decisions regarding schools, looking at the role of micro, meso and macro level characteristics and how they affect or shape choices.

In Italy, education plays a pivotal role in individual trajectories, affecting the opportunities to reach and occupy different social positions and being potentially a ladder for upwards social mobility. Nevertheless, this selective function of the system in allocating individuals in different social positions, on the basis of their performances, has proved to be dysfunctional, since individual ascriptive characteristics are still determinant for pupils' attainments and achievements. If on the one hand research showed that the Italian educational system is partially failing in guarantee equality of chances, on the other hand schools' everyday routine reveal that schools are more and more under pressure. Not only public schools have been at the centre of a national debate due to ceiling collapses, temporary employed teachers, parents' struggle over meals, homework and WhatsApp groups, but they are facing a severe state of shrinking resources. If this on the one hand increases the difficulties of those schools who must manage different pupils' special needs – for instance not Italian pupils recently arrived and their alphabetization – on the other enhances the role of more affluent and participative parents and their associations with fundraising roles.

Despite of these weaknesses, “having an education” is still highly valued by individuals and educational decision are considered as having long term consequences. In this sense, attending a school rather than another, might make a difference to parents, when they oversee the decision in the early years of their children schooling. In fact, parents not only turn to be co-protagonist with schools in pupils' education, but they are officially invested by policy-makers of an important role within the educational space. The Autonomy

Reform, in fact, with the introduction of freedom of choice, recognized their right to choose the school they consider the most suitable for their children. This means that families are no more compelled to refer to the school catchment area, as before, but can move in the territory to find the most adequate institution both for primary and lower secondary schools. Therefore, on paper, the assignment of pupils to different schools is no more based on a geographical principle, but on parental decision. Parents may continue to refer to the school assigned based on catchment areas, or can enrol their children in a different school, with the availability of places as the only practical limitation.

What might be relevant in this apparently straightforward decision, in the compulsory and primary level of education, is the possibility that parental choices may be differentiated along class and ethnic axes and may have collective effect of distinction and closure, with consequences on the equity of the system. If families already play a central role in determining individual probability of success their role is enhanced in a system based on freedom of choice. The system may favour parents endowed with cultural and social resources, that in seeking the best possible school might avoid schools' intakes perceived as characterized by ethnic minorities or socio-economically disadvantaged pupils.

This research takes the move from this interrogative with the aim of contributing to the literature on school choice, shedding light on the transition from primary to lower secondary school that has been overlooked in the Italian context. This exploratory qualitative study addresses parental school choice as it is experienced and narrated by parents in the local context of Milan, vis-à-vis school systems and institutional constraints. It is intended to explore Italian and not Italian parents' decisions through their representations of the choice, to understand which are their declared criteria of choice and how these choices are mediated by class resources and can constitute a mechanism of reproduction of social inequalities in urban areas. The methodology employed includes: 1) semi-structured qualitative interviews to parents of children enrolled in a public lower secondary school or recently exited from one; 2) semi-structured qualitative interviews to school principals and other key informant; 3) observation during lower secondary schools' open days; 4) secondary analysis of data at the school level (including the location and number of pupils by gender and nationality, curriculum and timetable characteristics, closeness and dislocation of schools in the territory and capacity of the building and catchment area "dimension/extension"); and 4) secondary analysis of data at the city level on parents' enrolment decisions in or out of the catchment area of schools.

The present work is divided in two parts, the first one – Chapter I, II and III – is dedicated to the groundwork of the research, namely the theoretical overview, the literature review on school choice and the features of the Italian case. It also includes a methodological account on research design and fieldwork. The second part – Chapter IV, V and VI – is devoted to the presentation of the research results with focus respectively: on schools' catchment areas and their attributes, on criteria guiding parents in the choice, their decision-making process, parents' schooling strategies in the neighbourhood.

In the light of the relevance that educational transitions have in sociological research, **Chapter I** is devoted to review this tradition and track the theoretical and analytical coordinates of the research. The chapter contains an overview of the two main theoretical approaches around which educational choice research has clustered: the cultural reproduction and the rational choice theories. With more emphasis on the macro-structural constraints, in the former approach, and on rational evaluation of costs, benefits and chances of success in the latter, these theoretical approaches have provided different explanations of individual decisions in the educational arena. The chapter contains also a review of the literature that has taken the move from these approaches, focusing, in different national contexts, on the exploration and/or analysis of individual educational choices. Moving from this extensive literature, the chapter focuses on three relevant aspects when researching school choice: class and ethnic differences in the choice (who choose?); reasons behind parents' choices (how do parents choose?) and their decision-making process (how do they know and/or look for what they are interested in?); the relevance of the national and local context in which parents' choices emerge as schooling strategies in and out their catchment area schools.

Finally, the chapter includes a discussion on the conceptual framework of this work that places it in between the rational action and the culturalist theories, with regards to the rationality of the choice and the possibility to address decisions as strategies. This research focuses on individuals' representations and motives of choice, considering parents choosing their children schools as rational actors, that is as making choice perceived by them as grounded on reason. Nevertheless, parental choices need to be placed within a social and physical context, and their individuals' preferences must be considered as inevitably filtered and constrained by material and cultural characteristics and by their interaction with institutional constraints that can shape or influence those preferences or reduce the number of options available to the individuals.

Precisely because of the relevance of the national and local context in the analysis of school choice, **Chapter II** is devoted to the Italian educational system, described as the result of several reforms from the 60s to the present days. Particular attention is paid to the lower secondary level since this segment has been overlooked by policy interventions, although it seems to constitute an important step in terms of further success or failure in the educational path. Moreover, lower secondary school, once *middle school*, was born as a compulsory track with a common core curriculum to help democratize the transition of all pupils to upper secondary school, regardless of their class. While today this segment maintains its original aim, there is the risk that its socialization function may be endangered by the polarization of schools in the territory, based on the concentration of pupils with migratory background. The chapter in this sense attempts to link the formal characteristics of the system to the relevance of this transition at the light of preliminary evidences of school segregation in urban areas, such Milan.

Looking at the current challenges that the system is facing, the choice of the lower secondary school represents a practice that involves both schools as institutions – with their educational offer, differentiated thanks to the autonomy reform – both parents occupying different social positions and choosing on the basis of differentiated criteria of preference.

From this initial insight, the research project has developed in detail as it is thoroughly explained in **Chapter III**, devoted to the research task and methods. The chapter illustrates the main steps followed in the research design, starting from the definition of research questions and the methodology. It addresses the local dimension of the research, explaining the relevance of the setting, Milan and its neighbourhood, and detailing the schools selection strategy. Later, it focuses on the individual dimension of the research, with a discussion about the qualitative approach, on the unit of analysis and on parents' sampling decisions. It describes the step taken during the fieldwork and finally it a description of the profiles of parents involved in the research.

With the end of exploring parents' retroactive accounts of choice, the research addresses also many aspects related to the functioning of the system, that were unclear at the beginning of the path and could not be taken for granted. In particular, catchment area attributes, their functioning and the role they play in parents' decisions needed specific attention. To this purpose, **Chapter IV** is devoted to uncovering how the catchment area system works in the city of Milan, focusing on how individuals navigate this system in a context of fragmented and discretionary school practices. The Chapter refers to three aspects: 1) how catchment areas are designed at the local level, what is their aim and functioning; 2)

what the data tell us about schools' enrolment in the city and in the participant group; and how parents are situated in this map of catchment areas (in or out of their catchment area school?) to detect parents' *flows* throughout the primary level; 3) to what extent parents' experiences of catchment areas and freedom of choice might be emerging differently in terms of perception and degrees of awareness.

What emerge from Chapter IV forwards the exploration of parents' narrations to understand based on which criteria they opt for a specific school, preferring it to another. This is the object of **Chapter V** that looks at the main criteria guiding parents' choices – proximity, children well being and preference, school quality and school mix – and what is their role in their ultimate choice. Moreover, the chapter contains a reconstruction of two important moments in the decision-making process: the negotiation of the choice inside the family and the information-gathering. Through the latter – mainly based on school open days and above all grapevine information – mothers and fathers learn about schools and construct their opinions.

Parents' criteria of choice are nevertheless dependent from the local context that has a specific educational offer in terms of available institutions. That is why, is pivotal to place mothers and fathers within this context, to look at the characteristics of their catchment area schools and to explore how their own criteria of choice have been influenced by schools. This is the aim of **Chapter VI** that, describing schools characteristics – through “cold” official and “hot” one – focuses on parents' choices as flows in and out of catchment area schools. Chapter VI stresses how these criteria declared by parents intersect with schools characteristics and how they emerge as specific schooling strategies of avoidance of certain schools. The last section of the chapter is devoted to a broader discussion on the types of parents that put in place each observed strategy. It pays attention to their socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics, stressing homogeneity and heterogeneity within groups of parents choosing similarly, with the aim of stressing possible social consequences of specific group choices.

Chapter I – The debate on parents’ school choice and schooling strategies

1.1 Introduction

Educational choices are “decisions (...) encountered by virtually everyone” in Western societies (Gambetta 1987:1); they have become pivotal for individuals, even when the choice is made in their teens. Thus, such decisions involve parents as much as they involve significant others and friends and they have received wide sociological attention because they constitute individual actions with social premises and social consequences.

Studies on educational decisions have therefore developed different focuses, concentrating on the nature of choices and its determinants, the importance of families’ characteristics, teachers and peers, and the choices’ consequences for an individual’s future social position.

A wide scholarship has aimed at understanding and explaining the role of factors such as class and gender (and more recently racial/ethnic) differences in educational choices. To explore and analyse these differences, educational decisions research has largely clustered around two theoretical approaches. The rational choice theory (or “pulled-from-the-front” approach, as Gambetta (1987) defines it that provides a theory of individual action based on rational evaluation of costs, benefits and probabilities of success, and the cultural reproduction theory (or “pushed-from-behind” approach) that emphasizes the macro-structural constraints of individual actions. From these two approaches, educational decisions research has mainly drawn its theoretical framework, stressing different aspects of individual – and parental – decisions inside the educational system, analysing the role of individuals class characteristics in influencing or determining preferences.

Even if traditionally educational choices have been analysed looking at individuals’ decisions on their own educational paths, research on educational decisions has also developed around the role played by parents in choosing their offspring schools at the lowest level of education. This research path – developed and consolidated in several national contexts - has mainly been related to two research interests: studying school choices as (middle-)class strategies in urban areas and analysing parents’ choice in relation to residential and school segregation.

Research on the first topic has mainly explored how native middle-classes parents choose their offspring’s schools, therefore on the basis of which criteria and resulting in

which schooling strategies. Even if, more recently, working-class and minority parents have received similar attention, studies have typically focused on how native middle-classes parents construct their idea “good school” and are able to activate their social and cultural capital to gain access to it, granting their children’s success.

Research on the second topic has aimed at determining and assessing the role of parental choices on socioeconomic and ethnic concentration in schools and/or neighbourhoods. In fact, parents’ tendency to avoid racial or ethnic minorities and/or socioeconomically disadvantage pupils – looking for more homogeneous school environment – might contribute to create or enhance these groups concentration and segregation among schools. Studies on the relation between parents’ schooling decisions and school segregation have acquired more relevance in the light of several education reforms that, in Western countries, have introduced quasi-market elements in educational systems, increasing individuals’ freedom of choice in the field of education. Similarly, school choice has been explored to evaluate how systems such the French one, that binds pupils’ assignment to school to their residence¹, may affect spatial and educational inequalities.

In the overall, parents’ choices have been studied 1) by quantitative researches that developed analysis to evaluate the effects of the introduction of school choice program in national educational systems 2) by quantitative and qualitative researches that explored parents’ narratives on school choice, with the aim of studying the more advantaged classes’ strategies of choices and their effects on other social groups.

Despite national differences – in the variations of the degree of freedom, educational stratification, and racial and ethnic composition of the population, this extensive work on educational decisions, and on school choice, has provided evidence about three relevant intertwining questions.

- 1) How different class positioning and ethnic or national identities influence (shape, constraints or determine) parents’ capacity to choose, evaluating different options and getting access to these options;
- 2) Which are the declared reasons behind parents’ choice – why parents choose what they choose, if they do – that is, by what criteria they claim to be guided and what resources they rely upon in the decision-making process (examining, again, class and ethnic differences);
- 3) The width of the choice in practice, that depends on the national education system, on the local school setting and on parents’ educational strategies when facing different options.

¹ The system of assignment of pupils to school has been widely debated in France. The catchment area system (*carte scolaire*) has been abolished in 2007 and then reintroduced in 2012.

This chapter is devoted to a review of the literature that has explored school choice from these three different angles. It starts from an exploration of the main premises and conclusions of the rational choice and the culturalist approach to educational decisions, underpinning the theoretical framework of the work presented here. Moreover, this chapter reviews the international literature that has developed researches on school choice from these approaches. It focuses on: class and ethnic differences in the choice (who choose?); reasons behind parents' choices (how do parents choose?) and their decision-making process (how do they know and/or look for what they are interested in?); the relevance of the national and local context in which parents' choices emerge as schooling strategies in and out their catchment area schools.

In the approach of parental choices as they have been explored in this research, parents' representations and vocabularies of motives (Mills 1940) are the focus of the study, as through them we access to their declared reasons, preference and guiding criteria as well as to the decision process taking place in their local context.

1.2 Theoretical debate on educational transitions

Educational choice research has largely clustered around two theoretical approaches: the rational action theory, grounded in Boudon's theory of action, and the cultural reproduction theory, based on Bourdieu's theory of practice. Both theoretical frameworks have been largely used in educational research to explore and analyse the determinants of choice and class differences in educational transitions.

As was previously mentioned, both the rational action and cultural reproduction approaches are aimed at giving meaning to evidence of class differential in education, in academic performance and attainment in educational choices. Despite being traditionally in opposition, these two theoretical approaches recognize the need to provide micro-level explanations to make sense of macro-sociological phenomena. They include both agency and structure – but differently – in accounting for social class influences on individual decisions. Starting from Boudon's theory, I initially refer to the Rational choice approach overturning the chronological order of events, because Boudon's applied rational action theory to education has emerged as an alternative to cultural reproduction explanation of the effects of social class on education (Hatcher 1998) (see section 1.2.2).

1.2.1 The rational action theory: Boudon's approach

The core of Boudon's theory rests on the assumption that mobility and success have little meaning if they are separated from an individual's social position because individual motivations are, in fact, influenced by the individual's environment and background (Boudon 1973). His model explains class difference in education as a result of the existence of social classes associated with different systems of values. These differences, embodied in individuals' class positions, engender different attitudes and behaviour in the educational attainments of individuals and in the value and importance attributed to each educational level in terms of future chances. Boudon's theoretical *explanandum* of individual and family decisions in the educational system relies on what he defines as a qualitative version of an economic model of choice, based on rationalist assumptions. His framework of the educational decision-making process in light of individual social position can be summarized in a few points. 1) Transition points exist inside the educational system that represent survival/non-survival decisions for the individual and/or his family. 2) Thus, each of these alternatives is associated with cost/benefit evaluations that differ for each social position and have a level of risk that changes for everyone, with age and academic success as relevant elements. 3) Costs, benefits and expected risk evaluation are associated, with a different utility for each alternative; in fact, each social position corresponds to a hierarchy of a different combination of costs, benefits and risk associated with different actions. 4) The higher the utility associated with an alternative is, the higher the likelihood is that the individual will opt in favour of this alternative.

Applying this framework to educational decision, Boudon includes in his theory both the individual's (stressing the relevance of preferences) and the families' social position. The latter, mediated through the cultural background, influences the likelihood of educational success; keeping educational success equal, it influences the likelihood of choosing one path instead of another. The effect of social class is defined as the "primary effect" of individual background characteristics on academic performance. However, the "secondary effect" is the influence of social class on educational choices made by individuals facing the range of options allowed by their own performance. In Boudon's model, the role of class resources is considered in shaping an individual's set of preferences, a set constructed based on a rational evaluation of costs, benefits and risks.

1.2.1.1 *The rational choice approach in educational research*

Boudon's rational choice model has been adopted and developed by Goldthorpe and colleagues (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Goldthorpe 1996) and applied empirically in different contexts. Examples include (Erikson and Jonsson 1996) in Sweden, with an analysis of the transition to secondary schools and use at the university, and Duru-Bellat in her study of the French system inequalities through the years (see for instance Duru-Bellat 1996, 2002). More recently, it has been applied to the analysis of secondary school transition in the English and Welsh systems (Jackson et al. 2007) and in the study of access to higher education in Germany (Becker and Hecken 2009). Moreover, in the European context, Boone and Van Houtte (2013) analysed differentials in the transition from primary to secondary schools in Flanders lying on different theoretical framework incorporating both rational action theory and cultural and social capital theories). The authors focused on the mechanisms that intervene in educational decision-making and found that parents' socioeconomic backgrounds have an independent effect on the probability of choosing a more demanding secondary school track, together with gender, family type and mother's educational attainments (being a girl or a pupil from not-disrupted families increases the probability of choosing an academic track, as does having a highly educated mother). However, they also found that whereas gender and family type effects decrease after controlling for pupils' performance, the effect of mother's education disappears completely. The authors aimed at evaluating the social and cultural capital effect on the choice, but they concluded that, controlling for parental relations and knowledge of the educational system, these factors do not explain the effect of the parental socioeconomic status on the choice. Note also Manzo's (2013) study on class differentials in educational choices in France, which introduced a new theoretical model that considered preference formation a combination of individual rational evaluation and peer-group pressure. Using an agent-based computational simulation, the author concluded that a network-based social influence on the choice must be considered at the theoretical level because, although its effects are weaker than ability/benefit calculations, they contribute to explaining part of the choice.

Boudon's theory of action has also underpinned several studies on determinants of educational transition in Italy (Abburrà, Gambetta, and Miceli 1996; Bonica and Olagnero 2011; Checchi and Flabbi 2006; Checchi 2010; Gambetta 1987) that reached similar conclusions for the Italian case. Although families' economic capital has been decreasing in importance since the 1970s, the pupils' socioeconomic background plays a key role in the

move to more academically oriented tracks and in the probability of dropping out or being left behind (with lower class pupils having a clear disadvantage). Gambetta's analysis introduced an adjusted version of Boudon's model. Conducted in northwest Italy, his main study analysed pupils' transition to labour or continuing in the educational system after the completion of compulsory education. He moved from Boudon's theoretical approach to the choice, but he mediated in the conclusion between causality and intentionality (Gambetta 1987:169). In fact, explaining individual decisions within a rational action theory, Gambetta found that in the evaluation of costs, benefits and risk of different options, middle-class youngsters *over-adapt* upwards (choose to persevere even when facing a high risk of failure) and that lower-class youngsters *over-adapt* downward (*Ibidem*, 86). The author described these findings as explained by a type of "over-ambition" of middle-classes in pursuing academically oriented upper secondary schools (even when not supported by parents' educational capital) and by the propensity of the lower classes to persist only when successful completion is certain. These inertial forces, which could explain over-adaptation, are forces embodied in norms, beliefs and sub-cultural values that can shape the preference structure and the perception of the alternatives.

Gambetta's research was followed up, ten years later, by his colleagues and himself (Abburrà et al. 1996). Their work – although confirming the rational nature of the choice, based on individual ability and occupational aspirations – found, in contrast to the previous conclusions, that family economic resources have no more effect on the choice. In contrast, parents' educational background plays a central role, choosing not only the more academically oriented tracks but also in the decision on whether to continue in education. In their study on upper secondary school choice of pupils in Turin, Bonica and Olagnero (2011) more recently found that educational performance influences pupils' probability of choosing more-demanding tracks. However, this effect diminishes when one considers family class position (e.g., a blue-collar youngster has a 50% lower probability of choosing an academically oriented track compared with his middle-class peers, other conditions being held constant).

These abovementioned studies share the same premises of Boudon's approach – analysing the differences in education (and in educational choices) generated by different distributions of resources within society and, thus, by the individual social position, which influences preferences, values and costs/benefit evaluations. Individuals belonging to different classes evaluate differently the costs, benefits and expected outcomes of (or probability of success in access to) different options, even with the same level of academic

attainment. Sociologists applying rational choice theory have broadened the concept of cost to also include the social costs of one's decision and returns on education, such as family social status or peer and significant other's social recognition. In particular, when analysing parents' choice, the analysis of school decisions extends beyond the parent-child relationship (a form of altruistic action) to involve kinship, friendships, and other "socially structured bonds" (Barone 2005:431).

1.2.2 The cultural reproduction theory: Bourdieu's approach

In Bourdieu's theory of practice, unequal endowment with different forms of capital operates through individual and class dispositions that adjust individual aspirations and expectations to the probabilities of success of different behaviours of the same class members. Bourdieu's critical class-based analysis of educational practice rests on two key concepts: the "open concept" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:110) of field – and species of capital active in it – and *habitus*. Bourdieu's theory of practice is based on the idea that individual practices are the result of the embodiment of structures through schemes of dispositions (*habitus*) that operate at a tacit, taken-for-granted level, constitute the social words and reproduce (or transform) structures (Bourdieu 1990). The *habitus* represents the subjective thought, actors' disposition, and mental structures through which actors understand the social world. Thus, it is both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices. Critiques on the empirical use of this concept have been addressed to Bourdieu, considering its intrinsic determinism and its resistance to change (Swartz 1981; Wade 2011). Nevertheless, it has been applied in educational research to understand class differences facing educational institutions, to explain homogeneity in groups' choices, and the dominance by some groups over others (Reay 1998). Moreover, *habitus* produces practices that can be classified and recognized as such only by actors that possess the code needed to understand their social meaning. Thus, it implies both "a sense of one's place" and a "sense of the place of others" (Bourdieu 1989:17) and is useful in understanding more-powerful parents' attempts to distinguish and conserve their positions in the social space through school choice.

In addressing education as a site of class reproduction, it is important to refer to another central organizing concept of Bourdieu's work: the field. The field is defined as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and

Wacquant 1992:97), in which these positions are defined not only by the location in the distribution of capital in the present but also by the potential future situation of it. The possession of such capital is pivotal in having access to “specific profits that are at stake in the field” (*Ibidem*, 97). The functioning and transformation of the field is based upon asymmetries between the different forces that confront themselves in the field itself; in fact, actors and institutions in the field “constantly struggle, according to the regularities and the rules constitutive of this space of play [...] with various degrees of strength and therefore diverse probabilities of success” (*Ibidem*, 102). Bourdieu refers to the field as a particular type of “game (*jeu*)” that “is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified” (*Ibidem*, 98).

Examining the field as a game, Bourdieu explains the existence of different species of capital as though they were “trump cards, master cards whose force varies depending upon the game, just as the relative value of cards changes with each game” (98). As a master card, capital also varies across various fields and its relative value is determined by the field in which it is used.

Depending on the field “capital can present itself in three fundamental guises” (*Ibidem*, 46): economic, cultural and social capital. Economic capital – wealth that is either inherited or generated from interactions between the individual and the economy – is the one from which the different types of capital can be derived. In addition to these three species, Bourdieu discusses symbolic capital as manifested in individual prestige and personal qualities, such as authority and charisma, and as related to scarce resources in a field; it can be “capital – in whatever form – insofar as it is represented (...) it presupposes the intervention of the habitus, as a socially constituted cognitive capacity (*Ibidem*, 56)”. The notions of social and cultural capital have been pivotal in educational inequalities research. The first is eloquently defined as actual or potential resources that come from “possession of a durable network of more-or-less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition that provide each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital” (Bourdieu 1986:51). The importance of the second emerged in Bourdieu’s work on educational inequalities in the French system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). It is distinguished in the “objectified” state, taking the form of cultural goods such as book and pictures; in the “institutionalized” state, in the case of educational qualification; and in the “embodied state”, which includes linguistic competencies, manners, preferences and orientations, general knowledge about how to behave inside the field, competences and skills (Bourdieu 1986). The use of cultural capital is particularly interesting in the sociology of education as a

fundamental asset in parents' work vis-à-vis the school. Scholars have employed this concept, partially also criticizing Bourdieu, focusing not only on the possession of cultural capital to succeed in facing educational institutions but also on the ability to activate the specific capital needed in this field (Devine 2004; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Lareau 1987, 2000; Reay 1998).

1.2.2.1 *Moving from Bourdieu's approach: Anglo-Saxon and French research on school choice as a (middle) class practice*

The bulk of the research on school choice that, starting from Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, focused on educational decisions as class reproductive practices was tied to a specific educational policy framework, supported in several countries, that enhanced parental freedom of choice. Despite thereafter departing from this policy-critique approach, this wave of studies emerged in the UK in the 1990s in opposition to the advocates of freedom of choice. The studies focused on the possibility that the introduction of a market-based logic in education could increase rather than decrease the level of school stratification on a socio-economic and ethnic basis (Ball, Gewirtz, and Bowe 1994; Ball 1993; Stephen J. Ball 2003; David et al. 1993, 1997; Reay and Ball 1998; Reay 1996, 2004, 2007; Reay et al. 2007). The latter scholarship on school choice – focusing extensively on white middle-class practices – stresses the importance of the context in which individuals act and highlights that parents “construct the activity of choice making *within their specific social milieu*” (Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994). The first step in this study was to deconstruct the discourse of choice before knowing what parents choose and how, focusing on whether they are in fact capable of choosing. In fact, as David et al. (1997) observed, not all parents² live in the same area, they lack the same degree or the same occupation, and they possess neither the same mental nor the same physical health. In other words, not all parents know they are provided with the same options; for some, certain options are more accessible than others (Burgess et al. 2011). Moreover, not all parents know or can obtain the necessary information to set their own preference criteria (David et al. 1997). Thus, educational choice has been framed as one aspect of a number of family strategies, from child-rearing to involvement at school, that can constitute class reproductive practices (Devine 2004; Lareau 2000). In fact, the main argumentation of this wave of studies has been that the process of choice requires the

² To be precise, David et al. (1997) refer exclusively to mothers.

possession of specific resources, not only economic (which are undeniably relevant, particularly if one intends to buy a house somewhere else or if someone is willing to pay for a private school) but also cultural and social.

These resources extend and define the range of options available to families (Ball et al. 1994; Ball 2003). A similar stream of literature has developed in the French context, focusing on middle-classes parents as *consumers* in the educational market (Ballion 1982) and their strategies of staying or exiting the school assigned by the catchment area (François and Poupeau 2004). In fact, since the French educational system differs from others for a greater importance attributed to the geographical principle as the first assignment criteria, sociologist of education and urban sociologist have focused on the effect of *carte scolaire* on urban and school segregation also looking at parents strategies to avoid the assigned school. (Oberti 2007a; Van Zanten 2007, 2009) respectively highlighted that working-class parents opt more frequently for local schools (in a “logique de proximité” or “localisme”), whereas upper and middle classes are willing to evaluate other options. In this sense, as stressed by Oberti (2007b) only few families, endowed with more cultural and social resources, engage in strategic school choices and contribute to the overrepresentation of working-class and foreign origin pupils in the avoided schools.

This literature has stressed on the one hand that the context in which parents choose – and construct their choice – cannot be taken for granted; and on the other hand that upper and middle-class parents are more able to do “the right move” (Poupeau, François, and Couratier 2007:45) in schooling decisions, compared to more disadvantage families, as a result of economic, social and cultural resources they are endowed with.

Other evidences of class difference in parents’ choice emerge in the North American, in which evidence pertains more to participation in choice programs (i.e., magnet schools). Study findings show that students from poorer families or with less educated parents are less likely than are middle-class families to apply to or participate in public choice programs that provide further options apart from the catchment area (such as charter or magnet schools³) (Saporito and Lareau 1999; Saporito 2003; Yu et al. 1997). Within the USA debate on racial spatial and school segregation, Saporito and Lareau (1999) exploring racial dimension of school choice, stressed the importance of approaching this decision as not standardized for all parents. They introduced the idea of as class and ethnicity-informed “*models* of school

³ Charter schools are schools that are privately owned and/or managed but receive some public funding. Magnet schools are public schools that are characterized by a specific type of curriculum.

selection” (419) in order to study school choice as a practice that cannot be assumed for being identical for white and black families.

Also in other national context, such as the Netherlands, research has devoted attention to the issue of school choice: in Karsten et al.'s (2003) study on primary schools decisions, evidence suggested that native Dutch parents and better-educated parents sought different schools outside the catchment areas more often than other parents did.

Nevertheless, class is not the only element that matters when discussing school choice. As shown by recent studies, it must be integrated with other key elements such as *race* (particularly in the case of the USA) (Borman et al. 2004; Liu and Taylor 2005; Saporito 2003), ethnic origin of minorities (Burgess, Lupton, and Wilson 2005; Lankford and Wyckoff 2000; Weekes-Barnard 2007) and parental migration background (Byrne and De Tona 2012; Ledwith and Reilly 2013). Having a certain cultural capital in “the right currency” (Ball, Gewirtz, and Bowe 1994, 10) can be even more important for foreign families integrated in another country. For example, immigrant families can be less familiar with the educational system of the new country; foreign families’ lack of *country-specific capital* (Azzolini 2012) can make their decision even more complex. In some cases, as Byrne and De Tona argue (2012), foreign parents’ involvement in the activities of middle-class families – who can rely on specific resources that allow them to choose the best school and on people with whom they can share cultural and symbolic patterns (Ball 2003) – requires a heavy emotional and practical effort.

1.3 Criteria behind parents’ school choice

The literature reviewed above explored parents’ choice to interpret social reality and to read schooling decisions as mechanism of reinforcement of upper and middle-classes privileges. This literature attempted to provide answers to the complex question of how parents choose their children schools.

Parents – mostly mothers, overrepresented in this literature (Reay 1998) – can rely on different arguments when choosing the school. The literature illustrates that rarely parents follow one single criteria to select the preferred school, on the contrary the reasons that lead parents are the result of a complex combination of motivations. Criteria that are most frequently reported by parents in their reconstruction and justification of their decisions are related to *school quality*. School quality may be constructed on the basis of academic

performances, therefore having beyond an explicit preoccupation for social mobility. But it can also be based on the socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics of school population, relating more often to parents' values and identities. These ideas of school quality often interact and are intertwined with school (good or bad) reputation.

Concerns for school quality are always combined with other reasons, such as school proximity or closeness to the family residence, schools activities, school climate and child wellbeing. Proximity to home is recurring in particular in research that have explored school choice at the primary and lower secondary level, and it frames parental decisions as long as it does not interfere with more important criteria (Poupeau et al. 2007; Van Zanten 2010). While for instance, teachers and teaching quality are rarely mentioned as leading the decision, despite of their importance inside schools and the role they play in influencing, at least in part, pupils' success or failure (Fisher 2003). Moreover the role played by the child's expressed preference or declared interests, emerge as relevant only for working class parents, that appear as more concerned about children's responses than upper and middle-class parents, as stressed by several research that in the UK focused on working class choices. (Ball and Vincent 1998, 2007; Reay and Lucey 2003).

1.3.1 School quality: academic performances and school population characteristics

Starting from school quality intended as academic achievement and school performances, one might suppose that families would consider the "best" school for their children, the one ensuring good training and a proper education. Thus, school quality should emerge as the first criterion of choice. In a recent PISA survey, when asking parents from eight OECD countries about school choice, it emerged that parents from all backgrounds cited academic achievement as a criterion considered when choosing a school. Although parents with higher socio-economic backgrounds assessed academic achievement "very important" 10% more often than other parents did (Musset 2012), all parents in general considered quality to be important. These responses showed that parents declare that they care much more about quality than about financial considerations, a school's distance from home or the school's characteristics in terms of curriculum or self-presentation (as being more or less severe, for instance).

In a study exploring the transition to secondary school in inner and outer London, Noden et al. (1998) found that middle-class were more likely to apply to schools with better examination results and to pursue better-performing schools, than working-class families.

Also Denessen, Driessena, and Slegers (2007), examining reasons behind school choice in the Dutch education system, found that school quality was reported by parents as more important than school composition in the process of choice, together with school climate, order and discipline⁴.

1.3.2 School mix: “people like us” or “multiculturalism”?

The role of school quality is recurring in research on school choice, but it is often overlooked by parents compared with the importance given to other criteria. In fact, this characteristic of the school is not valued less by parents; nor do they present themselves as not concerned with their children’s education. In contrast, parents often view the quality of education as something interrelated with the characteristics of the pupils within the school (Van Zanten 2010). The class of origin and the racial/ethnic/minority status of the school population (and gender in some cases; see Noden et al. 1998) can influence parents’ selection of a specific institution.

In the USA, in choosing one single institute, both black and white parents might be more likely to choose schools with a higher concentration of students with the same ethnic background than the assigned school (Bifulco and Ladd 2007). In a study on the transition from primary to secondary schools in the USA, Saporito and Lareau (1999) found that schools’ racial mix is a factor that families consider when selecting a school. White families tend to avoid “black” schools independently of the academic value of their intakes, preferring “white” schools even when these schools have poorer children with lower test scores. In contrast, black parents show no similar “sensitivity to race”. The interesting aspect is that in parents’ accounts and motivation, some salient organizational factors of a school, for example, school size, teacher motivation, and curricula, are interwoven with the social characteristics of the schools’ intakes, such as racial composition (Saporito and Lareau 1999).

This phenomenon is also present in other European contexts. In Riedel et al. (2010)’s work on school choice in primary schools in Germany (in the city of Wuppertal), the authors showed that even when the information on academic achievement and distance from home was positively correlated with the likelihood of choosing a school, the percentage of

⁴ Some studies (Saporito and Lareau 1999; Schneider and Buckley 2011) have shown the risk, when assessing the relevance of school quality, of obtaining socially acceptable responses in which all of the parents endorse the “right” academic values of the schools.

immigrant students matters in the choice between the assigned school and an alternative one. A higher percentage of foreign students was positively related to the likelihood of opting out from the ‘neighbourhood’ school, and when this factor was the main criterion, the distance to a possible alternative school was no longer relevant.

Analysing school choice in the Netherlands, Karsten et al. (2003) found that non-white schools in a locality were more often judged unsuitable not only by native Dutch parents but also by ethnic minority parents. In the Netherlands, (Boterman 2013), has recently found similarities among middle-class families primary school decisions choice in Amsterdam. The study shows how in middle-class decisions – although not homogeneous – issues related to type of education and proximity became secondary, compared to school quality associated with class and ethnic composition of the school population.

In the Danish context, Rangvid (2009) highlighted that Danes choose schools with substantially fewer immigrant pupils over the local school. And the reference to the school population both in terms of socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics is prominent in discussing the quality of local schools also in a recent comparative study on London and Paris (Benson, Bridge, and Wilson 2014).

Research provided extensive evidence on the role played by school population characteristics – sometimes referred as “school mix” or “school composition” – in parents’ assessment of schools as “good schools”. Nevertheless, there are different rationales – not rarely overlapping – that motivates parents that consider school population characteristics as one of the leading criteria in the school selection process. Parents may be affected by the scarcity of objective information about school quality in term of academic performances, therefore they suffer from a “comparison bias” (Van Zanten 2010) evaluating pupils’ social and ethnic characteristics as “shortcuts” to assess the school. Nevertheless, more often, parents are concerned with the schools social and ethnic makeup regardless of the existence of information on school performance, because of their stances towards social and ethnic mix – looking for/disliking a more heterogeneous/homogeneous environment. Parents that disregard diverse school environment and high concentration of socially disadvantaged or minority students, have been thoroughly explored in the literature, since their decisions resulted in avoidance of the disliked school (see section 1.8). And the literature has showed these parents’ desire of a school setting populate by “people like us”, as parents (and thus pupils) with a similar class background.

More recently, the literature has also explored parents' preference for multiculturalism and diversity, studying decisions of those who chosen a more diverse school or did not opted out from it. Byrne and de Tona (2013) in the UK, studied the case of those who deliberately choose a multicultural school and showed how families can present this choice as a stance of liberality, a means through which they show their 'alternative' lifestyle (*Ibidem*:8). Alternatively, (Crozier et al. 2008) in the UK and (Cucchiara Bloomfield and Horvat 2009) in the USA, analysed parents choices of the "local" or "urban public" schools, where both definitions refers to institutions characterized by heterogenous population and avoided by upper and middle-class parents⁵. Both researches reach similar conclusions, suggesting that parents choose "diversity" to provide their children with an experience or taste for "real life" that will help them navigating a multicultural world. In this sense, also diversity choice constitutes a middle-class strategy through which parents aim at giving to their children more chances of success in a different world.

1.4 The decision-making process

Parents' evaluate several criteria in order to select the preferred school, in a process that as Saporito and Lareau (1999) have noted, articulates at least in two steps. In the first step, parents take a first-order decision in which they exclude some schools from consideration, on the basis of their assessment of school population characteristics. In the second-order decision parents review criteria such as school quality (declined as academic performance) or safety. Along this process, parents form their judgement based on information about school that they gather through different channels and source (see section 1.7).

The amount of information parents possess, or are able to gather, and their willingness to gather it, can also distinguish them on the basis of their *activation* and capacity to face school choice. Literature has distinguished more-or-less "active" or "skilled" parents (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Bosetti 2004) from those who are defined as *detached* or *disconnected*. The latter are those parents who do not engage in a process of information evaluations in order to select among school options, but end up by default in their catchment area school. They are mostly working class (Ball 2003). On the contrary, active or skilled parents are

⁵Raveaud and Van Zanten (2007) purposely refer to the choice of the "local" school, referring not "only to location but to public status and a high degree of social and ethnic mix" (p. 110).

those who spent time and energy in school options evaluation and gathering information crossing different sources. They treated school choice as more than a question of submitting and application and enrolling their children, but in fact looking at the long-term consequences of this choice. To this group belong mostly upper and middle-class parents. Finally, a group emerge as a category in between and it is defined as “semi-skilled”: it is more heterogeneous in terms of class background and present the characteristics of looking for a school perceived as ‘good’ but lacking resources to reach the most selective institution or learning about them.

1.4.1 Information-gathering: the role of “hot” grapevine knowledge

Information gathering about schools – and more generally about the functioning of the education system – is pivotal in parents decision-making process – when parents evaluate different school options on the basis of different criteria presented in section 1.5. The literature on educational decisions has highlighted that in order to learn about schools characteristics and assess school quality parents refers to several sources of information. This information may be “objective” thus providing a ‘cold’ knowledge, and be available as descriptions of schools activities, publication of school performances’ results or national evaluations test results, list of projects etc. Information may also be “subjective”, allowing parents to get access to ‘hot’ knowledge about school provisions (Ball 2003), that comes mostly from grapevine’s information, word of mouth travelling through social networks.

Availability of “objective” information about school academic performance can influence parents decisions when guided by school academic quality. Hastings and Weinstein (2008) conducted a natural experiment and a field experiment in a school district in the USA to examine the impact of information on schools’ performances on school choice. In both experiments the authors find that providing parents with information on school test score increased the number of parents opting for higher-scoring school for their offspring. Different findings emerged in Koning and Wiel (2013)’s work, that recently investigated the role of information about school quality (spread through the publication of rankings in a national newspaper) in school choice in the Netherlands. The authors found that the publication of school-quality information did indeed affect school choice but that its effect was generally small compared with the reputation of a school track or the school-home

distance. School rankings became more relevant for those who were oriented towards a more academic path.

The literature has stressed the centrality of grapevine information on schools' provision and on schools reputation, winning over standardized information about school performances and achievements. Grapevine's information may also be a way for parents to fill missing information – coming from official sources – that leads them to rely on “story-telling, rumour and gossip” despite the awareness of its uncertainty, as grapevine is “fickle” and reputation is vulnerable to change (Ball 2003: 379). What the grapevine provides is others' opinion on schools than often school's reputation travels along word of mouth.

Holme (2002), in her study on parental choices when buying a new home to enrol their children in a “better” school, found that parents' choice was driven by information about the reputation of the schools. Most parents were not prepared to gather their own information about schools or to visit the site before buying their homes; rather, they relied primarily on information from other parents in their social networks, trusting the grapevine about “whether or not a school was considered good by a number of high-status parents” (*Ibidem*:180). The interaction between parents in such networks was producing and reproducing school reputations.

Boon and Van Houtte (2013) also stressed the relevance of a reputation associated with different tracks in the choice of secondary schools: “the more stereotypical the opinions parents have about technical/vocational secondary education, the more likely they are to choose to send their child to academic electives” (*Ibidem*: 562). In addition, they highlighted that with respect to this decision, knowledge of the educational system had little influence and did not have a significant role in explaining the differentials in the choice.

The construction of parental judgements of schools based on the views of others also emerges in Ball and colleagues' (1998, 2003) work on middle-class strategies. Parents valued highly, although not exclusively, other parents' points of view, they cared about parents “who are like them” and about their opinions. Again, circulation of knowledge within closed circles leads to the construction of school reputations in a sort of cycle; “the search for a place of safety is a search for others like us, informed and reinforced by decisions made by and advice given by those others like us, whom we can trust” (Ball 2003:48).

Similar patterns of choice were also found by Crozier et al. (2008) when analysing middle-class parents' choice of the local comprehensive in the UK. The authors found that other people (“critical mass”) choices and the need for assurance from “people like us” present in the school, were of the highest importance for parents. These findings suggest that although

the local comprehensive appeared to parents as chance to give their children a diverse experience of life, with its mixed environment, middle-class parents always kept their distance from other parents.

Finally, also (Benson et al. 2014) found that their respondents mainly relied on informal sources of knowledge to make their school choice, in particular their own experience, teachers' opinions and other middle-class parents' opinions, despite of the availability of schools' performance criteria in each city in which the study took place (London and Paris).

1.5 Schools provision: the relevance of the local context

Education choice and strategies can be understood by examining how families construct their preferences and choices, then looking at how they can adapt, depending on the economic and cultural capital they possess (individually and collectively), to an educational offering that has specific socio-spatial characteristics (Poupeau et al. 2007:33). Exploring the choice within the field of education means to observe an example of a variable form of choice because its existence and nature depend also upon the educational system and on its provision, rules of access and entitlement. Although the relationship between parental decisions and institutional characteristics is not clear-cut, families' choices of school are constructed inside a specific framework of policies that can influence them. Therefore, to understand the extent of school choice, we must consider different institutional features, as choice in the quasi-market of education is recognized as complex and country-specific.

On the one hand, national education systems are intrinsically different and it is difficult to compare them. In fact, each country has different features with regard to levels and tracks differentiations⁶, therefore families face different choices during their children's educational career at different stages, ages and with different options. Moreover, different educational provisions are available in different national system (public/private/religious etc.) and more importantly different school choice policies have been implemented. Therefore, in the analysis of parents' school choice, by examining the geographical

⁶ Southern Europe (and England) has a common core curriculum for its primary and secondary levels up to 12-16 years of age, when the first differentiation begins. Central European countries have differentiated branches with an early stratification at the end of the primary level. Finally, Northern countries such as Sweden and Denmark are characterized by a single structure that includes both primary and secondary levels; the first choice among tracks is at 16 years of age.

assignment and the possibility of enrolling children in any other school, it is possible to know what families might *potentially* do. But, when there is an open enrolment policy and when families are assigned to a specific school, it is also important to examine the existence of admission criteria introduced by each school, with different levels of autonomy.

On the other hand, in the same national system analysing school choice within a specific policy framework can result in peculiarities and distinctions related to the role of the local context. Thus, the “geography of education” (Butler and Hamnetta 2007) matters; “the same school choice policy can look very different when implemented in a large urban school district versus a smaller suburban district, or in a community with an extensive public transport system versus one with limited public transport” (André-Bechely 2007:1355). Moreover, school choice has an “inherent geographical component” (*Ibidem*:1371) because it involves families’ residence, catchment areas, closeness and distance, and different neighbourhoods, which in this case can also affect decisions, as Bonica and Olagnero (2011) tried to explore.

Therefore, parents are not the only players in the educational market. The profile (or/and reputation) of the school together with its admission practices and capacity can be influenced by local policies and school principals’ decisions and can influence families’ choices. Moreover, parents and schools act and exist in a local context, conceivably not only as a portion of the territory but also, as highlighted by (Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007), as ‘lived markets’ that exert their influence through the type of opportunities they provide. Examples of such options include the residential and educational provisions available (their importance, quality, variety, accessibility and cost) and the types of norms they convey, dependent of the concentration of families belonging to similar or to different class groups (Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007:109). Therefore, when considering school choice, in addition to exploring parental choices and thus the individual level (e.g., preferences, values, and beliefs) as fundamental in understanding decisions, we must include in the picture schools, both in terms of school staff (teachers and principals from whom families can obtain important information) and as autonomic organizations with specific characteristics (e.g., time, curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and buildings) and constraints (e.g., number of available places).

Each school, based on the characteristics of its intake, in terms of performance, drop outs, and ethnic and socioeconomic background, occupies a specific, not unchangeable position inside the educational space that constitutes the “supply” in the quasi-market of education (Pitzalis 2013). Thus, the reasons underlying families’ choices – as seen above – whether

well-founded or not, could contribute, through the choices themselves, to the 'paralysis' of the position of these schools in a specific social and symbolic space. Inside this space, “good” schools become the best, and the “bad” schools become the worst (Pitzalis 2013), or schools with large proportions of minority students are disadvantaged in the educational market and defined as “unsuccessful” by parents (Ladd and Fiske 2001).

Along the way to differentiating education based on local territory needs, school choice could also contribute to tailoring school profiles and curricula to parents’ and pupils’ needs and requests. Poupeau et al. (2007), focusing on the role of the location of the school in their analysis on the social factors that influence individual choice in Levallois (France), found that competition among schools was affecting educational provision. Schools implemented strategies to improve their reputation and attract families with social and educational characteristics that guarantee children’s success. However, they also found that educational provision was not sufficient to improve a negative reputation because the value of the school was closely linked to the quality (or perceived quality) of the schools’ intakes.

1.6 School choice in practice

Educational paths in different countries are characterized by choices that are usually formalized and correspond to the transition from one level to the next one but are intrinsically more complicated than a shift from primary to secondary school or from secondary school to the university. Since research has been informed in country-specific educational systems, the use of terms such as school or parental choice is sometimes ambiguous and is often underspecified by researchers themselves. Each study has been framed within the structural characteristics of the specific system in terms, for example, of degree of freedom of choice, implementation of school choice program, existence and/or inflexibility of school districts or catchment area. Apart from parents’ capacity to choose, as described in the literature, the definition of *choice* varies across countries; in some cases, the word could be more appropriately defined as “response” (Butler and Hamnetta 2007). Thus, for example, choosing a local school might be “theoretically a real choice in which such policies [as freedom of choice] exist and an obligation and thus a non-choice where they don’t” (Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007:109).

From the literature reviewed in this chapter it is possible to summarize different parents’ choices and strategies on which research has shed light. Beyond the dichotomic

decision between choosing a school in or out of the catchment area school (whether it is a catchment area system or not), research in industrialized countries has found at least four forms of choices illustrated below: 1) voting with feet; 2) self-exclusion 3) exit 4) voice or colonization.

This differentiation between strategies, as analysed in the literature, conveys the idea that choice occurs when parents decide to opt out from the school in their neighbourhood, from their assigned institution or from the closest school they can reach. It appears that choice occurs when families are able to move across the educational field (Reay 2004), not only in the decision of buying homes but also in the capacity of knowing the options and selecting the schools. As we will see, choice is enacted also in less common cases of parents deciding to “stay” or to enrol in the (usually avoided) neighbourhood school.

1.6.1 Parents’ schooling strategies: from avoidance to ‘staying local’

1.6.1.1 *Voting with the feet*

In residential choice linked to school choice, parents can choose to live in an area in which the local schools provide what they seek. This choice is the consequence of a negative evaluation of the school to which the family should be assigned to or the closest school to home. Moving to another residence ensure to the parents the guarantee of having access to the preferred school (or schools). The literature indicates that the this option is more diffused in contexts such as the Anglo-Saxon and French ones, which are characterized by high spatial mobility, but less diffused in Mediterranean contexts such as Greece (Maloutas 2007) and Italy. It is also dependent on families’ economic resources that may allow them to face high residential mobility costs.

Holme’s (2002) research on parents’ residential choices for education, shows how buying homes to “buy an education” appears to be a struggle for status and distinction and a means by which privileged groups seek out high-status institutions that will confer both material and social advantages on their children. In a recent comparative study focusing on Paris and London (Benson et al. 2014) residential choice was one of the two main schooling strategies of middle-class parents in the cities. It included moving into a different neighbourhood, where the selected school was, but also moving out of the neighbourhood to avoid a specific school. The second strategy presented in the study is also the second form of school choice that emerges in parental schooling decision, as illustrated below.

1.6.1.2 *Self-exclusion and exit*

Self-exclusion is parents' choice to opt for the private sector (Jordan 1995; van Zanten 2005). This is a choice outside the public system and it entails possess of certain economic resources similarly to the residential strategy. Dependently from the country and the funding system of private education, it can also be a more affordable choice than moving out from the neighbourhood. It is the case of parents in the abovementioned study by (Benson et al. 2014) whose choice of "going private" was presented by them as an alternative to bear the cost of residential mobility and still be able to avoid the neighbourhood school.

Both strategies are very common in the French context, in which – until the 2007 and again after 2012 – the catchment area system (*carte scolaire*) compelled parents to enrol in their neighbourhood school. In the analysis on the functioning of this system conducted by (Oberti 2007a, 2007b) examining both spatial distribution of schools provision by social characteristics of localities, the author found that it was uncommon for localities to have both public and private schools with good reputations –and when it is the case the district school was able to maintain all upper classes middle-school pupils; in all other cases the upper and middle-classes parents tend more often than the working class ones to exit the local context.

In fact, another option presented by the literature is "exit", which is usually referred to parents applying to selective institutions, where they are available in the public system. Nevertheless, this strategy may be also enlarged to include the decision to avoid the neighbourhood school – often the closest school to home – to enrol in another public school.

1.6.1.3 *Avoidance practices*

Strategies of "voting with the feet", going private or exiting the neighbourhood school and opt for another institution, are closely intertwined with what have been defined as parents' avoidance practices. These schooling practices are the consequence of parents' concerns about pupils' socioeconomic and ethnic background described in section 1.5.1. These avoidance strategies can be seen through the lens of out-group avoidance theory, because advantaged parents choose a school as a distinction from groups generally characterized by low social status. However, they can also be interpreted through a neutral

ethnocentrism lens; in other words, all parents seek school environments in which their students can be with students of similar backgrounds (Bifulco, Ross, and Ladd 2007).

In New Zealand, (Weekes-Barnard 2007) highlights how some immigrant families, to avoid racial and bullying episodes, deliberately choose a school in which *minority students* are over-represented, whereas other families, that is, white and middle-class families, avoid schools with this demographic profile on purpose. Conversely, studies have shown that white parents are more likely to opt out of their children's assigned school if they live in an attendance zone with a high percentage of not-native students, and they tend to avoid schools with substantial proportions of minority students (Lankford and Wyckoff 2001; Söderström and Uusitalo 2005). In the choice of opting out from the public system, (Betts and Fairlie 2003) in a study on native families in the USA found that the increase of immigration induced white flight from public to private education, but only in secondary schools. However, in the Danish context, Rangvid (2009) highlighted that Danes choose schools with substantially fewer immigrant pupils over the local school and that, in so doing, they reduce the immigrant concentration by 50 percent on average, from 29 percent to 15 percent. In contrast, immigrants adopt two strategies: they choose an alternative public or a Danish private school with fewer immigrants, or they choose a private school with almost no immigrant pupils.

1.6.1.4 *Voice or colonization*

Choice can also be analysed when it is a decision to choosing multiculturalism (Byrne and de Tona 2013) or to staying in the neighbourhood school (Crozier et al. 2008; Cucchiara Bloomfield and Horvat 2009; Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007). The decision to remain in the local school has not been explored as a strategy per se. But it emerges as such in the form of "voice or colonization" when parents exert (and have) power to influence collective decisions concerning school-choice related issues or to control the functioning of local public schools with pressure and demands. Parents with high cultural resources may in fact decide to opt for the neighbourhood school having the capacity to intervene in the institution from the inside (Ball 2003:22) and counterbalance school's characteristics if it has a bad reputation (Van Zanten 2011).

In fact, parental involvement at the school level has been a key-factor in explaining middle-classes parents' choice of public/neighbourhood schools, namely schools characterized by a more diverse environment from which, as explored above, parents tend

to flee away. In general terms, parental involvement has been explored as a central element in education and educational inequalities. Studies have noted the relevance of a “profound understanding” (as Boone and Van Houtte 2013 define it) of the education system in furthering children’s school career; information on the function of the education system can affect home-school relations and education decision-making. Both less-educated parents and those belonging to disadvantaged social classes or ethnic minorities can experience difficulty, a sense of inadequacy and feelings of being rebuffed when addressing teachers and school staff (Baker and Stevenson 1986; Lareau and Horvat 2010; Lareau 2000). In contrast, parents with high academic qualifications can cope more efficiently with the school system, not only because they are well integrated but also because they participate actively in school activities and speak on the same level as the staff, who help and support them during the choice (Ball et al. 1994; Noreisch 2007).

Upper and middle-class has been proved to be “interventionist” (Crozier 1999; Crozier et al. 2008:268; Reay n.d.) in their children schooling. They might choose, as in the case shown by (Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007), a school despite it not corresponding to their general expectations in terms of education and overcome this drawback with constant support to the child throughout the year. In this case, French middle-class parents who cannot or do not want to leave the local school develop strategies by activating their cultural and social resources to remodel or to control the school. These strategies might include requesting their children be tracked in classes with other middle-class children with good results, or attracting sufficient middle-class children to the local school and improving the results of the lower class and immigrant children who form the majority.

The idea that “attracting” other parents “like them” could contribute to ameliorate the school reputation and quality recurs also as explaining in part parents’ orientations toward public schools in (Cucchiara Bloomfield and Horvat 2009) research. In fact, this decision was not only motivated by a “collective” will to improve the local school, but also by an individualistic interest in “improving the school by attracting more middle-class families” (*Ibidem*:975). Finally, also middle-class parents in London and Paris showed a tendency to give a chance to the (avoided) state sector because “if there is a collective middle-class move towards [...] the quality of schools will improve to the point where they can consider educating their children there [...]” (Benson et al. 2014:32).

1.7 A released concept of rationality to explore parents’ choices

Choice is a term that is highly associated with individual freedom, at least in Western society, in which individual decisions are not only confined to consumption but also used to analyse many fields of individuals' lives (Brannen and Nilsen 2005). Studying school choice entails the necessity to study social action – parents' decisions – as the result of parents' agency, considering their autonomy (enhanced in recent education reform) but inevitably influenced by social structure, thus constraints. That is why it serves the cause of exploring parents' school choice, the decision to enlarge the theoretical framework of the work presented here to include elements that consider both agency and structure.

Rational action theory and cultural reproduction one link agent and structure in explaining individual actions (through preferences or dispositions, influenced or determined by social positions) and in structural consequences of individual action/practice. The theoretical debate on educational transitions and the related literature that somehow enriched it through time, pointed at the importance of “releasing” the concept of rationality, abandoning a pure rational choice theory in which all parental choices would be “irrational” as they all are made based on insufficient or inadequate information (Hatcher 1998).

On the contrary, it is pivotal to consider the notion of cognitive rationality introduced by Boudon, in combination with the Weberian notion of “axiological” rationality, as a value-oriented rationality by which individuals act because they believed something was good or fair (or had strong reasons to believe that) (Boudon 1998, 2003). In this sense, parents' rational decisions are defined as such if they are meaningful to the actor, that is, they are “perceived by him as grounded on reasons” (Boudon 2003: 826), thus parents rationality is not assumed as the “*dictator-criterion*”⁷ leading school choice (Micheli 2008:8). As stressed by Gambetta's extension of rational action theory, it must be acknowledged that individual perception and evaluation of alternatives can be *pushed* by inertial forces, embodied in beliefs and subcultural values. Therefore, when studying educational choices – looking at parents rational decisions as those that are meaningful to them – it is necessary to balance the attention paid to the parents' individual agency with the attention to the context in which parents act (Bonica and Olagnero 2011) and the set of resources and constraints shaping their choices.

Hence, individuals' preferences and life plans must be considered as inevitably filtered and constrained by material and cultural characteristics; by their position in a specific social and physical space; and by their interaction with institutional constraints that can shape or influence those preferences or reduce the number of options available to the

⁷ “Criterio dittatore” in the original Italian version.

individuals. In fact, to analyse social reality in terms of individual choices, it is also necessary to consider actors' capacity and variation according to different structural constraints, which are determined by the resources possessed and deployed in the specific *field* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), and the structure of this field. In this sense, cultural capital is local and country-specific (Butler and Hamnetta 2007; Devine 2004; Lareau 1987; Reay 1998) as the variation of the characteristics of the national educational system and of the local school setting cannot be assumed in advance.

1.8 Approaching school choice as strategies

This chapter has placed this work into a broader field of research that has explored educational transitions in different countries and approaches. It has shed light on the meanings that can be assigned to “school choice”, on how parents do take educational decision and on the embeddedness of these transitions in specific national frameworks. In fact, has highlighted how educational choices are example of a variable form of choice because its own existence and nature depend upon the educational system and its rules of access and entitlement. This means that the same school choice, e.g. the decision on the lower secondary school, may be less or more relevant according to the national and educational reference system.

Moreover, educational choices are relevant not only for individuals, but also for their effect on other social groups. They can be considered “relational and interdependent” because the choices of one group or groups must be contextualized in relation to the practices of and consequences for other groups (Reay 2004:549). Both (Boudon 1977) and (Bourdieu 1998) gave importance in their frameworks to the unanticipated or undesirable effects of individual action for one or more groups (for the community). The former refers to perverse effects, meaning “question of individual and collective effects that result from the juxtaposition of individual behaviours and yet were not included in the actors' explicit objectives” (Boudon 1977: 5) while the latter to “practices that are phenomenally very different are objectively organized in such a way that they contribute to the reproduction of the capital at hand, without having been explicitly designed and instituted with this end in mind” (Bourdieu 1998:272). The relevance of unforeseen consequences of social actions has also been addressed by a classical paper by Merton in 1936, where the author stress the importance to look not only at consequences to the actor but also to “consequences to other persons

mediated through (1) the social structure, (2) the culture and (3) the civilization” (Merton 1936:895).

As we saw above education choices have been explored and analysed as crucial “field of distinction and identities” Ball (2003:8), in reproducing the unequal distribution of resources within society.

This aspect of parental action is considered in the present study, with the aim of understanding how the aggregation of parental choices, mediated by class resources, might constitute a mechanism of reproduction of social inequalities, in urban areas, having the collective effect of exclusion and closure. How this mechanism may unfold can be explored looking at the interaction between parents’ criteria of choice and parents’ behaviours (choices) interpreted as strategies. Once it is clear on the basis of which vocabularies of motives (Mills 1940) parents justify their actions, these can be read in relation to the characteristics of the local educational provisions, and result in specific schooling strategies.

Three levels of context must be considered when looking at individuals action in the educational arena: 1) the micro-level, thus individuals characteristics – related to their social class and migratory background – influencing their awareness of the existence of freedom of choice, and the criteria guiding the choice; 2) the meso-level, thus local policies on school choice and neighbourhood and schools characteristics that might define the opportunities or constraints to parents choices; 3) the macro-level that not only include educational system regulations but also cultural norms related to the role of education and attainments in society.

In this work, I focus on the concrete choice of a specific institution within lower secondary school provisioning, within the compulsory track and in a core-curriculum system, as is the lower secondary school in Italy. Because the Italian educational system has integrated parental freedom of choice of school, regardless of the geographical principle (see Chapter II), I examine the educational arena as a place in which parents are provided with options beyond the catchment area school and, on paper, are free to choose among them. In this specific case under study, the choice is made by parents (one or both), but it will affect the child, and the transition from primary to secondary schools is compulsory; thus, the existence of a ‘goal’ (be it utilitarian or non-utilitarian) mandates going beyond compliance with the law.

With the aim of exploring this choice, I explore parental judgements and evaluations of different schools (as institutes) as emerge from their accounts. Their declared preferences, constructed based on different information and possible criteria when combined will lead to their specific enrolment behaviour. Emphasis is placed on whether parents evaluated options

beyond the catchment area school, to explore awareness of the existence of this choice, but non-choice is not defined in advance.

The next Chapter will be devoted to the Italian scenario, with regard to its educational system – features and functioning – and to the potentially interesting case of the choice of lower secondary school.

Chapter II – Frozen in the *middle*: lower secondary school challenges within the Italian educational system

2.1 Introduction

Schools, in contemporary society, are the physical and symbolic places in which the socialization process occurs outside the family, in addition to peer groups, religion and working places. Schools are the institutionalized sites in which members of society are *educated* and in which they spend almost every day for a long period of their lives (Brint 2007; Fisher 2003). Moreover, the structure and functioning of the educational system, combined with other elements, such as labour market characteristics, can have important consequences on the life trajectories of individuals with a more disadvantaged socioeconomic background. For this reason, as discussed in the previous chapter, individuals' and their parents' educational choices have been investigated at length by sociologists, with particular attention to stratification and social inequalities.

In the past years, in Italy, schools have been at the centre of a national debate due to public schools' ceiling collapses, parents' struggle over meals and homework, and teachers' struggling with shrinking resources. Nevertheless, education in Italy remains a factor that, more than others, affects the opportunity to reach different occupational positions and therefore can be considered a means to climb the social ladder (Schizzerotto and Barone 2006; Schizzerotto 1997). It is thus highly valued by individuals. Although the Italian educational system has been conceived and built as an inclusive system, the sixteen years of compulsory education appear to constitute the time and space in which gaps between students are fostered and obstacles (or springboard) to their social mobility arise. Thus, knowledge of the functioning of the system and its virtuous or vicious consequences is pivotal to exploring parents' choices that are made within it (and could influence, or being influenced by it).

Before moving to the core of this work, this chapter will be devoted to the Italian scenario. On the one hand, it will give the reader some coordinates to move more easily in this specific educational system. On the other hand, it should facilitate the understanding of how a lower secondary school choice might constitute a new challenge to the equity of the system.

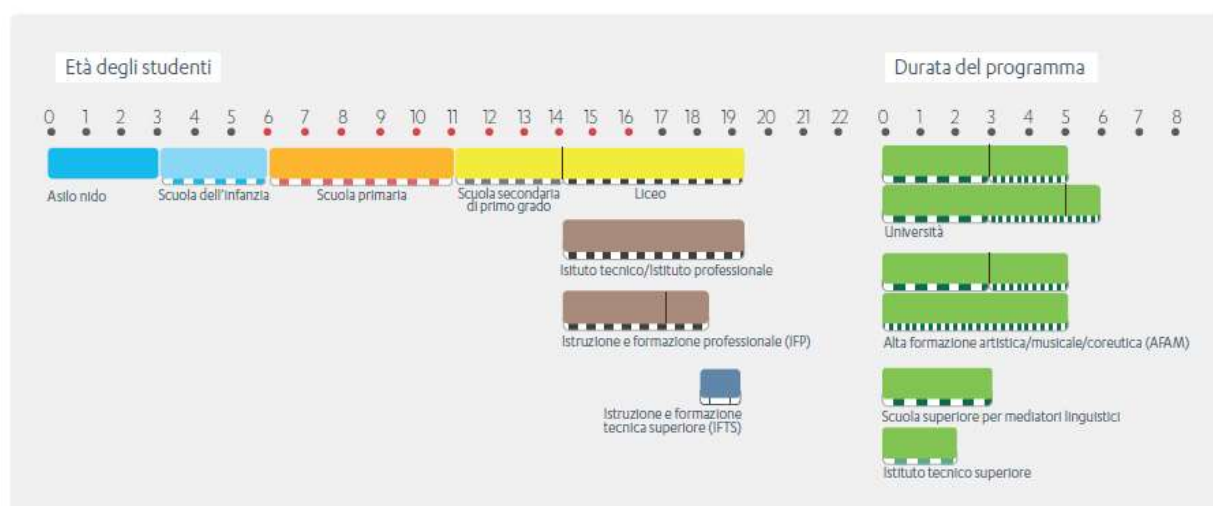
2.2 Italian educational system: historical overview and latest interventions

Italian schools, like all contemporary educational systems, are divided in three hierarchically ordered levels of education – primary school, (lower and upper) secondary school and the university – each one with a specific institutionalized aim. If the primary school must ensure the acquisition of basic cognitive skills, the secondary level aims at the attainment of intermediate and professional cognitive competences, whereas the university's goal should be the acquisition of higher professional or cognitive qualifications (Ballarino 2009). Moreover, each one addresses different age groups, from five or six years of age until, by law, sixteen years of age – compulsory age⁸ – and thus until the second grade of upper secondary school. A common core curriculum of five plus three years (primary schools and lower secondary schools) is followed by the choice, free and reversible, between different tracks of upper secondary school, with no formal constraint on continuing to tertiary education or stopping after reaching the age of sixteen⁹ (see Graph 1).

⁸ Until the 1999 the compulsory education age was 14 years old. By the law no. 9 of 1999 it was raised to 15 years old. After, with Moratti law (53/2003), the right to education and vocational training was granted up to 18 years old, but de facto it states that this increase of the compulsory age will be made gradually. Lastly, with the Ministerial Decree no. 139 of 2007, implementing the Law 296/2006, 16 years old is fixed as the compulsory school age since 2007/2008 school year. Even if the individual, when turning 16 years old, should stay in the school system, in vocational training or apprenticeship, until he is eighteen years old, avoiding drop-outs after the age of 16 is very difficult.

⁹ The different tracks are *Liceo* (mostly university-oriented), *Istituti Tecnici* and *Istituto Professionale* (providing technical and vocational training but not excluding, formally, university) and *Centri di Formazione Professionale* (regional vocational schools oriented toward entering the labour market). Each track has further differentiations in terms of curriculum and lasts five years (with the exception of the *Formazione Professionale* that is three years, but it can be complemented by another two years). The obtainment of the Diploma di Istruzione ensures to everyone the right of access to the University.

Graph 1 Italian educational structure.



Source: Eurydice Italia 2016/2017

We can discuss Italian schools as those we are familiar with today, only after understanding the process of massification of education, started in the 1950s. There was a long and continuous growth of enrolments in primary and lower secondary schools, as a result of a radical change in the role attributed to the educational system, formerly elitist, that was meant to transform it into an open one. Since its formal birth in 1859, with Casati Law to “*La Buona Scuola*” (the good school) reform of the recent, although no longer in charge, Renzi’s Government, the Italian educational system has been affected by several waves of reform shaped by different societal changes and pedagogical approaches to education. Grimaldi and Serpieri’s (2011) approach this long transformation of the education state in Italy *historiographically* and distinguish two different eras of educational policy-making: “the era of the welfarist education state and the building of the nation” from post WW II to the early 1990s, and “the era of the restructuring of education: between managerialism, decentralization and a tentative neoliberalism” (148) from the autonomy reform in 1997 to the present day¹⁰. Using their approach as a lens to examine Italian school changes – in a brief review such as follows – might help in understanding common traits of smaller and larger reforms of the system and the latest year’s change of paradigm in favour of a quasi-market of education.

Here, I focus on some aspects of this complex scenario, with particular attention to what changed (or did not change) at the lower secondary level during the “welfarist education state”.

¹⁰ Their analysis stops at Gelmini’s reform.

2.2.1 1962 middle school reform: an attempt to go from selection to socialization

The first reform that substantially transformed the Italian school system, from an elitist point of view, was the Gentile Law in 1923, which divided what was the lower secondary level into differentiated and alternative tracks. Whereas the “*Ginnasio*” granted access to “*Licei*”¹¹, and the technical and “*Magistrale*” education might open the road for some upper secondary schools, the “*scuola complementare*” – “*avviamento*” after 1930 – was preparatory only to the labour market. The Gentile’s Law ratio aimed explicitly at excluding lower-class pupils from upper secondary education in a job-oriented track.

This highly selective and differentiated system was partially modified in 1940 by the Bottai Law, which unified the first three years of “*Ginnasio*”, technical school and “*Magistrale*” and gave life to the (old) middle school. Despite the existence of art. 34 of the Republican Constitution, which ensured equality of access to education to everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic background¹², the so-called “*avviamento*” was kept separated, segregating lower class students and contributing, together with the two world wars, to the difficult path towards the schooling of all Italian population. In fact, at the beginning of the 1960s, 16% of the Italian population did not hold any educational title, 35% did not continue after elementary education, and 3,8 million citizens were illiterates (Fondazione Agnelli, 2011).

A pivotal regulatory intervention to face this scenario and grant equal educational opportunities to all, was the approval of law n. 1859 in 1962, which founded the “*scuola media unica*”. This reform embodied at least the formal will to change the educational system aims from selection to socialization of the population. In fact, in compliance with art. 34 of the Constitution, the new law provided that “compulsory education after the elementary school is provided free of charge in the middle school, which lasts three years

¹¹ To be more specific it granted access to *Liceo classico* if “*ginnasio*” prosecuted up to its higher level, otherwise it granted access to *Liceo scientifico* or *Liceo femminile* (Schizzerotto and Barone 2006).

¹² Art. 34 Italian Constitution: “Schools are open to everyone. Primary education, which is imparted for at least eight years, is compulsory and free. Capable and deserving pupils, including those without adequate finances, have the right to attain the highest levels of education. The Republic renders this right effective through scholarships, allowances to families and other benefits, which shall be assigned through competitive examinations.” (translation provided by Italian prefecture’s website). Original text: “La scuola è aperta a tutti. L’istruzione inferiore, impartita per almeno otto anni, è obbligatoria e gratuita. I capaci e meritevoli, anche se privi di mezzi, hanno diritto di raggiungere i gradi più alti degli studi. La Repubblica rende effettivo questo diritto con borse di studio, assegni alle famiglie ed altre provvidenze, che devono essere attribuite per concorso.”

and is the lower secondary school”¹³, ratifying that the new-born middle school was non-differentiated, then open, with respect to future access to upper secondary school. Moreover, the new school was compulsory and free of charge, with the aim of raising the enrolment rate together with the reinforcement of compulsory education¹⁴.

The new middle school, according to art. 1 of the law, also played a new role, a specific institutional mission. In fact, the new middle school “[...] fosters youngsters’ guidance aimed to the following activity”¹⁵ and has the task to educate and guide every child, avoiding any premature tracking. Finally, the middle school had to face a last challenge, most likely the most controversial at the time; it should comply with the equalitarian principle of granting to everyone the same educational opportunities. In fact, the legislator thought not only to open the door to those who had been excluded from education, but also to do so for everyone in the same school.

The democratization purpose of the new middle school was not approved or welcomed with unanimity; to the contrary, it generated dissatisfaction and was firmly opposed by the same teachers who were employed in the old middle school. For most such teachers, who were used to teaching to a majority of upper-class students, it was impossible that lower class students, considered inferior, could learn that type of “specific knowledge” (Fondazione Agnelli 2011; Barbagli and Dei 1969).

2.2.2 1969 to 1979: towards an effective democratization of the system

In the following season of student movements, other segments of the system were reformed in a more egalitarian sense, particularly with the institution of the public kindergarten (*scuola materna statale*) as an autonomous level of education¹⁶ and with the liberalization of university enrolments (opening university access to all secondary school diplomas). Moreover, an extended curriculum (*tempo pieno*) was introduced in elementary schools with law 820/1971, as a response to the needs of families. In 1974, the so-called “*provvedimenti*” or “*decreti delegati*” introduced representative bodies for teachers, non-teaching staff and students, always aiming at responding to the democratization pressures of the whole system.

¹³ Art. 1 L.1859/1962. In the original text: “l’istruzione obbligatoria successiva a quella elementare è impartita gratuitamente nella scuola media, che ha durata di tre anni ed è scuola secondaria di primo grado”.

¹⁴ It was not provided as compulsory the attainment of the middle school diploma, but it was only a guarantee of free education until 14 years old. (Ribolzi 2012).

¹⁵ In the original text: “favorisce l’*orientamento* dei giovani ai fini della scelta dell’attività successiva

¹⁶ Law n. 144 18 March 1968.

Following these changes, two laws in 1977 abolished retake tests (*esami di riparazione*) and ratified the integration of handicapped pupils in the public system, refusing the previous system of “special institutions” and providing personalized programs to this category of children (law n. 517)¹⁷. These laws also intervened to modify again the organization of the lower secondary school, left untouched since 1962. In particular, law n. 348/1977 abolished the teaching of Latin (previously compulsory) and the *Liceo* entry test. It also made technical and music teaching compulsory, introducing changes in the state certification exam (*esame di stato*) and in the school week timetable. The rationale of this law was the actual implementation of a *popular* lower secondary school, as initially conceived in 1962, and its democratic role within the system. This law was followed up in 1979 by two decrees¹⁸ that changed the lower secondary school curriculum, timetables and exams and stressed – taking direction from the constitution and previous laws – the lower secondary school role. In particular, the lower secondary school was defined (Art.3) as “school of education of the man and Citizen [...] school that places each one in the world [...] school with an advising role and [...] secondary school at the compulsory education level”¹⁹. The provisions of the new decree and the introduction of the new curriculums highlighted the need to consider elementary-middle school continuity²⁰: “the middle school stands within the unitary development process of education that translates through the dynamic continuity of contents and methodologies in the field of compulsory education”²¹.

Due to these legislative interventions, the lower secondary school has remained substantially unchanged in the past 40 years. In contrast, the elementary schools were reformed in 1985 – by a presidential decree²² – with the definition of the curriculum (*programmazione scolastica*) stressing educational continuity and the importance of pupils’ educational needs, around which this level of education is built. Furthermore, with law n.148/1990, the organizational aspects of elementary school were reformed, from the number of pupils per classroom and timetable to the introduction of multiple teachers, replacing the single teacher (*maestro unico*).

¹⁷ This law also introduced the report card.

¹⁸ A President of the Republic Decree (n.50, 6 February 1979) and a Ministerial Decree (9 February 1979).

¹⁹ In the original text : “ scuola della formazione dell’uomo e del Cittadino [...] scuola che colloca al mondo [...] scuola orientativa e [...] scuola secondaria nell’ambito dell’istruzione obbligatoria”.

²⁰ A similar idea of continuity was introduced between pre-primary and primary schools in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.

²¹ Art. 3 M.D. 9 February 1979. In the original text “la scuola media si colloca all'interno del processo unitario di sviluppo della formazione che si consegue attraverso la continuità dinamica dei contenuti e delle metodologie nell'arco della istruzione obbligatoria [...]”.

²² N. 104 12 February 1985.

2.2.3 Late 1990s to the present day: the emergence of neoliberalist discourse cross-cutting educational reforms

The era in which “education was given the primary role in the process of nation (re)build[ing]” (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2011:150) ended with the early 1990s intervention. In fact, the late 1990s and 2000s reforms – defined by (Parziale 2016) as “one continuous reform” (p. 15) due to their substantial coherence – tried to balance the socialization aim of education with the social selection one. Primarily through the reinforcement of training programs at the secondary level, together with the restriction of public investment in education²³. These reforms have been characterized by a high level of unresolved social conflict with teachers, trade unions and student organizations as main actors *vs* the government. And also by the emergence, regardless of political orientation, of what might be defined as a neoliberal discourse in education, fostered by European Union pressures towards lifelong learning, student performance and a decrease in early school leaving. Throughout eight different Education Ministries, from 1997 through 2016²⁴, the Italian educational system has been affected by radical changes in school autonomy, managerialism and evaluation, although the latter was much more a matter of rhetoric than of actual practice (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2011).

The first important change was introduced with Luigi Berlinguer’s reform (yielded effectively by Law n.20/2000), an expression of the work of this centre-left ministry of education (under three different governments) and his team, which included both school autonomy and a reform of educational levels. The former will be discussed below in section 2.1.4). The latter proposed the abolishment of the distinction in tracks at the upper secondary level, providing for a common core curriculum in two parts (six years of primary and six years of secondary education, with slight differences in the last years).

The following change of government, with Berlusconi’s victory in the 2001 political elections, also resulted in the abolishment of Law n. 20/2000 by a new educational reform proposed by Minister of Education Letizia Moratti and approved by the Parliament in 2003 (Law n.53/2003). This new reform aimed again at transforming the whole system; among other things, it included the possibility of enrolment in primary school at 5 years of age and

²³ Public expenditure on education (primary to tertiary) in Italy was the 7.3% of all public spending in 2013, according to the latest data available from OECD. The average expenditure is 11.35%. Source: (OECD (2017) Public spending on education (indicator). doi: 10.1787/f99b45d0-en (Accessed on 27 June 2017)

²⁴ With the exclusion of Valeria Fedele, recently nominated with the new Gentiloni’s Government.

abolished the full-time schedule (in primary and lower secondary schools). However, it was partially modified by the new centre-left wing government in 2006, with Minister of Education Fioroni, and finally abolished by Gelmini's Reform in 2008. Fioroni's intervention modified primarily the upper secondary school level, raising the compulsory education age to 16 years²⁵, providing for the attainment of a diploma being compulsory and introducing retaking exams at the end of the summer.

Major changes came with Gelmini's reform that, during the fourth Berlusconi government, provided a comprehensive reform of all levels of education, but mostly affected the upper secondary level and university. Concerning lower secondary schools, the only changes involved a shrinking of school hours (from 33 to 30 per week), the introduction of grading on a decimal scale and the introduction of the INVALSI²⁶ test in the third year final examination. Overall, Gelmini's reform affected school financial and time resources and resulted in a wide wave of protests at the national level by the trade unions, teaching bodies and students at all levels of education.

Although this reform became effective between the 2008 and the 2014/2015 school year (in the case of the new organization of upper secondary school tracks), the fourth educational reform bill in fifteen years was proposed by Renzi's Government and approved in the summer of 2015. The so-called *La Buona Scuola* (the good school) – to which the Government devoted a specific website and social media campaign²⁷ – contained primarily measures on the teachers' hiring process and evaluation, principals' role and powers, interventions on school buildings and the introduction of *alternanza scuola-lavoro* (work related learning) in upper secondary schools. Effective from the 2015/2016 school year, the complex reform bill encountered problems in its implementation²⁸ and strong opposition from school staff.

Regardless of these school reforms that have characterized the Italian educational system as with Penelope's web but in a relatively short amount of time, note that no intervention was specifically tailored to the lower secondary schools, which have remained untouched since 1979.

²⁵ Law 296/2006.

²⁶ INVALSI is a national examination that tests math and literacy skills of second and fifth grade elementary students; of third grade lower secondary students and of second grade upper secondary students.

²⁷ Apart from its own website (<https://labuonascuola.gov.it/>), the reform was also promoted through a hashtag (#labuonascuola). Moreover, before its approval, each step was published on the website "Passo dopo passo" (step after step) <http://passodopopasso.italia.it/>, which contains all Government bills and proposals.

²⁸ The national newspaper La Repubblica considers "passed and rejected" aspects of the new reform (see: http://www.repubblica.it/scuola/2016/04/19/news/le_pagelle_alla_buona_scuola-137939781/)

2.2.4 School Autonomy lexicon: how it works in practice

Along with these reforms, starting with the Berlinguer intervention, schools increasingly began playing the leading role in their own stories. In fact, in the late 1990s, the Italian administration was restructured and the new institutional structure granted autonomy to schools. In particular, Law 59/1997, then implemented through the Autonomy Regulation (dpr 275/1999), created new space for schools to depend less upon the Ministry of Education, on what regarded the educational and organizational level, the research, experimentation and development one. Nevertheless, a national framework, set by the Ministry of Education, was provided to guide schools' decisions, ensuring uniformity within the Italian educational system on several subjects/issues²⁹. This level of autonomy, have left to schools thr space for diversifying their curricular and extra-curricular activities, compared to the traditional teaching offer.

As a result of this legislative intervention, the Italian State still has exclusive legislative competence on the general organization of the educational system, whereas the Regions' role is to define school networks in the territory, manage the school calendar and supply funds to non-State schools. At the national level, the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR)³⁰ is responsible for the general administration of the system, whereas schools – at a decentralized level – are organized in Regional School Offices (*Uffici Scolastici Regionali*) gathered, at the provincial level, in Local Offices (*Ambiti territoriali*). At the local level, provinces are responsible for providing upper secondary education, whereas Municipalities are in charge for the lower levels of education. The latter, together with provinces, can determine the establishment, merging and the closing down of schools.

Although in terms of governance, the Ministry still controls school human and financial resources down to and including the local level, much autonomy was granted on

²⁹ Broader educational objectives, pupils' skills, 'specific learning objectives', subjects on the minimum national curriculum; annual number of teaching hours dedicated to these subjects; total annual compulsory timetable for curricula, quality standard for educational services, general criteria for pupil assessment and general criteria for the organization of adult education study paths

³⁰ After a succession of contrary rulings, the former Ministry of Education was merged with the Ministry of University, Scientific and Technologic Research, with law n. 244 24 December 2007, which refers to a 1999 reform of ministries. It then became Ministry of Education, University and Research (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, M.I.U.R.).

the professional level to teachers and principals, because of the Educational Offering Plan (Piano dell'Offerta Formativa, henceforth POF) and the renewed role of the school principal.

The Educational Offering Plan (Piano dell'Offerta Formativa (henceforth POF) embodies in a certain way the identity and activities of each school. The school draws up its own annual POF – beginning in 2015, it became a three-year plan called PTOF, Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa – that, although consistent with the general educational objectives set at the national level, must reflect cultural, social and economic needs at the local level. The Teachers' Council (*Consiglio di classe*) is in charge of outlining the POF based on general objectives defined by the School Council (*Consiglio di Istituto*) and considering the proposals and advice of parents' organizations and associations (also, at the upper secondary level, of student associations). The POF must be approved by the School Council and given to students and their parents at enrolment.

Pre-primary, primary and lower secondary schools are organized in comprehensive institutes. These groupings were initially aimed at responding to the peculiar situation of small municipalities in mountain areas (where educational provisions were scattered in the territory) at the end of the 1990s. They began spreading in other areas and were used to experiment with the continuity of elementary and lower secondary schools as being part of the same level of education and to prevent school dropouts. They finally became compulsory in 2011 (in enforcement of Law 111/2011). Moreover, regions now have the responsibility to merge all (formerly) separate primary and lower secondary schools with the aim of ensuring pedagogical continuity within the same level of education.

The school principal is the head of the comprehensive institute, he/she is a civil servant, and his/her work conditions are regulated by a specific collective labour contract. Until 1997, two figures existed, the principal (*preside*) and the director of studies (*direttore didattico*) in charge of, respectively, secondary and primary schools. With the Autonomic Reform (art. 21 Law 59/1997), the principal became the “school manager” (*dirigente scolastico*) because his tasks were extended to include organizational and management ones. He/she is the legal representative of the institution and is responsible for the management of financial and material resources and the quality of the service provided. With “the Good School” reform, in which the school manager is called “educational leader”³¹, the school principal can, in addition, select a certain percentage of teachers to be part of “his team” and manage, in contrast to the law, the number of pupils to avoid overcrowded classrooms.

³¹ Although this definition is not in the text of the law, it is used on the website of the Government in the summary of the reform.

From the 2013/2014 school year, enrolment in the first year of the primary school and first year of lower/upper secondary school occurs only through the online procedure. The application can be sent only to a single institution, but families can indicate up to two more institutions (in order of preference). If the first institution rejects the application, the online procedure service will communicate to the family, through emails, that a second application (to the second institution indicated) has been submitted. At the enrolment, parents and students are required to sign an education co-responsibility pact with the aim of defining in a detailed and shared manner all of the rights and duties in the relationship among the autonomic institution, students and families. How this agreement is elaborated, presented and signed, depends on the specific institution.

Limitations on families' choice might be due to a lack of available facilities or of school staff assigned to each school by the school administration. In this case, schools might have a surplus of applications and cannot accept all of the enrolment requests that they receive. Each school will establish its own criteria for student selection, in case the number of applications exceeds the number of places available. At this level of compulsory education, schools and local authorities must work closely together to guarantee the right of all to study. In the case of a surplus of applications, each school must establish a ranking based on admission rules and criteria, previously deliberated by the school council. These criteria must be published on the school notice board and when possible on the website of the school. The school must register all of the applications received and then communicate rejections to the families. In this case, another school will be chosen by the school and the family.

2.3 Italian schools between old and new challenges

When education substituted the role of social origin in allocating individuals to social positions, that allocation became an interesting object of study to understand whether each educational system was leaning towards selection or socialization. In the analysis of where school systems were positioned along this continuum, researchers have explored inequalities of access to education, but also chances of success in education, with reference to inequalities in educational opportunities and educational performances.

In the case of the Italian educational system, a great bulk of the research has shown numerous criticalities in the functioning of the system in terms of achievement, attainment and the selection processes that lead to different choices and, thereafter, to different future outcomes. Social and educational inequality scholars have indeed shown that the Italian school system

has failed to provide the same educational opportunities to all students and that pupils' ascriptive characteristics still play a crucial role in determining their probability of success.

Research shows, for instance, that regional origin and parents' occupation and education influence the chances of obtaining good marks, obtaining high qualifications and enrolling in tertiary education (Ballarino and Schadee 2008; Ballarino et al. 2010; Barone, Luijkx, and Schizzerotto 2010; Braga and Filippin 2010; Checchi 2010). In addition to this "old form" of educational inequality, recent studies have concentrated on a third factor that can enhance inequalities: pupils' migratory background. In fact, Italian schools, over the last twenty years, but with regional differences, have faced an increasing presence in their classrooms of children of foreign³² origin, having migrated with parents at different ages, reunited with their family after the migration, or born in Italy. In fact, schools have been the very first place in which these children and youngsters – *second generations*, stressing the plural form (Ambrosini 2004) – have been received and noticed. Their presence is adding a new perspective to the functioning of the Italian educational system in terms of access, inclusion, equality of opportunity and chances of success.

Despite the shift from the "emergency approach" to migrations – in different fields of society, including schools – the presence of pupils of foreign origin in Italian schools is relatively new, and institutions are still struggling to manage the increased diversity inside the classrooms (Ambrosini and Caneva 2011; Colombo et al. 2013), particularly in a situation of shrinking financial resources³³. On the one hand, Italian schools are compelled by the Constitution and the law to guarantee the same rights of access and opportunities to all children, irrespective of their socioeconomic or ethnic origin and of their parents' legal status³⁴. On the other hand, according to the specific needs of these pupils, schools must organize and implement tools to initially receive the newly arrived, provide them Italian language training or cope with their special learning needs when needed.

With respect to these "new Italian" pupils, scholars that has explored the issue – for a complete review see Santagati (2015) – have highlighted a gap with native pupils that persists even after controlling for social class. It emerges with respect to dropout rates, being held back, school grades and overrepresentation in vocational tracks irrespective of past

³² Due to space limitations, I use the adjective "foreign" as a category that contains people with too heterogeneous backgrounds (e.g., newly arrived migrants, first and second generations, different nationalities and reasons for migration) but that shares the characteristics of not having Italian citizenship and having a migratory background.

³³ See OECD Education at a glance 2013, "Country note" about Italy http://www.oecd.org/edu/Italy_EAG2013%20Country%20Note%20%28ITA%29.pdf.

³⁴ See Art. n. 34 of the Italian Constitution and Art. n. 45 of the Presidential Decree n. 394 of 31 August 1999.

performance (Azzolini 2011; Barban and White 2011; Farina, Dalla Zuanna, and Strozza 2009; Ricucci 2010). The higher risk of educational failure of pupils of foreign origin is becoming a challenge for the education system and Italian society because it can be an obstacle to the process of integration of these children and youngsters in the society. Moreover, if education is considered an opportunity for social mobility as we saw, the risk of failure can jeopardize their chances of ameliorating their position compared with their parents' assimilation in the host society (Ravecca 2009). Although most of the research has focused on native-foreigners gap at the secondary level, recently Paba and Bertozzi (2017) have studied the transition to tertiary education, highlighting that pupils migratory background seems to matter negatively also for those who attended an academic secondary track.

Within this scenario, educational transition and school choice have played a key role in both understanding individuals' decisions and life trajectories and the analysis of social stratification in Italy. The centrality of schools in Italian society and the importance of "having an education" to the social status of individuals, at least on paper, make educational choices crucial decisions, independently of the awareness of this importance. The choices that families, children and youngsters face in their (long or short) educational careers are different in nature and have consequences.

Individuals (or parents in their stead as long as they are minors) face at least three types of choices during their "school life". The first two involve the choice of the specific school for primary and lower secondary education. The second one, more explored by the literature, is the choice of the upper secondary school tracks. This choice, despite the fact that each track allows access to the university, can have different outcomes in an individual's life. In fact, the chances of continuing to university and attaining a tertiary degree are higher for who choose *Liceo* than they are for *Tecnico* or *Professionale* graduates³⁵. Scholars who have analysed the latter transition have focused on the determinants of choosing one track instead of another, on the decision of dropping from the school system (Aburrà 1997; Bonica and Olagnero 2011; Checchi and Flabbi 2006; Checchi 2010; Gambetta 1987; Olagnero and Cavaletto 2011) and more recently on the role of teachers and their orienting practices Bonizzoni, Romito, and Cavallo 2014; Perino and Allasino 2014; Romito 2016).

³⁵ In the 2012/13 school year, 75% of *Licei* graduates enrolled in university, compared with 24.1% of *Tecnici* graduates and 11.5% of the vocational school track graduates. Moreover, having completed a *Liceo* increases by 50% the probability of completing a university path compared with those who had a secondary education in a vocational school (Cingano and Cipollone 2007).

Although employing different approaches, these studies reached similar conclusions: even if since the 1970s, families' economic capital has been decreasing in importance, pupils' socioeconomic, cultural and migratory backgrounds play a key role in the continuation of studies, in the propensity towards a more academic track and in the probability of dropping out or being left behind.

Most of this research was conducted at the upper secondary or tertiary level of education, nevertheless also lower secondary school may represent an interesting research field to explore further educational inequalities.

2.4 Lower secondary school choice: a new territory at the light of freedom of choice

Despite the strong relationship and 'consequentiality' of the levels and the fact that the individuals' identity as "students" is formed from the beginning of the path (Fisher 2003), primary and lower secondary school choices have received less attention. The "underexposure" of this choice, apparently less problematic, can be explained by the fact that until the late 1990s, parents had to enrol their children in their neighbourhood school. Consequently, the choice was more a *duty* than an evaluation of alternatives based on different information and criteria³⁶.

In contrast, the Autonomic Reform in Italian schools introduced "family freedom of choice in education,"³⁷ encompassing the words of Law 59/1997, which claimed that "teaching autonomy aims to pursue overall objectives within the national education system, with respect to the freedom of teaching, of family freedom of choice in education and the right to learn" (art. 21 c. 9). The inspiring principles at the basis of this reform – differentiation of the curricula of the primary and lower secondary schools based on the needs of the population of each school, the territory and local administrations – constituted the premises for the introduction of the freedom of choice of families.

Despite the lack of political debate on the introduction of school choice policies (which were introduced *de facto* with the abolishment of geographical assignment), it remains possible to consider some institutional features of school choice policy. The OECD's 1994 report on school choice identified public support for non-public schools and the liberalized enrolment

³⁶ Some attention has been paid to the (freedom of) choice between public and not-public schools, and the need to differentiate the educational supply with more options for families (and eventually more financial support to make these alternatives affordable) (Ribolzi 2004).

³⁷ See Art. 4 c.1 of the Presidential Decree n° 275 of 1999.

rules in the public sector, as two of the five main types of policy supporting choice of school (Hirsch 2002). In this sense, we could say that school choice policies in Italy has been a “latent development in which the school choice has been a by-product, since families were given an opportunity to apply to a school other than the one assigned based on their residence, enabling schools to admit students from outside the catchment area” (Pöder, Kerem, and Lauri 2013:24).

Hence, in a system invested with a crucial role with respect to the future of individuals, the role of the family was enhanced and become central. Families now have the right to choose the most preferred school for their children, both primary and lower secondary schools, because the enrolment practice is separated from the geographical principle³⁸. Families can continue to enrol in the school assigned based on the location of their residence in the school’s catchment areas or can enrol their children in a different school, with availability of places as the only practical limitation. Because schools can adjust their curriculum³⁹ – within the boundaries of common national objectives – families will (and must be) able to choose the options they prefer and, instead of adapting to the supply, make the schools change to react to their demand (Pitzalis 2012).

Families’ school choice was part of a broader enhancement of parental roles at the school level. In fact, the autonomy reform refers to the family-school relationship as pivotal in the elaboration of the POF, in which parent associations’ opinions must be considered (also their *de facto* associations, art. 3 c. 3 d.p.r. 275/1999)⁴⁰. Moreover, art. 1 of the Law 30/2000, requires that “the system of education and training aim at the development and promotion of human beings [...] in the framework of cooperation between schools and parents”. Moratti’s Reform (l. 53/2003), also aimed at enhancing the role of the family inside the school, states that families must contribute “in an active and participative manner in the definition of the educational paths (*percorsi formativi*) of their children”. Additionally, parents elect their classroom councils and school council representatives and are entitled to hold meetings to exercise their right to democratic participation in the school’s activities.

³⁸ To date, Italy is one of the few OECD countries (with Belgium and the Netherlands in Europe, and Chile and New Zealand outside Europe) that has separated the school enrolment practice from the geographical principle (Musset 2012).

³⁹ The autonomy reform introduced “Piano dell’Offerta Formativa” as an educational project of each school that should represent “the cultural and planning identity of the schools and explain their curricular, extracurricular, educational and organizational program” (Art. 3 of the Presidential Decree n° 275 of 1999).

⁴⁰ The National Forum of Parents in Schools (Forum nazionale dei genitori nella scuola) has existed since 2002. It lists all the most representative parent associations at the national level.

Parents can choose to form associations outside the schools, and they can stand for election with their own agendas to become representatives on the committee and boards.

Within this system that grants freedom of choice, studying how it develops at the local level may be interesting to explore the functioning of the system in terms of equality.

2.4.1 Why lower secondary school choice in Italy is worth exploring

Why should focusing on the choice of a specific school and on the consequences of different family choices be interesting or relevant?

First of all, as seen, school will have important effects on the future of pupils, because the accumulation of education disadvantage, both for native and not-Italian students, can begin in the first grades of school. It can result from the interaction of different elements involving, for example, the student and his/her relationship with teachers, management, parental involvement, the curriculum, the peer group, and approaches to teaching and learning. Indoubtly, the characteristics of schools intakes and the incidence of pupils with disadvantaged socioeconomic or migratory background, can be addressed as a relevant element both in terms of their effect on other pupils, both in terms of its consequences on the role of the whole school system.

In fact, on the one hand, an extensive literature shows, although with some disagreement, the relevance of the school composition effects and educational peer effects on performance and attitude towards education (Benito, Alegre, and González-Balletbò 2014; Brunello and Rocco 2013; van Ewijk and Sleegers 2010; Thrupp, Lauder, and Robinson 2002; Zimmer and Toma 2000). The absence of the “right school mix” (Thrupp 1995) might have negative outcomes on the weakest and disadvantaged pupils, and the characteristics of the school intakes in terms of abilities, socioeconomic background and language skills matter more for the already disadvantaged. For Italy, Contini (2013) assessed the effect of immigrant concentration on student learning in primary and lower secondary schools and found the existence of small and heterogeneous negative effects of the concentration of foreign pupils, but a stronger negative effect in a larger share of foreign students on pupils with low socioeconomic background. On the other hand, looking at the educational offer, differentiation of schools on the basis (mainly) of their intakes, also might increase inequality among them. In fact, being characterized by more homogeneous intakes, could benefit some institutes enhancing “the probability that certain schools develop into

communities in which students perform better, teachers cooperate for common purposes, or parents profit from more intense social networks [...] whereas other schools are excluded from this improvement” (Colombo 2011).

Second of all, exploring parents’ school choice may provide explanations about schools segregations in urban areas. In fact, in some national contexts, as mentioned in Chapter I, the discussion of school choice has taken the form of a debate, analysing the *pros* and *cons* of increasing the options for families or debating the abolition of the catchment areas and envisaging the consequences of these different policies.

The traditional assignment of pupils to schools based on catchment areas has been criticized in several countries, although in different periods, characterized by high levels of urban segregation. For example, in the French system, the so-called *carte scolaire*, which assigns pupils to schools based on their family residence, was discussed and eventually abolished in 2007. Binding children’s enrolment to their residences affected school intakes in terms of segregation (Oberti 2007a; Sohoni and Saporito 2009). This situation contributed to the creation of schools attended exclusively by specific categories of people – for instance, by black pupils belonging to lower class families in the United States or by immigrants in France. However, well-off families – upper and middle-class families and white families – left segregated neighbourhoods and moved to other areas, seeking high-performing schools (Clotfelter 1999; Liu and Taylor 2005). Facing this scenario, the introduction or increase of freedom of choice has been part of a process of marketizing of education that considers parents as choosers or consumers in the field, and of enhancing a market-style principle, such as competition among schools. In this new system, freedom of choice was presented as a viable solution to the residential segregation problem; poor families, who were otherwise obliged to enrol their pupils in neighbourhood schools, would have had the same opportunities offered to rich, formerly advantaged families (Chubb and Moe 1997; Hoxby 1998; Saporito 2003; Sweetland 2002). Thus, the freedom of choice was intended to become, according to its promoters’ view, a democratization tool applied to an unfair system – the one based on the geographical assignment principle – due to the growth of educational options available to all families (Bosetti 2004), which would have formally provided the same opportunities, boosting social and ethnic integration at school. Furthermore, by increasing the degree of competition among schools, students’ performance would also be enhanced, creating better schools and favouring brighter school results (Hoxby 2004).

The underlying logic of the proponents of school freedom of choice was based on the ideas that parents should not have to choose based on residential constraints and that the existence of different options would allow parents to function as pure rational actors, aware of the educational needs of their children and with a clear system of preference (Bosetti 2004; Chubb and Moe 1997). Similar to consumers, they could rely on a range of educational options allowing them to express their preference (public, private and religious schools), and after having collected the necessary information, they could make the “right” school choice that met their expectations. As seen, these assumptions by the advocates of school choice were criticized by several studies based on class and ethnic differences associated with the choice and on the enhancement of these differences in a quasi-market situation (Ball et al. 1994; Ball 1993; Ball 2003; Bowe et al. 1994; David et al. 1993, 1997; Reay and Ball 1998; Reay 1996, 2004; Reay et al. 2007).

Although in Italy segregation at the school level has been less explored, few elements and recent research point to the risk of an increasing segregation among schools, also due to parental schooling strategies.

2.4.1.1 *Segregation within Italian schools at the lowest level of education*

Although in Italy school segregation at the primary levels of education have been overlooked compared to other national system, the relevance of the issue has been stressed by institutions and research since it may constitute a further challenge for the Italian educational system. The Ministry of Education, acknowledging the risk of a high concentration of foreign pupils in schools, suggested in 2010⁴¹ that the concentration of foreign pupils should not exceed 30% per classroom, with the possibility of dispensation in the presence of foreign pupils born in Italy. In addition to the more known overrepresentation of lower classes and ethnic minority students in technical and vocational tracks⁴², a similar phenomenon appears to have emerged at the lower levels of education.

Santerini in 2008 discussed the issue related to the distribution of immigrant students between schools, raising the question of equity, equality and social justice inside the system

⁴¹ See the Ministry of Education directive n. 2 (8th of January 2010) on “Indicazioni e raccomandazioni per l’integrazione di alunni con cittadinanza non italiana”.

⁴² In the 2011/12 school year, whereas 44% of Italian students enrolled in a Liceo, only 19.3% of foreign students did so. Technical and vocational tracks were instead chosen by 39% of foreign students and 19% of Italians. Research has shown that immigrant children, compared with native students, are less often enrolled in Licei, even when their parents’ level of education, social class and school performance are equal.

(Santerini 2008). Attention to this has also been brought by the work of Colombo and Santagati (2014), on foreign pupils concentration in Italian schools and possible effects in terms of integration or segregation. The authors focus on secondary education – and lower secondary schools in particular – to explore integration issue and foreign pupils’ concentration nexus. In a two-year research in Lombardy they analyze different aspects of pupils’ integration at the school and class level in the framework of de-segregative and intercultural intervention of Italian educational policies. They highlight how the school play a fundamental role in the institutional integration of foreign minors.

Since lower secondary schools are homogeneously distributed in urban areas and this specific level of education must provide the same basic knowledge to all pupils (independently of the *how*), the allocation of pupils in different schools can depend upon population distribution in the territory and assignment by catchment area if schools are oversubscribed. In fact, each school has a definite number of available places, and when the number of applications exceeds the capacity of the school, each institution adopts independently its own criteria to manage surplus applications, appealing to a variety of criteria, among which are the catchment areas. In some cases, as shown by the recent case concerning “the ghetto class” in Bologna⁴³, the institutional constraints can also limit parental freedom of choice and foster concentrations of pupils with certain characteristics⁴⁴.

But, on the other hand, families might play a central role in this school differentiation on socioeconomic and ethnic bases, as some empirical studies suggest.

Santero, in her research on a lower secondary school in a multicultural neighbourhood in Turin, observed a higher concentration of foreign pupils in the studied school and a lower concentration in an another school in the same area (Santero 2006), suggesting “native flight” to explain this evidence. Moreover, a study by Borlini and Memo (2009) in Milan showed that the concentration of foreign students in some primary schools was much higher

⁴³ See “Bologna, una classe di soli bimbi stranieri. Scoppia il caso: “Così si rischia il ghetto” by I. Venturi LaRepubblica.it (04/11/2013) available at:

http://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/11/04/news/bologna_una_classe_di_soli_ragazzi_stranieri_scoppia_il_caso_cos_si_rischia_il_ghetto-70218937/

⁴⁴ Moreover, the not-rare circumstance of a surplus of applications – caused by resource cut-offs combined with the growth of the student population – appears to have some very negative effects for newly arrived foreign students, whose enrolment might be (unlawfully) rejected by schools. See on this issue “Nuovi milanesi» respinti dalle scuole. Classi troppo piene” by F. Cavadini, Corriere della Sera (11/10/2013) available on http://milano.corriere.it/milano/notizie/cronaca/13_ottobre_11/nuovi-milanesi-respinti-scuole-classi-troppo-piene-7ad66ad4-3276-11e3-b846-b6f7405b68a1.shtml and “Scuola, ci sono altri 77 minori stranieri «Siamo pieni, dove li mettiamo ora?»” by M. Amaduzzi, Corriere della Sera (10/01/2014) available on <http://comieredibologna.corriere.it/bologna/notizie/cronaca/2014/1-ottobre-2014/scuola-ci-sono-altri-77-minori-stranieri-siamo-pieni-dove-li-mettiamo-ora-230248171782.shtml>.

compared with urban segregation of foreign citizens in the area in which the same school was located. According to the authors, one of the possible explanation can be traced to family school choices: although Italian parents are reluctant to move to be closer to “higher”-performing schools⁴⁵, at the same time, “they seem to adopt strategies aiming at *avoiding* schools perceived as more problematic [...] as long as necessary to find a school with a lower concentration of foreigners” (Borlini and Memo 2009:106). Cognetti suggests a similar interpretation in her study of a single school in the San Siro neighbourhood in Milan, which has a high concentration of foreign pupils (Cognetti 2012).

Attention to the issue of school segregation in the territory of Milan has been more recently brought by a research project conducted by in the Polytechnic University of Milan. Specifically, in the period in which this PhD work started – when it was thought and put in practice – and while this dissertation was written, a group of scholars of the Polytechnic University of Milan engaged in a project on school social and ethnic segregation in Milan⁴⁶, under the supervision of the sociologists Costanzo Ranci and the urbanist Carolina Pacchi.

Not only their work reveals the relevance and centrality of this issue in challenging the Italian school system but it also gathers and presents evidence on school segregation in the city of Milan as mainly related to both families’ choices and schools autonomy. Their contribution, recently published in (Pacchi and Ranci 2017), provides the quantitative evidence that reinforce the premises of this work. In fact, the authors show that 1) primary and lower secondary school in Milan are socioeconomically and ethnically *segmented* 2) this segmentation is the result of territorial characteristics but also of parental choices. In this sense, their aim is not to explore the complexity of families’ decision but to “verify to what extent these choices – are significantly determined by the multiethnic and social context of the territory in which families lives” (Pacchi and Ranci 2017:19).

The existence of (a risk of) ethnic and socioeconomic concentration within the public system might have consequences at different levels: although the impact on performances and attainments of mixed or segregated classroom is controversial, it is indeed against the Italian public school’s aims to create separated learning environments on the basis of socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics. Even more so at the primary levels of education,

⁴⁵ Contrary to what occurs in the Anglo-Saxon or in the French context characterized by high mobility and similar to other Mediterranean contexts such as Greece (Maloutas 2007).

⁴⁶ The existence of this work was learned by the researcher only in the last months of the PhD work when the first results were presented during a seminar.

compulsory and free of charge at least for eight years, as provided by the abovementioned Art. 34 of the Italian Constitution.

In this scenario, parental choices within a system of freedom of choice, as one possible mechanism behind this school polarization, must be explored as a complex practice that, in combination with schools' decisions and institutional constraints, contribute to the distribution of pupils in different schools in the territory. The following chapter is devoted to the description of how, starting from this puzzling and indefinite questions, this research has been designed and conducted.

Chapter III – Research design

3.1 Introduction

The research presented here aims at shedding light on parents' lower secondary school choices in the city of Milan, within a freedom of choice policy framework. It focuses on their retrospective narrations about the decision process and their declared criteria of school selection. On the one hand, it examines choices as being influenced by parents' endowment with cultural resources, the neighbourhood in which they live, the social network in which they are integrated, their occupation, and their work-family balance needs. On the other hand, parents' representations need to be placed in a concrete institutional framework (defined number of schools and constraints to the building capacity), with a specific distribution of schools in the space, occupying different symbolic levels of, for example, "reputation", quality, and accessibility.

This chapter is devoted to a description of all the steps taken during this doctoral research work, exploring parents' accounts of school choice. Starting from a restatement of research aims and questions, this section includes a broader methodological discussion and a description of the research design (sampling strategy and discussion of the method). The chapter provides elements to understand *what* I have actually done in my PhD work, *when* and *where*, to generate my research data and *how* I analysed these data to produce this text⁴⁷. It also addresses problems encountered during fieldwork and blind spots of the method. The discussion of the abovementioned elements aims at using argumentation (Cardano 2011) to explain research decisions, in response to latent questions, critiques and objections that may arise.

The chapter is expressly divided in a "local" and an "individual" level of the research, first focusing on the relevance of Milan as a setting and the selection of interesting cases of study, then explaining how parents were sampled, starting from the chosen schools. Although the two phases were much more intertwined, the distinction allow for a thorough

⁴⁷ Within three years of my PhD from a.y. 2013/2014- to a.y. 2016/2017, I obtained access to data on schools and catchment areas between January and February 2015. I defined my sampling strategy in the following months, and I started my fieldwork in September 2015, concluding interviews in March 2016. I give more information about the research time span throughout the description of different phases of the work in Appendix 1.

explanation of the research process. Finally, the chapter contains a detailed description of the fieldwork and a characterization of parents' profiles.

3.2 Research aims and methods

This research addresses a complex social phenomenon, school choice, as it is experienced by parents in their local context and vis-à-vis school systems and institutions. The research can be defined as exploratory because little is known about lower secondary school choice in the Italian context. It is intended to 1) explore Italian parental schooling decisions and 2) understand how parents' reasons – as emerge constitute schooling strategies that in urban areas may have the collective effect of exclusion and closure. To this end, it attempts to answer the following research questions:

- How do parents choose their children's lower secondary schools?
 - Are parents aware of the existence of freedom of choice?
 - What resources allow the family to actually know the options and be capable of choosing?
 - Which are parents' declared school preferences, orientations and criteria?
- Do families make choices to avoid schools with a higher concentration of students with a low socioeconomic and/or migratory background (or perceived as such)?

In order to answer to these research questions, I decided to adopt an analytical approach that focuses on the individual level of parents and their choice-making process, but considering also their embeddedness in specific national and local contexts. To be able to place parents' decisions *in context* and interpret their choices as *situated* in a particular space and time, I examined local authorities' decisions, the definition of catchment areas, the distribution of the schools in the territory, the concentration of foreign pupils, and schools' constraints and autonomy. In the following sections attention will be paid to both dimensions of the research taken into account in the research design and in the conduction of the fieldwork.

With the aim of answering to research questions, data were generated through:

A) Semi-structured qualitative interviews to 1) parents of children enrolled in a public lower secondary school or recently exited from one. 2) school principals and other key informants. B) Observation during lower secondary schools' open days. C) Secondary analysis of data at the school level, including the location and number of pupils by gender

and nationality; curriculum and timetable characteristics; closeness and dislocation of schools in the territory; and capacity of the building and catchment area “dimension/extension”. D) Secondary analysis of data at the city level on parents’ enrolment decisions in or out of the catchment area of schools.

3.3 The local dimension of the research

In Chapter I and II it has been highlighted the relevance of the national and local context in the analysis of school choice. In fact, the extent of the choice (to what extent parents are free to move in and out from catchment areas, upon which conditions and with what limitations) and the characteristics of educational provisions have been proved to influence parental decisions. That is why the decision about where to study parental choices – urban or rural area? Big city or village? In which area of Italy? – cannot be assumed to be trivial or to be taken for granted. On the contrary, the reasons on which research decisions has been taken with regard to the setting and case selection need to be discussed as a mean to argue for both the general and the within case relevance of this research findings.

3.3.1 The setting: Milan

To address the *why Milan* question, a two-fold reply is needed. On the one hand, the two studies that had a major initial effect in defining this field of research from the beginning (Borlini and Memo 2009; Cognetti 2014 already mentioned in the previous chapter) were located in Milan and provided some initial material to orient the research⁴⁸. Bearing the above in mind, a further exploration of Milan as a site for understanding parents’ lower secondary school choice was needed. Moreover, the already mentioned work on school segregation conducted by (Pacchi and Ranci 2017) of the Polytechnic University of Milan, reinforces a posteriori the importance of providing qualitative data, exploring what quantitative evidence may only imply.

On the other hand, Milan constitutes a peculiar setting for this research. It is characterized by a socioeconomic and ethnic mix, it is one of the three Italian cities with the

⁴⁸ The previously mentioned research on school segregation conducted by the Polytechnic University of Milan, presented when this work was in its conclusive steps, reinforced the importance of providing qualitative data to sustain quantitative evidence.

highest concentration of foreign students in schools (together with Rome and Turin), and as an extended urban area, it provides a wide educational offering (in terms of number and distribution of institutions).

The extension of the city and its housing density all over its territory means that lower secondary school distribution in Milan is quite homogeneous, and it becomes denser when moving from the municipality borders towards the city centre. Thus, it is common to find in the same neighbourhood or in adjacent neighbourhoods more than one school available for families within the same, relatively small, portion of territory. In contrast, the one is further from the centre, the higher are the chances of finding an isolated school that should satisfy a larger portion of territory, which is often less inhabited. This configuration is interesting because it facilitates the observation of parents both choosing within the same neighbourhood and evaluating different options available, moving towards the city centre to find a more diversified educational offering, than the one available in the suburbs.

Not only can we find *many schools* in Milan, but the pupil population is also diverse. In fact, 1 of every 5 minors in the province of Milan is child to a foreign citizen, and they constitute 19,1% of the school population in the Municipality⁴⁹. Beyond numbers, non-profit associations⁵⁰ are active in the promotion of foreign pupils' integration and success in (and out of) schools and work in cooperation with the school staff. In 2007, the Municipality of Milan created a network of *Istituti Comprensivi* and other schools (called POLI START)⁵¹ that is involved in welcoming and supporting recently arrived pupils in addition to organizing activities and Italian as a second language classes. Thus, Milan represents a place in which, over the last fifteen years, schools have addressed an increasing number of pupils coming from other countries or born in Italy to foreign families. Necessarily, Italian families in Milan have started to adjust to this new situation and might have already had everyday life contact with the migration phenomenon in the neighbourhood. This point is even more relevant considering that Italian families have low spatial mobility and that, as I discuss below, several Milanese neighbourhoods are socially and ethnically heterogeneous.

⁴⁹ See the report edited by (Santagati and Ongini 2016) published by Foundation ISMU.

⁵⁰ Such as Centro Come for instance that since 1994 works to promote the integration and the inclusion of foreign pupils in schools through numerous services and activities (<http://www.centrocome.it/>).

⁵¹ "Poli Start" were created in October 2007 within an institutional project called "*Start- Strutture Territoriali di Accoglienza in Rete per l'Integrazione*". The main aim of the project was to promote and implement actions towards the welcoming, placing and teaching of Italian for foreign pupils. All primary and lower secondary schools in the territory were divided in four "Poli" on the basis of the 9 areas of the city. See: http://www.comune.milano.it/wps/portal/ist/it/servizi/educazione/servizi_per_adolescenti/prevenzione_disper_sione_scolastica/dirittostudio_progettostart

These abovementioned characteristics of the city satisfied the need to observe school choice in a situation in which parents are provided with at least one option beyond the catchment area one (not always true in smaller cities or the countryside) at a relatively close distance and in a context in which a type of diversity in pupils' composition can be visible as such and can influence parents' choices. The existence of multiple and alternative choices in a restricted area was taken into account in the case selection, as it allowed to understand how parents motivates their schooling decisions clear of closeness-distance arguments. The next section is devoted to a detailed description of the challenging task of exploring these aspects and including them in the sampling strategy.

3.3.2 The sampling strategy: lower secondary schools

The first phase of the research sampling strategy aimed at the selection of schools, starting from an analysis of Milan neighbourhoods and school characteristics. My sampling strategy rationale can be reconstructed starting from the following argument: each school is located in a specific environment with different characteristics in terms of commercial activities, transportation, public services, and connection with the centre (or the periphery); neighbourhoods are also characterized by different concentrations of immigrant populations, unemployment rates, and social disadvantages. Therefore, it is impossible to separate the school from its neighbourhood and then to separate school choice from the environmental characteristics of the neighbourhood because parents and children also live in a specific area of the city.

Disaggregated and uniform data by neighbourhood are difficult to find, at least with the limited resources – in terms of money, time and power – of a Ph.D. student. Therefore, it is challenging to draw a complete picture of Milan territory in terms of the socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics of the population. I discuss how I tried to focus closely on school neighbourhoods, acquiring the necessary data to compare different neighbourhoods and schools and thus select them. I also make reference to the strategy of reorientation that occurred during fieldwork.

3.3.2.1 *Milan and its neighbourhoods*

I started zooming out to examine the big (city) picture. In 1999⁵², the Municipality of Milan was divided into nine “administrative areas” called “Zone di decentramento” (decentralization areas, Zona/e henceforth). Each Zona cuts the city in large *slices* that include both the city centre and the suburbs; thus, it is incorrect to view them as relatively homogeneous territories sharing something in common (neither history nor other characteristics other than being run by the same area council). Beforehand, since 1968, the city was divided into twenty areas that were not yet completely homogeneous but smaller and relatively more coherent and delineated three spaces in the city: the historical centre, a belt in between the centre and the surroundings, and an external ring including more-peripheral areas. Using this division of the territory to examine some not-current figures, Milan territory can be viewed as a patchwork of different socioeconomic characteristics, social disadvantage and concentration of foreign pupils that do not respond to a classical juxtaposition of centre vs periphery⁵³.

Nevertheless, to place schools in their territories, it was necessary to find another unit to consider because the twenty area divisions appear to be obsolete and updated data are missing.

Therefore, examining the city more closely, the municipality of Milan can also be viewed as eighty-eight Local Identity Units (Nuclei di Identità Locale – henceforth, NIL)⁵⁴ that can be defined as “Milan neighbourhoods, in which it is possible to identify both history and future urban planning”. They are considered “urban life systems” that gather commercial activity, green areas, socialization activities and services; but they are also units of intervention to ameliorate and strengthen small and large services⁵⁵.

⁵² In the Directive 3rd March 1999, this division was governed on the basis of local authorities’ regulations (Direttiva 3 of March 1999), according to which all Italian municipalities, with a population greater than 100,000 inhabitants, have to divide their communal territory into districts.

⁵³ For instance, a Municipality Study on reproductive behaviors of women living in Milan draw a city profile, including the demographic structure, socioeconomic characteristics and social disadvantage of different areas. These figures explicate a difference between the city center and the more peripheral areas but not in absolute terms. Some areas located closer to the center show a level of social disadvantage similar to the surroundings and vice versa. Moreover, examining the foreign population distribution/concentration, the study says that there are not segregated areas only with foreign population (periphery) or with native population (center), but that foreign citizens’ concentration is higher in the northeast and in the southwest areas of the city.

⁵⁴ They have been introduced with the Plan of Governance of the Territory to manage urban planning and service provision in the city.

⁵⁵ In the original text: “I NIL – Nuclei d'Identità Locale rappresentano aree definibili come quartieri di Milano, in cui è possibile riconoscere quartieri storici e di progetto, con caratteristiche differenti gli uni dagli altri. Vengono introdotti dal PGT (Piano di Governo del Territorio) come un insieme di ambiti, connessi tra loro da infrastrutture e servizi per la mobilità, il verde. Sono sistemi di vitalità urbana: concentrazioni di attività commerciali locali, giardini, luoghi di aggregazione, servizi; ma sono anche 88 nuclei di identità locale da

Information at the NIL level is available, although the sources are different and data were not collected year by year. That information includes NIL's population by gender, citizenship, age group⁵⁶; public services, including pre-school, primary and lower secondary schools⁵⁷; unemployment rate, youth unemployment rate, drop outs, and youngsters without *licenza media*⁵⁸. The last three are available only for 69 NIL⁵⁹. Although these points do not refer to the same time span, they can be useful to take a picture of Milan territory before pinpointing schools in it. I examined NIL in groups, considering their geographical closeness; it is not possible to fit NIL into Zone because in some cases Zona cuts NIL in half. NIL present different characteristics in terms of both social disadvantage and the concentration of foreign populations. This point is true throughout the territory (with few exceptions) (in Table 1, they are grouped by geographical closeness). The number of the NIL is the number assigned to each NIL by the Municipality, but they also have names that correspond to Milan neighbourhoods. I added some indication on cardinal points to position NIL on the map. Finally, yellow cells indicate above-average values of indicators.

Table 1 NIL's socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics

Historical Centre	Num ber of the NIL	Name of the NIL	Youth Unemploy ment Rate (%)	Unemploy ment Rate (%)	15-19 years		Residen t Populat ion	Foreign Residen t Populat ion	Foreign residen t populat ion of the total populat ion (%)
					old witho ut Licen zia Medi a (%)	Dro p- out rate (%)			
	1	Duomo	21,9	6	2,2	15,1	16.630	2.374	14,28

potenziare e progettare ed attraverso cui organizzare piccoli e grandi servizi (Piano dei Servizi)” (Dal sito <http://dati.comune.milano.it/dato/item/61>).

⁵⁶ Latest data from 2015.

⁵⁷ Latest data from 2008.

⁵⁸ Latest data from 2011.

⁵⁹ 19 NIL cover parts of the city with small resident populations with large green areas or parks.

	2	Brera	24,2	6,7	2,8	17,6	17.851	2.611	14,63
	4	Guastalla	17,9	8,6	2,5	17,4	14.939	2.047	13,70
	5	Vigentina	23,2	5,6	1,4	7,2	13.675	1.701	12,44
	6	Ticinese	24,4	11	2,2	17,9	19.951	2.555	12,81
	7	Magenta S. Vittore	22,4	7,8	3	16,2	17.231	2.108	12,23
East									
	21	Buenos Aires- Venezia	25,2	6,4	2,5	11	61.517	8.401	13,66
	22	Città Studi	24,2	7,4	2,5	22,2	36.463	5.919	16,23
	23	Lambrate	22,5	9,3	2,7	17,1	10.602	2.189	20,65
	25	Corsica	28,8	8	3,3	13,7	18.991	2.944	15,50
	26	XXII Marzo	22,8	6,3	0	10,7	30.799	3.210	10,42
	28	Umbria- Molise	26,6	8,2	2,1	14,8	22.594	4.716	20,87
	29	Ortomercato	27,1	10,6	2,5	13,5	4.152	1.541	37,11
North									
	9	Garibaldi Repubblica	24,8	7,1	4	17,3	5.194	767	14,77
	10	Centrale	18,5	9,8	2,9	15,4	17.593	4.356	24,76
	11	Isola	23,1	4,8	1,9	4,2	22.273	4.338	19,48
	12	MaciachiniMag giolina	27,1	9,1	0,8	15,2	26.006	5.402	20,77
	69	Sarpi	20,2	8,9	4,3	19,4	29.777	5.356	17,99
	78	Farini	20,5	7,4	2,8	13,8	3.974	1.463	36,81
	79	Dergano	18,9	6,7	1,8	13,9	22.185	7.773	35,04
North (North -east)									
	14	Niguarda- Cà Granda	32	5,7	2,1	11,4	36.706	5.161	14,06

	15	Bicocca	39,3	5,9	1,2	8,9	7.563	1.266	16,74
	17	Adriano	21,8	6,1	1,8	8,4	15.520	3.137	20,21
	16	Viale Monza	28,3	9,2	3,3	23	27.880	6.507	23,34
	13	Greco	27,7	5,4	1,2	6,3	15.137	3.726	24,62
	19	Padova	23,8	7,2	3,2	18,1	36.172	12.280	33,95
	20	Loreto	20	4,2	1,7	5,2	44.285	15.708	35,47
North (North -West)									
	81	Bovisasca	31,6	7,6	4,2	19,5	7.263	978	13,47
	83	Bruzzano	24,6	5,6	1,2	7,3	12.564	2.311	18,39
	76	Quarto Oggiaro	31	5,1	0,6	4,7	31.362	6.952	22,17
	80	Affori	18,5	4,9	1,1	3,6	23.999	7.019	29,25
	82	Comasina	23,1	4,7	0,5	4	9.438	3.114	32,99
	79	Dergano	18,9	6,7	1,8	13,9	22.185	7.773	35,04
	77	Bovisa	17,9	9,2	3,5	6,8	12.994	4.637	35,69
	78	Farini	20,5	7,4	2,8	13,8	3.974	1.463	36,81
North (North -West)									
	66	QT8	36,6	5,7	1,2	6,6	4.017	421	10,48
	67	Portello	27,4	5,5	2,2	11,3	7.736	813	10,51
	68	Pagano	22,2	9,7	1,9	19,8	16.967	1.817	10,71
	69	Sarpi	20,2	8,9	4,3	19,4	29.777	5.356	17,99
	70	Ghisolfa	21	7,6	2,2	16,3	17.337	3.137	18,09
	71	Villapizzone	24	7,1	1,9	10,2	40.241	12.721	31,61
West									
	53	Lorenteggio	34,8	4,9	0,7	7	13.322	1.893	14,21
	52	Bande nere	23,6	10,7	1,3	21,2	43.436	6.678	15,37

	56	Forze Armate	31,9	6,2	0,6	6	23.785	4.039	16,98
	55	Baggio	30,2	4,8	1,2	4,4	29.295	5.061	17,28
	49	Giambellino	28,8	7,6	3,1	16,9	31.836	8.180	25,69
	57	Selinunte	23,5	6,8	1,4	11,3	26.342	9.136	34,68
South (South -West)									
	50	Tortona	21,4	4,1	1,1	3,5	14.983	1.431	9,55
	46	Barona	34,9	8,7	1,8	15,6	16.974	2.137	12,59
	48	Ronchetto sul Naviglio	25,2	8	1,8	20,3	14.622	1.874	12,82
	44	Navigli	22,2	7,9	1,5	16,4	17.038	2.516	14,77
	43	Tibaldi	24,7	6	1,4	11	11.699	2.092	17,88
	45	S. Cristoforo	25,2	7	2,3	9,8	13.077	2.428	18,57
South									
	27	Porta Romana	21	5,7	2	12,3	16.347	1.994	12,20
	38	Ripamonti	21,9	7,3	2,6	17,2	13.767	1.707	12,40
	37	Ex OM- Morivione	27,5	9	1,1	16,9	7.797	1.373	17,61
	36	Scalo Romana	28,5	8,5	2,7	17,9	11.562	3.983	34,45
South- East									
	31	Parco Monluè- Ponte Lambro	30,1	4,1	0,7	3,2	5.080	1.818	35,79
	33	Rogoredo	22,3	6,7	1,9	12,7	9.382	1.718	18,31
	35	Lodi-Corvetto	26,4	5,9	1,5	11	36.163	9.341	25,83
	36	Scalo Romana	28,5	8,5	2,7	17,9	11.562	3.983	34,45
	AVERAGE VALUES		25,85	6,98	1,93	12,3 8			19,65

- Youth unemployment rate: percentage of 15- to 24-year-old population seeking work
- Unemployment rate: percentage of active population (>15 years old) seeking work

- 15- to 19-year-olds without Licenza media: percentage of 15- to 19-year-old population that obtained only elementary school title, of the total amount of 15- to 19-year-old population
- Drop-out rate: percentage of 15- to 24-year-old population with Licenza Media as the highest educational attainment

3.3.2.2 *The selected lower secondary schools*

Schools in Italy are gathered, with few exceptions, in different autonomic institutions (with administrative, teaching and organizational autonomy) that include (at least) one kindergarten, (at least) one primary school and (at least) one lower secondary school. In Milan, there are 75 of these institutions – called “Autonomie” – and 262 schools (public and private) of which 28 are kindergartens, 143 are primary schools and 91 are lower secondary schools. Of these 91, 84 are public lower secondary schools: 68 are *Istituti Comprensivi* (comprehensive institutions), 1 is a “single” lower secondary school, 2 are boarding schools, 1 is a centre for adult education and 1 is a school for blind pupils⁶⁰. This research focuses only on free of charge lower secondary schools.

Data on primary and lower secondary schools in the 2013/2014 school year in the Municipality of Milan included name and address of the lower secondary school and number of enrolled pupils by gender and nationality⁶¹. No information was provided about the NIL or Zona they belonged to. Therefore, to locate them and cross-reference information with neighbourhood, I used their addresses (entering them in the Municipality website page, in which it is possible to “find your Zona and NIL”) and placed them on the map manually. This process provided me a chance to examine the map of school distribution in the city (not available otherwise⁶²) and at the same time know the correct NIL for each school. Schools

⁶⁰ The data from the Ministry of Education refer to the schools gathered per Comprehensive Institution without any distinction between different schools managed by the same administration. In contrast, the data of the Municipality of Milan concerning the catchment areas refer to the single school that – despite being part of a comprehensive institution – has its own catchment area.

⁶¹ These data also included 46 private schools recognized by the State, called *paritarie*, but they made no distinction among the Comprehensive Institutes. In other words, one Institute has two lower secondary schools, and these two different schools’ data are aggregated.

⁶² The municipality data to which I had access includes a map, but it does not contain any detail about NIL or Zone.

included in this research are located in 51 NIL⁶³, and some NIL have more than one school in their territory⁶⁴.

Despite being limited, Ministry Data included information on pupil nationality; thus, I categorized schools according to their *foreign* pupil concentration, which was 27,14% on average. Twenty-three schools have a low proportion of pupils lacking Italian citizenship compared with the total population of the school (between 0 and 18,76%), twenty-two have a medium concentration (between 18,77% and 32,25%) and twenty-four schools a high concentration (between 32,26% and 65,96%).

Graph 1 Number of schools by not-Italian pupils' concentration of the total population of the school in the 2013/2014 school year.



(Source: Ministry of Education)

Later, by surfing through school websites and a search engine provided by the Ministry of Education⁶⁵, I gathered information about how a school is organized around the day and about musical education, pre-high school Latin courses provided, and attention to Special Educational Needs (SEN) pupils⁶⁶. I also included information on public transport in

⁶³ Affori, Baggio, Bande Nere, Barona, Bruzzano, Buenos Aires, Città Studi, Comasina, Corsica, Mecenate, Dergano, Duomo, Brera, Ex-Om Morivione, Forze Armate, Gallarate, Giambellino, Gratosoglio-Ticinello, Greco, Guastalla, Isola, Dergano, Lodi-Corvetto, Lorenteggio, Loreto, Padova, Maciachini-Maggiolina, Magenta-San Vittore, Mecenate, Niguarda-Cà Granda, Parco Nord, Ortomercato, Pagano, Lambro-Cimiano, Qt8, Quarto Cagnino, Quarto Oggiaro, Ripamonti, Rogoredo, S. Cristoforo, Stadera, San Siro, Sarpi, Selinunte-Monterosa, Ticinese, Vial Monza, Vigentina, Villapizzone, Washington, XXII Marzo

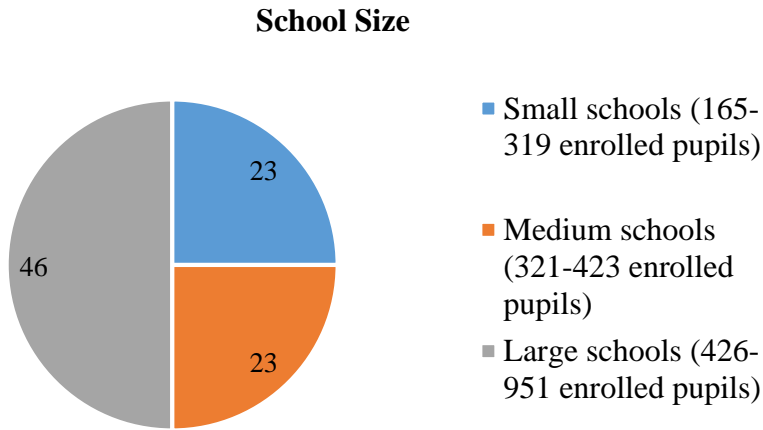
⁶⁴ Affori, Comasina, Corsica, Dergano, Duomo, Gallarate, Greco, Guastalla, Lodi-Corvetto, Quarto Oggiaro, S. Cristoforo, Selinunte-Monterosa, Stadera, Viale Monza, Washington, XXII Marzo have 2 lower secondary schools; Loreto, Mecenate, Niguarda-Cà Granda, Villapizzone have 3 lower secondary schools; Bande Nere and Buenos Aires-Porta Venezia have 4 schools.

⁶⁵ The website is called Scuola in chiaro – Cerca la tua scuola <http://cercalatuascuola.istruzione.it/cercalatuascuola/> and allows searching schools in a territory and filtering the information by level of education, school timetable, and state/non state school.

⁶⁶ This definition was introduced with the Circolare Ministeriale n. 8 del 6 marzo 2013. It includes “all pupils in difficult situations” enlarging the traditional idea of integration at the school level, founded on the existence of a certificate of disability. The “special educational needs” definition instead enlarge the possibilities of schools’ intervention and accountability, covering “cultural and social disadvantage, learning disabilities

accessing the school⁶⁷. Unfortunately, it was not possible to build a complete and detailed dataset with this information about schools because of school website deficiencies and non-conformity between their websites and information provided by the Ministry. In each school, I could find information about roughly one of the abovementioned aspects; I was also able to find information about the others (in 58 schools in total), but for some schools, it was not possible to find any information through websites.

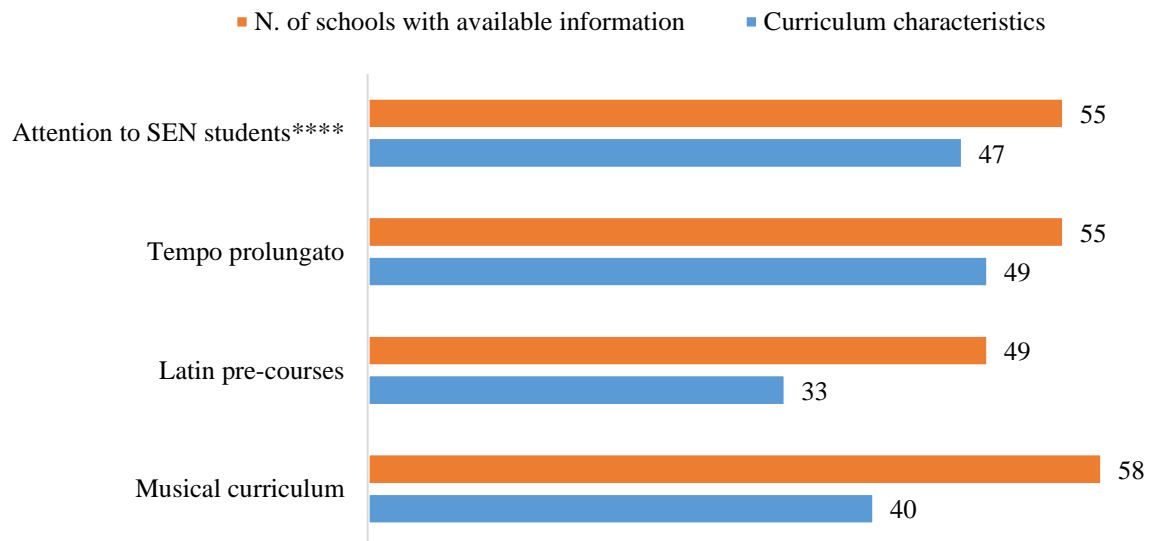
Graph 2 Number of lower secondary schools per school size (Total number of enrolled pupils) 2013/2014 school year



Graph 3 School curriculum characteristics (source: information provided on school websites)

and/or development disabilities, difficulties with Italian language and culture because of different cultural origin”.

⁶⁷ Using the Milan Public Transport (ATM) website, on which it is possible to find all public transport near a specific street or place (<http://giromilano.atm.it/#/home/cercaintorno>).



Combining all of the information gathered so far, I defined a rough school profile, and I cursorily examined the lower secondary educational offering in Milan.

I observed that these differences and similarities among schools were not attributable to any type of pattern and that small and large schools, musical curricula and other information can be found all around the city. It is unclear, with these rough data, if public transportation does penalize specific schools, although they all are reachable without a private vehicle. Of course, schools that are located in areas with a higher density of public transportation can be reached by subways, trams, several buses and urban railways, whereas others can be reached only by two or three bus lines.

In addition to these data, I considered Municipality data on enrolment choice at the catchment area level⁶⁸ that include the percentage of enrolled pupils from the school catchment area, based on which the Municipality distinguishes among *Neighbourhood*, *Territorial* and *Supraterritorial* schools.

Table 2 Types of catchment areas and schools

Types of schools	Percentage of enrolments of resident pupils in the catchment area	Number of schools
<i>Neighbourhood School</i>	> 70%	17
<i>Territorial School</i>	50%	47

⁶⁸ These secondary data have been already analyzed and presented in a report by the Municipality. A Municipality layman provided me with a report that contains detailed information for each single school.

<i>Supraterritorial School</i>	< 70%	19
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Having considered these aspects, my initial research design envisaged a selection of the sample aimed at finding 4 schools that could constitute particular settings in which to find parents. This sampling strategy also aimed to limit the boundaries of the research field to a few neighbourhoods and analyse within-neighbourhood “flows” in and out of the catchment areas. Finally, but most importantly, school selection was designed to find unique institutional settings that could constitute typical cases to be studied.

Initially, to increase the chances of meeting both families who have exited their assigned school and families who have not (and have chosen their neighbourhood school), I considered only territorial and supraterritorial schools, excluding neighbourhood schools that receive more than 70% of their pupils from the catchment areas. Thereafter, sixty-six schools constituted my school population. I decided to consider school ‘dimension’ (number of pupils) as not relevant in the selection because it does not always correspond to school attractiveness (the larger it is, the more popular it is), and it can depend upon a school building’s physical capacity.

Moreover, if the choice of the lower secondary school is based on the practical reason of closeness of the school to the residence – parents are not exercising their right to choose outside their catchment area – schools’ intakes should reproduce the socioeconomic and ethnic composition of their neighbourhood population. Therefore, to detect interesting cases, I compared schools with neighbourhood (NIL) characteristics⁶⁹, examining the foreign population concentration, because socioeconomic data, such as pupils’ parent’s occupation and education, I did not have access to a disaggregated data for each institution (although they do exist⁷⁰).

I considered the composition of the school population in terms of the native-not native dichotomy, and I assumed that in a neighbourhood with an above-the-average (below-the-average) concentration of foreign population, the correspondent school (or schools when more than one) should have an above-the-average (below-the-average) concentration of

⁶⁹ Although catchment areas do not overlap with NIL, I could not include the former in the picture because I did not gain access to catchment area extensions or boundaries that might allow examining their intakes.

⁷⁰ Each school year, schools must fill an online form on the “SIDI” platform (Servizio Informativo Dell’Istruzione) providing information about the school population (e.g., number of classrooms, enrolled pupils, gender and nationality of pupils etc.).

foreign pupils. Thus, the schools in which the concentration of foreign pupils is above average in below-average neighbourhoods (and vice versa) (see Table 3) might be an interesting case study to understand the role of families’ decisions and strategies. For instance, among the type showed in Table 3, type 3 might represent the case of schools from which Italian families are “fleeing”, opting for a less ethnically mixed school. While type 1 might represents a school considered “good” by parents living in an already selected area of the city who, for this reason, choose to remain local.

Table 3 Schools and neighbourhoods classified based on their concentration of foreign population

		NEIGHBOURHOOD	
		Concentration of foreign population	
		< average	> the average
SCHOOL	< average	<i>Type 1</i>	<i>Type 2</i>
	> the average	<i>Type 3</i>	<i>Type 4</i>

Using this typology, and excluding type 2 because there are only four type 2 schools in Milan, I also considered NIL characteristics, school proximity and their location in the same neighbourhood or close neighbourhoods. I selected two different areas of Milan, west and east, because given the heterogeneity of different neighbourhoods around the city, these two areas present similar levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and foreign population and allowed me to observe what was occurring at the city antipodes.

I then selected two groups of neighbourhoods in the east and west areas (Buenos Aires, Loreto and XXII Marzo; Bande Nere, Lorenteggio, Selinunte, San Siro and Washington) with more than two schools within their ‘borders’ and in adjacent neighbourhoods.

I had selected 8 schools (4 in each area) to be involved in the research, from which I would focus more closely on 4 schools. However, only 4 schools agreed to participate in the research. The path in between this selection, access to the field, and school’s actual participation is explained in detail in Appendix 1. Fieldwork was actually conducted in approximately 5 schools (4 included in the original strategy) in which the great majority of the participants had enrolled their children.

School characteristics (see table 4) include the following:

- Four schools are located in the west area of Milan, between Bande Nere, Lorenteggio and a more central area, Washington: Mimosa, Bellatrix, Sirius and Vega. These schools can be consistently defined as alternative options for parents leaving in this area of Milan⁷¹.
- The other school, Spica, is located in the east area of the city in the Corso XXII Marzo neighbourhood.

One school, Bellatrix, has two lower secondary schools; Bellatrix, Sirius and Spica are of type 3, whereas Mimosa and Vega two fit type 1.

Table 4 Selected schools' characteristics

Name of the school	n. of school complexes	Type of school in terms of enrolment from (outside) the catchment area	% of catchment area enrolments	% of foreign pupils in the school (2013/2014)	Concentration of foreign pupils compared to the city schools' average	Neighbourhood (NIL)	Concentration of foreign population in the NIL	Musical curriculum	School hours
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⁷¹ Although in the same portion of territory there are at least three other schools relatively close.

Type 1	Mimosa	1	Supraterritorial	35.3	17.73	<	Bande Nere	15,57	No	<i>Tempo normale</i>
	Vega	1	Territorial	51.9	7.91	<	Washington	11,04	Yes	<i>Tempo normale e Tempo prolungato</i>
Type 3	Spica	1	Territorial	40.9	29.91	>	XXII Marzo	10,42	Yes	<i>Tempo normale e Tempo prolungato</i>
	Bellatrix	2	Supraterritorial	32.15	20.22	<	Bande Nere	15,57	No	<i>Tempo normale e Tempo prolungato</i>
	Sirius	1	Supraterritorial	28.8	46.59	>	Lorenteggio	14,21	No	<i>Tempo normale</i>

*4 interviewed parents have children enrolled in 3 different schools (1 in Vela, 1 Libra and 1 in Pavo, in the east area of Milan; 2 in Andromeda in the west area)

Nevertheless, they have different percentages of concentrations of foreign pupils, even when they are placed in neighbourhoods with similar concentrations of foreign populations. Considering their curriculum and school hour arrangements, two of them offer only “tempo normale” (30 hours weekly timetable), whereas the rest offer both “tempo normale” and “tempo prolungato” (36 hours weekly timetable); only two schools include in their educational offering a musical curriculum.

3.4 The individual dimension of the research

3.4.1 Studying parents’ narrations of school choice

This study addresses who chooses and what is chosen. Above all, however, it addresses how and why choices were made, in a context in which the role of policies might have been less relevant than parent and school actions at the local level. In this sense, choice, as a bottom-up process, can tell us what policymakers and public debate have not previously discussed after the introduction of freedom of choice in Italy (Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007).

Nevertheless, the “how” and “why” of this choice is not intended as self-evident in parents’ behaviours, but must be explored through parents’ retrospective narrations. These

narrations compose stories, narratives or other ways of organizing experience and memory of human happenings, as Bruner (1991) defines them, through which is possible to understand and give meaning to parents' choices, as locally and contextually constructed. In fact, parents' narratives give access not only to what is plausible to believe has meaning to them and to what they intentionally decided, but also connect their individual experience to their social context. As Bruner stresses, in fact, narratives are "conventional forms transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual's level of mastery" (Bruner 1987:4). So, parents narrating the event of school choice, on the one hand rely on culturally shaped repertoires and already existing plots, on the other hand they talk about their own identity (Olagnero and Cavaletto 2008).

In this sense, the conduction of a qualitative study – using qualitative interviews as a technique – responds to the intrinsic complexity of the process to be explored (Marshall and Rossman 2011:58). Thus, a qualitative approach allowed me to interpret, starting from actors' narrations, parents' approach to the choice and grasp their reflexivity and the system of constraints that has shaped their choices. The use of qualitative techniques was meant to explore and understand how each parent, in different contexts, can address the process of choice in which he/she plays a leading role and that encompasses for example his/her beliefs on education, perception about the relevance of the choice, relations with the school, role inside the educational system, networks, interactions with his/her children, beliefs about multiculturalism, and stereotypes.

In contrast, the use of a quantitative interview would necessarily bind their answers to pre-existing boxes, asking abstract question in a one-size-fits-all form, that would prevent the interview from being contextual and thus drawing specifically on the experience I was interested in exploring. At the same time, a survey would not "do the job" of removing possible biases; in fact, previous research has shown that the use of quantitative techniques in analysing school preferences can lead to socially acceptable responses, in which all parents endorse the "right" academic values of the schools (Saporito and Lareau 1999; Schneider and Buckley 2011).

Moreover, the use of a qualitative approach was also considered appropriate for the topic being a little-known phenomenon. In fact, families' school choices for their children have been studied in Italy, focusing on lower-to-upper secondary school transition, but other specific turning points such as lower secondary school choice, have been overlooked. Although international research has extensively addressed this topic, many differences

among national cases can emerge, and Italian parents' practices need further, deeper investigation.

3.4.2 Unit of analysis: parents in public lower secondary schools

The unit of analysis consists of Italian and foreign parents of boys and girls enrolled in public lower secondary schools in Milan, and of the schools their children attend.

I initially decided to focus on the public-school system because almost all families in Italy opt for a public school (97,1% of 2016/2017 school year applications)⁷². However, a second reason was that if the Italian educational system works, formally, as a socialization and democratization mechanism, ensuring equal opportunities to all, one would expect this goal to be fulfilled in the state sector more than in the private one⁷³.

The decision to consider only the primary school-to-lower secondary school transition (excluding primary or upper school choice, for instance) is based on four sets of reasons. As discussed at length in Chapter II, parents are initially provided with the same options, at the formal level, because lower secondary schools are characterized by a common core curriculum (without any difference between vocational or academic as in the upper secondary schools). Moreover, elementary and lower secondary schools now belong to *Istituti Comprensivi* (comprehensive institutions) that should encourage a smoother transition within the same institution. Second, the degree of dependence of the child upon parents can be smaller than in the primary, allowing, for instance, independent transfers. Thus, the relevance of choosing a catchment area school for family management reasons is decreased. Third, during the last year of lower secondary school, students must address the crucial choice represented by the upper secondary school, a choice that will be decisive for their future⁷⁴. In this transition to the upper secondary school, the lower secondary school is invested with a guidance role – accompanying pupils with guiding activities, exercises,

⁷² Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the percentage of parents choosing a private school is higher in the case of Milan. One out of four Italian parents in Milan enroll his/her child in a private school.

⁷³ Of course, a consequence of including private schools in the picture would have been to address the fact that parents in the private sector are endowed with higher economic capital (they can afford to pay for these schools). Economic resources are otherwise not as relevant in the state sector (because voting with the feet is already uncommon in the Italian scenario).

⁷⁴ Although at this stage young boys and girls are growing up and may have a voice in the choice, their position was not included in the present study. Nevertheless, their point of view – accounted or not in families' decision – will emerge from parents' interview (see Section 5.2.1.)

organizing meetings with upper secondary schools and so on. At this stage, as shown in recent studies on guidance practices and the role of “Consiglio orientativo” (Bonizzoni et al. 2014; Romito 2016) differences may arise not only in teachers’ attitudes towards pupils with different social and migratory background, but also in the school practices that may influence pupils chances to get in contact with specific upper secondary schools in the territory. Finally, research has highlighted how lower secondary schools represent a step in which foundations for future scholastic failures lie, in the Italian educational system (Fondazione Agnelli 2011).

Initially, I intended to include parents of children enrolled only in the first and second year of lower secondary schools. However, as I will discuss in next sections, unforeseen difficulties in the fieldwork emerged, and I interviewed parents of children enrolled in a public lower secondary school (38) or who recently exited from one (5). Moreover, although initially not included in the sampling strategy, an overrepresentation of mothers (40 mothers and 3 fathers were interviewed) was interviewed. This imbalance was caused by 1) mothers’ primary and fathers secondary role in their pupils’ education and schooling decisions, as also seen in international research; 2) selection bias in the sampling strategy because mothers are the more involved parents at the school level (at which the participants first met); and 3) an unwillingness by both to be interviewed as a couple (or separately), due to time constraints and family arrangements⁷⁵.

3.4.3 The sampling strategy: parents

The selection of parents employed the use of a snowballing technique starting from two different *mountains*: the selected schools and a youth centre.

The initial sampling strategy aimed at involving parents in the research starting from the selected school, with the aim of selecting a heterogeneous group of Italian and not Italian parents with different socioeconomic background. Nevertheless, difficulties encountered in schools’ cooperation and in accessing basic information about parents, in advance, affected the original plan. Therefore, the strategy was readapted to the goal of interviewing parents that in terms of occupation and education might occupy a middle status position – therefore a heterogeneous group – and had different degrees of involvement at the school level.

⁷⁵ Both parents often were working, with different schedules; thus, the only chance to find them together was interviewing them at dinner time or on weekends when, of course, they were not available to invest time in activities other than family time. In fact, most of the interviews were conducted on their days (or time) off from work or during lunch breaks but rarely after 6 pm or during the weekend.

To contact parents, I followed two main strategies and tried but failed with other paths. After having achieved in September 2015 schools' agreement to participate, I asked school principals to be allowed to present my research at the parent meeting at the beginning of the school year. Through this strategy, I was able to gather parents' contact information and ask participants to suggest to me other people to involve in the research⁷⁶. Moreover, other parents were contacted through participants' suggestions (13) and the researcher's personal network (4). This first step got me in contact only with mothers and fathers

Because using parent meetings or principals' intermediation means finding the most involved parents – usually endowed with high cultural resources – in December 2015, I started attending a Youth Centre, participating as a volunteer in its activities, to contact more *invisible* parents. I introduced myself to one of the three social workers managing the centre, who was an acquaintance of a colleague, and I presented my work and aims, offering at the same time my help. The centre is close to Sirius, Mimosa and Bellatrix schools and welcomes children and young boys and girls between 10 and 25 years of age, providing help with homework and other activities. Most of the users of the centre have critical situations at home (for example, unemployed parents and inadequate living conditions) and often similarly critical situations at school (from difficulty in doing homework to being at risk of dropping out, not to mention not having schoolbooks or pencils). I participated in a meeting that educators organize periodically to discuss with parents and through the educator's help and cooperation I reached 9 parents.⁷⁷.

Through these different strategies combination, the goal was that of interviewing parents enrolled in the selected schools (see section 3.3.) and the goal was reached with the exception of 4 parents interview in the schools of Libra, Andromeda and Pavo, as illustrated by the following table:

Table 5 Number of interviews in the selected schools

Name of the school	n. of interviews
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⁷⁶ This strategy had different outcomes in different schools since in one school (Bellatrix) I had the chance to introduce myself and my research to parents while in another (Spica) – whose meeting was in the same day and time – I asked the vice principal to talk to parents in classrooms. Moreover, in a third (Vega) the principal only gave me permission to stay in the corridor and reach out to parents passing by. Finally, in Sirius, I got the chance to talk to the principal when parents' meeting had already taken place, thus she was her that wrote to possible interested mothers and introduced me to them.

⁷⁷ Out of 46 parents contacted thanks to the school cooperation and willing to be interviewed 23 were interviewed. Out of 27 parents contacted through other parents (13), youth center (10) and researcher personal network (4), only 20 were interviewed.

Mimosa	6
Vega	5
Spica	8
Bellatrix	7
Sirius	13
<i>Libra, Andromeda, Pavo</i>	4
Total	43

3.5 Fieldwork

3.5.1 Interviewing parents, principals and other key informants

I conducted forty-three semi-structured qualitative interviews with parents (40 mothers and 3 fathers) of children enrolled in a public lower-secondary school (38) or who recently exited from one (5). I also interviewed five school principals, two social workers and a municipality layman.

3.5.2 Parents interview

Parent interviews were conducted by the researcher. The interviews were face-to-face⁷⁸, recorded⁷⁹ and completely transcribed⁸⁰, and lasted on average 60 minutes (from a minimum of 20 minutes to a maximum of 2 hours). Interviews were transcribed entirely, paying attention to their content, while emphasis, speed, tone of voice, timing and pauses where not noted in the transcription. Interviews transcripts were coded using Nvivo 11 software and were thematically analyzed, although attention has been paid also to the connotative use of language, beyond its descriptive one. The interviews excerpts used in this text has been translated to English, but the original text is quoted in the footnotes.

⁷⁸ The first interview of the Municipality layman was conducted on 12 February 2015, whereas principal, social worker and parent interviews were conducted between September 2015 and March 2016. Eighteen interviews were conducted at the participants' houses; three at their workplaces; five at the youth center; two at the school where they were volunteering and finally fifteen in a public place (cafés and restaurants).

⁷⁹ Except for one participant who did not want to be recorded.

⁸⁰ Interviews were transcribed entirely, paying attention to their content, while emphasis, speed, tone of voice, timing and pauses where not noted in the transcription.

The interviews were semi-structured, and I was able to alter the order of questions according to the interviewee's narration pace, her/his availability in terms of time and her/his own order of importance of single events, ensuring coverage of all relevant topics. The parent interviews –see Appendix 2 – explored the following dimensions, among others: children's path in previous institutions, information about the current institution, practical information on the process of choice (online enrolment, number of choices filled in as second and third choices), timing of the choice, criteria of choice, type of information, channels of gathering information, social networks, relationship with the school, and retrospective evaluation of the choice.

The aim of the interview was not only to gather detailed information on how choosing lower secondary school occurs in practice, as this transition has not been reported in the literature, but also to explore, through the parents' own accounts, their criteria of choice, their preferences and expectation towards schools and education, how they construct the idea of "good school" and how, in interaction with schools, they move in this scenario within a specific neighbourhood and social ties. In so doing, the interview also aimed at depicting each parent's confidence with talking and telling about school choice.

Acknowledging the existence of different types of experience within the school system – parents coming from a private experience in elementary school or having known only the catchment area school since kindergarten – the parent interview guide was designed to adapt to different cases. In addition to the presentation of the research and the researcher, it consisted of three parts. The first and the third were identical, on paper, for all of the interviewed parents, whereas the second was constructed to adapt to different situations.

The first part aimed at gathering the interviewee's demographic information (age, family status, and number of children), his/her and his/her partner's education and current occupation, national (or regional) origin and familiarity with the neighbourhood in which they currently live. This introductory part of the interview also aimed at acquiring specific information on numbers of children and their ages⁸¹ and was preparatory to asking specific questions on offspring schooling history. In fact, the first part included questions on the school (e.g. whether it was the catchment area school), child's grade of enrolment, previous choices (e.g. whether the child had attended elementary school in the same *istituto comprensivo*) and similar questions if the interviewee had more than one child. Moreover,

⁸¹ Occasionally, I already had in advance some information about an interviewee's children (e.g., their age), but more frequently, I had no information about the existence of other children and their current enrolment in school.

questions on enrolment practicalities were asked with the aim of understanding how parents managed enrolment (e.g. whether in the online form they put more than one option). The information gathered in this first part was pivotal for the interviewer to know before asking about the choice ... at least whether 1) parents had already faced with an older child the lower secondary school choice, 2) they had chosen a catchment/out of the catchment school, and 3) they had obtained access to their first choice.

The second part was the core of the interview in which the discussion would go more in depth in reconstructing the choice. Two slightly different guidelines were designed for catchment/out of the catchment area parents, but only in the sense of acknowledging a different present situation that signalled 1) that parents might not know about the existence of freedom of choice and 2) that parents already had evaluated at least one option other than the catchment area school. Nevertheless, in both cases, nothing was taken for granted, and the interview aimed at exploring parents' awareness of the existence of the freedom of choice, their knowledge of the functioning of the system and source of knowledge, the number of options they evaluated, and the timing of the choice. To open the door to the reasons for their choices, I asked the following open question: "I would like you to tell me about why you chose this school?" This question was followed by probing questions if the interviewee did not cover all of the dimensions of interest. In fact, this part would cover criteria guiding the selection of the preferred school (closeness/distance, school's staff characteristics, school's population characteristics, and relevance of future upper secondary school choice), concerted decision between parents (even when not currently living together) and reasons for self-exclusion from the private system. Moreover, the second part included a section on information gathering to understand how parents obtain access to the information they have and evaluate on schools. Questions were asked on sources of information, on who inside the family was responsible for this activity of information gathering, and whether and how children were involved in this process. In addition to the questions on the source of information about schools (e.g., open days, internet, or leaflets), interviewees were asked about their social network, in particular who they consulted (if they did so) or from whom they received (or requested) tips, with particular attention to the perceived trustworthiness of this network of information.

The last part aimed at exploring the family-school relationship and parents' participation at the school level, with particular attention to their involvement in school activities and to the role that parents should have inside the institution (and what role they actually have). Finally, because the choice had already occurred, participants were asked to

evaluate their (and their children's) experience and choice in general, to state what was their expectation towards education and to indicate to what extent they were satisfied with the reality. This last part was important to close the interview to summarize parents' views on education and lower secondary schools that emerged (and were expected to emerge) transversally to other topics without being specifically asked for. Closing the interview, I would ask the interviewee whether he/she would like to add anything to our discussion⁸².

3.5.3 Principals and other key informants' interviews

Although parents' accounts are the core of this research and covered, in depth, different ranges of topics within family choice of school, other voices were heard to add details to the picture investigated in this work. Seven semi-structured interviews with principals and other key informants (two educators and a municipality layman) were conducted face-to-face by the researcher, recorded and completely typed out. On average, the interviews lasted 45 minutes⁸³ and were conducted at the participants' workplaces.

3.5.3.1 School principals interview

As anticipated above, interviews of principals were part of the sampling strategy to contact parents but also aimed at having an inside-schools point of view. Principals reacted differently to the presentation of my research project (see Appendix 1). Thus, in one school, I had the chance to interview both the principal and vice-principal, whereas in other schools (Bellatrix for instance), I was unable to interview the principal himself. The general aim of interviewing principals was to start to know the school from its manager's point of view, focusing on issues that could not be accessed through secondary data or schools' websites.

In particular, the interview guide explored some of the school history – according also to the principal's seniority in that institution – and changes the school has been through, with the aim of understanding how the principal presents the school and its reputation. Moreover, the interview guideline, covering similar aspects that could be considered in parents' choices, included questions on school population characteristics (e.g., “*if you would describe to a newcomer like me, what kind of pupils attend this school...what would you*

⁸² Only three participants replied to this question, asking me about my final work (2) and about how many interviews I had to do (1).

⁸³ From a minimum of 16 minutes with one principal I interviewed (but I also interviewed the vice-principal) to a maximum of 60 minutes for educators.

say?") but avoided revealing any specific interest in socioeconomic or ethnic characteristics. Moreover, the interview guideline focused on the family-school relationship, covering in particular parents' level and type of involvement, with more or less participant families. With respect to their contact with parents, more questions were aimed at knowing whether parents contacted the school – independently, through mail, phone calls, asking for an appointment – before enrolling their children, and what type of information they would seek.

A later part of the interview aimed to understand whether schools planned guidance and advising activities for parents and children in their elementary-to-lower secondary school transition, and in which terms (e.g., type of activities, school presentation, and degree of involvement of parents in these situations). In addition to incoming guidance activities, the interview guidelines included some questions referring to outgoing decisions on upper-secondary schools. More broadly, principals were asked not only about the nature of these activities but also about "monitoring" their former students after the choice (e.g., whether they collected data on pupils' final choices and grades in upper secondary schools). The aim was to understand how they would define/present their school in relation to students tracking in a higher level of education. In this phase of the interview, the from-the-catchment area/out-of-the-catchment area issue was introduced, and principals were asked to comment on some secondary data with respect to enrolment (e.g., "*che idea si è fatto di questo dato?*" - "*How would you comment these evidence?*") and to provide their own opinion on why parents might prefer/escape their school. If the school had to face oversubscription, more questions were included on what types of criteria existed to manage this surplus of applications and on why this surplus occurred. The last part of the interview included questions on the school's relationships with schools in the same territory and finally a general evaluation of the school they manage (e.g., "*if you had to describe this school to someone who does not know anything about it, how would you do it?*") in an attempt to understand their own idea of the school's reputation.

Consistent with the principals' seniority in his/her office, questions were asked to understand whether for each element (e.g., school enrolments from/out of the catchment and number of foreign pupils) variation had occurred over time. This question was important because parents' decisions can depend on school characteristics, which can change over time, and because parents might influence those characteristics, thereby driving the change.

3.5.3.2 *Key informants: a sketch of the landscape*

The interview of the municipality lay-man, called here Aristarco, was not planned from the beginning, but because he showed availability to meet face-to-face after I requested further information on catchment areas, I took advantage of the situation and requested permission to record our conversation. Although I had prepared a short guideline, my being in the very first phase of my research activity prevented me from having a clear idea of what I was seeking. In any case, I was aiming at gathering more information about how catchment areas worked in Milan (e.g., who was in charge of designing them, based on what criteria); thus, I also listened to his opinion about parents' choice of lower secondary school in the Municipality.

Concerning interviews with two educators⁸⁴ whom I met during my fieldwork, their everyday activity in supporting and accompanying children and parents, often replacing the latter in the interaction with the school, suggested that they could contribute to the description of parents' framework of action. In fact, since my first meeting with the educator responsible for the youth centre, he acknowledged the relevance, in his work experience, of the lower secondary school choice, because in the neighbourhood, "major and minor league schools" were emerging, with consequences on pupils' performance and permanence in the school system. The interview of educators aimed at considering their privileged observation of neighbourhoods and schools, with respect to what they experienced in working with more-disadvantage pupils and their families. Nevertheless, the interview guideline also included an introductory part on their own career, length of time working in that specific environment and questions on the history and identity of the youth centre, with a focus on what types of difficult situations they addressed. Furthermore, the interview focused on the neighbourhood, the role played by the youth centre in the neighbourhood and their relationship with schools. With attention to these factors, questions were asked concerning the terms on which educators interact with principals and teachers and whether they encounter difficulties. Finally, the choice of lower secondary school in particular was explored, inquiring about the educators' opinions and beliefs on what might occur in the transition and, in the case of exiting the neighbourhood school, and on the role played by catchment areas. If the issue did not emerge from their accounts, some probing was used to ask their opinion about the possibility that Italian parents might avoid schools with a high concentration of foreign pupils. In connection with schools' reputations, they were asked to

⁸⁴ Three educators were working at the youth center.

give a description of schools in the neighbourhood and whether in their everyday work activity they perceive in children's lives any consequence of attending a specific school instead of another, particularly based on further school choices. To have elements to use to understand how the interviewee might construct and define success and failure, in the end he/she was asked to tell two stories – that he/she believed to be a successful and an unsuccessful one – about children attending the youth centre.

3.5.4 School open days

To gather information on schools' self-presentation to the public (parents and children), I attended 9 lower secondary schools' open days, trying to cover both participant schools and their surroundings. As many parents observed in their accounts, many different school open days are on the same day at the same time; thus, in three cases, I could not attend the open day as planned.

For each school, I would go to the school earlier to start observing parents gathering in front of the school and before the beginning of the presentation. Although each open day was slightly different, I would try to walk around as every other parent did, following the activity (e.g., listening to each laboratory presentation or sitting in the main hall and listening to the principal's speech). I would not record anything, but I would take notes, mostly using my smartphone to avoid drawing other parents' attention. Apart from the content of the presentation, I would also focus on the type of activities and the open day content (e.g., only straight presentation or different laboratories), parents' appearance and behaviour and finally on the visibility of not-Italian parents.

3.5.5 Blindspot of the method, limitations and presentation of the self

Although qualitative interviews can provide “depth, nuance, complexity and roundedness in data”, possible blind spots and limits are strictly related to their being tools to *reconstruct* and not excavate knowledge (Mason 2002:Introduction). Therefore, parents were questioned in a specific setting because the interview – a social interaction in itself – reconstructs, retrospectively, their school choice-making process. Their accounts depended heavily on their “capacities to verbalize, interact, conceptualize and remember” (Mason 2002:64) what and how they experienced when approaching the choice of their children's

school. However, the specific focus on school choice allowed me to partially compensate for memory losses and retrospective behaviour reconstruction because – for those parents who profusely thought about it – their children’s schooling decision is not a trivial or an everyday one (in which “everyday” indicates something that occurs regularly) (Friedrichs and Opp 2002). In fact, parents must enrol each child in a school (for the first time), four times (if we also consider pre-school) in their lifetime. Therefore, I assumed that this type of decision was not difficult to recall and reconstruct when discussing it within three or four years⁸⁵.

Moreover, I chose to interview parents in the aftermath of the choice to explore a *posteriori* evaluation of the choice that they had already made. According to the rule of the system, applications must be submitted online between January and February of the previous school year. Therefore, although I had intended to observe the decision occurring, this would imply to interview them from September 2014 to February 2015 – when they were evaluating options – and follow up with them in September 2015 to check whether they were actually enrolling their children in the selected school. This approach would constitute an extremely risky research strategy, considering its feasibility and likely success in a two-year study.

In addition to the recall bias a qualitative interview relies on for example participants’ ability to express themselves, to elaborate on their motivations and reasoning, and to talk when asked to describe freely a specific event in their life. Participants’ differences had several implications for the type of data generated because individuals’ ability to narrate about themselves heavily depends upon their cultural resources. More-educated mothers’ accounts were lengthier, full of details, required less probing and questioning and were very focused on the topic of discussion (at the same time anticipating topics in the interview guide). Conversely, less-educated mothers’ interviews were shorter, focused more on school-related topics and less on school choice and needed frequent intervention by the researcher with questions. This phenomenon also occurred because the interview guide was developed based on a theory of school choice according to which educational decision privileges parents with higher endowment of cultural capital. Many issues related to school choice (e.g., awareness, evaluation of different options, and resources invested in gathering information), although they made a great deal of sense to the majority of mothers, made little sense to few, less educated, parents questioned on them.

⁸⁵ Parents discussed with me a choice that they had made on average 29 months before, with a minimum of one month to a maximum of 48 months before.

The explorative nature of this research and its time constraints related to being a doctoral research, entailed other limitations at different levels. The first two are related to *time* and *space* which are pivotal in educational research (Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster 2000). With regard to the first, it is important to stress that what has been explored with these interviews, not only is subject to change at the individual level, for instance mothers changing their mind with their second and third child, but also transformation at the school level may change. A further follow-up would have contributed to compare these choices in time, above all since they are strongly related to school reputation.

With regard to the second, *space* constitute a possible limitation at two levels. First, schools are not monoliths, hence different classrooms may constitute completely different worlds inside the same school: a further step of the research could have been that of considering also differences among classrooms and parents' and schools' role in enhancing or contrasting within schools' segregation. Second, the setting of Milan, on the one hand was chosen because one would have expected Milan, for the attention paid to integrating difference into the school system, to represent a best-case scenario and promotor of the best practices when it comes to schools and foreign or socially disadvantage pupils. On the other hand, it is undeniable that other cities, similar in extension to Milan, offering a similarly differentiated educational, might differ in characteristics of the population and in neighbourhoods. Similarly, little can be said on smaller centre, such as towns surrounding metropolitan areas or the countryside, for which a different analysis should be conducted.

Finally, as a young white Italian female researcher, I found that my interaction with interviewees was strongly affected by my self-presentation. I introduced myself with a similar formula to all parents – adapting my Italian speech only when I realized that foreign parents did not understand me. Moreover, I always choose to dress as neutral as possible, choosing to be formal but not too elegant or casual. I aimed at feeling comfortable and at ease and be prepared to face different interviewees, who in most cases I did not know much in advance (except for few professionals who received me in their offices).

Nevertheless, parents who were not Italian showed much respect towards my work (in a few cases calling me “doctor”), asked me for help and advice on school-related issues (such as the choice of upper secondary school), and evaluated my opinion as similar to those of teachers and educators. Contrarily, highly educated Italian mothers (in their forties and fifties) addressed me as a young student needing help, as their own children might one day (four mothers explicitly justified their participation with this reason), and as a *cute* and *nice*

girl with whom it was really nice to talk. I also received two job offers from two interviewees employed in different work fields.

3.6 The profile of interviewed parents

As mentioned previously, most of the participants are women (40); only 3 men were interviewed. Until now I have referred intentionally referred to “parents”, as in fact the literature uses this neutral term and my research design itself aimed at including both male and female parents. Nevertheless, because of the characteristics of this group of participants I will refer to “mothers” in Chapter V, VI and VII, including also the three participant fathers, unless differences emerge based on parents’ gender.

Participants are, on average, 47 years old (min. 40, max. 62); 29 of them are married, 3 are partnered, 10 are divorced, and 1 is a widow. Most of the mothers and fathers are of Italian origin (36), and 23 of the 36 come from Milan (whereas 8 of 36 come from other parts of Italy). Only 7 have a migratory background (1 is in a mixed couple) and a relatively old migration history; they have been living in Italy (from Colombia, Egypt, Moldavia, Peru, Ecuador and Palestine) for 17 years, on average (min. 7 years, max. 31 years). This situation was expectable because having a child (or more) at the lower secondary level means a stabilized migration through the formation of a family or a recent episode of family reunification (in both cases, at least one parent having been in Italy for a long time is needed).

When examining number of children per participant, 20 mothers and fathers have 2 children, 14 have three children or more⁸⁶, and 9 participants have an only child. Because the main focus of the interview is the choice of lower secondary school, the presence of younger or older siblings was relevant both in the reconstruction of the choice and in influencing the choice itself. In 26 cases, the discussion about the choice involved, in different ways, past experiences with older brothers or future evaluation for younger children. In 6 cases, parents had more than one child currently enrolled in the same lower secondary school.

Moreover, it is possible to distinguish between *first-time chooser* and *second-time chooser*. The former number 25 and include mothers and father of an only child (9) and children with only younger siblings (10), plus (6) those who have two or three children in lower secondary

⁸⁶ In fact, only one mother has more than 3 children.

school. The latter number 16 and are parents with children older than the one enrolled in lower secondary school.

Considering the characteristics of the enrolled school, most of the group have one or more children enrolled in a school that is located outside the catchment area (25), whereas the rest are attending the catchment area school (18). I had the chance to include a small group of parents (6) who failed in entering their children in the preferred/selected school because they saw their application rejected both from the first and second options. Therefore, their children are now enrolled in a third different institution.

Including in parent profiles their level of participation at school⁸⁷, the group is diversified; 21 of the 43 parents are active, 17 never were active, and 5 participated in the past (at primary school or with other older children) but no longer do so.

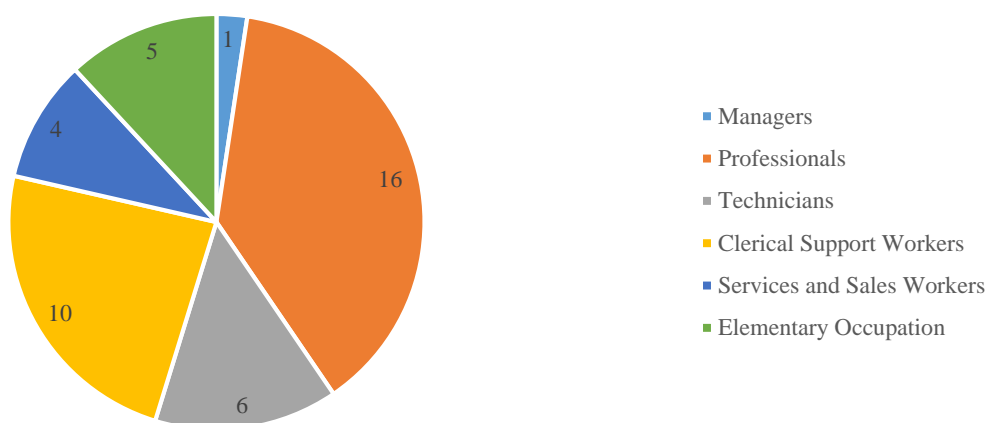
3.6.1.1 *Parents' social class*

The nature of the sampling strategy – and the difficulties encountered in accessing the field (see Appendix 1) – made the selection of parents on the basis of their socioeconomic and cultural characteristics difficult. Nevertheless, since information about their occupation and education were collected, it is possible to understand at least their belonging to the broad categories of upper, middle and working classes. Moreover, since the group is heterogeneous with respect to occupation and education, some distinctions will be made on the basis of the same class sub-profiles.

With respect to participants' occupational status, 37 mothers and fathers are currently employed, whereas 1 is unemployed, 1 is on a redundancy scheme, and 4 are not working. Of those who are employed, 20 are full-time employees, 3 are part-time employees, 11 are self-employed, 2 have no regular contract, and 1 is temporary worker (*contratto a progetto*). In the case of working mothers, their husband or partner, if present, has an occupation similar to their own; therefore, I derived their social class status from their mothers' occupation, while for five three unemployed or not-working mothers, I considered their husband/partner's occupation (see Graph 4).

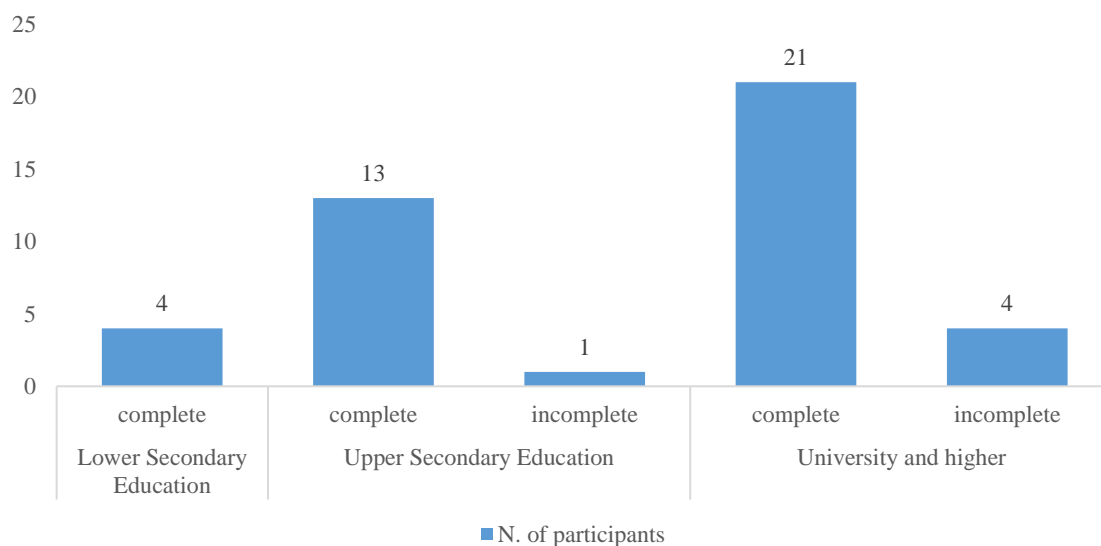
⁸⁷ I considered school involvement to be volunteering at school, having a representative role at the classroom or school level (*consiglio di istituto*), or being part of a parent association.

Graph 4 Employed parents' occupation and unemployed parents partners' occupation

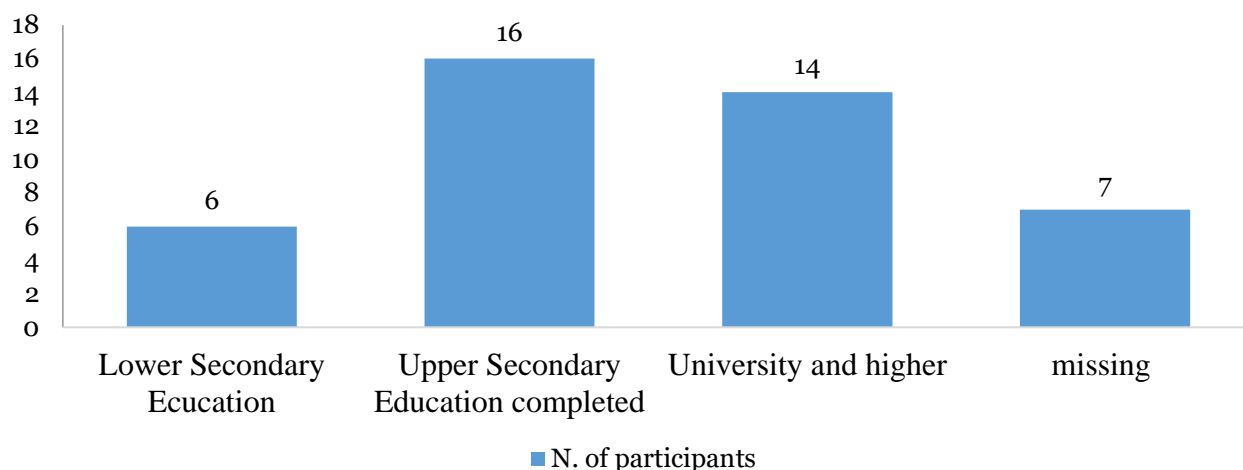


Examining participants' education (see Graph 5), 21 of 43 have a degree (or higher), although 4 went further after upper secondary education but never completed the degree; 13 mothers hold an upper secondary diploma, whereas 5 of them hold only a lower secondary title (*licenza media*), with one drop out after continuing in the upper secondary school.

Graph 5 Participant parents' level of education



Graph 6 (Former) Partners' level of education



In the group of participants there is a small group of seven parents – five not Italians and two Italians – that can be classified as working-class parents. In fact, five who works are employed in elementary occupations or service occupations, while the two unemployed are partnered, both, with caregivers. With respect to their education, Fatima, Jorge and Malala acquired degree and a secondary school diploma in their homecountries (Perù and Moldavia), but the rest of the group holds a lower secondary school diploma (two of which acquired abroad).

The rest of participants can be defined as middle-class parents, although heterogeneity emerges among them. A part of them are professionals (or housewives married to a professional as two mothers): they are 16 and they all hold a tertiary degree⁸⁸. While another portion is mainly made of employed office workers (11, counting an employee in a public library and sales responsible) and self-employed with small business or freelance activities (6). To this group it should be added the case of a mother who lost her office work job, while also her husband lost his. She is now working as baby-sitter and her husband ad a taxi-driver.

⁸⁸ With the exception of one manager with an upper secondary school diploma and a translator with a diploma which is now equalized to a degree.

Having delineated all the steps taken in this research work, from the research design to the participants group characteristics, the next part is dedicated to the presentation of the main findings.

Chapter IV in particular is devoted to a description of the characteristics of school choice at the lower secondary level in Milan, focusing on the functioning of catchment areas. Starting from Municipal data and more institutionalized definition of catchment areas, it will explore parents' representations of how the choice works in practice.

Chapter IV – “I would say it’s well known!”. Attributes of school catchment areas: how the system works in practice

4.1 Introduction

In Milan, 85.967⁸⁹ pupils are enrolled in primary and lower secondary schools; 78% of them attend a public school, whereas the remaining are enrolled in a private one. Examining the resident population, according to the 2012/2013 school year Municipality data, of the 91.488 children and children between 6 and 13 years of age living in Milan, 90% attend a school in the city, of whom 70% choose a public primary school and 72% a public lower secondary school. As we anticipated in Chapter III, the distribution of pupils in schools can depend upon different factors. However, it ultimately depends upon the enrolment decision of the family when submitting the online application. This new procedure was introduced in 2012 (by the Law 135/2012) and has been in effect since the 2013/2014 school year. It requires parents to complete an online application to enrol their children in the first grade of each educational level. In January/February 2013, as reported by the Ministry of Education, families submitted on average of 70% of applications, whereas the rest were taken in charge by schools⁹⁰. In fact, although parents can follow the procedure autonomously, they can also ask schools to support them or to proceed with the enrolment on their behalf.

Beyond the right to study established and granted by the Italian constitution and the regulations on enrolment practice, the functioning of the system of allocation of pupils to schools is not managed at the central, regional or local level but rather occurs in a grey area in which parents’ choices and school autonomy meet (or collide). On the one hand, parents can list three hierarchically ordered options on their online application, but they are not compelled to add a second or third option. On the other hand, in the event of the school being oversubscribed, the absence of a second or third option causes the application to be automatically redirected by the school administrative offices to the catchment area school.

⁸⁹ Report on enrolments in 2015/2016 school year. MIUR 2016.

⁹⁰ In Lombardy, this percentage is higher (approximately 80% for the 2013/2014 school year).

The same result can also occur if the second and third options are not able (or do not want)⁹¹ to accept more enrolments from outside the catchment area.

In a scenario of freedom of choice in which parents in fact are no longer limited by catchment areas, how they experience school choice can be understood by examining different pieces of the puzzle, how catchment areas are designed at the local level, and what is their aim and functioning, to which this chapter is devoted. Moreover, it contains an examination of what the data tell us about schools' enrolment in the city and in our participant group and how parents are situated in this map of catchment areas (in or out of their catchment area school). Finally, it explores parents' experience of catchment areas and freedom of choice and how they might be emerging differently in terms of perception and degrees of awareness; not only can catchment areas be permeable borders or thick ones depending upon institutional limits but also freedom of choice might emerge as a taken-for-granted practice assimilated with school choice.

4.2 Catchment area system: orienting parent choice or vice versa?

The Italian expression “*bacino d'utenza*” links metaphorically the word basin (as a river basin) to refer to a (territorial) area in which all users (*utenza*) of a specific service (either public or private) are located⁹². Thus, the expression is more similar to the English “catchment area”, the area served by a school or another service, than to the French word “*carte scolaire*”, which refers to a map that assigns pupils to schools, being specifically associated with the school system. Nevertheless, the use of these expressions, more in the Anglo-Saxon and French world than in Italy, bring a broader discussion on school and territory. Despite the simple definition of the word, Italian schools' catchment areas and their functioning are not so easily understandable in their use and ratio when examining law, documents or ministerial reports, but they can be explored by examining Municipality decisions and schools and parents' practices.

⁹¹ Whether to admit extra-catchment area pupils after the enrolment deadline is each school's discretionary decision. In fact, each school can decide not to accept these applications. If its classrooms are already formed and human resources are adequate, the school can suggest that the family enroll in the catchment area school.

⁹²As expressed in the seventh Treccani Dictionary of the Italian language online, “7. b. d'utenza, per indicare l'area territoriale che raccoglie gli utenti di un servizio offerto da enti pubblici o privati, da imprese concessionarie, ecc.: il b. d'utenza di una scuola, di un ospedale, di una rete radiofonica”.

In discovering catchment area characteristics, I was guided by a Municipality layman, Aristarco (see 3.5.2.2) that is working in the office responsible for the provision of educational services. He introduced me to the system and explained how it works.

The Municipality of Milan, in cooperation with the representatives of the government in the territory (Consigli di Zona⁹³), designs and redesigns borders and extensions of the catchment areas of each primary and lower secondary school in the city. At the urban level, catchment areas are designed based on the census tract, which is a smaller-scale of analysis of the city and is the basis of neighbourhood divisions (NIL, see Chapter III). Although catchment areas and neighbourhoods are constructed using the same *bricks*, they do not overlap completely because the former primarily depend upon the distribution of schools and population in the latter, which can change over time. This relationship is also why catchment areas have different extensions, based on the school capacity and number of resident pupils, and they might be in some cases smaller (or larger) than necessary for the 6- to 13-year-old population that they *could* receive. Moreover, catchment areas vary at different level of education: for instance, primary schools' areas are smaller than are those of lower secondary schools, and because each school has its own catchment area, lower secondary schools' catchment areas are larger, because they still must cover the same territory (see attachments B). Moreover, primary and lower secondary schools belonging to the same Comprehensive Institute (IC), occasionally even sharing the same building, have catchment areas that do not overlap completely.

Although catchment areas should ease the allocation of pupils to different schools such that everyone in the city can enrol in a school, they are not compulsory for parents; to the contrary, they have a guiding aim that also responds to the Municipality's requirement that schools can receive all students that are in the city.

Basically, there are two leverages in this context, let's say in the public system, through which the local authority, in some way, manage school provision to the benefit of the city. On the one hand there is the "*dimensionamento*" (school resizing), that is how each school is gathered with other schools in autonomic institution. On the other hand, there are school catchment areas or areas of competence⁹⁴. (Aristarco)

⁹³ Italian law prescribes that, for all of the Municipalities with more than 100.000 inhabitants, the territory must be divided in decentralized zones with local agencies that, beyond managing basic services for the city, can be consulted by the central authority and must participate in the governance of the territory.

⁹⁴ In quest'ambito, diciamo, sulla scuola statale, noi abbiamo sostanzialmente queste due leve, con cui l'ente locale, in qualche modo, orienta a beneficio della città, l'erogazione di questo servizio. Sono il

Moreover, with this aim, it is pivotal that catchment areas can readapt to demographic changes and mobility within the city:

For example, in some central areas, or in more stabilized neighborhoods, even in large areas of public housing, but with a generally stable population, with low residential mobility, the population ages and ... youngsters exit the neighborhood and start a family elsewhere. Therefore, that place loses students (...). Now, in some of these cases there is the opposite trend because those houses are being occupied by family groups with different demographic characteristics, hence with different demographic trends.⁹⁵ (Aristarco)

To supervise catchment area responsiveness and effectiveness, the municipality can use two figures: the actual school building capacity and the number of resident pupils in the neighbourhoods. Although the first one might be considered “fixed”, it can also vary according to schools’ autonomy, which allows them to manage space differently.

It's not always the case (*that data about school capacity do not change*) not only for the simplest reason that buildings may have only some fully usable sections, but also because of a more complicated one that depends on teaching activities. That is, if teachers privilege frontal lessons, there will be a maximized use of space, on the contrary if workshops constitute most of activities, the concept of capacity won't be strictly linked to the building perimeter.⁹⁶ (Aristarco)

dimensionamento, da una parte, cioè il modo in cui stanno insieme le singole autonomie, e dell'altra i bacini scolastici o territori di competenza. (Aristarco)

⁹⁵ Per esempio in alcune zone centrali, o in alcune zone dove c'erano quartieri consolidati, anche grandi quartieri di edilizia popolare, però con una popolazione tendenzialmente stabile, quindi con una scarsa mobilità di alloggio, ovviamente la popolazione invecchia e... i giovani escono, vanno a far famiglia altrove, e quindi quel luogo perde studenti (...). Adesso in alcuni di questi casi si sta invertendo il *trend* perché tornano ad essere occupate quelle case da gruppi familiari di classe demografica diversa e quindi anche con *trend* demografici diversi. (Aristarco)

⁹⁶ A volte non è così (*il dato della capacità non è fisso ndr*), non solo per una prima lettura banalissima per cui alcuni edifici possono avere, alcune parti compiutamente usabili, ma anche per una questione un po' più sofisticata, che dipende dalla didattica che si fa. Cioè se una didattica privilegia per esempio le lezioni frontali, è evidente che viene massimizzato l'uso dello spazio. Se all'opposto si tratta di una didattica con uso laboratoriale molto spinto, anche il concetto di capacità non è strettamente legato alla definizione del perimetro murario. (Aristarco)

When monitoring these two elements, it is necessary to intervene and, when needed, change the configuration of catchment areas. That is why, according to the population of pupils of a certain age in the territory and the displacement of schools, catchment areas can change over time. In the case of Milan, they were completely redesigned in 2007 and more recently re-adjusted in response to the needs emerging from the territory, the schools and eventually families.

In fact, decisions on catchment areas and their changes appear to be the results of a negotiation process that involves the Municipality and main actors in the territory, with a first step (top-down) being the Municipality proposing a change and discussing it with schools and Consigli di Zona. In the second step (bottom-up), schools and Consigli di zona can communicate with the Municipality and stress problems or issues to be addressed. The overall process is presented as increasingly participative (comparing with different approaches in recent decades) and open, although it can generate conflict.

The fact that the choice is reinforced and validated through a real confrontation with the actors is an advantage. A bit disadvantageous is the synthesis of particularisms, which is not always easy ... and sometimes you risk following those who are more effective in representing the issue(...) or how they perceive it, compared to what is the objective dimension of the problem. But I must say that this transition went quite well, it worked, well...we also spoke in a Consigli di Zona. This was also the procedure for the downsizing, there was an internal decision-making process, and an external one in a fired-up assembly in the Consiglio di Zona. We almost got hit.⁹⁷ (Aristarco)

Although intervention on a catchment area is the result of a Municipality proposal, shared and agreed with Consigli di Zona and principals, parents' decisions do not play a secondary role. In fact, the Municipality can and does observe parents' *flows*, checking pupils' schools and residences to track in-and-out of the catchment area enrolments;

⁹⁷ Diciamo i vantaggi che sono, naturalmente, di un irrobustimento della scelta che viene validata da un confronto reale con gli attori. Qualche svantaggio che, come dire, la sintesi dei particolarismi, non è sempre agevole...e qualche volta si rischia di inseguire chi con più efficacia riesce a rappresentare (...) come lo percepisce, rispetto a quella che sia una dimensione oggettiva del problema. Però devo dire che questa transizione è andata abbastanza bene, funziona, insomma...siamo anche andati a parlare in un consiglio di zona. Ma questo anche per il ridimensionamento, stessa cosa...ha corrisposto una prima parte molto interna, e un'altra anche con un'assemblea infuocata nei consigli di zona...abbiamo rischiato di prendere qualche colpo. (Aristarco)

most importantly, these factors appear to influence Municipality decisions to modify catchment areas in one way or another.

When a family enrolls in a school it means that all the things that I have told you now (*some criteria behind parents' choice*), have already been evaluated by families. Then they pull a line and says "I'll go there". So, when they express their choices, knowing and intercepting this flow is very important. Translated: if we have to change a catchment area, in addition to our physical-geographic coherence assessment with respect to the city, we rely heavily on flows of enrolled parents. Let's say we have a catchment area, but we know enrollments actually come from this other area, then if we have to change the catchment area it is useless to change it here ... we will change it on this side, or from here, trying in some way to intercept that portion of the city that has already expressed a preference towards this school.⁹⁸ (Aristarco)

Therefore, parents' decisions not only are provided by law but are also considered sensible choices useful to follow to adapt catchment areas to families and not the reverse.

We believe that, as we have been saying here, families, somehow, autonomously and usually in a fairly responsible and thoughtful way have already done the math, so to say. It's useless ... it seemed useless, to follow abstract considerations when families' behavior is different. It's a bit like if you pour a glass of water on the floor, you see where the slope is. This doesn't mean that you always lie in that direction, but that this direction is one of our first and strongest orientation categories. Then, of course, other considerations rise and are and must be considered by the administration, such as the use of space. But families' behavior is one of our first indicators to understand.⁹⁹ (Aristarco)

⁹⁸ Quando una famiglia va in quella scuola lì, vuol dire che tutte le cose che noi ci diciamo e che io adesso le ho detto (*alcuni criteri di scelta ndr*), in realtà la famiglia le ha già considerate, poi alla fine tira una riga e dice io vado lì. Allora, quando viene espressa quella cosa, conoscere e intercettare questo flusso è molto importante. Tradotto: se noi dobbiamo modificare un bacino, oltre a una nostra valutazione come dire di coerenza fisico-geografica rispetto alla città, ci basiamo molto sui flussi degli iscritti. Noi abbiamo, non so, questo bacino, però sappiamo che gli iscritti vengono in realtà da quest'altra area e allora se noi dobbiamo modificare il bacino, è inutile che andiamo a modificarlo di qua... andremo a modificarlo da questa parte, o da questa parte, cercando in qualche modo di intercettare quel pezzo di città che già esprime una indicazione verso questa scuola. (Aristarco)

⁹⁹ Noi riteniamo, quello che ci siam detti, che in qualche modo le famiglie, in maniera autonoma e solitamente in maniera abbastanza responsabile e ponderata abbiano già fatto come dire delle somme. È inutile... ci è parso inutile, sovrapporre astratte considerazioni quando poi il comportamento è un altro. È un po' come quando versi un bicchiere d'acqua sul pavimento, vedi dov'è la pendenza, questo non vuol dire che ci si sdrai sempre in quella direzione, ma quello è uno delle nostre prime e più forti, categorie di orientamento. Poi possono

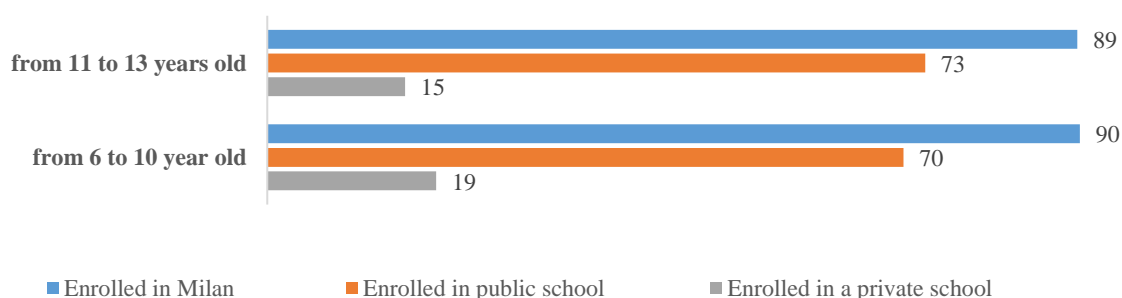
He admits later that, in his personal opinion, a school in which the majority of residents attends the catchment area “works better” than schools in which only 20% live in the catchment area. Nevertheless, parents’ aggregated choices and their movement, as the water moving on a table, can make a real difference in affecting local educational policies. Moreover, parental choices are considered something practised, or at least known, by all parents in the city such that intercepting their flows and eventually adapting catchment areas means responding to and recognizing a common practice.

4.2.1 Flows in and out of the catchment areas: participants’ effective enrolment decisions

If parents’ decisions, in combination with other elements, could affect catchment areas, it is also because in the case of Milan, with freedom of choice by law, parents *de facto* opt out from their catchment areas schools. The data collected by the Municipality clearly show that, considering pupils enrolled in Milan in a public school (Graph 1) in the 2013/2014 school year, it is not uncommon for parents to choose a different school from the one assigned by the catchment area (Graph 2). This statement is true at both the primary (38,77%) and lower secondary school levels (46,03%), but such a choice is slightly more common in the latter.

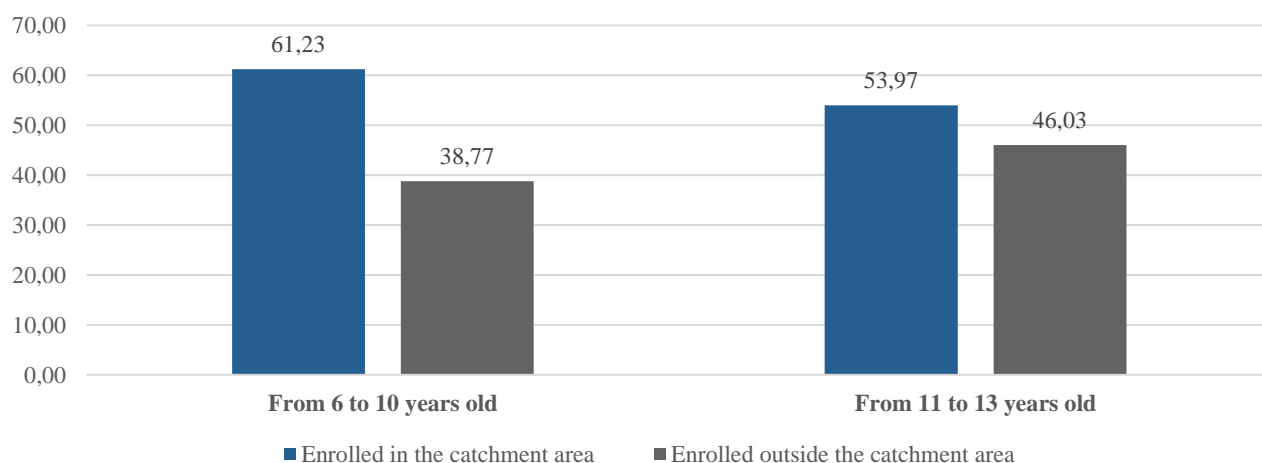
subentrare altre considerazioni, sull’uso degli spazi che l’amministrazione fa e deve fare, ma i comportamenti delle famiglie sono uno dei nostri primi indicatori per capire. (Aristarco)

Graph 1 Resident children enrolment, 2013/2014 school year



Source: ANASCO (Anagrafe Scolastica – Comune di Milano, Direzione Centrale Educazione e Istruzione)

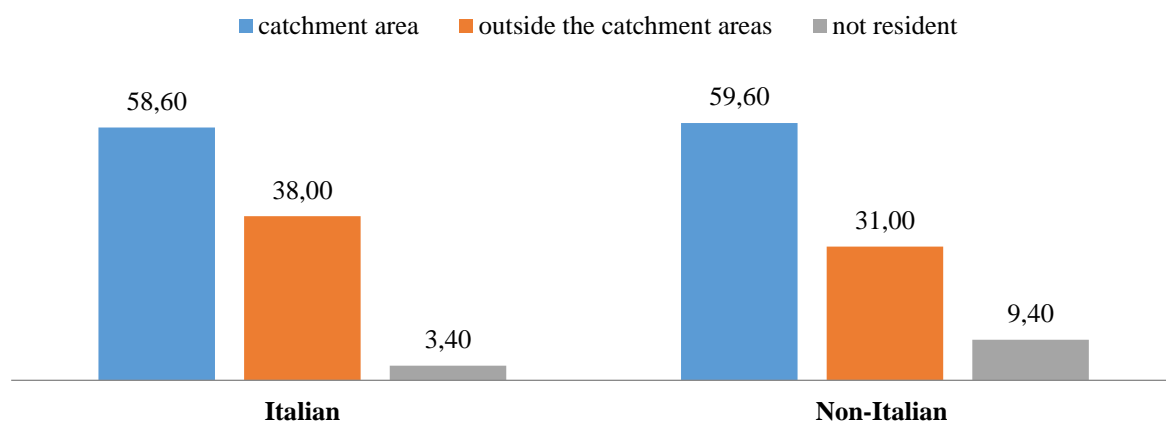
Graph 2 Resident children enrolments in the public system by catchment area, 2013/2014 school year



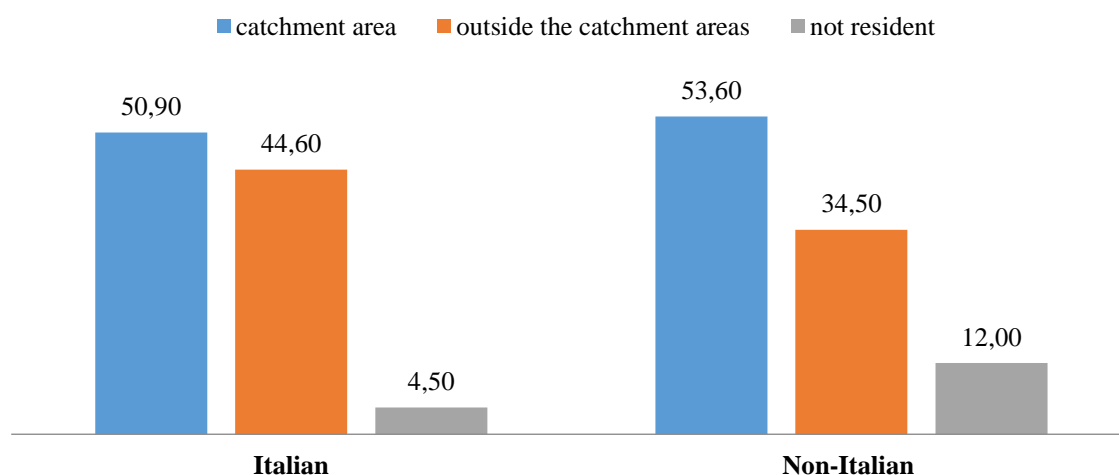
Source: ANASCO (Anagrafe Scolastica – Comune di Milano, Direzione Centrale Educazione e Istruzione)

For the 2012/2013 school year, we can also observe the difference between enrolments with respect to the citizenship of pupils (see graphs 3 and 4); primary schools receive almost the same number of applications from their catchment areas from Italian and foreign pupils (58,60% and 59,60%). In contrast, in the lower secondary schools, foreign families' choices appear to be less oriented to choosing a school outside their catchment area than are Italian families (34,5% vs. 44,60%).

Graph 3 Percentage of pupils enrolled in Primary schools, by citizenship and catchment area, 2012/2013 school year



Graph 4 Percentage of pupils enrolled in Lower secondary schools, by citizenship and catchment area, 2012/2013 school year



Source: Report “Bacini di utenza. Scuole Statali del Primo ciclo di istruzione.2013”, Direzione Centrale Educazione e Istruzione del Comune di Milano, Anagrafe Scolastica e Sistema Informativo Territoriale.

As long as we consider choice a decision between “staying vs opting out” from the catchment area school, what these data tell us is that – for reasons that must be explored – parents do exercise the so-called freedom of choice. Using the same criterion to categorize the behaviours of mothers involved in the research, we find similar patterns of parent mobility throughout their children’s primary level of education in and out of the formal borders of catchment areas (see Table 1).

In fact, more than one-half have a child or children enrolled in a school that is outside their catchment area (25), whereas the remainder (18) have opted for or unwillingly been assigned to the catchment area school. Examining their behaviour in choosing a primary school, we see that most parents choose a catchment area primary school (13 and 14) for their children.

However, more diverse situations emerge in the case of those who entered the public system after primary school (4) and in the two cases in which the catchment area lower secondary school was preferred after an experience in another primary school. Moreover, eleven parents opted for the out-of-the-catchment-area school at the beginning of the primary level.

Table 1 Enrolment decisions of participant parents

Lower secondary school		Primary school	
Catchment area	18	Catchment area	13
		Out of the catchment area (public)	2
		Out of the catchment area (private)	3
Out of the catchment area	25	Catchment area	14
		Out of the catchment area (public)	11
		Out of the catchment area (private)	1

It is possible to detect not only a synchronic diversity in choices – different situations at the same time – but also a diachronic one, considering the same family through time. In fact, 22¹⁰⁰ parents also have one (or more) older son or daughter for whom they previously had to face the same choice. Interestingly, 11 of them chose different schools for their children; 6 of them changed from out-of-the-catchment area to the catchment area one, and 5 did the opposite.

The presence of diversity of choices is reflected within different schools involved in the research and flows that will be observed, described and explored, occurring primarily within the same neighbourhood or adjacent ones. In fact, the majority of “out-of-the-catchment” cases are parents who exited the assigned school to enrol in another relatively close school (22); only four of them commute from areas that are further from the chosen school.

Table 2 Enrolment decisions of participant parents by lower secondary school

Vega	Mimosa	Bellatrix	Sirius	Spica	Others
------	--------	-----------	--------	-------	--------

¹⁰⁰ As we explained in Chapter III, 16 have one or more older children enrolled in upper secondary school, whereas 7 have more than one child enrolled in lower secondary school.

Catchment area	3	0	2	8	4	1
Out of the catchment area	2*	6	5**	4*	4	4

*one parent living at > 3 km from the school; ** 2 parents living at > 3 km from the school

If these behaviours tell us that parents – or at least some of them – are practising school choice, much is left unsaid on how they experience the process of choice and to what extent they navigate this system and are placed in a position to be able to choose.

In fact, on the one hand, the reasons and arguments behind the choice, if they exist, must be explored. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that all parents had the same knowledge about the possibility of choosing. Moreover, because their role becomes central in influencing local policies and we are entering unexplored territory, two elements cannot be taken for granted and are explored below: what catchment areas are and how they work according to parents' imagination and experience.

4.3 Loose borders or closed gates: parents' representations of catchment area

Starting from the term “catchment area”, all parents – with the three exceptions presented in section 4.3.1.1 – were familiar with this phrase, which I used explicitly in the interviews when questioning them about some practical aspect concerning enrolment. Whether I asked directly whether the school was the catchment area one or I was anticipated by mothers' accounts, almost all of them used the expression in their answers and elaboration without questioning it or showing the need to ask for more information or clarify its meaning. Carla, for example, resumes her second child path without a specific solicitation on catchment areas, although she uses a slightly different term that later in the interview she exchanges with “catchment area”.

He attended the elementary school that is next to the secondary school, in Sirius Comprehensive Institute. It wasn't really our catchment area school...we went out

of the catchment area, also for the kindergarten. He didn't attend nursery school.¹⁰¹(Carla, Italian, Sirius, OfC [Out-of-the-catchment-area school])¹⁰²

Despite exceptions, out of 43 parents none expressed explicit surprise when asked about school choice or appeared to be confused when discussing their children's schools. If this behaviour does not imply that parents' awareness of freedom of choice is uniform and experienced to the same degree by all, it certainly means that *on paper*, everyone appeared to be aware of the existence of some system that regulates enrolments. Because they discuss decisions a posteriori, they also tell something about where they applied in elementary school, where they are now and where they were supposed to be. In describing their children's school history, they used coordinates that refer to the public/private system (if appropriate) and the in/out of the catchment area one.

4.3.1 A piecework: parents' ideas of catchment area

Nevertheless, what catchment areas are and how they work, which appeared to be taken for granted at first glance, became more blurred when mothers continued to discuss their process of choice. Moreover, catchment areas appear to be recognized as something existing but invisible until they begin limiting access to schools. Catchment areas appear to be rather weak and vague in some accounts and not infrequently this term overlaps or substitutes for the idea of the nearest or local school. Mothers use term such as "scuola di zona" and "servizi di zona" to convey the idea of the closest school, more than the existence of an ideal territory that gives them a certain right to access a certain school or that binds them to a specific duty to enrol in another one.

They went to Bellatrix nursery school, then to [Name] kindergarten¹⁰³. She stayed in [Name] during all the kindergarten period, while Luca attended only one year

¹⁰¹ Ha frequentato le elementari a fianco della scuola media, quindi l'istituto comprensivo Sirius, in realtà non era la nostra scuola di riferimento...siamo andati fuori bacino, come siamo andati fuori bacino per la scuola materna. Il nido lui non l'ha fatto. (Carla, Italian, Sirius, OfC [Out-of-the-catchment-area school])

¹⁰² Hencefort each interview excerpt contains the interviewee's name, his or her nationality. Moreover it make reference to the school's name and if it is the catchment area (CS) or the out-of-the-catchment area school (OfC).

¹⁰³ A municipal nursery school.

there, because in the meanwhile she started the elementary school in Sirius_elementary1, and I transferred him there too, for our comfort, because the schools are crossing the street to each other. Then he attended the elementary school there, and the lower secondary school in Sirius. Anyway, we have used all the services here in the area...we didn't move (*she laughs*)¹⁰⁴. (Malala, not Italian, Sirius, CS).

Yes, I've considered other options (*besides the catchment area school*). I mean, I even went to see a couple of local schools open days. [...] I have always been...even with my first two children, first of all I always have wanted to try the local school¹⁰⁵. (Sarah, Italian, Spica, CS)

The idea that the closest school, the neighbourhood school is the catchment area school, can also be a source of surprise, when catchment areas are perceived as artefacts and might be in contradiction with mothers' first impression – as in the case of Silvia – and with the idea of belonging to a certain neighbourhood, as in Tom's case.

No, I actually should be in Bellatrix lower secondary school... because ... there is a strange division, I live on this side of the road (*a big road*), therefore, being in this area, even if the school is right here behind the garden, I should attend Bellatrix secondary school and not Sirius¹⁰⁶. (Ada, Italian, Sirius, CS)

So, the elementary school wasn't my catchment area one, because I lived...I always lived here in the area, but across the street, I moved last year. The catchment area school there was another one, but let's say that this is the neighborhood school. There is a catchment area that cuts the neighborhood in two. So, officially, the

¹⁰⁴ Loro hanno fatto...l'asilo nido in Bellatrix_kindergarten, poi hanno fatto [Name] la scuola materna, lei ha fatto tutta materna in [Name] Luca ha fatto mi sa solo un anno perché poi lei ha iniziato le elementari in Sirius_elementary1, per cui ho trasferito anche lui per comodità perché sono di fronte. Poi anche lui ha fatto le elementari là, le medie in Sirius. Noi comunque abbiamo usufruito di tutti i servizi della zona...non ci siamo spostati (*ride*). (Malala, not Italian, Sirius, CS).

¹⁰⁵ Sì, avevo considerato (*altre opzioni oltre alla scuola di bacino ndr*). Nel senso che ero andata a vedere anche un open day di un'altra scuola di zona. [...] Sono sempre stata, anche per i primi figli, ho sempre voluto provare la scuola di zona (Sarah, Italian, Spica, CS).

¹⁰⁶ *Questa scuola qui è la scuola del vostro bacino d'utenza?*

No...io in realtà dovrei essere come media in Bellatrix...perché...è divisa, sono strane le divisioni, praticamente io essendo su questo marciapiede (*di una grande strada ndr*), essendo in questa zona, anche se la scuola è proprio qua dietro al giardino, io dovrei essere in Bellatrix e non in Sirius. (Ada, Italian, Sirius, CS)

elementary school wasn't the catchment area one, but in fact it was the neighborhood school¹⁰⁷. (Tom, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

Both cases highlight that the choice of staying in the catchment area or going out of it can depend upon what parents believe is the "real" catchment area school. In fact, when mothers have not experienced catchment areas as constraining their choice, what they are and how they work can be misunderstood. For example, Rita, an Italian physician, based her knowledge of catchment areas on "everybody's" behaviour; when replying to my question, she requested the help of her 13-year-old daughter Clara, present at the time of the interview.

Was Sirius_elementary2 your catchment area school?

Yes

And Mimosa?

No

Which school should be your catchment area one?

Sirius ... and Bellatrix... from what I understood, I don't know now, I cannot exactly say. Usually everybody in this area goes to Bellatrix, I mean those who live in this area... they go to Bellatrix or Sirius ... right Clara?

[Clara]: Sirius is the closest because it's that... Sirius_elementary1 and Sirius have the same principal.

I see, so, it could be that Sirius is actually the catchment area school!¹⁰⁸ (Rita Italian, Mimosa, OfC). 110

However, a similar confusion on the existence of more than one catchment area school recurs in other stories of mothers who opted for an out-of-the catchment area institute. Emily, a lone working-class mother of 3, describing her elementary school choice, holds at the same

¹⁰⁷ Allora, (*le elementari ndr*) non erano quelle del mio bacino perché io abitavo, ho cambiato casa l'anno scorso, abitavo sempre qui in zona però al di là della strada ed era un'altra scuola, però diciamo che è la scuola di quartiere. C'è un discorso di bacino che taglia in due il quartiere. Per cui a livello...ufficiale...non erano di bacino, però di fatto erano le scuole del quartiere. (Tom, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

¹⁰⁸ *Sirius_elementary2 era la vostra scuola di bacino?* // Sì // *E Mimosa?* // No // *Quale sarebbe la vostra scuola media di bacino?* // Sirius...e Bellatrix da quello che ho capito io, non so adesso, non ti so dire con precisione. Tutti di solito, di solito vanno o alla Bellatrix, quelli della zona dico, o alla Bellatrix o alla Sirius...giusto Clara? // [Clara]: Sirius è quella più vicina perché è quella... hanno la stessa preside, sia la Sirius_elementary1 sia Sirius. // Ah vedi...quindi...potrebbe essere che Sirius di fatto sia quella di bacino! (Rita Italian, Mimosa, OfC).

time an extra-large idea of catchment area and the perception that it is too tight because in 10 minutes you are already out of it.

Then I started to visit the schools around here, anyway, there were Sirius_elementary1 and Sirius_elementary2... the same thing.

What do you mean?

Well, there are two or three schools in the catchment area. I exit the catchment area, even if it's ten minutes away.

But would Sirius_elementary3 have been your catchment area school?

No, Sirius elementary1, elementary 2 and elementary 3¹⁰⁹. (Emily, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

Finally, another element related to the existence of comprehensive institutes might contribute to this subjective representation of catchment areas in mothers' accounts. In fact, attendance of a given elementary school grants to the child a similar right to access the lower secondary school of the same catchment area, although on paper it is not his/her catchment area school.

Is this your catchment area school?

No! Yes and no. That is, the provenience from the elementary school is among the admission criteria, therefore we are in the catchment area for having attended the elementary school. But we weren't in the catchment area of the elementary school. So we are out of the elementary school area...but since we enrolled at that time...got it?¹¹⁰ (Angela, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

¹⁰⁹ Allora ho iniziato a vedere le scuole in giro, comunque c'era Sirius_elementary1, stessa cosa, Sirius_elementary2, stessa cosa... // *In che senso stessa cosa?* // Allora, sono 2/3 scuole del bacino d'utenza. Io sono andata fuori bacino d'utenza eh, anche se è a dieci minuti. // *Però la tua del bacino sarebbe stata Sirius_elementary3?* // No, Sirius elementary1, elementary 2 e elementary 3 (Emily, Italian, Mimosa, OfC).

¹¹⁰ *La scuola è del vostro bacino d'utenza?*

No! Ni, nel senso...siccome come criterio (*di ammissione ndr*) c'è la scuola elementare e noi siamo nel bacino d'utenza per aver frequentato la scuola elementare, ma non eravamo in bacino d'utenza della scuola elementare. Quindi siamo fuori zona per la scuola elementare, ma essendo entrati all'epoca...capito? (Angela, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC).

In other words, choosing an out-of-the-catchment area school since elementary school could change the perception of what is a catchment or out-of-the-catchment area lower secondary school. This situation might also double the perceived number of options available at the end of elementary school. This result occurred in the case of Cristina; she chose a catchment area school that she initially did not consider her *natural* choice.

So...the lower secondary school then would have been either Libra, [Name_lower secondary school], Spica or [Name_lower secondary school2]

And the catchment area one?

The catchment area school, Spica. Spica. But we hadn't looked at it that much ... because since she attended [Name_primary school2], she also had [Name_lower secondary school2] as an option. It seemed almost natural, the transition from the elementary school should have been natural, the same as in theory one should go from Spica_elementary to Spica_lower secondary¹¹¹. (Cristina, Italian, Spica, CS)

4.3.1.1 *Talking about school choice: the case of Mercedes, Violeta and Jorge*

Exceptions were represented by three parents about whom it is worth providing some details: Mercedes, Violeta and Jorge, some of the few not Italian parents in the group. They emerge, even before addressing the *why* of the choice, as “*disconnected*” parents. I borrow here Gerwitz et al.’s (1995) expression, focusing specifically on these parents being unskilled since their first engagement with school choice. Although other parents, as we shall see, have similar characteristics, Violeta, Mercedes and Jorge’s peculiarity is that from the first approach to the topic, both direct and open questions (such “tell me about where your son is enrolled and where did he attend primary and lower secondary school” or “was this school the catchment area school?”) revealed them as lacking understanding. In fact, although they do not share the same story, they have a common migratory background, and they appear immediately as lacking knowledge on school choice, which is why they rely on someone else.

¹¹¹ Allora...la scuola media a quel punto, doveva...sarebbe stata o la Libra [Name_lower secondary school] o la Spica o [Name_lower secondary school2] // *E di bacino?* // Di bacino la Spica. La Spica. Ma non avevamo guardato tanto quello...perché lei, avendo fatto [Name_primary school2], di bacino aveva anche la [Name_lower secondary school2]. E sembrava quasi naturale, il passaggio doveva essere naturale, dalle elementari...esattamente come Spica_elementary teoricamente il passaggio naturale dovrebbe essere la Spica_lower secondary. (Cristina, Italian, Spica, CS)

For instance, Mercedes, a Peruvian mother – a former baby sitter who is currently not working to take better care of their two daughters – told me about the choice of the elementary school when her first daughter arrived in Italy after family reunification in 2013. She did not fully understand my question because she did not know the meaning of the phrase catchment area and she had a limited knowledge of what occurred in practice because her husband most likely took care of the procedure.

Is this your catchment area school?

What?

Do you know what catchment areas are?

No...

There's a territory around each school.

Ok.

People who live in that territory, have the right to enroll in and access to this school, as a the first option

Ok.

In your case?

Hem ... my husband was the one doing everything, I don't know. But, what I do know is that my daughter had to go to another school.

Tell me about it.

Yes... or no, was it for Bellatrix_elementary? I don't remember well¹¹².

(Mercedes, not-Italian, Sirius, CS [Catchment area school]).

I encountered a similar difficulty in discussing some practical aspects of school choice with Violeta. She is a 44-year-old Ecuadorian mother of five. She holds a lower secondary education and was recently dismissed from her previous job as a maid because of her last pregnancy. She arrived in Italy in 2002, and two of her children attend Sirius_elementary3, whereas her 12-year-old son Josè is enrolled in Pavo lower secondary school, far away from home, in the Northeast of Milan. In fact, because he went through a difficult year in Sirius_lower secondary school, in which he was a victim of bullying, he asked to be moved back to where he attended elementary school. Although Violeta is involved in Josè's life,

¹¹² *Questa qui è la scuola del vostro bacino d'utenza? // Come? // Sai cosa sono i bacini d'utenza? //No... Ogni scuola attorno a sé ha un territorio // Ok // Le persone che vivono su quel territorio, hanno diritto ad iscriversi in quella scuola come prima scuola // Ok // In questo caso? // Ah...eh...ehm...el che ha fatto questo è mio marito...io non lo so. Però lo que yo so è che mi figlia doveva andare in altra escuela. // Eh dimmi dimmi //Si no esbaglio era per Bellatrix_elementary? Non me ricordo bene. // (Mercedes, not-Italian, Sirius, CS [Catchment area school]).*

particularly through (and with the help of) the youth centre in which I met her, her relationship with the school appears to be based, from the beginning, on information that the same school provided, without further exploration.

When you enrolled in the school, both in elementary and lower secondary school, did you go directly to the school or did you ...?

(interrupting) I went personally, I went personally to do it.

Did you put other options besides Sirius?

(silence)

Did they tell you if you could express more than one preference?

No, no they just told me... directly to apply because it was the closest one, got it¹¹³?

(Violeta, not Italian, Bellatrix, OfC).

Similarly to Violeta and Mercedes having difficulty in relating what they did with specific institutionalized moments in the school life (catchment areas and options), Jorge had a rough idea of the existence of other options besides her daughter's lower secondary school. However, he found it difficult to connect all pieces of a system he only started to be socialized in a few years ago. He is a 62-year-old Peruvian who has live in Milan since 2003, he holds a degree in mathematics, but he now works as a healthcare assistant. Although he is more involved in their 16-year-old daughter's education than is his wife, he still has difficulties with understanding how the system works and is unsure, for instance, of how many grades are in the Italian primary level of education.

Well, then she started elementary school

Yes she did, yes...

And did she attend Sirius?

Yes, she stayed in Sirius until ... (he doesn't remember the different elementary grades) fifth grade?

Yes, fifth grade

The fifth or the sixth?

The fifth ... And then did she attend the lower secondary school?

¹¹³ *Quando hai fatto l'iscrizione alla scuola, sia alle elementari che alle medie, sei andata a scuola o hai fatto...? // (interrompe) Sono andata personalmente, sono andata personalmente a farla. // Hai messo altre opzioni oltre a Sirius? // (silenzio) // Ti hanno detto se potevi mettere più di una scelta?*

No, no... solamente mi han detto... solo direttamente escrivirla, porque è quella più vicina, capito? *(Violeta, not Italian, Bellatrix, OfC).*

Yes, at Sirius too. Yes, she attended lower secondary school at Sirius. I also heard that there were other nice places as lower secondary schools¹¹⁴. (Jorge, not Italian, Sirius, CS)

4.3.2 “Are they going to accept her?” Institutional constraints on choice

As the two last excerpts anticipate, catchment areas begin to become tangible barriers when mothers consider or encounter them as possible obstacles in accessing the preferred school. If there is a chance that the school will not be able to accept an out-of-the-catchment area application, catchment areas that were perceived as loose borders rapidly become almost unbreakable barriers.

In this case, the perception is not only a matter of parents’ perceptions but also related to the actual management of enrolments and applications of autonomic schools. In fact, freedom to choose whatever school parents think is the best for them, has one large limit¹¹⁵. If schools have received a number of applications that exceeds their building capacity, they must apply, to select among them, previously approved admission criteria. In the group of schools involved in the research, three, Vega, Bellatrix and Mimosa, face now or had faced in the past this problem of a surplus of enrolments.

Regardless of whether the school must address in practice a situation of oversubscription, it must approve in advance the list of criteria that, according to the Ministry of Education, should also be published on the website and on the online application form. What should be the nature of these criteria is left to the school autonomy, despite the national level suggestion, as in the excerpt below, that criteria should be reasonable – for instance related to the closeness to the residence and parents’ workplace – and should not involve entry tests or random selection.

“In this regard and respecting the autonomy of the scholastic institutions, it is recalled that the admission criteria, deliberated by the School Councils, must rely

¹¹⁴ *E quindi lei ha poi iniziato a fare le elementari // Sìsì // E le ha fatte in Sirius? // Sì, ha fatto in Sirius fino al... (non ricorda quanti anni sono di elementari ndr)...quinto? // Sì, quinta elementare // La quinta o la sesta? // La quinta...E poi ha fatto le scuole medie? // Anche alla Sirius. Sì la scuola media l’ha fatta anche alla Sirius. Anche si ho sentito dire che c’erano altri posti belli per la media. (Jorge, not Italian, Sirius, CS)*

¹¹⁵ Another exception exists with respect to a smaller group of pupils, recently arrived foreign pupils¹¹⁵, i.e., pupils who enrol for the first time in the Italian school system, if they arrive after February. In this case, because the school has already received all applications, each recently arrived pupil should attend his/her catchment area school.

on good sense principles such as, the closeness of student's residence to the school or parents' particular work arrangements. It should be noted that priority cannot be given on the basis chronological order of the applications. Neither the criterion which gives priority to the kinship relationship between a child and the school staff can be considered reasonable. It is also recommended to avoid entry tests as admission criteria. From this point of view, the possible use of random selection must be used as an extreme ratio."¹¹⁶(Ministerial Communication No. 10 dated 15/11/2016).

Because schools are not compelled to follow these, indeed, vague guidelines, each institute approves a different order of criteria, as shown by the diversity of practices of schools in the sample. For instance, examining Bellatrix and Mimosa's decisions – criteria that can be found through their websites – we discover that Mimosa does not even consider “residence in the catchment area” as the first criterion – as Bellatrix does – but rather prefers the child (or his siblings) attend the elementary school belonging to the same comprehensive institute (see Table 3). Both schools include a reference, with a different order of priority, to schools in the surrounding area, parents' workplace and other caregivers, but Mimosa also approved two criteria explicitly advised against by the Ministry: being a child of a school employee and random selection.

Table 3 Criteria of precedence in the event of oversubscription (source: Mimosa and Bellatrix websites)

Mimosa	Bellatrix
Students enrolled in our comprehensive institute and pupils with siblings attending our comprehensive institute	Students belonging to the two catchment areas of Bellatrix school complex 1 and 2 respectively, or pupils with at least one parent/guardian residing in the aforementioned catchment areas (the list

¹¹⁶ “Si rammenta in proposito che, nel rispetto dell'autonomia delle istituzioni scolastiche, i criteri di precedenza deliberati dai singoli Consigli di istituto debbono rispondere a principi di ragionevolezza quali, a puro titolo di esempio, quello della viciniorietà della residenza dell'alunno alla scuola o quello costituito da particolari impegni lavorativi dei genitori. Si evidenzia che non può essere data priorità alle domande di iscrizione in ragione della data di invio delle stesse. Si reputa non rispondente a ragionevolezza il criterio di precedenza consistente nel rapporto di parentela tra minore da iscrivere e personale della scuola presso la quale si fa richiesta di iscrizione. Si ritiene inoltre sia da evitare il criterio di precedenza consistente nel ricorso a eventuali test di valutazione quale metodo di selezione delle domande di iscrizione. In quest'ottica, l'eventuale adozione del criterio dell'estrazione a sorte rappresenta l'estrema ratio.” (Circolare Ministeriale n. 10 del 15/11/2016).

	of the catchment area streets can be found in the school website)
Residents in the catchment area	Students coming from Bellatrix_primary school (with a school complex expressed preference)
Students with siblings who have attended our comprehensive institute in the previous 3 years (calculated as school years from the pupil's departure from school)	Students living outside the catchment area with siblings attending the first or second grade in Bellatrix secondary schools (the application must indicate the name, surname, grade and <i>sezione</i> attended, under penalty of exclusion,)
Children of the school staff	Out of the catchment area pupils coming from the elementary schools close to Bellatrix Institute according to the list below (LIST OF SCHOOLS)
Students coming from the following primary schools, in order of priority: (LIST OF SCHOOLS)	Students residing out of the catchment area, whose grandparents live in the catchment areas (the name, surname and address must be indicated in the application, under penalty of exclusion)
Pupils of which at least one parent works in the catchment area	Students who live out of the catchment area with at least one parent working in the catchment area (the name of the institution / company / employer and address must be indicated in the application, under penalty of exclusion)
Draw (made publicly following official communication on the school website)	---

For Vega, Sirius and Spica, which did not publish their criteria online, some information was provided at “parents’ question-time,” which occurs after the presentation of the school, during open days. Despite the less specific level of detail, field notes of these three different open days show again the high degree of autonomy with which schools approve criteria contrasting with central guidelines.

The existence of a real possibility that the school must use these criteria, as in the case of Vega, increases parents’ interest in learning more. In fact, during Vega’s presentation at the school open day, mothers’ preoccupation on this issue emerged repeatedly when question time arrived.

With the last speech of the catholic religion teacher, the Principal leaves the floor to parents' questions, asking a child to bring the handheld microphone to whoever asks to speak. After one question on the musical curriculum, the second mother to intervene is interested in knowing what criteria are adopted to select applications and how many pupils were admitted last year. The Principal admits, "This is a delicate issue" because the first criterion is to give priority to those who attend the same Comprehensive institution and who come from the catchment area. Because he cannot open new classes and he does not like overcrowded classes with more than 23 students, other criteria are used concerning who comes from out of the catchment area: siblings attending the same school, coming from another close school, and parents who work in the catchment area. Although admitting that he does not remember all the criteria by heart, he also stresses that although catchment areas have been abolished, they still represent a landmark for schools. In fact, three other questions return to the same topic. One father asks whether priority in access might be granted if the online application is sent the day on which enrolments open based on a first-come, first-served logic; the answer is no. Two mothers ask again about criteria, forcing the principal to repeat them with patience and to add that they usually are able to apply only the first three criteria before reaching the maximum number of enrolments (Vega's open day, 01/12/2015).

Less emphasis on this issue emerged during Spica and Sirius open days; nevertheless, a general interest in understanding how the school manages out-of-the-catchment area enrolments was expressed by parents.

In the case of Spica's open day, after sixteen questions, one mother asks "Cosa succede se non è la scuola di competenza?", and she is followed up by another mother seeking further clarification. The principal explains that parents must fill in a questionnaire in the enrolment application online that contains several information items about them. In the event of having to select applications, "catchment area pupils are advantaged and have priority," and each pupil will gain a certain number of points based on some criteria. He does not explain which criteria, but he adds that in a situation of equal positions, the school will use a public drawing of lots.

In the case of the Sirius school, the presentation followed a two-hour tour of the building, and most of the parents had already left. Nevertheless, questions were raised; the first addressed admission criteria:

I recognize the mother who is speaking as one of the parents in the small group I followed when visiting the school. I had seen her as very demanding during the 'tour,' and she kept on showing this attitude. She asks what are the criteria needed to be accepted in the school. The principal smiles and answers that the only criterion is to apply. The mother replies immediately, but doubting: "But what about

catchment areas?” The principal firmly says, “The division in catchment areas does not exist anymore. It only takes to apply, we take everybody!” (Sirius’ open day, 18/11/2015).

During all of the open days I attended (see Chapter III, section 3.5.3), at least one (or more) question was asked about out-of-the-catchment area enrolment, with the aim of having information about acceptance criteria. These questions suggest that for parents who are thinking of or planning to consider an extra-catchment school, the possibility of being stopped by an oversubscription is a major concern. In fact, several schools in the territory receive more applications than they can accept, although there is no systematic collection of data on this trend.

Although most parents in the group experienced a smooth enrolment, the chance that they might be rejected constitutes a source of anxiety for those aware that the preferred but out of the catchment area school might be oversubscribed. In this situation, catchment areas become something more real than a vague idea of a limit that can be bypassed or even ignored. Moreover, this problem appears to be a new one, of a type that parents have not addressed in their past experience with other children or in their own educational path.

Is this school your catchment area school?

No, well, I mean ... the first school should be the [Name_lower secondary school], it is the one that must accept your application, if don’t want to make too much effort. *The school where he is enrolled* it is not in our area, so I would be out of the catchment area, I think. They accepted me, but if they would have received more applications they wouldn't have accepted me, as it happened in [Name_lower secondary school2]¹¹⁷. (Natalia, Italian, Vela OfC).

(she’s talking about the stress of choosing the upper secondary school)

Look, it has already been stressful even with the lower secondary school, but for different reasons

Why?

¹¹⁷ *Ed è la scuola del vostro bacino d’utenza? // No...allora, nel senso...la prima scuola sarebbe la [Name_lower secondary school], quella che se tu non vuoi fare sbattimenti, lì te lo devono prendere. Non è nella nostra zona (la scuola in cui è iscritto ndr), quindi io...Io sarei fuori bacino per quella, credo, cioè mi hanno presa, ma se c’erano più domande non mi avrebbero presa, com’è andata con la [Name_lower secondary school2] (Natalia, Italian, Vela OfC).*

I'll tell you ... why stressful? Because you are not sure if the school that you want it's the school where your daughter will be accepted, at least here, nowadays¹¹⁸.
(Mary, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

The awareness of the existence of this limit might play a role in advance, guiding parents to exclude from their pool of choices schools at which they believe they have no chance to be accepted. This awareness also implies not only knowledge of the existence of multiple options further in the territory but also a certain planned evaluation of risks and possibilities. However, this evaluation is more often based on the mothers' intuition, as in the case of Anna as she tells me about her a priori exclusion of one potential school when explaining to me her daughter's experience in a private primary school.

Is the school in [Address] the same school that is now together with Vega?

Yes. So, that one was great, wonderful etc. etc. The issue was that I was not from the catchment areas, so when they said that I should go to the catchment area school, that one had a high number of application, everybody from the catchment area goes there, because it is an excellent school. [...] Therefore in my opinion I wouldn't have been accepted as coming from outside (the catchment area). So I left all hope behind, they couldn't accept the catchment area applications, so for my daughter from outside the catchment area was impossible!¹¹⁹ (Anna, Italian, Bellatrix, CS)

If these parents' concerns were overcome with the acceptance of their first choice, more bitter accounts came from the six parents who were actually *rejected* by the first option school or, as some of them say, were "bounced off".

Among these parents, four of them had applied to Mimosa school coming from Sirius, one aimed at Bellatrix_2 and was redirected to Bellatrix_1, and another one tried to access

¹¹⁸ (*parla dello stress della scelta della scuola superiore ndr*) Già è stata stressante anche alle medie, ma per motivi diversi guarda... // *Come mai?* // Ti dirò...stressante perché? Perché non è certo che la scuola che tu vuoi, almeno in questi anni, da noi...è la scuola dove tua figlia verrà accettata (Mary, clerk, Italian, Mimosa, OfC).

¹¹⁹ *La scuola di [Indirizzo] è quella che adesso è insieme a Vega?* // Sì...sì..sì. Allora, quella lì era ottima, fantastica etc. etc. Il discorso è che io non ero di utenza, quindi quando...a quel punto han detto che tu dovevi andare nella scuola di utenza, lì hanno una richiesta altissima...cioè tutti quelli dell'utenza ci vanno, perché è ottima. [...] Quindi io come fuori (*bacino*) non sarei, secondo me, mai entrata. Quindi ho lasciato ogni speranza, quindi non è...mandano via quelli della zona, tu figurati se prendono mia figlia da fuori! (Anna, Italian, Bellatrix, CS)

another school in the east part of Milan. All six of these parents saw their applications refused and had different final destination schools because their children were resident out of the catchment area and did not comply with other criteria. Despite six parents experiencing the same tangible limitation of their freedom of choice, a great variability in situations emerged once again due to different schools' responses and parents' behaviour.

As seen in Table 4, all parents who were opting out from their catchment area school anticipated enrolling in another institute, and two of them, after being rejected, returned to the catchment area school. Although Natalia was accepted by her second-choice school, this was not the case for Tom or Emmeline, who were not accepted by their third option, or for Jane, whose son finally enrolled in the Bellatrix other school.

Table 4 Rejected parents' catchment area school, expressed preferences, final destination school

	Catchment area school	1st choice	2nd choice	3rd choice	Lower secondary school attended
Natalia	School_1	School_5	Vela	<i>none</i>	Vela
Jane	School_9	Bellatrix_2	School_9	<i>none</i>	Bellatrix_1
Marie	Sirius	Mimosa	Sirius	Bellatrix_2	Sirius
Tom	Sirius	Mimosa	Bellatrix_2	<i>none</i>	Andromeda
Emmeline	Sirius	Mimosa	Bellatrix_2	<i>none</i>	Andromeda
Claudia	Sirius	Mimosa	Bellatrix_2	<i>none</i>	Sirius

The picture is more complex than a simple description of starting and finishing points, and it would require a broader reflection on mothers' activation to obtain what they want. Thus, it is beneficial to disentangle here the institutional procedures that lie behind these experiences.

After the closing of online enrolment, schools evaluate whether the number of applications received fits with their building capacity and number of pupils per classroom. If they receive

an excess of submissions, they proceed to communicate the denial of application to parents, with a message sent to the email address used in the online application. This process usually occurs a few weeks after the enrolment deadline in February.

What occurred after this first step depends upon several elements; first, if no other options have been filled, the application is redirected to the catchment area school.

If second and third options exist and are not the catchment area one, the application is redirected to the second and, if the problem persists, to the third. This situation describes Natalia and Marie's experience and to a certain extent Jane's also; Jane was accepted at the other school of the institute, Bellatrix_1, although she expressed a preference for Bellatrix_2. There is also the possibility of asking to be included in the school waiting list. Although that option might not result in success, it might be used to take time, as in Tom and Emmeline's case.

Because they are also family friends, they went through this process together and addressed the situation similarly but differently from the other parents. In fact, their second option was also oversubscribed, and a third one was absent, so their application was redirected to their catchment area school. To avoid it, they moved strategically, as described by Tom in the following excerpt, and were able to enrol their children in a fourth school, which is the one they are currently attending.

Then, in the end, we should have gone to Sirius automatically, having been rebounded by the second choice, because Bellatrix_2 was full. But, together with another family, with whom we are fairly close, we applied in Vega, another school where we were sure not to be accepted. But we stayed parked there, knowing that we were going to be bounced off, in order to go to Andromeda that still hadn't taken us. That was all, we had such days!

How did you know what to do in that case?

We didn't. But we knew that if they would put us in Sirius, they would certainly take us. After that we would have to ask for a permission to leave. It's not impossible, but to take time, to avoid producing more documents and so on, we applied to the other school. So, we did a little investigation on the local remaining schools, right? To see which had room and which didn't¹²⁰. (Tom, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

¹²⁰ Alla fine, allora, rimbalzati dalla seconda scelta, perché Bellatrix_2 era piena...saremmo andati in Sirius d'ufficio, ma noi e un'altra famiglia con i quali siamo abbastanza uniti, ci siamo fatti mettere d'ufficio alla Vega, che è un'altra scuola ancora...dove eravamo sicuri di non entrare, ma per essere parcheggiati lì, sapendo che lì ci avrebbero rimbalzati, in modo da poter andare in Andromeda dove ancora non avevano dato l'ok per prenderci. È stato tutto...devo dire dei giorni. // *Come sapevate cosa fare in quel caso?* //

Not only did they deploy all of their social network contacts to obtain information about schools in the little time available but they also obtained full cooperation from the school, which in fact helped them in this process. In fact, Vega's school staff cooperation was essential – "the secretary was an angel" says Tom – because the administrative offices accepted their late enrolment, knowing that it was necessary to avoid the catchment area school. Finally, their strategy succeeded because the fourth school, Andromeda, was available to welcome them; it had sufficient places and was willing to accept the application after the official deadline.

4.4 "It's not something you get to know like this": learning about freedom of choice

The discussion thus far depicts a scenario in which parents from all backgrounds show some knowledge of the system, but they also have different experiences with respect to how they perceive catchment areas and eventually bypass them. If we assume that freedom of choice is formally granted to everyone, but we also observe that not everyone exercises it to the same extent, after the starting line, parents might run different races.

To understand whether these assumptions are correct, one relevant aspect to explore is the source (or sources) of information from which parents recall they learned about the existence of freedom of choice. I insist on the term recall because parents retrace their path back in time and because the first information about the school system is occasionally grasped at the beginning of pre-school or elementary school. That could also explain why some mothers were not able to remember exactly how they knew they could enrol their child in a different school. However, when my question was perceived as odd, it was usually because the possibility of out-of-the-catchment enrolment was taken for granted.

And how did you know that you could choose a different school from the catchment area one?

Non lo sapevamo...però sapevamo che, se ci avessero messo in Sirius, c'avrebbero presi sicuramente, dopodiché avremmo dovuto chiedere un nulla osta...che vabbè non è che è una cosa impossibile però, per prendere tempo, per non dover fare documenti in più...ci siamo fatti mettere in...allora abbiamo fatto una piccola inchiesta sulle scuole di zona che avanzavano, no? Chi aveva posto e chi non aveva posto (Tom, Italian, Andromeda, OfC).

(*pause*) There is the possibility to apply...right? Hem, it is not certain that the application will be accepted, because of course they must give priority to the catchment area users right?¹²¹ (Leonilde, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

These responses, despite being a minority, anticipated the absence of a standardized channel to provide parents with information on freedom of choice, a channel that in fact emerged as informal and fragmented from other parents' accounts. How parents became (and are) aware of the possibility of submitting different options in addition to the catchment area school can be identified as two main approaches: an active seeking of information and a learning from second-hand sources and word of mouth.

The first one largely involved mothers who already had in mind that they wanted to choose a different school. Thus, they actively sought information, as in the case of Claudia who, despite her initial hesitation, quickly recalls what she did initially and stresses that one must always obtain information to see how things work. Whereas Claudia relied on more-formal channels, such as the Municipality, Joan preferred to request information about a school's oversubscription from other mothers inside the institute.

How did you know that you could choose a different school from the catchment area one?

Hem

For example, someone told me "oh well, but there is a catchment area school! Parents do not choose!"

Oh, no it isn't like this anymore! No, no, well, I think ... I'd say it's a well-known thing! But...I found out when I had to enroll to elementary school, because in elementary school I asked myself, well, at the kindergarten I asked myself, how does it work? No ... sorry ... even before, it was in nursery school, because they attended it. When I went to the city council and said I wanted to enroll my children to the nursery school, they explained to me how it worked, and every year it worked differently. So, there, I realized that every year there is a different logic behind. Because, one year it was aerial distance, two years later it was the pedometer. It changed. So, I realized that there was some sick logic and that day by day you have to get to know how it works¹²². (Claudia, Italian, Sirius CS)

¹²¹ *E come facevate a sapere di poter scegliere una scuola diversa da quella del bacino?* // (*pausa*)...C'è la possibilità di far domanda...no? Ehm... non è detto che poi la domanda venga accolta, perché chiaramente devono dare la precedenza agli utenti della...appartenenti al bacino...no? (Leonilde, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

¹²² *Come sapevate che potevate scegliere una scuola diversa da quella di afferenza?* // Eeehm // *Per esempio qualcuno mi ha detto "vabbè ma tanto c'è la scuola di bacino" i genitori non scelgono!* // Eh non più! No, no! Allora...boh...secondo me...ti direi che è una cosa risaputa! Però...no, l'ho scoperto quando dovevo fare l'iscrizione alle elementari, perché alle elementari mi sono chiesta cioè alla materna mi

When you decided to move from here, did you know you could change school?

Yes ... I asked to other moms who were already in the school to ask if there was room in the classes, because sometimes, if the classes are already overbooked, they no longer accept your application. In this school instead there were fifteen, sixteen pupils per class. Now there are twenty-eight, twenty-nine¹²³. (Joan, Italian, Sirius, CS)

These two channels were often complementary; in fact, if one was the starting point, the other followed or emerged as contributing to build the knowledge. Moreover, schools played a central role as first interlocutor for those wondering how to behave. For instance, Cristina received a formal communication from her catchment area school that stimulated her activation to contact the out-of-the-catchment area school they could be interested in attending.

Regarding the possibility of choosing, for example, how did you know you could, in the first case, in elementary school, go out of the catchment area instead of going in, and then change again ...?

Simply by asking. By asking for information and so on. Because I remember that we received a letter for Bianca precisely from Spica, saying that my daughter would be well-received there, this and that, so in that moment I was certain that this was her catchment area school. In fact, I went to talk with the principal and vice-principal of another school, they told me that she was right at the limit/boarder, it wasn't like she was coming from the other side of the city. Anyway, I believe that these things are known, because there are many parents living in one area but working in another. Thus, many choose to bring their children closer to work, especially when it comes to elementary and lower secondary school. And so, I think they know that actually there is this possibility¹²⁴. (Cristina, Italian, Spica, CS)

sono chiesta, come funziona? No...scusa...prima ancora in realtà, perché al nido, loro han fatto il nido, e quando io sono andata al Comune, a dire vorrei iscrivere i miei figli al nido, ti spiegano come funziona, e ogni anno funzionava diverso. E quindi lì, ho capito che ogni anno c'è una logica diversa. Perché un anno era la distanza aerea, e due anni dopo era il contapassi. È molto diverso. E quindi ho capito che c'erano delle logiche malate e che man mano ti devi informare a come gira. (Claudia, Italian, Sirius CS)

¹²³ *E quando avete deciso di spostarvi da qua, sapevate di potervi spostare...di non essere vincolati a quella scuola?* // Sì...avevo chiesto ad altre mamme che erano già inserite nella scuola per cortesia di informarsi, se potevano informarsi se c'era posto nelle classi, perché a volte le classi sono già in overbooking non ti prendono più. Invece qui erano quindici, sedici per classe per dire. (Joan, Italian, Sirius, CS)

¹²⁴ *Riguardo alla possibilità di scegliere per esempio, come facevate a sapere che potevate, per esempio nel primo caso, alle elementari, andare in là invece che nel bacino, e poi cambiare ancora...?* // Semplicemente

As observed in Cristina's case and in other parent's stories, schools not only are consulted for information but also appear to play an active role; some parents in fact received a sort of semi-standardized communication from schools, beginning at the pre-primary level, that informed them of their options. In the era of offline enrolment, it could be a letter sent to a family about to choose the first grade of elementary school or information provided by schools through parents' representatives.

When you had to enroll your child in lower secondary school, how did you know you could choose a school out of your catchment area?

Because the school sent the information, there are also those who come from lower secondary school to elementary school to let the children know. Even in the fifth grade, they visit the school, for example Sirius, and stay for an hour, and they go around the school. That is why my daughter knew Sirius elementary_1, she knew Sirius elementary_2 because they went there¹²⁵. (Fatma, not Italian, Sirius, CS)

Nevertheless, not only is this activity not systematized at the national or local level and occasionally at the school level, but schools also intervene in this picture in unorthodox ways, as reported by several parents in different schools, through the individual initiatives of elementary school teachers who might suggest that parents change to a comprehensive institute. For those who instead learned about freedom of choice only informally, the information was largely a reinforcement of a sort of pre-existing knowledge based on other parents' choices in the neighbourhood. Above all, this result occurred for mothers who did

chiedendo. Chiedendo informazioni, e via. Perché mi ricordo che arrivò a dicembre una lettera per Bianca che diceva, appunto quelli della Spica, diceva sua figlia è benaccolta qui, una cosa e l'altra, quindi lì avevo assodato che quello sarebbe stato il suo bacino. In realtà, appunto, sono andata a parlare con la preside e la vicepresidente dell'altra scuola, loro m'han detto no...guardi signora, lei è proprio al limite, non è che lei mi viene da una zona completamente opposta. Però io credo che queste cose si sappiano perché ci sono molti genitori che abitano magari in una zona ma lavorano niun'altra. E molti scelgono soprattutto quando si tratta di elementari e medie, di portare i figli più vicini al lavoro. E quindi credo che sappiano che in effetti c'è questa possibilità. (Cristina, Italian, Spica, CS)

¹²⁵ *Quando tu dovevi iscrivere tuo figlio alle medie, come sapevi che potevi scegliere una scuola che non era del tuo bacino d'utenza...? // Per me....su questo...perché mandano le informazioni a scuola, ci sono anche quelli che arrivano dalle scuole medie nelle scuole elementari per fargli sapere. Anche in quinta vanno a scuola, per esempio Sirius, per stare un'oretta, per fare il giro da loro sede. Per quello mia figlia ha saputo Sirius elementary_1, ha saputo Sirius elementary_2 perché loro sono andati lì. (Fatma, not Italian, Sirius, CS).*

not aim to evaluate more than one option. In this case, knowing about school choice was a type of sleeping awareness that parents need not activate.

When you had to choose the lower secondary school...you told me before... you weren't tied to the catchment area anymore. How did you get this information?

I knew mothers who already had several children, who told me that there was this freedom. I wasn't bound, because I took for granted that that was my catchment area school, and then later I discovered that in fact it would have been the other. Really? I said, because the distance is more or less the same (*she laughs*), what does it change? Then you say alright, but I still can choose where to go. They told me so. In any case it is not information that comes to you easily¹²⁶. (Ada, Italian, Sirius, CS)

To this point, these examples largely address how parents were able to know they could choose. As we will discuss thoroughly in the next chapter, several and different reasoning processes followed. In other words, those who knew or were informed that they could evaluate different options then decided whether to do so, and those willing to change school – opting out from the catchment area school – sought information on how to do so. Thus, almost all of the parents I interviewed had differences that emerged when exploring whether and how they were *pushed* or *pulled* to escape the catchment area school or decided to stay. Nevertheless, for Mercedes, Violeta and Jorge, we can glimpse in this preliminary approach to the choice the main determinants of the choice itself.

As we saw in Mercedes' case, she went directly to the school to enrol and received no further information; however, in addition, she learned about that school after having inquired of others, trusting people she did not know.

When you had your first child, how did you know where you had to go ... kindergarten, elementary school

(Silence)

I mean, did you ask someone? How did you know everything?

¹²⁶ *Quando dovevi scegliere la scuola media...prima mi hai detto non essendo più legata al bacino d'utenza...queste informazioni tu come l'hai avuta? // Io avevo le mamme, mamme che avevano già vari figli, che mi hanno detto che c'era la libertà.che non ero vincolata...perché io la davo per scontata che quella fosse la mia...e invece poi dopo ho scoperto che in realtà sarebbe stata l'altra. Io ho detto ah sì? Perché la distanza più o meno è uguale...(ride), che cambia? Poi dici va bene...Però io posso scegliere dove andare e quindi, me l'avevano detto loro. Sì perché comunque non sono informazioni che ti arrivano così (Ada, Italian, Sirius, CS)*

In the area where I lived, I asked where I can enroll him and they told me, where does he live? Here, then, it is convenient for you here or there.

They...like other people?

Yes, a lady in the neighborhood told me to go to Sirius_elementary3, therefore I went directly there. It would have been different if another person would have said to me to enroll him in Sirius_elementary2. But I went directly to Sirius_elementary3.

And who did tell you so?

A lady I don't know¹²⁷. (Violeta, not Italian, Sirius, OfC)

In her case, there was no discussion on whether she could evaluate other schools; in contrast, the system worked because it was based on the geographical principle. Differently, in the case of Jorge and Mercedes, their decision was guided by other actors, respectively, the employer and landlord, and therefore based on those others' decisions and knowledge. Mercedes' landlord for example suggested one school based on his experience as a child, and she and her husband trusted him.

How did you know that you had to apply to Bellatrix_elementary?

With this ... helped the sir, the landlord of the house where we were living. There is a landlord that helped my husband to enroll her there, because once he attended that school, do you understand? So, since he helped him, my husband enrolled her there¹²⁸. (Mercedes, not Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Similarly, Jorge learned from his employer where he could enrol his daughter. Although Jorge's wife, immediately after family reunification, enrolled their daughter in a school in a close neighbourhood, he does not remember why they selected this school; however, after a

¹²⁷ *Tu quando hai avuto il primo figlio qui come hai fatto a sapere dove dovevi andare...la scuola materna, le elementari? // (silenzio) // Non so, hai chiesto a qualcuno? Come hai fatto a sapere le varie cose? // Yo en la zona che abitava...yo chiedeva, dove posso metterlo a lui...y ellos me decian dove abita? Qua, allora te conviene di là, te conviene di qua. // Ellos...come altre persone? // Sì...del quartiere una senora me digo va anda ahì a la Sirius_elementary3...entonces, allora yo sono entrata, andata direttamente lì. Si otra persona me decia no metelo en la Sirius_elementary2 era otra cosa. Però io sono andata direttamente a la Sirius_elementary3. // E chi è che te l'aveva detto? // Una senora che no la conozco. (Violeta, not Italian, Sirius, OfC)*

¹²⁸ *Come sapevate che dovevate iscrivere alla Bellatrix_elementary? // Questo...ci ha aiutato el signore, el padrone de casa...dove noi estavamo abitando, lì este padrone de casa le ha ayudado a mio marito per iscrivere lì, perché lui prima andava in quella escuela capito? Y siccome le aveva fatto questa ayuda mio marito l'ha iscritta lì. (Mercedes, not Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)*

few months, their daughter was moved to the Sirius school because his employer's child was attending the school.

The school you told me about, where Chiara started elementary school, what school was it?

Sirius

How did you understand how everything worked here?

I found good people ... I worked in a café and the owner was from Puglia, he was nice, not racist, I liked him, his daughter was in that school. So when my wife arrived, I worked there. Since her daughter studied there ..there were three, Sirius elementary1, elementary 2, elementary 3 right? So there was a place in Sirius_elementary 1 and she went there.

So because of your boss...

He and a friend of his, good people, he told me that Sirius was certainly a good school¹²⁹. (Jorge, not Italian, Sirius, CS)

Although these parents represent exceptions in the group of parents, their experiences show the possible effect of the lack of an official, standardized school-family communication on enrolments, and of a system in which much is left to each parent's single initiative and to second-hand information. Thus, for less skilled parents with little knowledge of the functioning of the educational system, school enrolments can depend completely on others', although trusted, suggestions.

4.5 Conclusion

The Italian educational system formally provides an enrolment practice based on parents' freedom of choice, granting to families the ability to choose their preferred school without being limited by catchment areas. Despite this practice, catchment area systems still exist and, as in the case of Milan, are important instruments through which the municipality supplies and manages educational services. In this context, parents' behaviours tell us that freedom of choice is exercised and, most importantly, is considered by the local governance

¹²⁹ *La scuola di cui mi parlava, dove ha iniziato Chiara le elementari, che scuola era? // La Sirius_elementary 1 // Una cosa che mi interessava capire...come ha fatto a capire qui come funzionava? // Sì...ho trovato persone brave...ho lavorato nel bar di una persona che era della Puglia, bravo...niente rasta, mi è piaciuto, sua figlia era lì...quindi quando è arrivata mia moglie io lavoravo fisso, lavoravo. Come la figlia di questo qua, studiava qua...erano tre posti a la escuela Sirius_elementary1, elementary_2, elementary_3 no? Quindi c'era posto alla Sirius_elementary 1 è andata alla Sirius_elementary 1. // Quindi perché il signore del bar.... Lui è una sua amica...gente brava...mi ha detto sicuramente lì sì...buona scuola quella là (Jorge, not Italian, Sirius, CS)*

in adjusting or changing catchment areas. Thus, it becomes central to understand on the basis of which criteria parents choose and what guides them in staying or leaving the catchment area school. Before diving into this topic, we explored in this chapter to what extent parents are aware of the existence of freedom of choice and how they perceive catchment areas.

First, in understanding some practical aspect of school choice, the awareness of the existence of the possibility of choosing among different schools emerged in all accounts and appeared as a taken-for-granted practice. Although three parents showed little knowledge of the system and relied on other people to help them navigate it, freedom of choice in practice does not appear to be the privilege of a small group of parents.

Nevertheless, this apparent awareness of how the system works appears to depend on two highly variable factors: 1) the existence of institutional constraints on accessing schools and 2) how parents learned about their freedom of choice. In both cases, the variability of school practices and the absence of a standardized communication with parents to provide basic information on school choice can enhance inequality from the beginning of this process. As long as parents actually succeeded in accessing their preferred school, they have different perceptions of catchment areas, often showing a lack of understanding of existing institutional divisions of the territory. Nevertheless, these perceptions do not affect them directly until they experience catchment areas as a real limitation if they want to leave the catchment area school. In this case, when schools are in a situation of oversubscription, parents initially see their freedom limited if they do not comply with some criteria. Second, schools' admission policies and procedures can vary significantly and are not required to follow a national standard.

In accessing information about both school choice and possible constraints, more-diverse practices emerged, mostly linked to parents' personal activation in seeking information and to receiving second-hand information from other actors. Although some schools provided forms of communication, doing so cannot be described as a uniform practice designed to reach all parents.

Therefore, examining parents' behaviours and accounts, choosing at the primary level appears to be a taken-for-granted exercise, and they do move in and out of the catchment area. Conversely, the combination of fragmented school practice and the lack of systematized information might have different consequences for different parents. In fact, they must rely entirely on their resources to learn about the system, with Italian parents who have been socialized in it having a clear advantage. Conversely, for parents such as Mercedes, Violeta and Jorge, the discovery of the system – “you can or cannot choose” –

overlaps with the real choice of the school – “this is the right school”; following and trusting other people’s suggestions is their first and only source of information.

Chapter V - “In lower secondary school, an entire world opens up”. Parent’s declared criteria of choice

5.1 Introduction

Parents move into the educational arena, after primary school, with a sufficient awareness of not being compelled to enrol their children in the catchment area school, although they may have to face institutional constraints in accessing the preferred option if it has to select among applications.

Within this scenario, the choice of lower secondary school in Milan emerges as a *normal* practice – in the sense of not being experienced as an uncommon or extraordinary activity – in which parents evaluate different schools in the territory, beyond the straightforward option of the catchment area school. Concurrently, this choice results in a complex and puzzling decision, that requires a certain effort in finding a good school – the best? – and that it is not infrequently loaded with anxieties and caught in dilemmas.

This chapter will be devoted to the main findings of the exploration of mothers’ declared criteria guiding their choice. In fact, when telling about their decisions, mothers motivates their behaviour retrospectively, indicating – in a more or less detailed and long narration – the reasons that guided them towards (or away from) a certain school. We will see how parents in the research referred to several criteria of choice – proximity, children wellbeing and preference, school quality and school mix – that play different roles in their ultimate choice. Moreover, attention will be paid to the decision-making process, in which mothers, who lead the choice within their families, engage in the information gathering to assess the “goodness” of different schools option according to their criteria.

5.2 Criteria behind mothers’ choice

5.2.1 The relevance of proximity

The research focused only on the public educational system (see Chapter III); therefore, the interviewed mothers had already self-selected as choosers of a public lower secondary

school, and in most cases, they also chose a public elementary school¹³⁰. The mothers did not take into consideration more options in the private system, when enrolling their children in lower secondary school, but their exclusion resulted from two very different reasons. On the one hand, highly educated and better-off Italian mothers who were working as professionals or were married to a professional declared a strong belief in the public education system that was chosen over the private one for ideological reasons. To them, staying in the public system was a decision that also went against several problems that may concern public schools, as they believe that good education can only exist in this system, at least at the compulsory level.

Did you ever consider enrolling your last child, but also the others in a private school?

No, I've never considered it. This is something that isn't part of my DNA, in the sense that I have never considered it, I have always preferred to stay in public schools, with all my three children, even if I attended a private one, back in the days¹³¹. (Sarah, Italian, Spica, CS)

I started asking around. Given that I believe a lot in public schools, I didn't want to go to a private one.

So didn't you consider a private school?

No ... I did not really consider it. There are two private schools there. But no, I have never considered them, I knew they existed but I believe a lot in public schools.

Because there you can find excellences¹³². (Jane, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

These mothers' choice of "going public" without any doubt opposes a neglected desire for the "self-exclusion" of mothers whose choice of staying in the public system was influenced more by material resources, which limited their possibility of enrolling in a private school because the fees were too high. In their case, evaluation of only public schools arouses from

¹³⁰ With four exceptions of mothers that enrolled their children to a private elementary school.

¹³¹ *Avevate mai considerato di iscriverli, parliamo dell'ultimo ma anche degli altri, in una scuola privata? //* No mai, io anche quella è una cosa che non fa parte del mio DNA, nel senso che non ho mai valutato come cosa, ho sempre preferito stare nell'ambito statale, con tutti i miei tre figli, anche io stessa ai miei tempi sono stata in una privata. (Sarah, Italian, Spica, CS).

¹³² Ho iniziato appunto a chiedere in giro. Posto che io credo molto nella scuola pubblica, quindi non sono voluta andare nella scuola privata. *// Quindi non avete considerato la scuola privata? //* No...non l'ho proprio considerata...noi lì abbiamo due scuole private. Però niente, io non ho le ho mai considerate, sapevo dell'esistenza, però, cioè, credo molto nella scuola pubblica. Perché secondo me le eccellenze sono lì. (Jane, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

economic constraints that limited their possibility of increasing the number of options and considering what they believed was one more chance to give their children quality education.

Have you ever thought about private school for your daughters?

Yes, many years ago yes, when Gianna had to start the lower secondary school. Well it was a different time, I worked, I work now too but I'm a nanny, because I didn't find a part-time job anymore.

What was your job before?

I was employed in a multinational firm, commercial sector, in the customer service. After, my husband lost his job, in short it was a mess, and we couldn't afford it anymore!

And at the beginning why did you think about it?

I thought of the private school because I had this belief that "she must do well at the lower secondary school, because I'm scared about the upper secondary schools" and I hadn't heard so much good things good about the public schools¹³³. (Marie, Italian, Sirius, CS)

Willing or forced to consider only the public system, parents might on paper consider all schools in the Milan territory; nevertheless, in our group, the mothers seemed to keep their horizon of schools within a few kilometres from home, so that the school would be reachable by walking or public transport in no more than 15-20 minutes. Alternatively, if the school is further from home, it needs to be closer to other family members (e.g., grandparents) or on the parents' way to work, in order for them to be able to drive their children to school during their morning routine. In fact, even if lower secondary school is attended from 10 to 13 years old, on average, and the children are thus considered more autonomous than those in elementary school, they are still considered to be too young to be left alone in making a long commute through the city without an adult supervision.

¹³³ *Avete mai pensato alla scuola privata per le vostre figlie? // Sì, tanti anni fa sì, quando Gianna doveva iniziare le medie, avevo pensato...vabbè che erano altri tempi, io lavoravo, vabbè io adesso lavoro ma faccio la baby-sitter, la tata, perché non ho più trovato part time. // Che lavoro faceva prima? // Impiegata in una multinazionale, settore commerciale, ufficio clienti, così, poi anche mio marito è rimasto a casa dal lavoro, insomma un casotto, non avremmo potuto più! // E inizialmente...come mai? // Pensavo alla privata perché appunto in me c'era dentro questa credenza che ho detto "le medie deve farle bene, perché ho paura poi per le superiori" e non avevo sentito parlare bene più di tanto delle scuole pubbliche. (Marie, Italian, Sirius, CS)*

Of course I would have also moved but it must be said that it becomes important for kids at this age to be more autonomous and you cannot say to you friend “come...”and go through the city of Milan at eleven years old. I do not know, I don't give to my daughter so much freedom¹³⁴. (Anna, Italian, Bellatrix, CS)

The area has been selected based on where her grandparents live, for pure and simple organizational reasons, so that Clarice could return home safely, and find someone at home. Also because, in short, in the first year they are 10-11 years old. So ... at that point the area had to be that one¹³⁵. (Nina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

This preoccupation is not always explicit in parents' accounts – as in Anna or Nina's concerns – and it is mostly taken for granted. Only in four cases – two foreign mothers, one foreign father and one Italian mother – proximity to home is indicated as the main criteria of choice. Three of them are the already disconnected parents presented in Chapter III, while the fourth is Alda, an Italian mother working as an ironer and living in Sirius catchment area. These parents, relying also on third actors' opinion (such as the landlord's or the employer's) enrolled their children in the school that was the closest to home or to the workplace, without evaluating other options.

Look, at the lower secondary school it was not a big deal. I sent him in the closest school to home¹³⁶. (Alda, Italian, Sirius, CS)

Apart from these exceptions and regardless of whether mothers make reference to the (invisible) territorial constraint, the relevance attributed to proximity clearly emerges from the overall number of options evaluated. Mothers, in fact, consider among three and four schools within their neighbourhood or close to it, and they never look much further within the city for the comfort of the child and the family.

¹³⁴ È chiaro che...poi io mi sarei anche spostata però c'è da dire che i ragazzini a quest'età, ehm, diventa importante potersi un attimo gestire da soli e quando tu hai la scuola non puoi tipo dire bè l'amichetto vengo...attraversar Milano a 11 anni, non lo so, mia figlia non è una...non è una a cui do tanta libertà. (Anna, Italian, Bellatrix, CS)

¹³⁵ La zona è stata selezionata in base a dove abitano i nonni...per logistica, pura e mera logistica in modo che Clarice potesse tornare a casa tranquillamente, e trovare qualcuno a casa. Anche perché, insomma, in prima media hanno 10-11 anni. Per cui...a quel punto la zona doveva esser quella. (Nina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

¹³⁶ Guarda io alla scuola media non mi sono fatta tanti problemi...cioè io l'ho mandato a quella più vicino casa (Alda, Italian, Sirius, CS)

I said alright, let's see which are the best schools in the public system. What should be considered? Also distance from home. Because they are at the lower not at the upper secondary school. So I had to find a place not too far away, so that at the beginning maybe... in fact at the beginning another dad came to pick them up, now that the three of them are there they take public transports¹³⁷. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC) 139

Hence, all the choices that will be discussed here can be defined as micro-territorial in terms of scale, since mothers' criteria are applied on a small landscape of choices that limits the family to staying as close as possible to home, all other things considered. In fact, proximity does not constitute a decisive criterion, as we shall see in the next paragraph, unless the school has already been positively evaluated based on other elements. In particular, closeness is a residual and secondary criterion if the closest school is perceived as a risk; thus, comfort may be a limit and not an opportunity that mothers prefer to give up, in favour of other options. However, closeness becomes "a plus", an asset, if the closest school to home responds to mothers' expectations more than other, further options.

5.2.2 Child well-being and preferences

Children's involvement in the school choice was explored during the interviews with the main aim of understanding how their needs or preferences were considered as criteria and to what extent they participated in the decision. Children's well-being is an implicit, taken-for-granted concern for the interviewed mothers and it is more evident in the case of difficult educational experiences, when parents describe their children's rough relation with school (in studying, doing homework, feeling at ease with teachers and friends, etc.). Nevertheless, contrary to what could be expected, children's well-being, as well as children's

¹³⁷ Ho detto ok, cerchiamo in ambito statale quali sono le scuole migliori...ovviamente, cosa bisogna considerare? Anche la lontananza da casa. Perché questi comunque non sono al liceo ma alle medie. E allora devo trovare un posto non troppo lontano, così che all'inizio magari, infatti all'inizio veniva un altro papà a prenderli, adesso invece che sono tutti e tre lì, vanno con i mezzi tranquillamente. Quindi qualcosa che non fosse comunque troppo lontano. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

expressed desires and preferences did not constitute a decisive element in the choice and emerged as marginal criteria for the majority of the group.

Only in three cases children wellbeing it is declared to be the main criteria of choice, by three mothers enrolled in Sirius (2) and Spica (1). These mothers' idea of a good school was shaped on their own children's specificity and mostly related to unmeasurable school characteristics, such as feelings when meeting teachers and principals, teachers' touch and approach, although they also considered school size and schools equipment. For their children wellbeing, they overcame all assessments about school quality and reputation, done in the first place. For instance, Malala is a Moldavan mother working as a waitress whose choice of the catchment area school, Sirius, responded to the importance of finding a comfortable environment for her daughter. Among two alternatives, she perceived one school to be "with hundreds of people" and she thought her daughter wouldn't fit in, because "she's a calm girl, a bit shy, if she'd go there she wouldn't feel at ease".

The other two cases are two "special" situations: one is an extremely vivacious boy, enrolled in Sirius, with a troubled elementary experience. For his mother Susanna, the choice couldn't be guided but by the search of an accommodating environment, with sensitive teachers. The other is an albino girl, whose mother Sibilla, is consequentially guided, first of all, by the school capacity to deal with her needs. Sibilla and Susanna, both graduated and working as professional, have developed during the past years of pre-school and primary education a certain idea of what may work and may not for their children.

Other three exceptions involving children's importance in the choice, emerged in the case of mothers who went against their own preference to comply with their children's desire. Joan, Frida and Fatma – with children enrolled in Sirius (Joan and Fatma) and in Spica (Frida) – are full-time working mothers and they are also very involved in school activities. They are aware of not being constrained to their own catchment area school, and they are open to evaluate other school options in the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, regardless of what could have been the best choice, they value their offspring's opinion and their ability to make an autonomous choice at this age.

What is expressed by their children is strictly related to practical characteristics of the school, such as curriculum or week schedule or to the influence of the group of peers.

Have you ever considered enrolling him in another school?

Well at first, I thought maybe there was also this school here ... Spica_elementary but then George wanted to learn German, he wanted to stay here, then all his friends went here. That's it, we chose this school¹³⁸. (Frida, Italian, Pavo, CS)

As a parent, knowing my daughter, I wasn't convinced at all, because my daughter...and the respect for the rules, no, that is, she knows them and therefore she goes around them ... or looks for the way to do it. I knew that Bellatrix also relies heavily on discipline, and I saw my daughter... falling ... into a small abyss. But as she finished the elementary school quite well, she was convinced to be part of the small group of "good pupils". Since "good pupils" went to Bellatrix, then... However, Giada applied with all her enthusiasm, I wanted to encourage her, because I did not want to push a school on her¹³⁹. (Joan, Italian, Sirius, CS)

In this sense, these mothers are consciously giving their offspring the last word, even if the choice is in contrast with their own evaluations. For instance, Fatma was looking for a "good level" school, a place where her children could study and improve and she also had chosen Andromeda's school. But as she encountered her daughter opposition, due to the school week organization, they finally opted for the catchment area school.

So did you excluded Andromeda because there was school on Saturdays?

Yes indeed, even with the second daughter, it was the same thing. I said Andromeda. I heard that the school is good, I'm going to try...but my daughter said no, because they go to school on Saturdays¹⁴⁰. (Fatma, not Italian, Sirius, CS)

Mothers' choices that were mainly influenced – at the point to be changed – by their own children's preferences and satisfaction, revealed a more fatalist and detached approach to the choice. In fact, they appeared to be less preoccupied, than other mothers, with criteria that instead are a priority in the choices of the rest of the group, as will be explored below. On

¹³⁸ *Hai mai considerato di iscriverlo in un'altra scuola diversa da questa? //* Bè all'inizio pensavo magari c'è anche questa qua vicino...la...Spica_elementary però poi Giorgio voleva far tedesco, voleva stare qua vicino, poi tutti i suoi amici andavano qua e quindi niente, abbiamo scelto qui. (Frida, Italian, Pavo, CS)

¹³⁹ Io come genitore non ero per niente convinta, conoscendo mia figlia, perché mia figlia è una... rispetto per le regole mmm, no, cioè le conosce e quindi le aggira...o cerca il modo. Siccome sapevo che la Bellatrix punta molto anche sulla disciplina, e io vedevo mia figlia andare proprio boh...cadere...in un piccolo baratro. Però lei, siccome le elementari le ha finite in maniera dignitosa, era convinta di far parte del gruppetto delle bravine, e siccome le bravine andavano alla Bellatrix allora. Comunque Giada si è iscritta con tutto l'entusiasmo, io l'ho voluta incoraggiare, perché non volevo imporle una scuola. (Joan, Italian, Sirius, CS)

¹⁴⁰ *E quindi Andromeda l'avete esclusa perché c'era il sabato? //* Sì infatti, anche con la seconda figlia, era la stessa cosa, ho detto la Andromeda. Ho detto ho sentito che livello buono, non c'è problema vado a provare, però la mia figlia, anche lei ha detto no, perché c'è sabato. (Fatma, not Italian, Sirius, CS)

the contrary, mothers who valued at the most their children wellbeing in the school, acted on the basis of their own and not their children's evaluation. In this sense, although they represent an exception with respect to the rest of the group, they engaged coherently in a selection of school on the basis of their own criteria of choice.

5.2.3 School quality

Even if children remain in the shadow of school choice, it is implied that parents do not look for a “bad” school, and are willing to find a “good” school for their offspring. The search for a “good school” animated differently the group of mothers, such that, as seen, only a small number accommodated to one option without declaring to look for the best for their children education. Nevertheless, what is considered to be a good school, providing quality education, is not straightforward. Also in the literature, parents' choices based on “school quality” may refer to different criteria: from academic performances to climate, through school curriculum and organization.

What emerged by mothers' accounts in this work is that school quality is certainly a relevant criterion of choice, but it is identified and assessed by mothers through different elements. School quality for instance, may be also intended by parents as related to the school socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics, therefore going beyond specifying achievement and attainment indicators.

Twenty-eight cases in mothers' reconstruction of the choice pointed at the relevance of school quality as guiding criterion, but only in eleven cases it was strictly related to academic performances and/or school approach (see 5.2.3.1 and 5.2.3.2). In the other cases, mothers relied on school mix as a proxy for academic performances or school environment and their main criteria of choice was in fact related to pupils' socioeconomic characteristics. Their cases will be discussed and analysed later in section 5.2.4.

Mothers pursuit for a quality education emerged in eleven interviews in Vega, Bellatrix and Spica school, and it was expressed stressing different aspects: the presence of good teachers and the general academic level, on the one hand and schools' pedagogical approach and curricula, a kind of school “approach”, on the other hand. The school “approach” included several different factors – strictness, severity, homework, and extra-curricular activities – that characterized a school as being more traditional, as in the case of Bellatrix and Vega, or more modern, as in the case of the Spica school.

These mothers navigated the educational offer, evaluating options on the basis of their individual beliefs regarding the role that a school should play at this level of education – between being severe and strict or more attentive to children’s growth and development. While the first aspect was more recurring in Vega and Bellatrix school, the second one was found in Spica mothers’ accounts, as it will be highlighted in the following.

5.2.3.1 *School academic performances*

Five mothers had their children enrolled to Bellatrix and Vega, their catchment area schools, because, as they told, these institutions responded, more than others, to the idea of a good and solid education, in a quite severe and performance-oriented environment. In their own area of residence, these mothers found the closest option the most satisfying alternative that ensured their children a quality education necessary for their future. In their accounts, the rhetoric of a good school as a step to the future – and a necessary one – is recurring. school quality is identified with the school academic performances.

Barbara, for instance, who lives with her family right in front of Bellatrix school, decided to enrol her daughter only after learning that the Bellatrix principal gives “special attention” to two sezioni, with a 36-hour curriculum. The existence of two classrooms with a sort of special teaching staff, performance orientation and focus on teaching and learning more than other classrooms was pivotal in her consideration of the catchment area school. In fact, as she was looking for a lower secondary school that would provide her daughter a stimulating learning environment, she chose this 36-hour classroom on purpose to enhance her daughter’s performance and keep it at the highest level.

Everyone spoke very well about this M ... even the L ... however.

So right about the “sezione”?

Yes.

Not about the school ..?

No! Here, you can talk well about the school or about the sezione. I have always heard that the principal makes this political choice to give the opportunity to two 36-hours sections to be followed in a particular way. So, since my daughter is a pupil that lies down on everyone else’s level, then you have to keep the level high. Because she is on 7, 8, 9 (marks), it's not that bad, she always 7, 8, 9- Yes, she says she'd like a 10, but she doesn't work hard for a 10, she likes to be good, though. I don't make troubles, I mean, she knows that she can't score less than 6 otherwise

the world war happens here, but apart from that (*she laughs*)¹⁴¹. (Anna, Italian, Bellatrix, CS)

Barbara, together with other mothers in this group, showed a tendency to disguise her primary concern with performance and school success behind a declared softer interest in educational issues, presenting herself as more detached than her behaviours – and words – actually show. In fact, she describes herself as not being a mother who make trouble with regard to school issues, but the possibility of her daughter failing would require a “world war” response. A similar red herring emerges from Amelia’s story, as at the beginning of the interview, she described herself as very determined enrol her first son in Vega’s school, almost without considering any other schools.

So ... I'm a bit, how to say, like a Taliban, in the sense that I would not have looked at other schools. My ex-husband went to two other schools open days. But in the end, we discarded them because there was actually no reason to exclude Vega¹⁴². (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

Nevertheless, as she kept telling how it went, she was not sure at all of the worthiness of Vega school, and she first of all discussed the issue with her sister, whose older children have attended the school, looking for opinions about the school’s quality and specifically teachers. Nevertheless, knowing that the school is a “high level” one is not a final guarantee for Amelia, who considers her choice to be a pivotal investment for her children’s education, for whom she has a specific idea of their future. Her, and her family’s, goal and concern of seeing her children of 10 and 13 years old graduate – because a “solid cultural education (...) is essential at many levels” – encouraged her to finalize her enrolment decision with the choice of a specific ‘sezione’.

¹⁴¹ Tutti mi hanno parlato molto bene di questa M...di questa M...anche la L...però.

*Quindi proprio della sezione?// Sì. // Non della scuola..?// No!, Ecco, ti possono parlar bene o della scuola o della sezione. Mi avevano sempre detto che quel preside fa questa scelta politica di dare l’opportunità a due sezioni a 36 ore, insomma, di essere seguite in modo particolare. E allora, dato che mia figlia è una che si adegua al livello, allora bisogna tenere il livello alto. Perché lei sta sul 7, l’8, il 9...non è che va male, lei sempre 7, 8, 9, non è quella che...Sì, dice mi piacerebbe il 10, ma non si sbatte per il 10...le piace essere brava, però. Io non è che faccio problemi, insomma...lo sa che non mi deve prendere delle insufficienze perché qua succede la guerra mondiale, però a parte quello (*ride*). (Anna, Italian, Bellatrix, CS)*

¹⁴² Allora...io sono un po’, come dire, talebana, nel senso, io non avrei guardato altre scuola...il mio ex marito è andato all’open day di altre due scuole. Ehm...però alla fine, poi le abbiamo scartate perché effettivamente non c’era un motivo per escludere la Vega. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

Talking with my sister who, in fact, knew more mothers and also knew professors, she also got involved, I found out that Vega is still a school with an excellent level. The choice of Vega was not related to the musical curriculum because both my children didn't pass the test, but I chose the sezione¹⁴³. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS) Since I care that the kids attend a good school because, I wouldn't want to appear pedantic, but even my children know, I expect them to go to *Liceo* upper secondary school and then to university. Because as a family, both on my side and on my ex-husband's, we all went to the university, we are all graduated, we all went to *Liceo* upper secondary school. So I told my children that they can be truck drivers, but after having graduated. I want my children to have a very solid cultural background, because I think that in life it's essential, at all levels. So, Vega itself and this sezione "I", they told me it's the best¹⁴⁴. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

The lower secondary school decision is truly believed to be a matter of success or failure for children, as it can be instrumental to ensuring that the child does not miss the chance of becoming a good student. In the case of Eva, it is peculiar in this sense: she opted out of Bellatrix, her catchment area school, for her first son, preferring Sirius as an "easier" school, since he was struggling in his studies. Afterwards, with her second son, she stayed with Sirius because he had ADHD, and the school offered a good special needs team. Finally, for the exactly same reasons that guided her first choice, she avoided Sirius for her last daughter because she was hoping that a more severe and difficult school would help her get back on her feet.

Why did you choose Bellatrix coming from Sirius?

Because I saw her brothers' experience, that is, they were left with few willing to study. Since she is like the older one, she doesn't crave to study, I was afraid that it would have the same effect on her. I consider *Liceo* secondary school as the only way out from lower secondary school, I did it myself, it educates you more than any other school. So, I think that if you attend a school where you don't study a lot, you get used to study a little, and that she'll go to the secondary school like her

¹⁴³ Confrontandomi anche con mia sorella che, appunto aveva più conoscenze tra le mamme, conosceva anche dei professori, quindi si era anche interessata, ho appurato che la Vega comunque è una scuola...di un ottimo livello. La scelta della Vega non è stata dovuta all'indirizzo musicale, perché i miei figli sono stati...tutti e due non l'hanno passato...e però io ho scelto la sezione. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

¹⁴⁴ Dato che io ci tengo che i ragazzi facciano delle buone scuole perché, allora, io...adesso non vorrei neanche apparire come dire pedante, però mi aspetto, anzi i miei figli lo sanno, mi aspetto che facciano il liceo e poi l'università, perché come...famiglia, sia dalla parte mia che dalla parte del mio ex-marito, abbiamo fatto tutti l'università, siamo tutti laureati, abbiamo fatto tutti un liceo, per cui io ai miei figli ho detto, potete fare i camionisti ma dopo la laurea. Quindi voglio che i miei figli abbiano una formazione culturale molto solida, perché poi ritengo che nella vita sia essenziale, a tutti i livelli. E quindi la Vega proprio...e la sezione I in particolare, mi hanno detto essere la migliore. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

brother, unwilling to study. This is not going to happen. So, let's try to make her put a little more effort right away. So I'll send her to this school which turns out to be a little bit more difficult¹⁴⁵. (Eva, Italian, Bellatrix, CS)

In Eva's case, the decision was made as a possible intervention that may influence her daughter's path with the hope that she still has the time to change and benefit from a stricter environment to attain a higher educational title. Apart from her situation, which still needs to be proved as function, the other mothers' criteria of choice met both Vega and Bellatrix characteristics in what is described by them as a good matching, as in fact their children are having a good experience and they are satisfied with their choice.

These mothers attribute great importance to the choice of lower secondary school in terms of further education as in fact they expect their children to study – and be willing to study – not in any upper secondary schools, but in a *Liceo*. In their narratives, the lower secondary school choice is part of a longer-term plan of providing their offspring with a good (the best?) education which is needed to access and succeed to *Liceo* and afterwards. A similar narrative in which this choice is not to be underestimated emerge in the accounts of mothers concerned that foreign pupils may worsen their children's learning (see Section 5.2.4).

5.2.3.2 School “human” approach

Vega and Bellatrix characterization as “good school” would nevertheless be regarded differently by other six mothers, all of them enrolled in Spica, since they tell a different story about what school quality may represent to them. In fact, they justified their choices of a “good school”, employing a different narrative centred on the individual growth, but at the same time never underestimating the importance of education in their children lives.

These mothers come from the school catchment area (3) but also from adjacent neighbourhoods (3), they preferred Spica because it was a less competitive and more modern school but still a “good school”. In fact, with respect to them, a more “human” view of

¹⁴⁵ *Come mai da Sirius avete scelto Bellatrix? // Perché ho visto l'esperienza dei fratelli, cioè, poca voglia di studiare che è rimasta, siccome lei è come il grande, ha poca voglia di studiare, avevo paura che facesse la stessa fine. E siccome io ritengo come unico sbocco alle medie il liceo, perché effettivamente io l'ho fatto, ti forma, più di ogni altra scuola, allora dico, se lei va in una scuola in cui studia poco, si allena a studiare poco, e arriva alle superiori come il fratello, con voglia di studiare poca: non ci siamo. Allora, proviamo a farla...a farle un attimino, tirar fuori un po' più di impegno subito. Per cui l'ho mandata in questa scuola che risulta essere un pochino più difficile.* (Eva, Italian, Bellatrix, CS)

education emerged as a pivotal element guiding the choice. Those who opted for Spica, disliked severity and performance and looked for a friendly climate – among pupils, teachers and families – and for more extra-curricular activities.

In the interview, even before talking about her age, education and job, Diane explained why she chose Spica. Her account is very similar to other mothers' description of Spica's atmosphere, and it is focused on what may involve feelings and sensations that combined with "objective evaluations" in leading to the final decision.

Because it seemed a school where there is really a beautiful climate ... and you feel it right away. So, you know when you go to choose...I'm one of those who often chooses things on instinct. Obviously also after objective evaluations, but a lot by feeling. I did like this for nursery school and for kindergarten and it worked so far (*she laughs*). I evaluated several things but I also trusted what you can call instinct, I don't know, feelings on the environment, the climate. Then of course you evaluate actual things like teachers, teaching, but those are also things they talk you about and you don't really know if they are like that¹⁴⁶. (Diane, Italian, Spica, OfC)

What emerge from Diane's accounts and is recurring in Spica's mothers is a double-step evaluation which includes elements that appears to be at the opposite poles: on the one hand, they describe themselves as being "instinctive" and "trustworthy", relying on their own feelings about the school climate. On the other hand, they still consider school "objective factors". These objective factors include similar elements that were evaluated in all other decisions and relate to the school being a place in which children (must and should) study and learn.

In fact, mothers who liked Spica's approach did not disregard teaching and learning in principle, but they did not identify quality of education with performance, test and strictness. They were looking for an educational approach that, while allowing children to learn, would care about their growth as human beings, at least at this educational level.

¹⁴⁶ Perché a me è sembrata una scuola veramente dove c'è un bellissimo clima...e lo avverti da subito. Quindi sai quando vai a scegliere, io sono di quelle che ha scelto queste cose spesso tanto, come si suol dire, di pancia. Cioè anche con valutazioni ovviamente oggettive, però tanto a sensazione. Ho fatto così per il nido, ho fatto così per la materna, e finora ha funzionato (*ride*). Valutando tante cose però fidandomi anche tanto di una cosa che se vuoi chiamare istinto...non lo so...feeling sull'ambiente, sull'atmosfera. Che poi le cose effettive tipo gli insegnanti, la didattica, ovviamente le valuti, però sono anche cose che ti raccontano e poi non sai in realtà se sono veramente così. (Diane, Italian, Spica, OfC)

I like a lot the idea of the community, it's not like I don't want the kids to work well, but I think that above all at the secondary level, it is still very important to care about relationship, to feel that others understand you, instead of thinking right away about studying¹⁴⁷. (Sarah, Italia, Spica, CS)

Moreover, these mothers attributed more importance to the teaching and learning of arts, as in fact most of their children play an instrument and the school offers a musical curriculum. Spica has put in place numerous activities that involves pupils in theatre workshops and performances, and – as stressed by all – these activities are considered a good strategy to learn what is usually taught in classrooms. Despite the choice of a musical curriculum was not decisive – and in their neighbourhood other two schools provide a similar offer – it is evident from their accounts that Spica was also perceived as a place to feel at ease and to be part of school activities without necessarily being judged and evaluated on the basis of numbers and hours of study.

They told me that I was a very serious school, which prepared pupils a lot, albeit using less traditional approaches. Because of my character and my children's character, I like the idea that they learn less conventional forms, different from opening the book and reading a certain number of pages. I think the culture is transmitted also through different forms, so the go to the theater a lot, they act, they also enacted also committed pieces. Well...it's a different way of studying than reading on a school book¹⁴⁸. (Tina, Italian, Spica, CS)

I went to visit it and I was impressed by this principal who presented to all parents big charts on how cool the school was, on the percentage of boys who would enrolled in *Liceo* rather than in vocational secondary school. You could see that it was a school very set up on those things. But it left me a little puzzled. It was an all-about-books school and that's it. Instead Spica and the other one (*other school*

¹⁴⁷ Mi piace molto il rapporto di comunità, non è che non voglio che i ragazzi lavorino bene, però penso che ancora, soprattutto nella media, sia molto importante questa cosa del rapporto, del potersi sentire capito, non subito di partire assolutamente solo pensando allo studio. Anche se lo studio lo ritengo importante. (Sarah, Italia, Spica, CS)

¹⁴⁸ Mi han detto anche che era una scuola molto seria, che preparava molto, anche se con modalità meno...tradizionali. Per come sono fatta io, per come sono fatti loro, mi piace l'idea che studino anche in queste forme non proprio convenzionali, diverse dell'aprire il libro e leggersi un tot pagine. Credo che la cultura passi attraverso varie forme, per cui vanno molto a teatro, fanno teatro, hanno fatto dei pezzi magari anche impegnati, e in questo modo, insomma, è un modo di studiare diverso che non è leggere sul libro (Tina, Italian, Spica, CS)

she visited) were more or less equivalent, because both wished to discover the kids and let the kids discover themselves¹⁴⁹. (Cristina, Italian, Spica, CS)

Therefore, although they also looked at other schools in the neighbourhood, they excluded institutions that made considerable investments in performance and competitiveness, looking on the contrary for a place where their children passion for studying and learning would grow instead of fading out.

5.2.4 School mix

School quality is used by some mothers as a criterion of choice on the basis of the abovementioned elements, more performance-oriented or more interested in a less traditional approach to education. Nevertheless, what emerge as predominant in this research, confirming the evidence in the literature, is mothers' consideration of school mix as the main criterion of choice. Although the distinction between pupils' ethnic and social characteristics of the intake was not always clear in mothers' narrations, it is important to look at both the ethnic and class elements in relation to mothers' decisions, albeit based on different but not exclusive reasons. In fact, the relevance attributed to pupils' socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics is based on two arguments that, as their accounts are a complex combination of elements, are never mutually exclusive.

On the one hand the socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics of pupils may be used by parents as proxy for school quality: they believe that the presence of not Italian pupils in particular may compromise the teaching and learning of the classroom. On the other hand, mothers seem to be particularly worried by the presence of foreign and disadvantaged pupils because, they want a school environment that is culturally more similar to the family.

5.2.4.1 Pupils' ethnic background as a proxy for the school performance

Not Italian pupils and families that populate mothers' accounts, with expressions that include "foreign" and "extra-communitarian" and a few references to "foreign pupils that

¹⁴⁹ Sono andata a visitarla e sono rimasta colpita da questo preside che presentava a tutti i genitori dei grandissimi grafici su quanto fosse figa, sulle percentuali di ragazzi che sarebbero andati al classico o allo scientifico piuttosto che ai professionali, si vedeva proprio una scuola dove era ancora molto inquadrata su quelle cose. Però a me aveva lasciato un po' così. Una scuola proprio tutta sui libri e chi s'è visto s'è visto. Invece Spica e l'altra (*altra scuola visitata* ndr) si equivalevano per certi versi, perché tutte e due avevano la voglia di scoprire i ragazzi, di far scoprire ai ragazzi se stessi. (Cristina, Italian, Spica, CS)

are born here”, are addressed as a large homogenous group, with almost no within-group distinction, except for “Arabs”, “Muslims” and “the South Americans”, which appear as the majoritarian portion and are often used as one part for the whole for some mothers. In particular, mothers that refer to them almost immediately when explaining their choices, are those whose catchment area school was characterized by a higher percentage of foreign pupils, as in the case of Sirius which in fact has the 45% incidence of not Italian pupils. These mothers then enrolled in several schools: 3 in Bellatrix, 6 in Mimosa, 4 attempted to enrol in Mimosa but were rejected and enrolled in Sirius (2) and Andromeda (2).

This preoccupation with the presence of “pupils of a certain kind” is related to mothers’ view of their children future educational path. In fact, mothers insist on the importance of school choice about the future educational path of the child and the relevance of having a good education, also foreseeing the upper secondary school choice. To this end, the presence of foreign pupils could endanger their children’s opportunities and achievement, since such a school environment is known to be less demanding and lower performing. Hence a high presence of foreign pupils is considered a proxy for a less demanding school and a less academically oriented learning environment (“an easy school”), since these pupils may require specific attention, owing to their linguistic difficulties, with consequences for the entire classroom.

This risk is associated with Sirius school and may influence mothers’ decisions, because it contrasted with their aim of strengthening their children’s education, allowing them to attend a *Liceo* as an upper secondary school and, in general, requiring excellent performance.

Unfortunately, Sirius has the reputation of being a school attended by many immigrants and the information I had, from some ... from other parents, is that unfortunately the teaching gets slower because some children don't know Italian. Therefore, honestly, since they plan to go to *Liceo* secondary school, I want them to be ready¹⁵⁰. (Rita, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

Although mothers try to quantify their perceptions of this presence in terms of numbers, concerns regarding foreign pupils being a problem for teaching activity hold if there are “a lot” but also if they are not numerically predominant, with “just two” per classroom. This

¹⁵⁰ La Sirius purtroppo ha la fama di essere una scuola frequentata da moltissimi extracomunitari e le informazioni che ho avuto, da alcune...da altri genitori, è che purtroppo il programma scolastico va a rilento perché alcuni bambini non conoscono l’italiano. Per cui sinceramente, visto che loro hanno intenzione di andare al liceo, voglio che vadano preparati (Rita, Italian, Mimosa, OfC).

belief is also resistant to any other circumstance, such as the possibility that foreign pupils were in fact born or raised in Italy and have thus been socialized to the educational system and assimilated as Italian pupils.

Then, well, for everything else, it is nice in terms of teachers, in the sense that those who were inside spoke well about it, clearly, they told us that there were some kind of problems, because there are many non-EU people. It's true that now they get to lower secondary school definitively educated, but they told us that they had so many different situations.

Why did you worry about this kind of environment?

Because we saw in elementary school, when my daughter had only two non-EU kids, but inevitably the teaching was very much affected. So, I imagined that since there are so many kids there ... because I'll say it again, I'm lucky that my children are good at school, then I was afraid that education will be less valuable. That is, maybe they would have excelled, but that's not my goal, because maybe they wouldn't fill the gaps they had¹⁵¹. (Elsa, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

Further, this already risky scenario may also be aggravated by the existence of specific Italian school conditions in terms of resources: since schools may face difficulties in obtaining and managing economic and human resources, they may not have the ability to efficiently manage the presence of foreign pupils and to reduce the gap in terms of performance. Therefore, even if the presence of foreign pupils bears potentially positive effects, these are compromised by the inability of schools to face the phenomenon in a way that it doesn't not affect other pupils.

This was what, for instance, Hypathia was most scared by and the reason why she did not trust her catchment area school, similarly to other mothers in the group.

In fact, you started with this idea you told me, to attend the elementary school here and the lower secondary certainly in another place. Why?

¹⁵¹ Poi vabbè per il resto, carino come insegnanti, nel senso che quelli che c'erano appunto ne parlavano bene, ci dicevano chiaro e tondo che c'erano dei problemi, tra virgolette, perché ci sono parecchi extracomunitari è vero che ormai adesso arrivano alle medie che sono assolutamente scolarizzati, però giustamente ci dicevano, abbiamo tante realtà diverse. // *Che tipo di preoccupazioni vi dava un tipo di ambiente del genere?* // Perché noi abbiamo visto alle elementari, quando mia figlia aveva avuto solo due extracomunitari, che comunque inevitabilmente la didattica ne risentiva tantissimo. Quindi io immaginavo che esponenzialmente essendoci così tanti ragazzi lì...a quel punto...perché ribadisco, ho la fortuna che i miei figli sono bravi e quindi mi dispiaceva andare al ribasso dalla didattica. Cioè ok magari avrebbero eccelso, però voglio dire non è quello il mio obiettivo, perché poi magari non colmi il gap che c'è. (Elsa, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

Because precisely my neighborhood school population is negatively...connoted. I don't know, I don't want to use this expression ... but the school population, in large part, perhaps for the 60%...my children enjoyed very much elementary school, their classes were more or less half and half, 50 Italians, 50 non-Italians, some of them newly arrived, others not. There is clearly a big difference between one that is arrived the day before and one who grew up in Milan. However, these are schools that are a bit penalized by this phenomenon, which is not a negative phenomenon by itself, it is negative if you don't know how to deal with it, if the school doesn't have the instruments to deal with it. So, I was afraid that the school in our neighborhood hadn't the instruments to deal with it¹⁵². (Hypathia, Italian, Vega, OfC)

5.2.4.2 *A matter of (cultural and class) identity*

In addition to mothers' preoccupation for the impact of foreign pupils on their children learning, the characteristics of the school intake are also considered in terms of ethnic/national homogeneity. In this regard, the prevalence of foreign pupils over the total population is not considered an asset, and it rules against the socialization and identity representation needs of the child and his/her family.

In this case, foreign pupils are an issue of perceived numbers because mothers feel that, as Italians, they and their children may end up being a minority in the school. This possibility is refused and disliked in advance, as the proportion of foreign pupils is considered too high to be beneficial. We will see that it may constitute a very good first reason to leave the catchment area school even since elementary school (see Section 6.4.1).

When you decided on elementary school, why didn't you choose your catchment area one?

I'll give you an answer that might seem vaguely racist, but that is not: I don't like to be a foreigner in my own house. That is, I mean, there are many Arabs and Muslims in the catchment area school, I mean in terms of numbers and so basically my son would have been a minority.

¹⁵² Ecco...infatti...voi siete partiti con questa idea mi dicevi, le elementari qui e le medie sicuramente in un altro posto ...ma perché? // Perché appunto la popol...l'utenza scolastica nel mio quartiere è connotata...negativamente? Non lo so, non voglio usare per forza questa espressione...però la popolazione scolastica, in gran parte, forse al 60%... miei figli alle elementari, sono stati benissimo, nelle loro classi erano più o meno metà e metà, 50 italiani, 50 non italiani alcuni dei quali neo arrivati, altri no, e quindi chiaramente un abisso di differenza tra uno che è arrivato l'altroieri e uno che è cresciuto a Milano. Però scuole un po' penalizzate da questo fenomeno, che non è di per sé un fenomeno negativo, è negativo se non lo sai affrontare, se la scuola quindi non ha strumenti per affrontarlo. Allora io ho temuto che la scuola del nostro quartiere non avesse strumenti per affrontarlo. (Hypathia, Italian, Vega, OfC)

And didn't you consider it? Didn't you go to get any information?
No..no, nothing at all¹⁵³ (Judith, Italian, Spica, OfC)

The main reason for this preoccupation is primarily linked to the need to provide for children, but for most families, the opportunity to meet and relate to other people of the same cultural background. Mothers who based their decisions on the fact that a school has too many foreign pupils – or a school that was not perceived as being predominantly Italian – present this choice as a ‘normal’ expectation regarding schools that play an important socialization function. The reasons why too many non-Italian pupils may endanger this function are mainly related to what mothers describe as the cultural limitations of this homogenous group of foreign families. For instance, as a clear and recurring example of why non-Italian parents are addressed as a problem, mothers made reference to extra-scholastic events and activities. As in fact foreign parents are rarely involved at school, being almost invisible, this reduces the occasion and chances of ‘integration’.

My children went to the nearby municipal nursery school, I liked it very much there. There is a real integration because there is everything, and I liked it very much. I think every year it's different, when you go to Sirius_elementary3 you find yourself in a condition of minority, of minority! You see there and say “oh my”! Here there's especially an Arabic majority, some Filipino, some South American. And they are many! (she *laughs*) They are so many! And it is not easy to integrate with them and vice versa. There is a concern that you'll be a bit isolated¹⁵⁴. (Mary, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

Since not Italian families are hardly reachable at the school level, mothers see this peculiarity as adding difficulties to the Italian-not Italian matching. Therefore, in a condition of

¹⁵³ *Quando avete deciso la scuola elementare, come mai non avete deciso la scuola del vostro bacino? //* Una risposta che potrebbe sembrare vagamente razzista, ma che non lo è: fare lo straniero in casa non mi piace. Cioè, intendo dire, la scuola di bacino ha come utenza molti arabi e mussulmani, ma proprio come quantità...e quindi sostanzialmente mio figlio sarebbe stato in minoranza. *// E non l'avete considerata...non siete andati a prendere informazioni? //* No..no...assolutamente niente. (Judith, Italian, Spica, OfC)

¹⁵⁴ I miei figli sono andati all' asilo che è qua vicino, nido comunale, mi sono trovata benissimo, che lì c'è proprio l'integrazione, perché c'è di tutto, e mi sono trovata benissimo. Ogni anno secondo me è diverso, quando vai in Sirius_elementary3 ti trovi veramente una situazione...di minoranza, di minoranza! Cioè ti trovi lì e dici...fischia! Poi vabbè qua la componente è araba, soprattutto...ci sono molti arabi, e qualche filippino, qualche sudamericano. E sono tanti! (*ride*) Sono tanti! E non è facilissimo integrarsi con loro e viceversa. C'è la paura che si rimanga un po' isolati. (Mary, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

“minority” this would enhance the risk of feeling isolated at the school level and unable to cooperate with other parents.

Moreover, foreign families are presented as having a cultural problem in understanding and participating in certain central activities in the lives of Italian children, such as birthday parties or classroom dinners. These events represent social moments that go beyond the school and that involve children’s friends and parents’ social circle, and they are considered essential for social life in the neighbourhood. That is why, for instance, Gertrude was extremely worried about her daughter’s socialization needs, even more than her learning activities, if she attended Sirius school.

Mixed classrooms have many problems, in the sense that we speak of a mainly Arab intake. They don't not send their children to the kindergarten. I'm talking about when Clarissa attended it, about ten years ago, but I think now the trend is similar because it's a question of culture. There is a big portion of pupils that goes directly to elementary school. So, they have early literacy problems, and they emerge a lot in the first two years ... it's a suicide in those classes. It's crazy, you cannot even ask them if they want a piece of cake or a juice, because they cannot interact. Another problem is, and I'll make you laugh, birthday parties. Birthday parties ... it's normal that you as a mom, organize your child's party at home, who are you going to invite? Obviously, her classmates: they do not come. In a 25-people class, let's say they are half Italian, even if it is not so. because in percentage terms there are more Arabs¹⁵⁵. (Gertrude, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

Since the origin of other people in the school is so important in mothers’ school choice, they not only decline this concern by looking at who is there (i.e., too many foreign pupils) and how they differ from themselves (i.e., not Italian) but also acknowledge the need to find an environment that fits the family’s characteristics in terms of class: not just Italians but above all “people like us”.

¹⁵⁵ Le classi miste hanno dei problemi molto forti, nel senso che...noi parliamo di utenza soprattutto araba. Loro non mandano i bambini all’asilo o quantomeno io ti parlo di quando lo faceva Clarissa, una decina di anni fa, ma comunque penso che il trend sia quello perché è una questione di cultura. Per cui, o quantomeno ce n’è una grossa fetta, che arriva direttamente alle elementari. Per cui hanno un problema di prima alfabetizzazione, e si fa sentire tantissimo nei primi due anni...è un suicidio in quelle classi. È pazzesco, non si riesce neanche a dirgli...vuoi una tortina, vuoi un succo di frutta, non riesci a parlare perché loro non riescono a interagire. E un altro problema sono, ti faccio ridere, le feste di compleanno. Le feste di compleanno...è normale, tu mammina, organizzi la festiciola di tuo figlio a casa, chi vuoi invitare? È ovvio che inviti i suoi compagni: non vengono. Cioè in una classe di 25, facciamo finta che sia metà e metà italiana, anche se non è così perché sono più in percentuale araba. (Gertrude, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

In fact, some mothers emphasise their main preoccupation with the “environment” not because of foreign student but, paradoxically – as they say – because of “very Italian” families and pupils, that may be trouble makers.

Foreigner pupils were not my problem, but troubled students were. And what's funny is that in Roberta's classroom, kids that makes more mess, they are annoying, pestiferous and vandals are very Italian. Super Italian¹⁵⁶. (Claudia, Italian, Sirius, CS)

Let's say that, in my opinion, it is not so much about being foreigner or not, because it is true that it may be that foreigners slow down the teaching, right? In some cases, it can happen. Apart from this, sometimes these foreigners already speak Italian. But I have seen, for instance, that houses over there, I wouldn't like (*she laughs*) that she would be in a certain environment, also outside the school. Apart from the fact that the time they spend at school it's 8 hours in elementary school, then in lower secondary school it's shorter but still, it's a lot¹⁵⁷. (Thelma, Italian, Vega, OfC)

In fact, consideration of the ethnic or disadvantaged composition of the school population intertwines with the need to feel in the same class environment, since the socially mixed nature of the neighbourhood and the tendency of lower classes to choose comfort results in overrepresentation in these schools of families that live in public housing and that are associated with highly disadvantaged situation with culturally poor families.

However, not having attended the schools here in Milan, I also miss many information. So, surely, seeing where it was placed, it was easy to think that there are certainly people, let's say, like us, so professionals, people of a certain, let's say, cultural level, educational level¹⁵⁸. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

¹⁵⁶ Il mio problema non erano gli stranieri...semplicemente... se gli alunni sono delinquenti. E la cosa comica, comica! che nella classe di Roberta i due che fanno più casino, disturbano, sono pestiferi e teppisti sono italianiiiiissimi. Ita-lianissimi. (Claudia, Italian, Sirius, CS)

¹⁵⁷ Diciamo che, secondo me, non è tanto lo straniero o non straniero, perché è vero che può essere che lo straniero ti rallenti il programma no? In alcuni casi può succedere. Però allora, a parte che questi stranieri in effetti, a volte, l'italiano già lo fanno. Però io ho visto, non lo so, io vedo le case popolari che ci sono lì...non....ehh...non mi piacerebbe che.... frequentasse magari anche a livello extra-scolastico, un certo determinato ambiente. A parte il fatto che loro comunque alle elementari stanno 8 ore....e poi, alle medie meno, però insomma il tempo che loro spendono, è tanto. (Thelma, Italian, Vega, OfC)

¹⁵⁸ Comunque non avendo fatto le scuole qua a Milano, mi mancano anche tutta una serie di riferimenti. Quindi, sicuramente, forse non tanto...vedendo dove era collocata, era facile pensare che ci sia sicuramente una parte di persone tra virgolette come noi, quindi professionisti, comunque persone anche di un certo livello diciamo, culturale, di come si dice...di istruzione. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Concerns about pupils' socioeconomic background are related to the risk of putting their offspring in an under-stimulating environment because of the presence of children with absent or less present parents and exposure to lower class children who are a priori considered demotivated and not study oriented.

What got you and led you to say that this could be a valid alternative to the neighborhood school?

I'll say it again...the fact that it could offer better studying activities, the possibility of hanging out with peers who had a higher social level than the neighborhood, to be frank. Because, anyway, the neighborhood where we live, it's true that there are people who are now graduates... their grandchildren etc. but the level is obviously low. Maybe, because of my experience as a child, in fact, it was different back then, so you couldn't go out. But my children...I am trying to culturally elevate them ... I see the difference, for instance, the way of thinking among those who are in *Liceo* secondary school and those who are at the oratory, there is an abyss among them, of culture, of everything¹⁵⁹. (Jane, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Social class is also associated with deviant behaviours that not only may put the child at risk of being exposed to dangerous situations but also are associated with a more undisciplined climate in school. These concerns are mixed, once again, with the children's socialization needs, and since schools are places where pupils spend most of their day, mothers aim to give their children options for socialization that are safer and more selected.

There were people saying that in the catchment area there were particularly vivacious children, with less present families, families who weren't involved and left them a little too much by themselves. And this created in the classrooms an unproductive atmosphere with regard to teaching. But above all, I was also thinking about my daughter's socialization needs ...the environment was not even favorable

¹⁵⁹ *Cos'è che l'ha colpita e l'ha portata a dire sì, questa potrebbe essere una valida alternativa alla scuola di quartiere? // Le ripeto...il fatto che...il fatto che potesse offrire, potesse offrire uno studio maggiore, possibilità di frequentare, diciamo coetanei che avessero un livello sociale più alto del quartiere, parlandoci chiaro proprio. Perché comunque, il quartiere lì dove siamo noi, sì ci sono, ci sono i figli adesso che sono laureati, ci sono i nipoti, però il livello è basso ovviamente. E io forse, per la mia esperienza che ho avuto io, cioè comunque da piccola, appunto, era diverso, erano altri tempi, per cui non potevi uscire. Però ai miei figli sto cercando di elevarli...vedo proprio la differenza, i ragionamenti per dire che anche loro fanno, tra quelli che sono al liceo e quelli che sono all'oratorio, ci sono degli abissi, di cultura, di tutto. (Jane, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)*

for socialization ... because being with too different children ... she couldn't have bounded¹⁶⁰. (Emmeline, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

5.2.4.3 *Talking about school mix*

Despite mothers are convinced and determined in their choice, they are also aware that their motivations can be, or are, socially unacceptable responses, especially in this case in which their main concern is related to foreign pupils. This concern is shared by all mothers that on the basis of this consideration of school intakes justify their choice of avoiding a school.

With one exception, who is also the only mothers who hold a lower secondary school diploma among this group of mothers. Emily's account is one of the few cases in which the description of the school is harsh and clear, and she makes immediate reference to the student population's ethnic (religious) and social characteristics. She is a lonely working mother living in public housing, and she does not seem to be worried about being politically correct in describing her own environment and the school from which she decided to exit for her three children.

Do you know why? Here it is a bit better, but if you move where there are all the broken houses, they are all Muslims, right? If you go ahead, there are small houses in which the 90% of people were in prison. There is delinquency and so, many kids grow up, from an early age, in a certain way...they know drugs, there is drugs dealing, even theft. And schools take that fame ... because around the 80% of the intake comes from those houses. That's all¹⁶¹. (Emily, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

However, in the rest of the group, mothers do not always describe, with such detail, the characteristics of the school population that scared them. In fact, the first references in the

¹⁶⁰ C'erano tutta una serie di persone che dicevano che la presenza di bambini particolarmente agitati, con famiglie non presenti, che non li seguivano e quindi li lasciavano un po' troppo a se stessi, creava nelle classi un'atmosfera...non favorevole alla didattica. Ma soprattutto io pensavo anche ai bisogni di socializzazione di mia figlia...neanche favorevole alla socializzazione...perché trovandosi con bambini troppo diversi...non avrebbe potuto fare abbastanza amicizia. (Emmeline, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

¹⁶¹ Ma sai perché? allora, essendo che intorno qua, adesso, questo pezzettino qui va un po' meglio, però se ti sposti dove sono le case tutte rotte, lì sono tutti musulmani no? Se vai avanti, ci sono delle casette basse è tutta gente, dove il 90% delle persone sono state in prigione. C'è delinquenza e quindi tanti crescono, sin da piccoli, con determinati modi...conoscono la droga, quindi c'è lo spaccio, c'è magari il furto, e le scuole prendono quella fama...perché perché magari un 80% delle persone viene da quelle case lì. Questo è. (Emily, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

interviews were often quite vague – with the use of terms such as “the worst intake” – requiring that the interviewer probe them to offer better explanation in the narration.

In the sense that everybody who lived on this side went [*from elementary schools*] to Bellatrix, and everybody who lived on the other side went to Mimosa. Someone went to Sirius, but very few.

Although it would have been the catchment area school as in your case?

Exactly, because anyway recently Sirius has acquired a reputation of being a school... with a very bad catchment area¹⁶². (Claudia, Italian, Sirius, CS)

Well (*pause*) we didn't chose the catchment area school because along the years a certain fame has been created around the school, saying that it hosted...I mean, polarizations grew in that neighborhood, some schools hosted more children of a certain kind, other schools more of another type¹⁶³. (Emmeline, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

Since mothers are aware of the sensitivity of the topic, their accounts contain several expressions and asides aimed at not being identified as racist or too unfair. Two main rhetorical tools are used to achieve this goal. One is the explicit reference to “not being racist”, which precedes or follows a racist or discriminatory statement, and it actually signals the existence of an awareness that the issue is delicate. It was mainly employed by mothers who excluded schools on the basis of their population and recurred in different moments in the interviews.

Be aware, it's not a matter of racism, because I argued with half of my friends for this choice, well I didn't argue but I was clear that mine is not a racist argument, it is a matter of opportunities given to the kid¹⁶⁴. (Gertrude, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

¹⁶² Nel senso che [*dalle scuole elementari*] a Bellatrix andavano tutti quelli che abitavano un po' di qua, e a Mimosa tutti quelli che abitavano un po' di là. E qualcuno andava in Sirius, ma pochisssssimi. // *Anche se sarebbe stata la scuola di bacino come il vostro caso?* // Esatto esatto...perché comunque Sirius si era fatta negli anni scorsi la nomea di essere una scuola...con un pessimo bacino d'utenza. (Claudia, Italian, Sirius, CS)

¹⁶³ Allora, (*pausa*) non abbiamo scelto la scuola di bacino perché negli anni si era creata attorno alla scuola di bacino, la fama che ospitasse...che ci fosse...cioè, in quel quartiere si son create delle polarizzazioni, per cui alcune scuole ospitavano più bambini di un certo tipo e altre scuole più bambini di un altro tipo. (Emmeline, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

¹⁶⁴ Non è una questione di razzismo stiamo ben attenti, perché io ho litigato con metà delle mie amiche per questa scelta...cioè litigato...ho fatto ben presente, il mio non è, non è un discorso razzista, è un discorso di opportunità dato al ragazzo. (Gertrude, Italian, Mimosa, OfC).

But it's not because of racism or something like that ... it's just a matter of be educated well ¹⁶⁵. (Rita Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

I mean that, a little further here there are public houses, rather degraded houses ... so the kind of intake changes. But not because, it's not absolutely a racist matter or what, but it is precisely the idea that our children grow up in an environment that is more or less similar to ours¹⁶⁶. (Thelma, Italian, Vega, OfC)

In explaining why caring about the presence of foreign is not a racist stance, mother highlight what we explored above: they link the presence of foreign pupils to less opportunities, a worst learning environment and, finally, a different social setting.

The second rhetorical tool is more generic praise for a “good” social and ethnic mix in schools. This also emerges later in mothers’ accounts and is not logically linked to the actual decision. For instance, Janis, despite avoiding the catchment area school because of its intake, declared appreciating as a value the mixed environment of the school she opted for, although her second criterion concerned the academic performance of the classroom to which she asked for her child to be admitted.

In reality there are many, many non-EU people, their children were obviously born here and they speak a better Italian than us, so to say. So, I got an idea about it and I thought it wasn't too different from our neighbourhood, where there is actually a bit of everything. I think it's very healthy to have be in an environment that is the reality, in my opinion it is healthy for the boys to see that there is everything, those who struggle, and those who don't¹⁶⁷. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC) 149

¹⁶⁵ Ma non è per motivo di razzismo o cose...è solo per una questione di preparazione. (Rita Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

¹⁶⁶ Nel senso che, diciamo che un po’ più avanti, ci sono delle case popolari, case abbastanza degradate...quindi cambia il tipo di utenza. Ma non perché, cioè...assolutamente né essere razzista o cosa, però è proprio l’idea che i figli crescano in un ambiente più o meno simile al nostro. (Thelma, Italian, Vega, OfC)

¹⁶⁷ Infatti in realtà ci sono comunque tanti, tanti extracomunitari, sono bambini ovviamente nati qua e che parlano meglio di noi, insomma, per dire. Però insomma, così. Quindi, mi sono fatta un’idea e ho pensato che non fosse troppo diverso dal nostro quartiere, dove veramente c’è un po’ di tutto, e questo comunque io lo trovo molto sano, cioè avere un ambiente che poi è una realtà perché ecco...secondo me è sano proprio per i ragazzi, per vedere tutto quello che è...vedono che c’è tutto, c’è chi ha difficoltà, c’è chi no. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Her sincere praise for this *mixité* is similar to the argumentation of Judith, who escaped the neighbourhood school exactly because she felt she would have been a minority, among Muslim Arabs; instead, she thinks that a good school should be one that is more similar to the real world the child is going to grow up in.

I consider our school a good school, in the sense that it's a good school of life, because there are foreigners, people who can afford certain things etc. It's just the image of the society you will find yourself in. So, you already learn to live in what society is. Why should you do like the upstairs neighbour's daughter, who has gone to the private school since the nursery to the upper secondary school? I think you'll finish and you won't realize that there is different world outside¹⁶⁸. (Judith, Italian, Spica, OfC)

In these seventeen mothers accounts the school socioeconomic and ethnic characteristic was pivotal in the choice, as in fact their catchment area school was, according to them, characterized by many foreign pupils and/or pupils coming from a disadvantaged family and this could affect their own children's education and/or socialization need. In the overall, what emerged from these narrations is a negative perception of socially and ethnically mixed school in favour of more homogeneous setting or a "better mixed" environment.

This position against diversity in schools (for their children) is not crosscutting all mothers accounts, as it is explored in the following section. In fact, on the one hand, the issue emerges as less important in the decision of those mothers whose choice has been analysed in Section 5.2.3. On the other hand, few mothers chose deliberately Sirius, because it was a more diverse school, sustained by their ideological beliefs.

5.2.4.4 *A taste for multiculturalism?*

School social and ethnic mix is rarely central in mothers whose choice was guided mainly by school academic performance and "human" approach. These eleven mothers' tranquillity with regard to their schools' intake is related to the homogeneity in terms of class

¹⁶⁸ Io la considero la nostra scuola buona nel senso che è una buona scuola di vita, nel senso che ci sono stranieri, ci sono persone che possono permettersi alcune cose persone che...Che è un attimino l'immagine della società in cui ti troverai. Quindi impari già a vivere in quello che è la società. Perché andare come...la figlia della signora qua sopra, che è dal nido che va alla privata dal nido alle superiori, secondo me esci e non ti rendi conto che fuori c'è un altro mondo. (Judith, Italian, Spica, OfC).

and ethnicity of their schools intake. Therefore, it results in the absence of ethnic and socioeconomic issues in their narratives. To get them to discuss their position on this theme, the interviewer was often required to probe them. Not only the presence of foreign pupils did not affect their choice in real life, but they also considered it to be something that would not constitute a problem for their children's everyday experience, although this risk could emerge in a different context depending on its magnitude.

Before enrolments some mothers try to figure out what kind of people attend that school, among the information they collect...

Yes, I tried to figure it out, but I must say I didn't consider the presence of foreign students, because I think that in a multi-ethnic society ... it would be ridiculous¹⁶⁹. (Sarah, Italian, Spica, CS)

For example, some families are concerned with getting information about what kind of people attend the school

No ... I've never done it, I am for being open to the world.

I don't know if you have any information about whether there are foreign students or non-Italian children

Yes, there are. It is not a very high percentage...they have a foreign mother or father foreign, mixed families. There is an Arab girl, one from Colombia, some Spanish, well, some. However, it's just something that opens your mind.

Aren't you worried about it?

Absolutely not. It depends ... at least from my experience it was not a problem. It depends on the percentage. Obviously, if on 25 students 22 are Chinese who speak Chinese, teaching is slowed down of course. If there are 25 students, 6 who are Spanish, French and everyone speaks Italian it's just a nice thing¹⁷⁰. (Sibilla, Italian, Vega, CS)

¹⁶⁹ Alcune mamme, prima di iscrivere, tra le varie informazioni che raccolgono, cercano di capire anche che tipo di utenza frequenta quella scuola...// Sì ho cercato di capire, per quanto riguardo la presenza di alunni stranieri, le devo dire no, perché penso che oramai è una società talmente multi-etnica che non...sarebbe una cosa ridicola. (Sarah, Italian, Spica, CS)

¹⁷⁰ Per esempio alcune famiglie si preoccupano di prendere informazioni prima su che tipo di gente frequenta quella scuola...// No...mai fatto...io sono per l'apertura al mondo. // Non so se hai delle informazioni su questo, ci sono alunni stranieri o comunque figli di non italiani? // Sì...ci sono. Non è una % altissima...sono un po' la madre o il padre straniero, famiglie miste. C'è una ragazzina araba, uno della Colombia, qualche spagnolo...insomma...qualcuno. Però, è solo un'apertura...è solo un'apertura. // A te non preoccupa? // No assolutamente. Dipende...almeno, dalla mia esperienza non è stato un problema. Dipende dalla % è ovvio che se uno si trova su 25 alunni 22 cinesi che parlano cinese...il programma viene rallentato sì. Se ci sono su 25, 6 che sono uno spagnolo, uno francese e tutti parlano l'italiano è solo una bella cosa. (Sibilla, Italian, Vega, CS)

Nevertheless, since this was not an issue, foreign pupils are often presented as an asset and celebrated as giving more meaning to the school experience. Most of the time, the school is described as a “real life experience” and when it has a really low percentage of foreign pupils. In fact, the existence of children from different backgrounds in the school, instead of being described as problematic in line with fleeing parents’ accounts, is put under good light because it is compared to highly selective schools, such private schools. In comparison with these environments attended by rich pupils coming from rich families – regarded as dangerous – public schools with a lower percentage of foreign pupils, such as Vega, paradoxically appears to be mixed, according to mothers. Amelia, for instance, expressed her preference for a “right and healthy” number of foreign pupils as a positive element for her children, in comparison with a famous private school in Milan.

I haven't even had the problem of the school being not suitable for my needs in terms of population. In fact, to tell the truth, I have always preferred that my children went to public school exactly because they could start to know children coming from other countries and cultures. That is, I would never have sent them to San Carlo or Leo XIII, where the environment, although rich, is not the environment that I want my children to be in.

So, you did consider this element.

In a positive way, however, there is a fair a healthy number of children coming from other countries, because my children don't consider them as different, they are much better than us. There are many South Americans here. Francesca also has a Chinese friend who is also very good at math. Let's say it is not the San Carlo School¹⁷¹. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

School mix, which as we saw is subjectively perceived, is celebrated and considered to enrich and not to limit children’s experience. Thus, the approach to pupils’ ethnicity is very different from the one showed above, and mothers praise multiculturality in the classroom

¹⁷¹ Io non ho neanche avuto questo problema qua di dire la scuola non è adatta alle mie esigenze anche dal punto di vista della frequentazione. Anzi, le dirò la verità, io ho sempre preferito che i miei figli andassero alla scuola pubblica proprio perché iniziassero ad avere delle prime frequentazioni con bambini provenienti anche da altri paesi e da altre culture. Cioè io non li avrei mai mandati al San Carlo o al Leone XIII, dove l'ambiente...pur di ricchi, non è l'ambiente che voglio che i miei figli frequentino. // *Quindi questa cosa l'ha considerata...* // In maniera positiva, comunque c'è un numero di bambini provenienti da altri paesi...giusto e sano...perché i miei figli, e son molto più bravi di noi, non considerino diversi gli altri bambini. Ci sono molti sudamericani da noi. Francesca ha anche un compagno cinese che tra l'altro è anche bravissimo in matematica. Non è il San Carlo ecco. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

as great opportunity to provide their children with a taste of that they would not have otherwise. The rhetoric of the ‘goodness’ of foreign pupils was recurring also among this group of mothers, and the presence of such pupils is considered to be enriching and not to constitute a real obstacle.

In elementary school, I actually found that there was much alarm about nothing, there were a lot of foreign children who were an enrichment for both my children’s classrooms. Because they found children, how to say, extremely ... rich in different experiences, they didn't have learning difficulties, there were some difficulties but crosscutting the classroom. Italian children were often the most problematic indeed. So...no problems. They both have different foreign children in lower secondary school too, moreover my children tend to bound with foreign children, so often they are intimate friends, no problem again. They are children coming from everywhere in the world and all...we had very positive experiences¹⁷². (Tina, Italian, Spica, CS)

As in the case of Tina, the approach towards foreign pupils’ presence in the classroom is similar among those who opted for a more selective school and those who applied to Spica, which previously had a bad reputation because of its intake, similarly to the case of Sirius. Although in the latter case, there is the objective presence of a higher concentration of non-Italian pupils – compared to Bellatrix or Vega – and although the mothers certainly have more experience with a mixed classroom, their approach is equally softened in their accounts, and the presence of foreign pupils is certainly not a priority among the criteria applied in school selection.

On the contrary, in the same neighbourhood in which many Italian parents judged negatively Sirius because of its population, four mothers opted exactly for this specific school. The dislike for other options, was concomitant with the preference for a school that could offer them a mixed environment without precluding the presence of a good teaching

¹⁷² Alle elementari in realtà io ho trovato che c’era un grandissimo allarmismo per niente, nel senso che c’era una quantità di bambini stranieri che per quello che riguarda entrambe le classi dei miei figli è stato un arricchimento, per entrambi. Perché han trovato ragazzini, come dire, estremamente...ricchi di esperienze diverse, nessuna difficoltà dal punto di vista dell’apprendimento, nel senso che c’erano in classe delle difficoltà ma erano trasversali...anzi spesso erano i bambini italiani quelli più problematici. Ehm...quindi nessuna difficoltà. Alle scuole medie anche, hanno entrambi diversi bambini stranieri, tra l’altro i miei figli hanno una propensione a sviluppare amicizie con bambini stranieri, per cui spesso loro intimi amici, anche qui nessun problema, anzi. Bambini tra l’altro che arrivano da ovunque, e tutti...come dire, esperienze molto positive. (Tina, Italian, Spica, CS)

staff. However, it was not only the dislike for other options in the neighbourhood that guided their decision, as something different emerges that relates to mothers' personal belief.

In their accounts, they explicitly motivate their decision as a consequence of their political/ideological stance for multiculturalism. Their political position in favour of a mixed school and in opposition to schools that presented themselves as selective, guided their decision of enrolment as a proper act of "trust" towards the school and a firm decision to stay in the neighbourhood school. They valued as an asset the presence of heterogeneity in terms of class and ethnicity, and since they found reassuring elements with regard to the quality of learning and teaching, they deliberately chose to enrol their children in a school with a bad or shaky reputation.

I did it because of...sorry if I always use the word political, but it is about policy, citizenship, it was a highly criticized school with a high presence of immigrants. I said okay, I'll enrol my son. Because I don't like ghetto schools etc. So, Emilio is together with 6...8 immigrant kids, three that are second generations and the others that aren't¹⁷³. (Carla, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

Of course, the appreciation of Sirius is also related to their specific idea of what a good school is or may be. In fact, they offer a more complex picture of the school, balancing what it is in fact – a school with a higher concentration of foreign pupils compared to other school – with what may represent a strength and not a weakness. They acknowledge that because of the complexity that school staff must face, teachers are highly valuable, and the school embraces a pedagogical approach focused more on inclusiveness, tailoring teaching activities to the individual pupil, than on performance and academic achievement.

Their decisions cannot be considered naïf or uninformed, as they are in fact perfectly aware of other parents' decision to flee from that institution, and they build their own choice in opposition to this tendency. If the flow goes in the direction of abandoning the school, as we will see in the next Chapter, their own choice is presented as a stubborn decision against the grain. They gave value to what may scare other parents, considering the presence of foreign pupils to be enriching. Their narratives, in fact, are full of positive words that point

¹⁷³ E l'ho fatto anche qui in termini...scusi sempre uso la parola politico...però proprio di policy, di cittadinanza, era una scuola molto criticata perché con una presenza elevata di immigrati e io ho detto va bene, ci metto mio figlio. Perché non amo le scuole ghetto etc. Allora, Emilio si trova con 6 ragazzi, 8 ragazzi 8 ragazzi immigrati, tre di seconda generazione e gli altri no. (Carla, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

in the direction of trust in considering or, better, re-evaluating the neighbourhood school that is celebrated as having several characteristics, including diversity and closeness.

Also, because I have been volunteering for 25 years and therefore for me diversity is a treasure. Also, because in elementary school they weren't just Italians, if they're kids who were born here, they're Italians to me. Even if the state doesn't recognize them. Since we live... more and more, in a multi-ethnic world, it's right that they have to deal with different cultures, because they have to know what's outside the world¹⁷⁴. (Ada, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

5.3 The decision-making process

Mothers accounts of the choice are the result of each mother narration of this past event, therefore they often intertwined the reasons behind their choices (the criteria that has been explored above) and the process of choice. In fact, while explaining why they chose a certain school they provide information about who was involved in the decision-making, how they assessed schools on the basis of their guiding criteria and through which channel they accessed the information to assess the school. Often these different elements overlap in the same narration flow and sometimes in the same sentence. Nevertheless, the following section will be devoted to different levels of the decision-making process that lead mothers to their final choices, with the aim of understanding who is in charge of the choice and which are the main channels to access information.

5.3.1 Mother's and "mothers-only" work? Entitlement of the decision within a family

All narrations that has been explored here concern women because all interviewees are mothers, except for three fathers – Mahmoud and Jorge, a Palestinian and Peruvian who immigrated to Italy, and Tom. To understand how the choice was negotiated inside the

¹⁷⁴ Anche perché io faccio volontariato da 25 anni e quindi per me la diversità è ricchezza. Anche perché alle elementari non è che erano solo italiani, anche alle elementari ci sono ragazzi...quindi se sono ragazzi che sono nati qua, sono italiani per me. Anche se poi lo Stato non li riconosce. E quindi...è giusto...e visto che siamo...sempre di più, in un mondo multietnico, è giusto che abbiano a che fare con diverse culture, perché devono conoscere anche cosa c'è fuori dal mondo. (Ada, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

family, the interview explored their (former or current) partner's involvement in the decision. In two-parent families, no kind of conflict emerged in the choice of a school preferred over another, and the final decision was described by all married/partnered mothers as shared by both parents equally. Similarly, in the case of separated couples, the majority of which were together at the moment of the choice, the last word on enrolment was described as shared by the other partner, although some disagreement emerged in two cases – where the opposite positions toward the ‘best’ school arose – but the mother had the final word.

Despite this apparent harmony within the couple, the consensus on the choice appears to have resulted from mostly work on the part of only mothers through information gathering and evaluation towards the final decision. In fact, fathers remain in the background during most of the process of schooling children and in the different steps of school choice. In this way, their participation is *submarine*, as it emerges only in few cases, when specifically needed. Interestingly, mothers describe their husband or partner's involvement in the choice to in part result from a lack of time in combination with less interest, even if mothers are also full-time workers, as with the case of Diane, a full-time project coordinator in a large publishing company, who justified her partner's lower involvement in school activities. Her husband is less present than she is at school, but he never misses special occasions, such as participating in a competition among schools called “Energiadi”, which addresses the energy issue and aims to strengthen a sense of community inside the school. In fact, over a weekend, parents, teachers, pupils must ride for 52 hours no stop on eight stationary bikes to beat other participants.

Did you share the choice with your partner?

Yes absolutely, even if I go ahead for reconnaissance and then report to him!

So, did you mainly take care of the information-gathering?

Yes, I did.

Is he involved at the school level, does he participate as much as you do?

Less, for lack of time, because he works in Lorenteggio. Then when men work, they really work! But for example, during the Energiadi he was always there too. When there is the chance, like plays and things like this, he is there, absolutely. Then, actually, in everyday things and commitments ... one is enough (*she laughs*)¹⁷⁵.
(Diane, Italian, Spica, OfC)

¹⁷⁵ *La scelta è stata condivisa con il tuo compagno? // Assolutamente sì...anche se io vado in avanscoperta e poi relaziono! // Quindi la raccolta di informazioni l'hai fatta tu principalmente? // Sì. // Lui è coinvolto nella scuola, partecipa tanto quanto te? //No...un po' meno...un po' per questioni di tempo, perché lui comunque lavora a Lorenteggio, poi gli uomini quando lavorano, lavorano! Però per esempio alle Energiadi era lì sempre*

However, a recurring framing of fathers' marginality in this process is the characterization of their behaviour as delegating the responsibility to mothers, in the sense of giving them *carte blanche* in evaluating different options, in gathering information and in assuming the responsibility of the choice itself. This attitude is described by mothers through their own 'privileged' position of being left with considerable space to be in charge, and no interviewed woman complained about a supposedly unfair division of roles, while two of them declared that they enjoy this situation.

Did you take care of collecting information? Not your partner?

No, I reported to him, but we must also say that if, by chance, he had told me that he didn't agree, I would have gone straight ahead.

Did you share the choice with him?

I did, that is, I have said "look, in my opinion, this and that". And he always told me that it was my call. He was not happy with School_1_elementary, he told me later that he knew it was going to end like this. In the end he was a little happy to say "I knew it". He has left me doing almost everything¹⁷⁶. (Natalia, Italian, Vela, OfC)

Still, fathers are not completely out of the picture: they play a role as background actors who do a small amount of work, as they may accompany mothers to open days or call a friend who works in a school to ask for information. Thus, they may come on stage in specific cases and disappear again in the background as soon as they have finished their temporary role. Two different examples in our group are particularly illustrative of this on-and-off presence of fathers in their children's schooling. When Anna and her husband were about to choose her only daughter's elementary school, her husband vetoed their catchment

anche lui. Quando ci sono le occasioni...i saggi queste cose assolutamente sì. Poi effettivamente nelle cose quotidiane...nell'impegno...uno basta insomma (*ride*). (Diane, Italian, Spica, OfC)

¹⁷⁶ *Di raccogliere le informazioni etc. te ne sei occupata tu...non il tuo compagno?* // No...io gli dicevo, c'è anche da dire che se per caso lui m'avesse detto io non sono d'accordo io sarei andata dritta. // *La scelta è stata condivisa?* // È stata condivisa...cioè io ho detto guarda secondo me questo e quest'altro. E lui mi ha sempre detto fai tu, lui non era contento della School_1_elementary, me l'ha detto...me l'ha detto poi dopo. 'Io lo sapevo che andava a finire così!'. Alla fine è stato un po' contento di dire io lo sapevo. Mi ha sempre fatto fare abbastanza a me. (Natalia, Italian, Vela, OfC)

area school because it was too big: she says “*It looks like a barrack, he said. He didn’t go deeply on it, he saw the barrack, he said there were too many children, that it was a mess and too chaotic*”¹⁷⁷. After his firm opposition, Anna started looking for a private elementary school. Despite this “instinctive thing”¹⁷⁸ – as she defines it – her husband did not intervene anymore afterwards in other important decisions, and he “followed” Anna’s preferences. In addition, Fatma’s husband played a temporary role vis-à-vis the school system in gathering information about kindergarten and talking with school staff when Fatma joined him in Italy from Egypt and had her first baby. Nevertheless, as soon as she learned Italian and started understanding how the system worked, her husband did not play a role anymore.

Was you or your husband that deal with the choice of lower secondary school?

It was me. My husband on this thing is a no. No, no, no!

Why?

Because I’m more prepared than him, that is why on these things no, I do everything, since the beginning, from writing ... from everything, He doesn’t do anything!¹⁷⁹

(Fatma, not Italian, Sirius, CS) 133

Despite a similar pattern in their husbands’ participation, the consequences of this division of roles when it comes to schools and school choice are different for Anna and Fatma. In fact, in the first case, Anna took care of managing their daughter’s schooling from kindergarten, but at the critical point, her position became secondary, as she says. In contrast, in Fatma’s case, being able to know how the educational system worked resulted from time spent ‘studying’ (and not only the Italian language) in order to be the leading actor in her children’s education in a completely new country.

Overall, the mothers seem to be entitled to lead the decision process and to do most of the work, with support by their husbands/partners on the side, while another actor may intervene in this unbalanced weighting within the family. In fact, even if children’s voice

¹⁷⁷ ‘Sto casermone, diceva. Lui non c’è neanche entrato nel merito, lui ha visto il casermone, ha detto troppi bambini, troppo casino, troppo dispersiva”.

¹⁷⁸ “Roba istintiva”.

¹⁷⁹ *E sulla scelta della scuola media te ne sei occupata tu o anche tuo marito? //No mio marito su questa cosa no, nonono! // Come mai? //Perché io sono più preparata per lui [di lui ndr] per quello su queste cose no...ormai dall’inizio già...faccio di tutto, sulle cose anche da scrizione...da tutto, lui non fa nulla! (Fatma, not Italian, Sirius, CS)*

was not directly heard in this work, their everyday life and schooling experience, as well as their personalities, are present in mothers' narrations to different degrees. Moreover, it is expected that they are taken into account in the decision, but it cannot be assumed that they express certain preferences and personalities and that mothers give them credit. From mothers' narrations the position of boys and girls is marginal: they appear to have been left out of the decision, in terms of voice and participation even when mothers affirm the contrary. In fact, it is true that most mothers brought their children to attend open days, with the aim of capturing their reaction and feelings, but in their words, this involvement in the choice appears to be rather a quick confirmation or ratification of a decision that was already made. Because of their children's young age, mothers describe involving their children as difficult, and since they trust their parents, mothers decide on their behalf, even when they express some other preference.

So, no, I told you something wrong ... it's not true that we didn't involve him ... let's say that we involved him by telling him what we wanted to do. But it's not that his opinion would have been decisive. He tried to say, 'mum I want to go there because all my friends go there', but then at the end we said to him 'you're okay if we sign you up?', because there was also an older cousin who is like a reference point for him, and he said yes. Also, because at ten and a half years old, he is not even able to...¹⁸⁰ (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

Was she involved in the lower secondary school choice?

(sighs) She came to open days, but honestly, we chose ... 100%. She came to open days and expressed her opinion, she liked the school there, but probably she was more influenced by..let's say that what I thought become what she thought¹⁸¹. (Virginia, Italian, Spica, OfC)

¹⁸⁰ Allora...no, le ho detto una cosa inesatta...non è vero che non l'abbiam coinvolto...diciamo che lo abbiamo coinvolto raccontandogli quello che volevamo fare, ma non è che il suo parere sarebbe stato poi determinante. Ha provato a dire 'mamma voglio andare lì perché vanno tutti i miei compagni', però poi alla fine dato che ci andava anche il cugino grande che è un po' il suo punto di riferimento, comunque alla fine gli abbian detto 'ti va bene se ti iscriviamo?' ha detto di sì...anche perché a dieci anni e mezzo non è...neanche in grado. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

¹⁸¹ *Riguardo alla scelta delle medie lei comunque è stata coinvolta?* // (sospira) È venuta agli open day, però onestamente abbiamo scelto noi...al 100%. Agli open day è venuta e ha detto la sua, cioè lì le è piaciuto, però lì probabilmente l'influenza era più...era un po'...quello che pensavo io è diventato quello che pensava lei (Virginia, Italian, Spica, OfC)

Mothers therefore appears to play the central role in their children lower secondary school choice, in fact – although sometimes husbands/partners and children accompany them – they are the ones who work through the choice to evaluate options and select among them. This element emerges mainly in their description of a fundamental moment in the decision-making: the information-gathering, thank to which mothers learn about schools and their characteristics.

5.3.2 Information gathering

In fact, what has been missing from the puzzle is how mothers acquired all the information that guided them through the decision, allowing them to have an idea about the school and to conclude that it could be preferred over another one. In fact, if mothers' narrations highlight on the basis of which criteria they chose a certain school, they also reconstruct the information gathering process through which they assessed school quality or school mix (according to the relevance they attributed to each criteria).

As it has been highlighted in Chapter IV, not all parents engaged in school choice with the same awareness of the functioning of the system, as in fact we saw in the case of Mercedes, Jorge and Violeta. They relied heavily (and exclusively) on a third person's opinion – the landlord, the chief and the school staff – to enrol their children in a certain school. Apart from these *disconnected* parents, in the group of mothers emerged differences in the timing of information-gathering process.

Reflection on school choice does not overlap with the moment of enrolment; rather, it involves the families in the previous period of time. Italian schools do not require, on paper, early bird activation to get access to a specific school. Nevertheless, while the majority of mothers started thinking about lower secondary school in the fifth grade, four months before the online application deadline, twelve of them date their first activation on the school choice matter back to fourth grade (and in two cases even in third grade), thus with more than one year of anticipation. The latter mothers are among those who were guided by the school academic performance and by the school population characteristics. In this sense, considering mothers' timing also reveals how this choice is regarded as relevant – bringing with it a considerable amount of stress. In fact, school choice may be experienced as complicated, something that deserves time in order to gather necessary information.

When did you start thinking about the lower secondary school?

Oh well we are a bit psychopath (*she laughs*). No, I mean, we have already started last year to consider upper secondary schools open days, to go to some of them, so that this year we have already a little bit clearer idea and we'll only visit those schools in which there could be a real possibility. The same we did in elementary school, because we started in fourth grade, yes, yes. We are more organized, then we always go with our children, or maybe we go alone to grasp things better, but we always move a little in advance¹⁸². (Elsa, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

When did you start thinking about the lower secondary school?

Hem, I am always a bit of a tardy, in the sense that ... we are always a little late, we are always seraphic when approaching things. In fact, the enrolment was due in January and I went to see the schools in December (*she laughs*). There are those who go one year before, we always watch them a bit...so, we say it's okay if you really have nothing better to do¹⁸³. (Cristina, Italian, Spica, CS)

What is interesting to stress is that, independently from the time considered necessary to collect information, mothers are lacking in sources. In fact, regardless of the amount of time being several months, up to one year or more, or four or five months between the beginning of the year and enrolment, all mothers access to similar information through similar channels. What is interestingly different is, as we shall see, what they consider valuable and what they ultimately trust.

In looking and asking around since their children where in fifth or fourth grade, each mother cannot only gather all the information considered relevant with respect to her idea of a good school, but also respond to the fact that an institutionalized system of information on schools was missing and has been implemented only recently. In fact, although schools should upload online – on the ministerial website “Scuola in chiaro” – several pieces of information about their organization, pupils, human resources, financial management and self-

¹⁸² *E voi quanto tempo prima avete iniziato a pensare alla scuola media?* // Vabbè noi siamo un po' psicopatici ahah...no, nel senso che...perché per esempio adesso per le superiori, noi abbiamo già iniziato l'anno scorso a valutare un po' di open day, ad andare anche a qualche open day, in modo tale che poi, quest'anno, ci trovavamo già ad avere le idee un filo più chiare, e andare solo in quelle in cui veramente ci potrebbe essere la possibilità. E così abbiamo fatto alle elementari, perché abbiamo già iniziato in quarta, sì sì...Eh vabbè. Siamo un pochino più organizzati ...poi vabbè ci andiamo sempre con i figli, poi magari andiamo da soli per captare meglio, però comunque ci muoviamo sempre con un po' di anticipo. (Elsa, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

¹⁸³ *Quando avete iniziato a pensare a pensare alla scelta della scuola media?* // Eeeh....io sono sempre un po' una tardona, nel senso che...noi siamo sempre un po' tardi, siamo sempre molto serafici nelle cose...per cui in realtà c'era da fare l'iscrizione al gennaio e io a dicembre sono andata a vedere (*ride*). Ci sono quelli che vanno un anno prima, noi li guardiamo sempre un po' così, abbiamo detto....diciamo vabbè se proprio non ha niente di meglio da fare. (Cristina, Italian, Spica, CS)

evaluation, this process has taken off in only the last two years,¹⁸⁴ and only two mothers knew about it and used it.

Mothers did not use schools (or other institutions) websites, nor they engaged in the so called “pilgrimage” outside the school, to have a first impression of the intake. Given this scenario, information about schools is searched through two main channels: school themselves, with open days and presentations; and the grapevine.

5.3.3 Open days

Open days and school self-presentations play the role of giving parents formal information or providing them an occasion to get a sense of the school atmosphere or to have a look to the building. However, they are never determinant in the choice.

Open days provide the place and time where schools have the chance to present themselves to potential pupils and families and where parents may collect new information, visit the school and get a first impression. Open days seem to have become something known by all parents, and as such, they are part of families’ pre-enrolment activities. For instance, in our group, thirty mothers attended at least one open day, twelve attended two, and 10 of them attended more than two open days.

Nevertheless, they seem to be more of a ritual event to which all parents participate because “everybody does”. However, mothers and fathers attending school presentations, often with children, do not hold any real expectation regarding what they can provide, unless they are lacking some information – as for Nina who lived outside the area and was outside the grapevine – or they are particularly hesitant. Apart from that, open days may give parents a particularly good or bad impression (to mothers or children), and each person responds differently to the same message offered by the presentation.

Well, when you go to a school open day, in my opinion, you never know exactly what you're looking for...basically an impression ... an impression of what the school is, how it is presented, if there are any peculiarities in the subjects, because then subjects are the same everywhere. How the presentation of subjects is done, if there's a reinforcement on some subjects and workshops. You go there and you see,

¹⁸⁴ The project “Scuola in chiaro” started in 2011, but it has been improved in the last few years with the aim of “providing in an organic and structured way all the available information about Italian school at each level of education” <http://cercalatuascuola.istruzione.it/cercalatuascuola/approfondisci/> last access 4/4/2017.

also because open days are everything and nothing at the same time¹⁸⁵. (Tom, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

Also talking to mothers and going to hear the presentations, the principal wasn't afraid to say that they do study in that school, that they are committed, that it isn't easy. Then I immediately realized that at the school open day teachers of the full-time sezione were talking, so that was the best they had¹⁸⁶. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Open days appear to be a moment in which a sort of theatrical activity takes place, where the school shows its best cards, in an operation perceived by mothers and fathers as proper marketing. Parents frequently compare schools' activities and self-presentation to marketing and sales techniques employed in business activities. Particularly when discussing about open days, they make extensive use of words such as competition, sell/sales, clients, marketing, firm/business, advertising, slogan, and targets.

In fact, during school presentations, teachers and principals explain how the school works and what their educational offer is, and parents may sometimes have a tour of the school. Mothers and fathers respond by reiterating similar questions and asking for information about the possibility of getting access to the specific school, stability of the teaching body, and religious teaching and alternatives.

I don't know, even at this lower secondary school open day presentation...a whole series of slides...anyway open days are very very sad. Because basically they are made by professors selling themselves, they must explain their work to others. Then usually, and especially in elementary school, questions typically are about how many foreigners and how many pupils there are per class¹⁸⁷. (Frida, Italian, Pavo, CS)

¹⁸⁵ Allora, quando uno va a un open day, secondo me, non sa mai esattamente che cosa cerca...fondamentalmente un'impressione...un'impressione di quella che è la scuola, come viene presentata, quali sono...se ci sono delle peculiarità nelle materie, perché poi le materie sono uguali dappertutto. Come viene impostato il discorso della presentazione delle materie, se ci sono dei rinforzi su certe materie, determinati laboratori. Si va lì e si vede...anche perché gli open day sono tutto e niente. (Tom, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

¹⁸⁶ E poi anche un po' parlando con qualche mamma, e poi andando anche a sentire le presentazioni diciamo che...il preside non ha avuto timore di dire che lì si studiava, ci si impegnava, così, che non è così banale. Poi ho capito subito che...all'open day c'erano proprio le insegnanti del corso prolungato quindi....quello era il meglio che avevano. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

¹⁸⁷ Non so, anche la presentazione all'open day di questa scuola media, cioè tutta una serie di diapositive, a parte che gli open day sono di una tristezza mostruosa. Perché sono praticamente i professori che si vendono, che devono spiegare ad altri il loro lavoro, quello che...poi in genere le domande, specie alle elementari,

Even if they use slogans during open days. Open days in my opinion are just a marketing move, that's it. But if you are a parent who must choose for the first time, you really believe in what you hear¹⁸⁸. (Rosa, Italian, Spica, OfC)

Despite this “show”, parents are left with no additional information than what they could find online – and did not look for. Moreover, they are aware of the artificial operation and thus do not trust what is said during open days.

5.3.4 Grapevine information

The lack of official rankings about schools and other information related to lower secondary schools performance, combined with the distrust in school open days leaves one option open, which is the one that parents prefer in order to collect important information about schools: asking around, asking other mothers, and asking or receiving advice from the grapevine. Asking around and getting information through the neighbourhood grapevine represent the core of parental activation to gain knowledge about a school.

When I chose...rather than going to open days, that I discourage, because in my opinion they are absolutely useless... I recommend asking to mothers¹⁸⁹. (Susanna, Italian, Sirius, CS)

In addition to the school open day I knew older children's mothers who attended Bellatrix_2 and Bellatrix 1 and I had feedbacks on what I considered to be a priority, right?¹⁹⁰ (Angela, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Then in fact, mothers who already had children...were decisive...knowing that mothers had a certain approach. In my opinion, unfortunately, word of mouth is

c'erano una serie di domande classiche 'ma quanti stranieri ci sono' 'ma quanti alunni per classe'. (Frida, Italian, Pavo, CS)

¹⁸⁸ Anche se, negli open day, ovviamente, si regalano degli slogan. Gli open day secondo me appunto sono una mossa pubblicitaria, punto. Che però se tu sei il genitore che devi scegliere per la prima volta, ci credi davvero. (Rosa, Italian, Spica, OfC)

¹⁸⁹ Almeno io quando ho scelto, più che andare agli open day, che io sconsiglio, cioè secondo me non servono assolutamente a niente. Io consiglio di chiedere alle mamme. (Susanna, Italian, Sirius, CS)

¹⁹⁰ Oltre all'open day io avevo altre mamme di bambini più grandi che avevano frequentato la Bellatrix_2 e la Bellatrix 1 e avevo dei rimandi rispetto a quello che io ritenevo essere prioritario no? (Angela, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

crucial, especially at the lower secondary school where you don't have anything objective, like a ranking¹⁹¹. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Following the grapevine is an activity that seems to involve a broad network of people, not necessarily close friends or parents, to whom mothers may have very weak social ties. In fact, they collect as much information as possible, as Anna stated: "I unleashed my acquaintances in the area. I can invent everything. I go to shops and stationery stores, and I investigate...!". Nevertheless, there is the awareness that this bulk of information may not be entirely trustworthy and valuable.

I think the personal experience is different ... I can like the school as my daughter can like certain teachers, but it is not certain that you will like it too. But word of mouth is certainly important, in my opinion, perhaps we as mothers trust word of mouth more than other things. Then, it's on you to...I have heard so many things, it's on you to say that your experience is different from others¹⁹². (Thelma, Italian, Vega, OfC)

In fact, this information is scrutinized with a more specific and targeted selection of opinions coming from stronger ties involving if not friends than other parents with whom they believe they have something in common or who occupy a professional position (teachers, for instance). How mothers perceive someone and his/her position regarding the school as trustworthy emerges in very heterogeneous way among the group of interviewees. In fact, some have had a specific person who substantially mattered in the choice. For instance, Mahmoud trusted another father and neighbour, and Mary, instead of following her cousins' suggestion, preferred to listen to a more "reliable source", teachers. Others, represented in the account of Emmeline, looked for reliable information coming from people

¹⁹¹ Poi appunto, molto sicuramente in quel caso lì han fatto appunto, qualche mamma che aveva già i figli, conoscendo le madri, insomma, avevano una certa impostazione. Il passaparola secondo me, purtroppo è fondamentale, soprattutto a livello secondo me di medie, dove, non hai...non hai qualcosa di oggettivo, una classifica. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

¹⁹² Ritengo che l'esperienza personale sia diversa...io mi posso trovare bene...come mia figlia si può trovare bene con certi determinati maestri, professori etc, non è detto che tua figlia si possa trovare bene. Però vabè...il passaparola sicuramente è importante, anche perché, secondo me noi mamme ci fidiamo forse di più del passaparola. Dopo sei tu che devi, io tante ne ho sentite, poi dopo dici, la tua esperienza è un modo, la tua è un altro. (Thelma, Italian, Vega, OfC)

whom they could trust subjectively and whom they perceived as similar to their own point of view.

For example, I trusted a person who lives upstairs, I was the one who organized the end of the year school party in Sirius_elementary2 and I had taken his place. When he left ... he said that he was going to Mimosa because of this and that, he explained us why¹⁹³. (Mahmoud, not Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

My cousin told me that Bellatrix was totally the best school. Then this mom that was a Mimosa teacher contributed a little, she gave me information that I trusted. She is a professional, she told me a few things, she was a more reliable source. I trust all mothers...but it's very subjective... many are bounded to their group of friends, you know?¹⁹⁴ (Mary, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

However, what makes the difference is that the information comes from a person that you perceive as similar to you. So, it is very vague, very subjective. In the sense that I trust people who seem to be like me, and therefore, with very broad criteria, with an educational style with their children, with a certain socio-cultural level rather than a socio-economic one. Because after some years that you know a parent, more or less you get an idea, so if you know that you tend to disagree with him, it is likely that even the information he gives you is not true to you. That is true for him but not for you¹⁹⁵. (Emmeline, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

¹⁹³ Nel nostro caso per esempio, mi fidavo molto di una persona che abita qua sopra di noi che tra l'altro, io essendo quello che gestiva la festa di fine anno, di Sirius_elementary2 avevo preso il suo posto., subentrato. Quando lui è andato via...ha detto vado in Mimosa perché... mi ha spiegato il perché. (Mahmoud, not Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

¹⁹⁴ Mia cugina mi diceva assolutamente la Bellatrix è la scuola migliore. Poi un po' è stata l'insegnante, questa mamma insegnante di Mimosa che mi ha dato delle informazioni di cui mi sono fidata. Professionista, mi ha detto un po' di cose, quindi come fonte più attendibile. Le mamme son tutte, cioè, mi fido di tutte per l'amor di dio, però c'è molta cosa soggettiva, molte sono legate al gruppo delle amiche, cioè capito non so quanto alla fine. (Mary, Italian, Mimosa, OfC)

¹⁹⁵ Cioè secondo me comunque quello che fa la differenza è che l'informazione ti venga data da una persona che tu percepisci simile a te. Quindi è molto vago, molto soggettivo. Nel senso che io mi fido delle persone che mi sembra a pelle che siano simili a me e quindi, con dei criteri molto ampi, di...stile educativo con i figli, di tipo di livello socio...culturale più che socioeconomico. Perché magari dopo anni che conosci un genitore più o meno ti fai un'idea, quindi se sai che tendenzialmente non sei d'accordo con lui, è probabile che anche l'informazione che ti dà non sia per te veritiera. Cioè è veritiera per lui ma non per te. (Emmeline, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

What emerged as particularly interesting was the fact that social networks are not pivotal in allowing only more educated parents to gain access to exclusive and precious information that other families are excluded from. In fact, all mothers relied on word of mouth and others' opinions and suggestion in order to learn about school characteristics. This is also due to the fact that there are not particularly complicated rules or protocols for knowing about enrolment or about how the system works, and very little objective information is formally available.

The only difference that could be noted is that parents that were already involved in school activities in the same comprehensive institution (half of the group) had access to specific information they would not have otherwise. In fact, they were in a position to see how the school works and to be in touch with school staff. But also, having considered their specificity, we did not find any exclusive circles among which more privileged parents learned and circulated what they know about schools. On the contrary, everybody depended on grapevine information, because as one mother said, "the neighbourhood is a little town in Milan!", referring to the limited spatial area in which all this knowledge about institutions circulates.

What instead differed among families is the way in which they looked at the validity and importance of this information, gathered through the grapevine. In fact, the majority of Italian middle-class families attributed great relevance to word of mouth, as they seem to find it reassuring when it was coming from people like them. In fact, it can be said that their interest was not in knowing how things go in a school, in reality, but in how other families – which they trust or regard as similar – feel and what they think about it.

In this sense, while the information on which parents rely is poor in generic terms – regarding the characteristics of the system – lower class and non-Italian families do not necessarily follow the grapevine. In contrast, middle-class parents in the group, and especially those who are concerned about the validity of the catchment area school (e.g., fleeing parents), use word of mouth in their social networks as the basis for their choice and as a guiding element that may confirm or belie their doubts. If Italian middle-class parents are more likely to follow other middle-class parents' opinions about schools and if these, as we saw, are concerned with schools' intake and parental involvement, the centrality of the grapevine may even enhance a choice that very often consists in looking for a socioeconomically and ethnically similar school population.

5.4 Conclusion

In the overall, mothers evaluated options on a micro-territorial level, considering the school (or schools) in their neighbourhood and in adjacent ones. In this sense, the school's relative closeness to home transversally characterizes the decision at this level of education, although with a different order of priority, as we shall see.

Facing a scenario with several schools as alternative options, mothers' main criteria of choice can be clustered around three elements: children's preferences and wellbeing; school quality, defined on the basis of school performances and school approach; and school population socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics.

Only for a small group of parents the choice was influenced only by home-school closeness and by children expressed preference and wellbeing, regardless of other factors. Instead the pursuit of a school where children could learn and be well trained is present in all other mothers' accounts. For some, the first criterion of choice is related to school academic performance – as a way to ensure educational success in the future – and to others is more important to offer one's child a stimulating and caring environment, focused on the individual growth more than academic achievements.

For other mothers, the concern for their children education emerged as strongly related to the school composition in terms of social and ethnic mix. Schools' population characteristics are mainly related to pupils' national origin and/or socioeconomic background, since parents are interested in the composition of school intakes in term of high or low concentration of foreign and/or socially disadvantaged pupils. For instance, the school mix, when perceived as troubling, may be associated with a softer pedagogical approach and a higher risk of cognitive and behavioural problems that may impede pupils' education. Moreover, mothers may care about other pupils characteristics because they are willing to find a culturally homogeneous school setting, in order for their children to bound with other children "like them". Finally, if on the one hand diversity may be considered as a negative asset when choosing the school, it can also be valued by parents who choose mainly on the basis of their ideological belief sustaining social and ethnic mix as enriching.

Mothers generally learn about schools and their characteristics through the neighbourhood grapevine and schools' self-presentation during open days. The importance attributed to the choice of lower secondary school that emerges from mothers' will to find the best possible school for their children, collides with the kind of information that they are able or willing to gather regarding possible school options. Although mothers appear to be well-informed about schools, the kind of knowledge that they hold mainly results from

information gathering over a short distance through weak social ties. Ultimately, the majority of information about schools are other parents or people's opinion or experience of what mothers were originally interested in.

Chapter VI - Parents' strategies of choice: in or out of the catchment area?

6.1 Introduction

Mothers' representations of catchment areas, criteria of choice and decision-making process have been explored in the last two Chapters with the aim of understanding a complex process such as the lower secondary school choice is. From mothers' reconstruction of their past actions and behaviours – and the declared reasons behind them – it is possible to say that school choice take place, for almost the totality of mothers, with a prior consideration of several school options in their territory. Mothers' are aware of the existence of a catchment area school – although sometimes they could be misinformed about it – and the binding function of the catchment area is encountered as an obstacle in the specific case of surplus of applications. We have explored the main criteria that guided their decisions in the way mothers themselves explained and justified their choices.

Mothers' evaluations of schools take place on the basis of two main criteria, related to school quality – declined as academic performance or school approach – and most importantly to pupils' socioeconomic and ethnic background – which entails both the concern with the academic level and the preference for a homogenous setting. The assessment of schools on the basis of these criteria take place on the basis of information about the school that are gathered mainly through word of mouth – what “they say” about schools reputation or quality – but are considered as trustworthy when coming from “people like us”.

This chapter is devoted to place mothers' choices within their local context, the neighbourhood, with the aim of looking at the characteristics of their catchment area schools and how their own criteria of choice have been influenced by the educational offer, resulting in specific enrolment decisions. Therefore, first of all the chapter includes a description of the schools involved in the research on the basis of “cold” information accessible by their websites and as they are described by mothers in their narration.

Moreover, the chapter will explore to which extent being in a certain school catchment area influenced mothers' main criteria of choice, compared with other mothers in other catchment areas. Hence, schooling decisions will be analysed as flows in and out of catchment area schools stressing how they emerge as specific schooling strategies of

avoidance of certain schools. Finally, it will be highlighted how these strategies combine with parents' socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics.

6.2 “Cold” knowledge on schools characteristics

The small *constellation* of schools in this study includes five lower secondary schools (at which 39 of 43 of the interviewed parents have at least one child enrolled): Mimosa, Vega, Bellatrix (1 and 2) and Sirius, which are located in the west part of Milan within a 2-km radius. It also includes Spica, which instead is located in the east part of Milan and is surrounded by other five schools in a 3-km radius. Moreover, five interviewed parents have one child enrolled in one of four other schools that are Andromeda, Libra, Vela and Pavo, which are located in the same areas of the selected school, with Andromeda in the west and the rest in the east. As it was already explained in Chapter III, they were selected also on the basis of the concentration of foreign population inside the school and in the neighbourhood, as in fact they have different characteristics with respect to this. While Sirius has almost the 47% of not Italian pupils (and its neighbourhood, Lorenteggio the 14%), the other institutes has lower concentration of foreign students (from the 7% of Vega to the almost 30% of Spica).

Although it is not very common to find specific data related to school population available as open data and schools are not compelled to publish them, most recently schools, as part of the public administration, have been encouraged (and under some aspects compelled) to adjust their website to a common standard. This standardization also involves the production and publication of specific documents that, nevertheless, can be personalized such that schools can emphasize some aspects more than others. These documents – the Educational offering plan (POF), the three-year educational offering plan (PTOF) and the auto evaluation report (RAV)¹⁹⁶ – contain detailed information about the school. Through them, parents might be potentially in the position to have access to “cold” knowledge about schools resources, activities, drop-outs, population etc.

Therefore, my aim is to present here some of Mimosa, Vega, Bellatrix, Sirius and Spica's features, coming exactly from these documents and from their website. I describe the schools as they would appear if parents learned about schools from only (or at least

¹⁹⁶ It can be read or downloaded on a specific website provided by the Ministry of Education – and already mentioned in chapter III – called “Scuola in chiaro”.

through) these sources. We will see, later in Section 6.3, how parents evaluate schools on the basis of their reputation more than on their more “objective” features.

6.2.1 Vega

In an imaginary walk through Milan, moving from the city centre towards the periphery, we find Vega lower secondary school in a 1959 building that serves, alone, approximately 700 students. Pupils are distributed in 30 classrooms, with an average of 25 per classroom, and divided into 10 classrooms (*sezioni*), six with 30 hours of classes (“tempo normale”), two with 34 hours of classes and two with a musical curriculum (32 hours). Until the 2013/2014 school year, Vega was one of the few middle schools remaining that had not been included in a Comprehensive Institute. In that year, as is explained on the school website, “The comprehensive institute [...] has been created [...] after the Lombardy Region resizing plan, following a suggestion coming from the Municipality of Milan”. This merging operation coupled the lower secondary school Vega with two nearby elementary schools that, nevertheless, are physically separated from Vega’s building. Vega’s principal has been in charge since the 2013/2014 school year, but he was a music teacher in the same school for most of his career.

Interestingly, Vega’s website provides a description of the neighbourhood, Washington, defined as a “residential area next to the city centre”, and of parents and pupils. Particular emphasis is placed on the parents’ level of education and working status and on parents’ involvement within the school.

"Our students' parents have on average between a secondary and a tertiary education; in most cases both parents work. They ask for wide cultural competences and for a school that takes care of and respects individual rhythms and needs; they are very responsive to school proposals and they are gathered in a Parents Association which is participating and active in school's projects." ¹⁹⁷(Vega website)

However, some information is provided on families’ economic background, which is defined

¹⁹⁷ “I genitori dei nostri alunni hanno mediamente un titolo di studio compreso tra il diploma della Scuola Secondaria di secondo grado e la laurea; nella maggior parte dei casi lavorano entrambi i genitori. Gli stessi richiedono sia una preparazione culturale ampia sia una scuola che rispetti ritmi e necessità individuali; sono molto attenti alle proposte che la scuola presenta e si sono costituiti in Associazioni di Genitori presenti e attive nella progettualità della scuola” (Vega website).

as mixed but with a majority of middle and upper-class parents, and on the ethnic composition of the intake. In this case, the low concentration of foreign pupils is stressed as a sign of strength for their integration, together with an emphasis on the existence (and frequency) of these pupils' excellent performance.

“In recent years, multi-ethnic pupils have grown, they are differently distributed between primary and lower secondary school. Pupils of foreign origin are about the 9% of those currently enrolled and attending the school, but, in most cases, they were born in Italy. The relative small incidence of foreign students allows an easier integration; it is not infrequent that foreign origin pupils show excellent results”¹⁹⁸ (Vega website)

6.2.2 Mimosa

Continuing walking southwest, in 20 minutes, we reach Mimosa lower secondary school, which has recently changed its site because its former building was declared unusable in 2013. Mimosa has been part of a comprehensive institute since 1999, together with one elementary school 1,5 km away. Mimosa lower secondary school has 400 pupils, distributed in 18 classrooms, with 24 children each on average. All six active *sezioni* have a 30-hour curriculum. Because its principal has uploaded his resume in the website, we know that he has been a principal since 2007; however, in what year he began managing Mimosa is unclear. Based on the RAV, he appears to have taken charge around the 2012/2013 school year.

The Mimosa school website is designed with the aim of providing visual material to describe Mimosa's identity and activities, primarily photos and videos, but its PTOF contains specific reference in its first page to the territory and the characteristics of the school intake. This document provides more than a description of the neighbourhood characteristics, also including references to actors and institutions that help and support the school in its extra-curricular offerings.

¹⁹⁸ Negli ultimi anni si è verificato un ampliamento dell'utenza multietnica, diversamente distribuita tra Scuola Primaria e Scuola secondaria di I Grado. Tra gli alunni che attualmente sono iscritti e frequentano, il 9% circa non è di origine italiana ma, nella gran parte dei casi, è nato in Italia. La relativa esiguità della percentuale di alunni stranieri consente un'agevole integrazione; sono frequenti i casi di alunni di origine straniera con risultati eccellenti” (Vega website).

“With regard to the educational, cultural, recreational activities the school uses those who are selected by teachers and also offered by external cultural and educative associations. Consigli di zona e the city council cooperate with the school on several levels and guarantee support at the economic, structural and planning level. Even if they don’t always have resources and instruments necessary to relaunch the institution.”¹⁹⁹(Mimosa PTOF).

Moreover, from the PTOF’s first pages, it is possible to have an idea of the ethnic characteristics of the school population because those pages stress the school’s activation to respond to the needs of this specific group of pupils.

“Foreign students belong to different ethnic groups; the majority is from the Philippines. Since many parents speak English, the presence of linguistic mediators during parents-school interviews is limited. The presence of foreign students with different Italian literacy levels has "pushed" the school to respond to their needs and their classrooms. The school must consider some constraints in its educational plan, among which the significant number of foreign students in the classes deserves particular attention. The arrival of students during the year, requires more teachers and the activation of Italian literacy courses in both our school complexes”²⁰⁰ (Mimosa, PTOF 2016/2019).

6.2.3 Bellatrix

Not far from Mimosa, at a 1,8-km walking distance, we found one of the two Bellatrix schools. In fact, Bellatrix is the only school in the group with two separated lower secondary schools in the same institution, and it serves almost 800 hundred pupils (400

¹⁹⁹ “Per quanto riguarda le attività formative, culturali e ricreative la scuola si avvale, oltre che di una ricca e articolata offerta selezionata dai docenti, anche delle proposte di associazioni culturali e formative esterne in grado di assicurare servizi e supporti ai processi educativi. Consigli di zona e Consiglio comunale collaborano, infatti, con la scuola a livelli diversi e garantiscono supporto economico, strutturale e progettuale, anche se non sempre dispongono delle risorse e degli strumenti necessari a un appropriato rilancio dell’istituzione scolastica”. (Mimosa PTOF

²⁰⁰ “Gli studenti stranieri appartengono a gruppi di etnie diverse, il più numeroso è quello di studenti provenienti dalle Filippine. Poiché molte famiglie parlano anche la lingua inglese, la presenza di mediatori durante i colloqui è limitata. La presenza di studenti stranieri di I e II alfabetizzazione ha “spinto” la scuola a offrire risposte specifiche ai bisogni di questi alunni e alle classi che di volta in volta li hanno accolti. La scuola deve tener conto, nella sua programmazione didattico-educativa di alcuni vincoli tra i quali merita particolare attenzione il numero significativo di alunni stranieri nelle classi e l’arrivo in corso d’anno di altri, richiede la presenza di più docenti e l’attivazione di altri laboratori di L1 e L2 in entrambi i plessi” (Mimosa, PTOF 2016/2019).

each). Bellatrix 1 and Bellatrix 2 are at 500 m in a beeline and are managed by a principal who, according to the RAV, has been in charge for more than five years.

As mentioned in its website's section on the school history, Bellatrix 1 and Bellatrix 2 (together with an elementary school) were merged in 2000/2001, and "for almost 30 years", they have been settled in two different buildings (at more or less 950 m walking distance). Bellatrix_1 has 18 classes (6 sezioni) and offers a 36-hour curriculum in 2 sezioni. Bellatrix_2 also has 18 classes, but all 6 sezioni have a 30-hour curriculum. As in the other two schools presented, Bellatrix PTOF provides information on the schools' intakes; however, it focuses on parents' involvement at the school level and on the provenience of the pupils in terms of residence.

"In the primary school, the intake is characterized by pupils coming mostly from the area in which the school is located, while in the secondary school there are also those coming from adjacent neighbourhoods. In most cases, pupils' parents are working therefore, other supportive figures, such as grandparents, are often in charge of pupils' care. Nevertheless, on average parents are present and involved in school life."²⁰¹ (Bellatrix PTOF 2016/2019)

In the case of Bellatrix, an explicit reference to pupils' migratory background also appears, again with an emphasis on the activation of the school to respond to this challenge. Although the two schools are part of the same institute, the PTOF distinguishes between Bellatrix 1 and 2 by stating that there is a greater number of foreign pupils in Bellatrix 1.

"In addition to Italian students, which account for a large percentage of our school population, there are also non-EU students, which are increasing year by year due to migratory flows.

The multiethnicity of the territory has made necessary for the school to activate several interventions to promote inclusion. Since our school reflects social reality, our educational approach is to try to plan school programs with the aim of facilitating on the one hand pupils' integration and, on the other, consolidation,

²⁰¹ "Nella scuola Primaria, l'utenza è costituita da alunni provenienti in massima parte da famiglie residenti nella zona di ubicazione della scuola, in quella Secondaria, invece, si registra anche la presenza di ragazzi provenienti da quartieri limitrofi. Nella maggior parte dei casi entrambi i genitori degli allievi sono occupati in ambito lavorativo e, pertanto, le cure parentali sono spesso affidate a figure di supporto quali i nonni. Si tratta in ogni caso mediamente di genitori presenti e attivi nella vita della scuola" (Bellatrix PTOF 2016/2019).

strengthening and recovery of several objectives in relation to each student specific needs.”²⁰² (Bellatrix PTOF 2016/2019)

6.2.4 Sirius

At 700 meters away and 15 minutes walking from Bellatrix 2, we finally arrive at the Sirius lower secondary school, whose old building was renovated two years ago. The school website, in the section dedicated to the lower secondary school, refers to the setting as the first thing:

“The building has been completely renovated according to the latest security legislation and it is surrounded by a large green area. It consists of a rectangular building on [name of a street], with a ground floor at the end of which a brand new beautiful gym is located, a first floor and a basement with multi-functional classrooms, meeting rooms, the art workshop and a huge library.”²⁰³ (Sirius website)

In the same period of the renovation, at the beginning of the 2014/2015 school year, the new principal arrived after some years of a temporary principal (*reggente*), and she now manages Sirius lower secondary school together with three elementary schools that are part of the comprehensive institute.

Sirius elementary 1 is located on the same street as Sirius lower secondary, whereas Sirius elementary 2 and 3 are two blocks away, at 500 m. Until 2013, Sirius elementary 2 was placed at 800 m distance in another building that was declared unusable and then demolished. Sirius lower secondary school had 324 pupils in the 2014/2015 school year with an average of 19 pupils per classroom, divided into 6 sezioni, all with 30-hour curricula. A

²⁰² “Oltre agli allievi di nazionalità italiana, che costituiscono una grande percentuale della nostra popolazione scolastica, sono presenti alunni di provenienza extracomunitaria, che tendono ad essere, con il passare degli anni, più numerosi per via dei flussi migratori.

L’insediamento sul territorio di componenti pluriethniche ha reso necessario attivare, all’interno dell’Istituzione, una serie di interventi atti a favorire l’inclusione. Essendo quindi la nostra scuola specchio dell’attuale realtà sociale, si continua, nell’ambito educativo e didattico, a cercare di programmare percorsi scolastici aventi lo scopo di agevolare da un lato l’integrazione e, dall’altro, il consolidamento, il potenziamento ed il recupero dei vari obiettivi in relazione ai bisogni specifici dei singoli alunni” (Bellatrix PTOF 2016/2019).

²⁰³ “L’edificio, completamente ristrutturato secondo la più recente normativa sulla sicurezza, circondato da un’ampia area verde, è costituito da un corpo frontale su [name of a street] a sezione rettangolare articolato su un piano terra, alla cui estremità è situata la nuovissima splendida palestra, un primo piano ed un piano seminterrato contenente aule polifunzionali, sale per riunioni, il laboratorio d’arte ed un’immensa biblioteca” (Sirius website).

longer curriculum existed. However, as is explained in the RAV, it was progressively dismantled.

“The lower secondary school full-time schedule has been progressively reduced and finally replaced by the part-time (30 hours) schedule, due to families' requests and to School Council's decisions, because the afternoon activities were not effective on the educational level. The extra-time was considered to be a "parking"-time for children.”²⁰⁴ (Sirius, RAV 2014/2015)

Information is provided in the PTOF concerning the characteristics of the intakes. However, although it references a multicultural and diverse context, this description is instrumental in the analysis of the school population needs with reference to guidance and improvement of Italian and other language proficiency and mathematics skills.

“The school context is characterized by a variety of different cultures and social classes bearing different needs, to which it is not always easy to respond adequately. In contrast, it offers the opportunity to build a horizontal educational network by virtue of the rich presence of institutional and non-institutional actors in the territory (non-profit associations, sports associations, parents, volunteers, parishes, citizens' committees, shop keepers, etc.) that are interested in the development and in the continuous improvement of the Comprehensive Institute Sirius organizational and educational offer.

Therefore, the school intake conveys the need of fostering educational success and enhancing a conscious guidance in future schooling and job choices, through innovation and progressive improvement of literacy skills, particularly Italian language proficiency, as well as the English one, improvement of basic logical-mathematical, scientific and digital skills, and civic-mindedness.”²⁰⁵ (Sirius PTOF 2016/2019)

²⁰⁴ “ Il tempo prolungato della secondaria è stato progressivamente ridotto fino alla sostituzione con il tempo scuola di 30 ore, su richiesta delle famiglie e delibere del C.d.I e del Collegio dei docenti perché le attività dei 3 pomeriggi non erano efficaci dal punto di vista formativo. Il tempo prolungato era considerato un “parcheggio.” (Sirius, RAV 2014/2015)

²⁰⁵ Il contesto di riferimento è caratterizzato dalla presenza di una molteplicità di culture diverse e ceti sociali con bisogni differenziati e ai quali non è sempre facile rispondere in modo adeguato, ma di contro, offre l'opportunità di costruire una rete formativa orizzontale in virtù della ricca presenza sul territorio di soggetti istituzionali [...] e non (ONLUS, associazioni sportive, di genitori, di volontariato, parrocchie, comitati di cittadini, commercianti ecc.) interessati allo sviluppo e al continuo miglioramento organizzativo e dell'offerta formativa dell'Istituto Comprensivo Sirius.

Si evidenzia, quindi, l'esigenza dell'utenza di riferimento di innalzare il successo formativo e l'orientamento consapevole nella prosecuzione degli studi e delle future scelte di lavoro attraverso l'innovazione e il progressivo miglioramento delle competenze linguistiche, particolarmente nella lingua italiana, in inglese, nelle competenze di base logico-matematiche, scientifiche e digitali, di cittadinanza (Sirius PTOF 2016/2019).

6.2.5 Spica

To reach Spica from the Sirius school, we can take public transport for 45 minutes, crossing the entire city from west to east. Spica lower secondary school, together with its elementary school within walking distance (350 m), is located in a peculiar context because it is between the city centre, less than 1 km from the beginning of the limited traffic areas of the historical centre, and a more popular neighbourhood, toward the peripheral area in which public/council houses are located.

Spica comprehensive institute is managed by a principal who has been in charge since 2010/2011. It is a relatively small school, with 283 pupils in the 2014/2015 school year. Pupils are distributed in 27 classrooms with on average 22 students each, and the school offers a 30-hour curriculum in five classes; it also offers a 36-hour curriculum that includes a musical component.

As in the case of Mimosa, the school website is designed to give a visual description of school activities (a gallery of pictures, for instance). The school also has a YouTube channel on which different moments of school life are provided online. Examining other documents, we found again in the PTOF a brief description of the characteristics of the intakes and a commitment of the school to respond to the different education needs of pupils.

“The school territory has the typical features of an urban area with a wide range of services and a highly dynamic population. School users are in fact heterogeneous, with pupils coming from Italian and foreign families. In the overall, foreign children are around the 16% of the total. In most families, both parents are employed and [...] the school is engaged in coping with all the situations that within the school reflect the complexity of social reality. In defining the educational offer, the school pays particular attention to pupils with special educational needs (BES): pupils with disabilities; students with SLD (Specific Learning Disorders); students with ADHD (problems of attention control and / or hyperactivity); students with socio-cultural, family, emotional, linguistic disadvantages (that are not or cannot be certified or recognized by the health system).”²⁰⁶ (Spica PTOF 2016/2019)

²⁰⁶ “Il territorio in cui è inserito l’Istituto presenta le tipiche caratteristiche di una realtà urbana in cui sono presenti una vasta gamma di servizi e una popolazione fortemente dinamica. L’utenza dell’Istituto è infatti eterogenea con alunni provenienti sia da famiglie italiane che da famiglie di origine straniera. Complessivamente i bambini stranieri risultano circa il 16%. Nella maggior parte delle famiglie, entrambi i genitori sono impegnati in attività lavorative pertanto [...] l’Istituto si impegna a far fronte a tutte le situazioni

In these descriptions, I stressed primarily what can be considered differences among schools, in what concerns their structure of the day, their population (and description of this population) and the aspects they emphasize. Concerning the educational offering, all schools provide projects within their curricular hours and extra-curricular activities for their pupils. In all schools, despite slight differences, the curricular projects are related to areas such as educational success, integration (of pupils with special educational needs), intercultural activities, guidance in the choice of the upper secondary school, languages proficiency, health and sport and the arts (e.g., theatre and music). Then, each school, in cooperation with parent associations and other bodies (associations, cooperatives, and hospitals), provides extra-curricular activities that cover similar areas but are not compulsory and occasionally must be paid for. Schools' offerings are thus diverse, but no major differences were found among schools, although, for instance, Sirius, Mimosa and Spica schools present more extra-curricular activities than do Bellatrix and Vega.

A similar uniformity emerges with respect to school material resources in terms of space. In fact, all five schools are similar, with at least a computer lab, a science lab (except for Vega), a gymnasium (and playground outside), a library, and some laboratories devoted to activities such as art, music or homework help. Finally, Bellatrix 1, Sirius and Spica each also have a canteen.

6.3 “Hot” knowledge: schools’ reputation

Despite from a first review of the schools’ presentation on paper surfaces no relevant difference that might characterize these schools as offering something substantially different from the others, mothers accounts tell a different story.

The fact that parents move around and within their enlarged neighbourhood means that they navigate a territory that they know and in which they have been living for several years. In fact, before facing their children’s schooling decision, families were not living in a vacuum. Quite the contrary, it is possible to describe them as insiders in the neighbourhood:

che all’interno della scuola riflettono la complessità del tessuto sociale. Nella definizione dell’offerta formativa l’Istituto presta infatti particolare attenzione agli alunni con bisogni educativi speciali (BES): alunni diversamente abili; alunni con DSA (Disturbi Specifici di Apprendimento); alunni con ADHD (problemi di controllo dell’attenzione e/o iperattività); alunni con svantaggio socio-culturale, familiare, affettivo, linguistico (ossia, non certificabili o diagnosticabili a livello sanitario).” (Spica PTOF 2016/2019)

including four mothers raised in other parts of Italy²⁰⁷ who moved to Milan around their twenties, all Italian mothers have been living in their neighbourhoods for at least fifteen years²⁰⁸. It is important to stress that this is true for mothers in all involved schools, except for Janis, Gertrude, Hypathia and Nina (with children enrolled in Bellatrix, Mimosa, Vega and Sirius), who live in slightly farther neighbourhoods, from which they in fact as we shall see, tried to escape. Since all mothers are familiar with the neighbourhood, they possess a certain amount of information on the neighbourhood itself and about schools.

Schools reputation is a particularly interesting aspect of the process of school choice, because it is at the same time part of the information regarding schools, and a possible criterion of choice for parents – it may influence or alert them, when bad, or reinsure them, when good. In our group of mothers, school reputation is certainly a recurring element because it helps them describing the educational offer in the territory, distinguishing among schools. In fact, to describe the educational offer they face, they make extensive reference to a stereotypical image of schools, placed within their own territorial horizon. This crystallization of schools is simply and clearly summarized in the description of Tom and Diane, who, in two different areas of Milan, describe what are the options available in the public system – not only labelling schools but also providing a specific map of parent flows, following these labels, within a delimited area.

So, the issue is ... Sirius Elementary_2 has as catchment area school Sirius, but up until two years ago it was a school where nobody wanted to go. So, they all attended two other schools, called Mimosa and Bellatrix. Which are a bit further but still both in the area. Bellatrix with a very traditional setting, quite severe, Mimosa a little more modern. Especially in recent years, everyone went to Mimosa²⁰⁹. (Tom, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

Well, what is said around is that at the end of the street here, there is [Name of Lower Secondary School] which is considered the “Comunione e Liberazione”

²⁰⁷ In Puglia, Piemonte, Liguria and Tuscany. Three of them moved to Milan to start their tertiary education.

²⁰⁸ The only two exceptions are Mercedes and Violeta, since the first one arrived in Italy seven years ago and the second one has recently moved from another neighborhood of Milan after a new council house assignment.

²⁰⁹ Allora, il discorso è... Sirius Elementary_2 ha come scuola di bacino la scuola di Sirius, che però fino a due anni fa era una scuola dove nessuno voleva andare. Per cui andavano tutti in questa altre due scuole che si chiamano Mimosa e Bellatrix. Che sono due scuole un po' più lontane ma comunque sempre più o meno di aerea. La Bellatrix con impostazione molto tradizionale, abbastanza severa, la Mimosa un po' più moderna come impostazione. E soprattutto negli ultimi anni tutti andavano in Mimosa. (Tom, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

school, and it has also a music curriculum. We went to see that too. Then, there is Libra which is the most standard and which for us would be very close, because we live just 50 meters away. Then there is, precisely, Spica, which was reborn when we got it. It was the second year of musical curriculum but everybody spoke very well about it. And then in the area, fairly in the area, there are School_1 and another one that are those attended by “viziosetti”. They are two and especially the second one is a public school that works like a private one²¹⁰. (Diane, Italian, Spica, OfC)

How a school’s reputation can be constructed in such a way that it is stigmatized over the years, can be clearly seen in the case of Sirius, whose name is spoken by all parents, whether they consider the school to be an option or not, and its case is similar to that of other avoided ‘neighbourhood schools’. Sirius’ bad reputation is primarily related to its population characteristics; in fact, this is the very first element that mothers and fathers talked about when describing the school. Its peculiarity in terms of its ethnically and socially mixed population, combined with the lack of efficient management – until the current principal arrived – worsened its reputation in parents’ eyes, and this characterization spread around the neighbourhood and became transversally known by all mothers, including non-Italian mothers.

It's been a while, for a few years, Sirius had this name, that pupils attending there... how can I say, pupils came from bad families, maybe they smoked ... they took care of little unclear things. And parents were afraid to send their children to these schools²¹¹. (Malala, waitress, not Italian, CS)

Because I didn't know it, before arriving in the school where my son is, there's another Sirius_elementary2 which they say is better. In my son's school, on one hundred people, maybe eighty are Egyptian and twenty are Italian. Ecuadorians... I think I am the only one, Peruvian four or five, Italians at the most five people! In

²¹⁰ Allora quello che si dice in zona è che c'è...qui in fondo qua c'è la [Name of Lower Secondary School] che è considerata un po' di CL, in fondo a Viale e anche questa ha la sezione musicale. Eravamo andati a vedere anche quella. Poi c'è Libra che è quella più standard e che per noi sarebbe stravicina perché noi viviamo proprio a 50 metri. Poi c'è, appunto, questa Spica, che era in rinascita quando siamo entrati noi, per cui era il secondo anno che c'era il musicale, però se ne parlava molto bene. E poi in zona, abbastanza in zona ci sono School_1 e un'altra che sono quelle più “su”, dove puntano quelli un po'...viziosetti. Sono due scuole, soprattutto la seconda, è una scuola statale che funziona come una privata. (Diane, Italian, Spica, OfC)

²¹¹ Perché è da un bel po' di anni, Sirius aveva proprio questo nome, che lì andavano...come si dice, i ragazzi erano magari di queste famiglie che non erano brave, magari fumavano...si occupavano di cose un po'...poco chiare. E i genitori avevano paura di mandare i figli in queste scuole (Malala, waitress, not Italian, CS).

Sirius_elementary2 for sure there are more Italians...and there aren't foreigners²¹²!
(Violeta, unemployed, not Italian, CS)

Why a school bad reputation may be so relevant in mothers' choices is due to the definition of good and bad fame. In fact, while a "good" reputation – such that of Vega, Bellatrix and Mimosa – is based on the quality of teachers and education provided and sometimes to their organizational stability, a "bad" reputation is mainly based on the school population. In both cases, though, reputation has the capacity of exist and resist without the need to be constantly motivated or supported by evidences. Because of this, a bad reputation is more effective in pushing away parents than a good reputation is in attracting them, as we will see later in section 1.4.1 and 1.4.2. In fact, in mothers' narrations school reputation is mentioned more often in those mothers' stories of avoidance of their catchment area school (see 1.4.1). In this sense, in the research, mothers who were concerned with pupils socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics were more influenced by school reputation compared to other mothers and in fact Sirius reputation exerted a strong influence on their decision.

6.3.1 Schools resources: parental involvement

Together with a clear, although often stereotypical, idea of the schools available in the territory, mothers refer to the level of parental involvement. This aspect of school characteristics is related to the schools functioning, because parents time and economic resources are *de facto* pivotal in school organization. Parents are aware of the role they (might) play inside the schools (what they are asked to do and what they voluntarily do) and above all they know that each school differs with respect to this. In fact, Italian mothers have already known the Italian educational system from their own experience and everybody have gone through at least five years of elementary school.

The presence of a visible team of mothers and fathers, constituted in association or not, emerges in parents' account as a guarantee 1) of opportunities that may be lacking in other schools, such as extra-curricular activities and materials for the gym or laboratories,

²¹² Porque yo no lo sapeva, porque prima de arrivare alla escuela dove sono mio figlio, c'è altra la Sirius_elementary2 che dicen che son le scuole meglio dell'altra. Porque donde esta mio figlio magari si son cento persona, sono ochenta egicianos, y veinte italiano. Italiano...ecuadoregno me creo que tan solo sono yo, peruviana seran unas 4, 5, italiano...como mucho 5 personas!En la Sirius_elementary2 sin embargo estan tantissimi italiani....non c'è nessuno straniero! (Violeta, unemployed, not Italian, CS).

and 2) of higher chances that whatever problem the school may face, parents will help to solve it.

The emphasis on the presence of involved families inside the school is particularly relevant because of what schools need and may need from parents in a peculiar situation that characterizes the system. In fact, Italian schools have faced and are facing an era of shrinking resources, both human and economic, that affects many aspects of school life, including teacher turn over, lacking materials, inadequate space. Moreover, schools receive funds from different sources and levels of government, and these funds are also linked to school characteristics in terms of number of enrolments. The fewer the enrolments and thus the number of classrooms, the fewer the funds and the possibility for the school to have permanent teachers.

One classroom means a lot, because it means that you'll have 18 classes in the lower secondary, that means a complete teaching (*cattedra*), so you won't have half-time teachers running among schools. For instance, the English teaching it has six classes and three hours per week...therefore eighteen hours. It makes a difference to teach all hours here. Also, when teachers go to the Provincial Office (*Provveditorato*) they won't choose partial- time. It's another kind of life²¹³. (Sirius_principal)

Therefore, parents are an asset *per se*, because they are entitled to the choice, therefore they bring enrolments to the school, with all the consequences in terms of virtuous or vicious circles. In fact, not all parents “are the same”: a school is more likely to succeed if it can attract more well-off and/or involved parents.

For instance, one clear element that may differentiate the potential contribution coming from families is the so-called “voluntary fee” that parents are asked to pay at the beginning of the year in order to cover insurance and school journals and provide a common fund. Each school may deliberate different amounts for the voluntary fee, and of course, it will also depend on families, since it should be affordable to them. It is therefore very common for schools such as Sirius to ask for a very low contribution, about 25 euros, while others may ask for more than 60 euros. Not only does this clearly differentiate schools, but it may also

²¹³ Una classe vuol dir tanto perché vuol dire avere le 18 classi, in secondaria e cioè la cattedra intera, perciò non avere più spezzonisti che corrono da una scuola all'altra. Per esempio la cattedra di inglese, no? Sono sei classi, 3 ore, 6 per 3, 18. Allora un conto è un conto è avere tutte le ore lì, un conto è uno spezzone. Allora, in provveditorato, quando vanno a scegliere, supplenti annuali, gli spezzoni non li vogliono, giustamente. Quindi è un altro vivere. (Sirius_principal)

be the case, as explicated by Fatma in her account, that it is very difficult to gather even the minimum amount in some school.

Parents are different too, everybody gives...if the school asks such as the voluntary contribution, which is 25 euros, or you pay only 7 euros for the school journal, or you pay 25 euros voluntarily. In Sirius they pay 25 euros, I pay 25 euros for my children in elementary and lower secondary school. Because I understand that it is for the school. It is to buy equipment. But in Sirius_elementary3, there are a lot of us, foreigners, most of them do not want to pay a single euro. I struggle to gather money for the end of the year lottery²¹⁴. (Fatma, not Italian, Sirius, CS)

The difficulty of fundraising money that Fatma attributes to other families being foreigners – as her family is as well – may also be related to objective difficulties with the situation of socioeconomic disadvantage that are absent in other, better-off schools. Regardless of several reasons that may cause this difference in resources, the combination of a lack of funding from the central government with the high level of diversity among institutions may create a vicious circle. Within this circle, parents, individually or organized in associations, may play a pivotal role, since out of their autonomous initiative – supported by the school – they may grant to pupils, opportunities that they would not have otherwise.

We have to raise funds to equip the first grades with multimedia interactive whiteboard with Esselunga's vouchers they gave them to the second grades, but they didn't succeed to do the same for first grades, so they favoured older kids. Then, for instance, interventions are also made on the school structure, tools, computers. To be honest, the public schools fortunately benefits from parents' funds. Apart from the enrolment fee, more than 65 euros per kid, there is a constant financial help from families, that is essential to make the school be up to the situation²¹⁵. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

²¹⁴ Anche i genitori sono diversi, tutti danno, io per me, se chiedono qualcosa per esempio, come il contributo volontario, è 25 euro, o paghi non lo so solo 7 euro per il diario, per altre cose 25 euro volontario. A Sirius pagano 25 euro...io ho 25 euro per 2 figli, sia quella che è a scuola media, sia elementari. Perché capisco che è per la scuola. La differenza...contributo volontario per comprare materiale. Però da noi a Sirius_elementary3, siamo tanti...tanti stranieri neanche 1 euro vogliono dare. Per pagare la lotteria...fine anno, faccio fatica. (Fatma, not Italian, Sirius, CS)

²¹⁵ Dobbiamo raccogliere dei fondi per dotare le prime della LIM perché con i buoni esselunga hanno dato la LIM a tutte le seconde medie, eh alle prime non si è riusciti, quindi hanno privilegiato i ragazzini più grandi. Poi ad esempio vengono fatti interventi anche sulla struttura della scuola, strumenti, computer cioè, non ci nascondiamo che la scuola pubblica comunque per fortuna beneficia dei fondi dei genitori. A parte la quota di

That is why, for instance, Sirius' mothers and its principal have struggled to attract Italian parents who are described by mothers as involved and committed. It is also why parental involvement may turn to be essential in the eyes of parents who are not sure about the validity of their catchment area school.

The presence of good parents too, because in this school there was also a lawyer dad who helped a lot. He worked really hard, also when there was the risk that the principal would have to move, for seniority reasons, if this school was going to be merged with another one. So, I was a little scared by this thing, since I said if things keep on like this I'll stay in the school, otherwise I have to think about it, I was scared by this merging. But, thanks to this lawyer they found a quibble, a trick and they managed to avoid it²¹⁶. (Sarah, Italian, Spica, CS)

Not only the parental state of alert inside the school may guarantee basic equipment, trips, and extra-curricular activities, but their organization may also ensure a rapid intervention in case of need.

Well, for example I knew that in Mimosa, compared to Sirius, there was a very organized group of parents, waiting to welcome me. In Sirius I would have to organize it by myself, that is what Claudia did it alone. So, let's say it was a little easier...also because I knew that I had to face a first-grade adjustment for my other son...where I didn't know anyone, so I said at least for her we'll go in a place where I don't have to organize everything by myself.

It seems to be very important for parents to see other parents participating.

At this age, yes. Because if there are problems they can be solved together. Everything: conflicts, problems with teachers, educational problems support, proposals for school trips, fundraising that schools need right now and so on²¹⁷. (Emmeline, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

iscrizione che è più 65 euro a ragazzo, c'è questo costante aiuto finanziario delle famiglie, essenziale, per rendere una scuola all'altezza della situazione. (Amelia, Italian, Vega, CS)

²¹⁶ E comunque anche la presenza di genitori validi perché qui poi c'è stato anche un papà avvocato che ha dato una grossissima mano. Si è dato veramente un gran da fare, anche quando ci sarebbe stato il rischio che se questa scuola andava a accorparsi a un'altra non sarebbe stato più il preside questo, per questioni di anzianità. E quindi questa era stata una cosa che mi aveva un po' allertato, nel senso che io avevo detto se funziona così, e temevo che questa cosa andasse a buon fine, rimango, sennò devo vedere, perché altrimenti mi spaventava questo accorpamento. E invece appunto grazie a questo avvocato hanno trovato un cavillo, un escamotage, per cui sono riusciti a evitarlo. (Sarah, Italian, Spica, CS)

²¹⁷ Quindi per esempio a Mimosa, rispetto a Sirius, io sapevo che lì mi attendeva una struttura di genitori estremamente organizzata e pronta ad accogliermi, a Sirius l'avrei dovuta organizzare io, cosa che poi ha fatto

These interventions seem to be working the best if parents are organized and if they develop strong social ties among them – ties that go beyond presence inside the schools and become friendships and a network of mutual support.

All the researched schools had a group of organized parents but while in Vega, Spica and Mimosa it was already an association and it was existing for a long time, in Sirius and Bellatrix parents have been gathering, more recently, in an assembly and in committee. Nevertheless, parents in Bellatrix have just created an association when the fieldwork was conducted.

6.4 Parents' schooling strategies

Facing this scenario and on the basis of their representation of schools, combined with their guiding criteria of choice, mothers and fathers took their enrolment decision.

These decisions constitute flows of pupils in and out of their catchment area schools. These decisions can also be interpreted and categorized as strategies. In this sense, parents' choices are considered to be *strategic* when, in deciding to opt in or opt out their public catchment area school, parents' aim at giving to their children the best education possible, given a specific educational offer in their territorial context. That is why, the decisions made out of proximity by parents mediated by a third person – such the *disconnected* parents – or those of parents who relied on their children's preferences, will not be included in this section. Moreover, parents' different strategies presented here must be considered as explaining, at least in part, the inflows and outflows from schools in a certain area of the city influencing not only the composition of schools intake but maybe also local educational policies on catchment areas. In fact, these strategies are going to be looked at also as group of parents' strategies, sketching their socioeconomic and ethnic profiles (see Section 6.5).

la Claudia da sola. Quindi insomma, diciamo che era un pochino più agevole, la strada già fatta, sapendo anche che dovevo affrontare un inserimento in prima di quell'altro in cui non conoscevo nessuno, ho detto almeno di una andiamo in un posto dove non mi trovo a dover organizzare tutto io.

Mi sembra che sia molto importante per i genitori vedere che altri genitori partecipano

A quell'età sì. Perché se ci sono dei problemi si possano risolvere insieme. Conflitti, problemi con gli insegnanti, tutto questo supporto per problematiche educative che si possano riscontrare, proposte per le gite, tutto ciò, raccolta fondi che ormai le scuole hanno bisogno. (Emmeline, Italian, Andromeda, OfC)

Parents strategies will be explored looking at those who 1) avoided the catchment area school 2) “safely” stayed in the local school 3) chose the “bad” neighbourhood school. In order to distinguish how mothers relate to the available options, the term catchment area school is used specifically in the case of mothers that avoided it; the term local is employed to indicate the catchment area school (or a school very close to the family residence) for mothers that choose it; finally, the term “neighbourhood” school to describe a school with a bad reputation avoided by its own catchment area parents.

6.4.1 Avoiding the catchment area school

Mothers that aimed at enrolling their children in a school with a less foreign and socially disadvantaged pupils (see Section 5.2.4) escaped their catchment area school when it was associated with a mixed intake.

In our group of parents this strategy of choice was put in place by 17 parents: A) 10 mothers that had Sirius as their neighbourhood school and then applied in Mimosa; only 6 got in (while 4 were rebounded and then enrolled to Sirius and Andromeda) B) 7 mothers that had a catchment area school similar to Sirius in terms of characteristics, in particular about the incidence of not Italian pupils. These mothers therefore applied to another relatively close school: Bellatrix (3), Vega (2) and Spica (1). These flows are described in the following table, each school name is indicated together with the percentage of concentration of foreign pupils.

Table 1 Parents avoiding the catchment area school

Catchment area school	Actual school	N. of participants
Sirius (46.49%)	Mimosa (17.73%)	6
School 1 (24.8%), School 2 (37.73%)	Vega (7.91%)	2
Sirius (46.59%)	Sirius (46.9%) Rejected, originally applied in Mimosa	2
Sirius (46.59%)	Andromeda (16.9%) Rejected, originally applied in Mimosa	2
School 3 (29.3%), School 4 (16.39%), School 5 (21.46%)	Bellatrix (20.22%)	3
School 6 (58.14%)	Spica (29.91%)	2

Mothers that avoided the catchment area school live in a socially and ethnic mixed neighbourhoods and their catchment area school is characterized by high concentration of disadvantaged and foreign pupils. This feature contributed to the school bad reputation – constructed in the neighbourhood through hot grapevine knowledge – that signalled to mothers that it wasn't the right school. In fact, they were looking for a setting with “people like us” and wanted to provide to their children a good academic level school. Moreover, the presence of many foreign and socially disadvantaged families in the school was associated with a low degree of cooperation at the school level and to lower involvement in their children education.

These mothers take a first-order decision in which they exclude their catchment area school from consideration and a second-order decision in which they evaluate among other neighbourhood schools and select among them. After the exclusion of the catchment area school, their goal was to find a good school, as long as it was close to the family home (or eventually grandparents' home).

The first thing that these seventeen mothers made clear in their narration was not, as expected, the reasons why they chose a different school from the closest one but why they excluded the catchment area school in the first place. Their own account of the choice started from their decision to leave the catchment area school out even before looking for other schools as an a-priori decision. This decision may be, as in the case of Hypathia, dated back to the beginning of the educational path and presented as a conscious “stance” against the possibility of attending the neighbourhood school. This stance pre-exists any possibility of knowing or gathering information about the school and its functioning. Other mothers shared this aim, for which they deployed different strategies, or at least thought about it, to ensure that it would be fulfilled. For instance, Janis was worried about having a plan B if plan A – avoiding the school and enrolling in another one – did not work out owing to admissions problems.

They attended elementary school in the catchment area school. Let's say that there has been stance that has been quite ... totally rational, that hasn't changed over the years. It has been a bit...irrevocable. We said that they would attend elementary school in the neighbourhood. We didn't even choose so much, although there were two options, I just had a look at one, but I chose the closest one regardless of its name and the reputation it had. We said that anyway they wouldn't attend the lower secondary school in the neighbourhood, even before knowing what the

neighbourhood's lower secondary school was like, the one we have 5 minutes away from home²¹⁸. (Hypathia, Italian, Vega, OfC)

But if you wouldn't be accepted in the M ... would you still have considered the catchment area school?

I must say that (*she sighs*) ... it is something that I asked myself at the beginning: what if they don't accept her in there? I don't know, but maybe we would have gone to [other school], but I really wanted to avoid the neighbourhood one, I must admit it²¹⁹. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Hypathia and Janis that exited the catchment area school for their two and three children, and Jane considered only out-of-the-catchment area schools after elementary school for her two sons. In fact, since she strongly valued education, she saw in exiting the peripheral neighbourhood's environment an increased chance of success for her children and more cultural and learning incentives that would be limited by a more problematic school.

Well, given that for me the school is the first thing, it is primary for me and for my children, then: I always looked for a school that could still offer them educational and studying starting points, stimuli of interest and so on. Therefore, I chose the elementary school (*of the neighbourhood*) because it was an elementary school. Since however, speaking around and getting information, the elementary school was still a good school. Instead, the lower secondary school has a bit of a flaw, which is a bit of a problem there. It has the problems of the periphery problems. I started with Daniele, who is the first child, both have good skills. Daniele had good skills so it seemed to me a waste to leave him in that school²²⁰. (Jane, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

²¹⁸ Nella scuola di bacino hanno frequentato le scuole elementari. Diciamo che c'è stata una presa di posizione abbastanza...totalmente razionale, che non si è modificata negli anni, e che è stata un po'...come dire...un po' irrevocabile. Si era detto, le scuole elementari le faranno qui, e non abbiamo neanche tanto scelto, benché ci fossero due opzioni, ho guardato un attimo una, però insomma ho scelto comunque quella più vicina indipendentemente dalla sua nomea, dalla fama che aveva. E, prima ancora di sapere come fosse la scuola media del quartiere, che abbiamo a 5 minuti, dico a 5 minuti da casa, abbiamo detto che comunque le medie non le avrebbero fatte in quartiere. (Hypathia, Italian, Vega, OfC)

²¹⁹ *Ma se voi non foste riusciti a entrare nella M...avrete considerato comunque quella scuola lì (the catchment area school)?*// Devo dire che...(sospira)...è una cosa che mi son chiesta anche io all'inizio: e se non lo prendono lì? Non lo so, ma magari saremmo andati alla [altra scuola], però ecco volevo proprio evitare quella di quartiere, devo dire. (Janis, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

²²⁰ Allora, bè, posto che per me la scuola è la cosa principale, primaria, per me, per i miei figli, allora: ho sempre cercato una scuola che potesse comunque offrirgli degli spunti educativi, spunti di studio, degli stimoli di interesse e così via. Allora la scuola elementare (*del quartiere*) l'ho scelta perché vabè era una scuola

Excluding the neighbourhood school from consideration is presented by mothers as an urgency, something that must be done and that will be pursued at all costs, because staying in the catchment area school is considered to limit pupils' growth and learning. Nevertheless, avoidance of the catchment area school is not presented as a gateway, a struggle to escape the neighbourhood school against the rules; to the contrary, since mothers are aware of not being compelled to choose the catchment area school, they talked about a straightforward decision to give up the comfort of choosing the closest school in exchange of more important characteristics. What these more valuable school characteristics are, emerges when mothers, instead of explaining what they were looking for in a school, devote the time to give a detailed description of what they were running from.

6.4.2 “Safely” choosing the local school

Above, we have explored mothers' reasons to avoid the catchment area school and move towards schools with a better reputation, looking for a context that is perceived as more similar in terms of class and ethnicity and overcoming constraints of living in a socially mixed neighbourhood. They were influenced by the school bad reputation founded on the presence of a high concentration of foreign and socially disadvantaged pupils that mothers disliked. Their decisions thus resulted in an outflow from the catchment area school towards other institutions in the neighbourhood.

However, this is only one part of the story of what may happen in an area of the city, and in fact, it must be complemented with parents who decide to “live” the local school. They constitute two additional important pieces of the puzzle, one it is explored in this section and regards mothers who selected their catchment area schools because it responded to what they were looking for and its good reputation confirmed it. The other, explored in section 1.3.1.2 regards mothers who decided to enrol their children in the avoided and stigmatized school.

elementare, perché comunque parlando e interessandomi la scuola elementare risultava comunque una buona scuola. Ehm, la scuola media invece ha un po' delle pecche, cioè è un po' problematica lì. Ha le problematiche di un quartiere di periferia. Quindi niente, io con Daniele che è il primo figlio, entrambi hanno delle buone capacità, ma io ho iniziato con Daniele. Daniele aveva delle buone capacità quindi mi sembrava sprecato lasciarlo in quella scuola. (Jane, Italian, Bellatrix, OfC)

Mothers whose declared criteria of choice were related to the school academic level or human approach were also mothers whose catchment area school wasn't described as having a bad reputation or peculiar characteristics in terms of populations. They evaluated several options, included the catchment area one, and opted for it since it satisfied them. In our group of parents this strategy was put in place by 11 parents A) 10 in Bellatrix and Vega catchment areas; B) and 6 parents in (or really close to) Spica catchment area.

Table 2 Parents staying in the local school

Catchment area school	Actual school	N. of participants
Bellatrix (15.57%)	Bellatrix (15.57%)	2
Vega (11.04%)	Vega (11.04%)	3
Spica (10.42%)	Spica (10.42%)	4
Pavo (16.53%)		2

Bellatrix, Vega and Spica are located in neighbourhoods with an under the average concentration of foreign population (Washington, 11.4%; Bande Nere 15.57% and Corso XXII Marzo 10.42%). Vega has a lower concentration of foreign population than the neighbourhood (7.9%) while Bellatrix and Spica a higher one (20.22% and 29.91%). These concentrations nevertheless are never used to argument or explain mothers' choices (as we explored in Section), reversely their narratives entail a broader reflection on the educational approach of the schools that also travels through their reputation.

Since these schools were already perceived as safe and reassuring in terms of their environment, being considered "good schools" on paper, mothers experienced a less stressful and smoother decision process, compared to mothers 'on the run'.

They chose the catchment area school because it offered what they were looking for in a relatively close to home area.

Even if the "good name" of their catchment area school pre-existed their children's transition, as in the case of Bellatrix and Vega, or even if it was recently reacquired after some years of bad reputation, as in the case of Spica, mothers did not surrender to this good

reputation. In fact, they nevertheless engaged in an evaluation of several options to verify that the catchment area school was the best possible choice. In this process of comparison among the closest school and other neighbourhood institutions, mothers gathered information about the presence of good teachers, the general academic level, extra-curricular activities and the school “mark”.

Nevertheless, no concession was given to the school’s good reputation. Indeed, although applying to the closest school is presented as the “normal” choice that required no effort, mothers spend time and energy to be sure it is worthy.

Of course, mothers did not put the same effort into verifying that their well-known catchment area school was “the best”. They may be satisfied with information offered by other mothers, which in combined with proximity may lead them to choose the school across the street without hesitation. For instance, for her daughter, who attended a private elementary school, Sibilla wanted a public lower secondary school and chose Vega, a good local school. She valued the opportunities that proximity would give to her daughter in terms of quality of life, but she wanted to be sure that Vega was “considered” a good school.

Then when deciding the lower secondary school, honestly, I was tired of the nuns and I said ... public school, because it's right that there is a public school. Vega is a school that is considered good, essentially, those who don't speak well about it, do it because of an excess of severity, not for other reasons. Not because it is abandoned etc. Then in this neighborhood there are, in the overall, enough schools, so we have always chosen locally. Because you can wake up later, your friends are closer, it's a more alive social fabric than going to school very far away²²¹. (Sibilla, Italian, Vega, CS)

6.4.3 Choosing the “bad” neighbourhood school

When mothers were guided by a declared political stance and a search for multiculturalism they chose on purpose the “bad” or stigmatized schools. In our group of parents this strategy of choice was put in place only by 4 mothers who enrolled in Sirius

²²¹ Poi al momento di decidere che scuola media fare, io ho francamente ero stufo delle suore e ho detto...scuola pubblica, perché è giusto che ci sia la scuola pubblica. La Vega è una scuola che viene ritenuta buona, essenzialmente, chi ne parla male ne parla male per un eccesso di severità, non per altri motivi. Non perché è abbandonata etc. Poi è un quartiere in cui tutto sommato un’offerta di scuole c’è, per cui abbiamo sempre fatto una scelta anche di zona. Perché ti svegli più tardi, perché hai gli amici vicino, perché... è un tessuto sociale più vivo che non andare nella scuola a casa di cristo. (Sibilla, Italian, Vega, CS)

school, being also the catchment area school for two of them. Mothers that chose Sirius lived in the same neighbourhood of those who avoided the same school.

Their stories are peculiar because they show a declared choice made on the basis of mothers' individual values – in contrast to prejudice and discrimination – combined with dissatisfaction with other options. Further, these parents invested their resources in order to build a safety net for a choice that was in contrast to the orientation of their social network. In fact, the way in which they enrolled their children in the school avoided by their group of friends constitutes an interesting observation of how parental involvement may intervene at the school level, to adjust the choice.

They evaluated different options in the neighbourhood and in the closest area, but they were mainly guided by a political/ideological stance for multiculturalism. Their tendency to prefer a mixed environment is combined with the awareness that Sirius is constantly losing pupils due to other parents' avoidance strategy.

That school was dying. I was very unhappy with this situation, because I said: it's a nice school, close to home, it's next to the elementary school. Then I can't understand why they must escape. It's not possible. So, I enrolled my son there²²². (Ada, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

Few go from Sirius_elementary1 to Sirius, because it seen as a school...beyond Via Primaticcio people think that it's like a ghetto. There are a lot of prejudices. Even if this school and this catchment area here is not so different from [Name] that has mainly an Arabic intake because, however, Giambellino is a mixed area. Therefore, there are many prejudice. There is a tendency to go towards the centre. Our choice was against the tide, since instead of going there we came here²²³. (Mina, Italian, Sirius, CS)

²²² Stava morendo quella scuola. E a me stava molto antipatica questa situazione, perché ho detto: è una scuola bella, vicino casa, è attaccata alle elementari. Poi non si capisce perché ci dev'essere questa fuga! Non esiste. E quindi mio figlio l'ho iscritto lì. (Ada, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

²²³ Pochi vanno da Sirius_elementary a Sirius, perché viene comunque vista come una scuola...al di là della Via primaticcio sembra che ci sia il Bronx, per certa gente, non è ben chiaro. Ci sono mooolti mooolti pregiudizi. Anche se poi in realtà questa scuola in ogni caso, e questo bacino, non è poi così diverso da quello, perché comunque la scuola di [Name] è frequentata in larghissima parte da arabi, perché comunque il Giambellino è una zona mooolto diciamo... variegata ecco. Per cui in realtà sono molti pregiudizi e preconcetti. C'è un pochino un tendere verso il centro. Quindi la nostra scelta, diciamo, è stata controcorrente, nel senso che, invece di andare di là, siamo venuti di qua. (Mina, Italian, Sirius, CS)

Their political position in favour of a mixed school and in opposition to schools that presented themselves as selective pushed them to refuse to enrol their children in a school such as Bellatrix, Mimosa or other similar institutions. The dislike for the neighbourhood school was concomitant with the preference for a school that could offer them a mixed environment without precluding the presence of a good teaching staff.

Staying in the “local” school may be a critical choice when parents engage in this decision against the grain of their social networks and the neighbourhood flow, and in fact, this decision is also always supported by a well-woven safety net: mothers engaged in making this choice select a “better” and safer school for their children. They may act in advance, for instance, by checking the validity of the school’s reputation or asking for guarantees (such as a specific classroom or teacher); however, they may also intervene afterward with intense participation in school life and activities by 1) aiming to attract other parents “like them”, 2) working together with the school staff/principals, and 3) overseeing school life with a readiness to intervene if necessary.

6.4.3.1 *Parents’ voice in the neighbourhood school*

We said that mothers who chose Sirius, because of its multiethnicity and also because they wanted to value the neighbourhood school, swim against the flow. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that this decision is backed up and carefully prepared and supervised decision. In fact, as in the case for Ada, who “knew the teachers, knew the principal”, for Mina, the importance of “egalitarian principles” is necessarily related to the reassurance that the school may offer good education for their children.

I chose Sirius lower secondary school because of my egalitarian principles, as the school principal says. That's why. It means that, once you say, the teacher tells you, that the teachers are good. According to me you have two criteria as a parent: the teachers are good and have a permanent contract. The second piece of information is your beliefs. I mean, if you are a parent who wants for his son a severe school, 'because children need to be educated' then you'll go one direction. Your beliefs are pivotal in these situations. I think it's nice to be with children of all nationalities, of all social backgrounds, because my son is not the most ... it's normal, there are very

reach children and children with nothing ... do you understand?²²⁴ (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

In fact, this choice that might appear a kind of irrational blind choice against their children's interest – to enrol in a “bad” school – required an investment, in terms of time and energy, in order to be sure that the school may be considered a good option and that it will not endanger their children. This process took place before enrolment with mothers' engagement in information gathering and afterwards through a combination of mothers' individual aims in a collective effort to restore the school's reputation. Before enrolment, mothers did not exclude the school in advance because of its bad reputation, but since they intended to consider it, they worked with the aim of understanding how founded on real facts this reputation was.

This group of mothers usually occupied a privileged position inside the school, as they are – and were at the time of the decision – highly present at the school level, and as insiders, they were able to grasp relevant information to understand what was really going on in the school.

When my son was finishing elementary school, I was also in the school council, being an active mother already, so anyway I also knew all the school's progress from the inside.

Being you there since elementary school you had the opportunity to access to the information.

Yes.

You watched what was happening there, did I get it right?

Yes.

Have you had the opportunity to ask other people close to you for advises or opinions?

Yes, because I had friends who had both children in lower secondary and in elementary school, and I had many of them whose children were my son's classmates, or they lived in the neighbourhood. Yes, I asked them where they were going, how they liked the school, what they thought about it etc.

²²⁴ La media Sirius l'ho scelta per i miei principi egalitari come dice la preside, per quelli. Cioè, tu una volta che dici, la maestra ti dice, le insegnanti sono brave. Tu hai due criteri secondo me come genitore, le insegnanti sono brave e sono di ruolo. E la seconda informazione è la tua... convinzione. Cioè, se tu sei un genitore che vuole una scuola severa, per suo figlio, 'perché i bambini vanno formati, perché eeh' e allora scegli in una direzione. Le tue convinzioni sono fondamentali in queste cose. per me, io comunque penso che sia bello comunque frequentare bambini di tutte le nazionalità, di tutte le estrazioni sociali, perché mio figlio non è il più... è normale lui, ci sono bambini veramente pieni di soldi, ci sono veramente bambini che non hanno niente, cioè... capisci? (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

Did you find conflicting opinions about this?

No, I didn't. Actually, whoever I asked to, I was told that Sirius was good. There were similar opinions were similar. I could trust them²²⁵. (Ada, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

In contrast to the parents who avoided the school a priori, this group of mothers attended open day and gathered all the available information through social networks and mostly teachers and school staff. The aim of the information gathering was to verify the school reputation that harshly influenced other parents' decisions and to ensure that, despite the existence of a social and ethnic mixed environment, the school staff was prepared and a good education can be granted. In one case, one person, Mina, went together with other friends to check pupils and families outside the school itself, and she is the only such case among in the group of interviewees. What she found, "people like us", reassured her. However, she still complemented this information with other actions, such as calling her acquaintances whose children attended Sirius school.

We chose Sirius like this, one day we went outside the school and said, let's see this Bronx here.

In elementary school?

Yes. You go outside the school and see these children coming out of the school, their parents who leave them and you say that's ok, they are normal people like us. This was the first thing we did, the second was to make phone calls to people we knew who had children who went there. They told us they liked it²²⁶. (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

²²⁵ Quando mio figlio stava finendo le elementari, essendo già mamma attiva all'interno ero anche nel consiglio di istituto, quindi comunque conoscevo anche da dentro tutto quello che era l'andamento della scuola. // *Tu essendo dalle elementari lì avevi avuto modo di prendere informazioni* // Sì. // *Sei stata lì e hai guardato cosa succedeva, ho capito bene?* // Sì // *Hai avuto modo di confrontarti e di chiedere opinioni ad altre persone vicine a te?* // Sì...sì, perché comunque io avevo amiche che avevano sia figli alle medie che alle elementari, e ne ho avute diverse che avevano magari o compagni di classe del figlio, oppure amiche comunque che abitavano in quartiere. Ho chiesto, ho chiesto a loro dove andavano, come si sono trovate, che cosa pensavano etc. Quindi sì... // *E da questo punto di vista hai trovato opinioni contrastanti?* // Mmm no....in realtà, in realtà a chi chiedevo chennesò della Sirius mi dicevano sì è valida, sì...cioè le opinioni erano simili. Mi sono potuta fidare. (Ada, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

²²⁶ E quindi niente, noi l'abbiamo scelta in questo modo (Sirius), siamo andati un giorno fuori da scuola e abbiām detto, vediamo questo bronx com'è? // *Questo alle elementari?* // Alla elementari. Vai fuori da scuola e vedi questi bambini che escono da scuola, i genitori di questi bambini che escono da scuola e dici vabè sono gente normale come noi. Prima cosa che abbiām fatto, e poi seconda cosa che abbiām fatto delle telefonate a persone che conoscevamo che avevano i figli che andavano lì e c'hanno detto che si trovavano bene. (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

However, also after enrolment, they actively supervised the “local” choice: in fact, what seemed to be choosing local no matter what was in fact a decision around which mothers built up a thick safety net. How they did so is mainly related to what can be defined as a true “call for action”. They chose a school particularly harmed by its reputation, and they engaged in a joined effort to contrast or reverse this reputation. It was a joint effort because these few mothers met and engaged with other mothers inside the school. The latter group of mothers are mainly those who choose Sirius merely because it was their catchment area school and they did not evaluate other options or because they were rejected from other institutions.

These different individualities meet inside the school in a common arena of commitment towards the school itself with the aim of reserving its reputation. Not only do they work hand in hand, but their involvement is also facilitated by the school principal who has recently take charge in the school after having had several years of temporary principal (*reggente*).

Yes, they do a lot, last week for instance we finished the school renovation, because there was still the basement do be done. The workers left and the next day mothers were already here with brooms and mops to clean up. I must say that they do a lot. Even the library is completely managed by them, then they participated to the “open school” call, they manage three free courses/courses for free²²⁷. (Sirius Principal)

You see, the headmaster might have had all these courses in her mind, but if she would have felt alone, abandoned, she wouldn't have open them. Instead, she feels bounded to devote particular attention...with a so active group of parents behind, that gives everything for the school²²⁸. (Marie, Italian, Sirius, CS)

²²⁷ Sì...sono attivi, per esempio adesso, hanno finito la settimana scorsa, giovedì, i lavori di ristrutturazione della scuola, perché c'era ancora il seminterrato. Sono andati via gli operai, il giorno dopo c'erano già le madri con gli scopettoni e gli stracci per pulire, e devo dire che fanno tantissimo. Perché...anche la biblioteca, completamente gestita da loro, poi hanno partecipato al bando scuole aperte, perciò tre corsi di questi li gestiscono loro, e son gratuiti. (Sirius Principal)

²²⁸ Sì, tutti questi corsi che fanno, non creda che...la preside magari ce li aveva in mente, ma se si fosse sentita da sola, abbandonata, non le avrebbe fatte. Invece con dietro, i genitori così, con un gruppo di genitori così attivo, che dà tutto per la scuola, si sente anche un pochettino in dovere di farla questa cosa, dedicare particolarmente...delle aspettative nei suoi confronti. (Marie, Italian, Sirius, CS)

Their commitment takes different forms: it goes from very practical activities, such as cleaning the school building to more structured interventions. Such interventions may be meetings and gathering to discuss school problems and organize school activities, such as open days, or may be participation in representative bodies and at the parental association level. Of course, since they have different jobs and history, as well as different amounts of available time, they play different roles inside the school. Although they all are or have been official parent representatives (in the classroom or in school representative bodies), at the moment of the interview, they had different roles. For instance, some took care of appealing to the public for funding for the parental association; some sponsored an anti-violence project inside the school, together with volunteering associations; other managed parent mailing lists or offered their expertise in coordinating advice activities aimed at choosing an upper secondary school.

This group of active and pro-active parents shares with the principal at least one common goal: increase enrolment at Sirius in future years. As we saw in Section 6.3.1 this goal, on the one hand, is pivotal for the school to have funds and be able to function properly and, on the other hand, is related to attracting new pupils and families, mainly Italian middle-class parents with more participation and involvement – who are also richer than most of the intake. In fact, all these parental interventions compose a puzzle in which the commitment of a few people affects the success of the school in ameliorating its image, with increases in extra-curricular activities or presentations to potential future applicants.

They exchange mail and phone calls with the principal and other school staff, and they are engaged in intensive activity aimed at the sensitization of other parents, not only within the lower secondary school, but mostly outside it. Their aim is to influence parents whose children were attending Sirius_elementary or other elementary schools in the neighbourhood to give Sirius lower secondary school a chance. In fact, as we saw above, most of the time, fleeing parents do not consider Sirius in the first place, deserting open days and avoiding verifying its reputation in any way. Therefore, the goal is to encourage them to at least attend school open day and get to know Sirius' educational offer, as well as reassure them about the validity of this option.

We worked together to raise awareness, everything informally, we have supported the principal who arrived last year, we tried to support the teachers, we brought

facilities/material to the school, we redid the library, it means we cleaned on Saturday and Sunday, the windows etc. We also worked on paying attention about why Sirius was avoided. And we've worked towards softening those prejudices and difficulties. That one was called the foreigners school, the school with drugs dealing and where nothing was learned²²⁹. (Carla, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

One of the most important moments at which most of these efforts are aimed is the school open day, for which all mothers worked and at which they were all present and very active. As they told me, together with the principal, open day at Sirius has often been a failure, since parents did not show up and/or the presentation was not brilliant and did not captivate parents' attention. This tendency was reversed in the last two years, as the principal herself and mothers noted during the interviews and as I was able to witness during the school open day that I attended on November 2015. Sirius was finally able to offer an animated school open day in which, for example, the parental association sold food and beverages and organized a lottery to fundraise money for the school.

So, one evening we presented the school and there was hardly anyone. At the Saturday morning presentation, there were more people. Then finally one school floor was opened we did another presentation. Now I'm sorry I can't show you the flyer...because it was so nice. It was last year, on the 17th of January 2014 and there were many people. Parents organized the parents' committee it was really nice, cakes, gadgets, a friendly atmosphere etc. So, we opened a new class, which changed everything²³⁰. (Sirius Principal)

Reading the flyer that the principal gave me when I met her, it said from 10 to 12.30 am, but it wasn't clear how the morning would be organized. I didn't know what to expect. I arrived at 9.55, and the school was already functioning, so much so that I thought to be late. (...) Entering the building I immediately saw a table with

²²⁹ Abbiamo fatto un gruppo di lavoro, sensibilizzazione, all'esterno, abbiamo...tutto a livello informale, abbiamo supportato la preside che è arrivata l'anno scorso, abbiamo cercato di supportare anche gli insegnanti, abbiamo portato materiale a scuola, abbiamo rifatto la biblioteca...cioè...pulito, sabato e domenica, vetri etc. Abbiamo fatto un lavoro anche di come dire, ascolto, del perché NO Sirius. E abbiamo lavorato in questo senso, cercando di, come dire, smorzare quei pregiudizi e quelle difficoltà. Quella era definita la scuola, la scuola degli stranieri, la scuola dove circolava droga, e la scuola dove non si imparava niente. (Carla, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

²³⁰ Allora, abbiám fatto una presentazione una sera, e non c'era quasi nessuno. Una presentazione un sabato mattina, e c'era un po' più di gente. Poi finalmente, un piano della scuola è stato reso accessibile e abbiám fatto un'altra presentazione. Adesso mi dispiace non farglielo vedere (*il volantino ndr*), perché era talmente carino. Il 17 gennaio dell'anno scorso (*2014 ndr*), e c'era tantissima gente. E poi alla fine, organizzando anche appunto il comitato genitori che...è proprio in gamba...torte, gadget...un'atmosfera amichevole etc. Insomma siamo cresciuti di una classe, il che ha cambiato tutto. (Sirius Principal)

refreshment on the left, with sweet and salty food, cakes and sandwiches, pizzas, drinks and coffee. Looking around also saw lottery game with several prizes and a small table with books and gifts. Inside the school there was a very lively climate, there were many people and everybody moved. They moved from one class to another, upstairs and downstairs, and then up and down again. There were many children and in fact it seemed to me that the day was very suitable for a boy or a girl, if he or she would be there. I saw all interviewed mothers, they wore their parents' association pin they had a pastry cake made with the association logo on the top. They moved around the school with swarms of parents following them. Although the first part of the morning was devoted to visiting freely the school, they seemed to be trying to take the control of the situation so they could lead parents²³¹. (Fieldnotes - Sirius' open day 18_11_2015)

This effort aimed at increasing the number of enrolments seemed to have had some results at the time of the interviews, as Sirius had in fact received enough applications not only to stay open but also to have a more stable teacher staff that is granted for a school when it gets to 18 classrooms in total. Despite the relevance and centrality of these few mothers for the school's fortune, it must not be forgotten that they also act in the first place in order to grant their children the best school environment possible. To do this, they try to overcome, by attracting fleeing parents, the limits of their own 'political' choice of a difficult school.

Therefore, what appears very clear from their accounts is the difficulty for not going beyond this space that they occupy in the school and the tendency to be more demanding at the school level. In fact, their narratives show a high level of emotional involvement to the point that they feel entitled to receive recognition from the school itself, in terms of a voice on internal matters on which the school staff usually makes decisions. For instance, since

²³¹ Dal volantino che mi aveva dato la dirigente quando l'ho incontrata, diceva dalle 10 a 12.30, non era però specificato bene come sarebbe stata la giornata. Non sapevo cosa aspettarmi. Sono arrivata alle 9.55, e la scuola era già in piena attività, tant'è che per un attimo ho pensato di essere in ritardo. (...) Entrando a sinistra ho visto subito un banchetto con il rinfresco, diviso in dolce e salato, c'erano le torte e i panini, le pizze, le bibite e il caffè. Guardandomi in giro, ho visto, oltre al banchetto con le cose da mangiare, a pagamento, a prezzi molto bassi, anche una lotteria, dove si vendevano i biglietti con estrazioni e premi vari, e un piccolo banchetto con libri e oggettistica. A scuola c'era un'atmosfera molto vivace, c'era molta gente, ci si spostava. Si spostavano tutti da una classe all'altra, piano sopra e piano sotto e poi ancora giù e su. C'erano molti bambini e infatti mi sembrava che fosse una cosa molto a misura di ragazzo o ragazza, se appunto questo fosse lì presente, per rendersi conto. Ho visto tutte le mamme che avevo intervistato nelle settimane precedenti, indossavano una spilletta dell'associazione genitori e avevano fatto preparare in pasticceria una torta con su il logo dell'associazione. Si muovevano per la scuola con sciame di genitori che le seguivano. Benché la prima parte della giornata fosse lasciata alla visita libera, sembrava che loro cercassero di prendere un po' in mano la situazione, in modo da poter guidare i genitori. (Fieldnote Sirius' open day 18_11_2015)

the school is characterized by a more “vivid” intake, several situations may happen in which pupils fight or have arguments, inside and outside the classroom. This group of mothers is very present on this issue, as in the case of Mina, whose son was punched in the face by a classmate, and as a result of this, she is planning to contact the teacher and the classroom coordinator because she was not satisfied with the way the teachers managed the situation.

Let's say that there are teachers who can handle things well and teachers who don't. That teacher didn't how to handle this thing, that's why I would like to talk to her. But not to do a j'accuse, but simply tell her that it ended up like this...maybe if she would have managed everything in the classroom... She's a 30-year-old girl, I think she has a temporary contract, poor thing, I don't want to judge or so. This happened on Friday, today is Wednesday, I'm going to talk with the teachers' coordinator on the first day the school reopens. I'm going to talk with this teacher who was there who couldn't handle the situation, she is a young girl, she teaches art. I really want to say to her, look it's okay that you didn't know how to handle it, but maybe next time you'll know that the boy punched him in the face and left him with a bloated nose. Maybe if next time you'll handle the conflict in the classroom²³². (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

She feels very at ease with the idea of expressing her belief on how things should go and how they should be better managed by teachers. In her words, it is possible to find something that also recurs in other narratives, and it is related to the legitimacy of parents' intervention not only in school activities such as open days but also in what relates to school's internal organization, such as the specific formation of the classroom. In fact, parents are not allowed to participate in the commission that oversees distributing newly enrolled pupils among the different classrooms – on the basis of national guidelines of heterogeneity inside the classroom and homogeneity among them.

²³² Diciamo che ci sono insegnanti che le sanno gestire bene, ci sono insegnanti che non...questa professoressa non l'ha saputa assolutamente gestire questa cosa, per quello vorrei parlarle. Ma non per fare un atto d'accusa ma semplicemente per dirle guardi che poi è andata a finire così, magari se la gestiva subito in classe. E' giovane...secondo me non sarà neanche di ruolo, è una ragazza...di 30 anni, poverina, non voglio assolutamente...dire niente ecco. Per cui adesso io andrò a parlare, questo sì è verificato venerdì, oggi è mercoledì, primo giorno che riprende la scuola, andrò a parlare con la coordinatrice con questa insegnante che c'era, che è una ragazza giovane, di arte, poverina, che non ha saputo gestire la situazione. Le voglio proprio dire, guarda, il punto è questo, va bene che tu non l'hai saputa gestire, però magari la prossima volta sappi che quello gli ha tirato un pugno in faccia gli ha lasciato il coso gonfio così. Magari se la prossima volta se il conflitto lo gestisci in classe. (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for them to influence the principal's decision or attempt to do so.

Last year we had some problems, because we had, two poor characters, I repeat, foreigners, one of them had language issues and probably having these issues, he expressed himself using his hands ... do you get it? He was aided by another boy...a loose cannon. The problem is that the principal realized later that she shouldn't have put them together, the problem is that the principal arrived when the classes were formed. What did they do? We went to talk with the principal, because the class was very disturbed, it was mess. The teachers were very tired, they were destroyed...even if they signed lots of disciplinary notes. Fortunately, after a major intervention of us as parents...they suspended them and then after they were suspended, it was better (*she chuckles*), because he was at home, he wasn't there, that's it²³³. (Marie, Italian, Sirius, CS)

Attempts to ask for specific kind of intervention do not always find a positive response from the principal or school staff, and when parents fail in seeing their request fulfilled, what appears to be a harmonious relationship may become shaking. For example, Mina's story is very representative of this mechanism by which parental intervention may turn out to be an arena of misunderstanding and dissatisfaction with the school organization. She noted to the principal that she was not satisfied with the composition of the classroom, since she thought that some classrooms were too segregated, since Arab-origin girls were the majority. Despite the merit of the critique and possible resolutions, she was highly offended by the principal's response. She was so affected by the principal's reaction – which she believed was even worse for addressing a highly involved mother such as herself – that her frustration motivated her to re-evaluate the possibility of changing school for her second son.

Let's start by saying that I'm not paid I'm investing much of my time in this activity, I'll do even less. I can volunteer with poor people it's not compulsory that I do it

²³³ L'anno scorso avevamo problemi, nel senso che avevamo, due personaggi, poverini, ripeto, stranieri di cui uno tra parentesi aveva problemi di lingua e probabilmente avendo questi problemi di lingua, lui si esprimeva con le mani...capito? E aveva trovato un suo complice, quindi erano una coppia...una mina vagante. Il problema è che la Preside dopo si è resa conto che non doveva metterli assieme, il problema è che la preside è arrivata dopo che le classi erano state fatte, quindi cosa hanno fatto? Per fortuna, dopo un grosso intervento di noi genitori che siamo andati a parlare con la Preside, perché la classe era disturbata da morire. Gli insegnanti...stravolti...stravolti, perché erano distrutti...poi insomma, anche se davi note su note. Poi alla fine siamo arrivati alle sospensioni, allora nel momento in cui erano sospesi si stava meglio (ridacchia), perché chiaramente lui era a casa, non c'era...ecco. (Marie, Italian, Sirius, CS)

here, do you get it? I'm discussing with her how we can do it in a way that...Right? Well, let's see, it is not granted/obvious that I'll enrol him in Mimosa, I'm open to all possibilities²³⁴. (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

What is substantial in her experience, and shared by other involved mothers in Sirius' intake, is that this primary concern for a good mix inside the school responds to an individual and class need to avoid the risk of seeing the family in a minority position, exactly as fleeing parents feared. In fact, they fear the possibility of a completely segregated classrooms – for instance with only pupils with north African origin – not only because they believe its unethical, but because this could undermine chances of socialization with other mothers.

Along the path of high involvement in terms of time and energy, and times of alternate success, these mothers aimed to attract other Italian parents, who are considered more similar to themselves than the majority of Sirius families.

This year some girls, daughters of a friend of mine, enrolled in Bellatrix even though I had told them to come and visit Sirius. We do the school open days, we push a lot for Sirius because in the end we are the catchment area²³⁵. (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

They all have an interest in convincing these parents to consider Sirius an option. In this sense, this group is interested in the composition of the school's intake, but they believe that they themselves can "make" the school's intake. They believe that they can play a relevant role in changing it in a way that it will be more socially and ethnically mixed.

²³⁴ Cominciamo dal dire che io non sono pagata, e che...sto impegnando tanto del mio tempo per fare questa attività, guardate che faccio anche a meno. Posso fare volontariato al pio albergo triulzo, non è che devo venire per forza qui, capisci? Siamo qua, ti sto dicendo come possiamo fare per. No? Vediamo eh...non è scontato che lo manderò in cardarelli, io ho aperto...ho aperto tutte le possibilità. (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

²³⁵ Quest'anno delle bambine si sono iscritte, figlie di miei amici, si sono iscritte in Bellatrix benché io gli avessi detto, venite a vedere Sirius facciamo gli open day, noi spingiamo molto per Sirius perché in fondo l'utenza siamo noi no? (Mina, Italian, Sirius, OfC)

Combining the main criteria that guided mothers' choices, explored in Chapter V, with the catchment area school characteristics, we can resume parents' schooling strategies found in this work (see Table 3). As any categorization, this parents' strategies typology privileges common characteristics among parents' declared criteria and their influence on the choice within a fixed educational offer in the neighbourhood. It is true that, with regard to the criteria guiding their decisions, parents often intertwine different arguments – for instance they value academic performance but they attribute it to teachers, extra-curricular activities and few foreign pupils – nevertheless from their narratives it was possible to grasp the importance they attributed to school characteristics and the order of priority.

Table 3 Parents' strategies of choice

			Evaluation of school characteristics	
			Catchment area school	
			Good reputation + Good educational level	Bad reputation + presence of foreign and disadvantaged pupils + less involved parents
Parents' orientations	Main criterion guiding the choice	Academic level	STAYING IN THE LOCAL SCHOOL <i>[5, Bellatrix and Vega]</i>	//
		School approach	STAYING IN THE LOCAL SCHOOL <i>[6, Spica]</i>	
		Presence of foreign and disadvantaged pupils as proxy for academic level	//	AVOIDING THE CATCHMENT AREA SCHOOL + looking for a good reputation school <i>[5, Sirius, 5 similar schools → to Mimosa, Bellatrix and Vega]</i>
	School mix	Cultural homogeneity in the school ("people like us")	//	AVOIDING THE CATCHMENT AREA SCHOOL + looking for a good reputation school <i>[5 Sirius, 2 similar schools → to Mimosa and Vega]</i>
		Multicultural belief	//	CHOOSING THE NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL + intervening at the school level <i>[4, Sirius]</i>

With regards to the “attractiveness” of schools in the territory, from this qualitative exploration we can observe that schools such as Sirius attracts catchment area enrolments of lower-classes and foreign pupils living in its territory and it might be chosen, as in the case

of four mothers, due to their multicultural beliefs but with the aim of changing the school reputation and fight against the Italian white flight.

Schools such as Bellatrix, Vega, Mimosa and Spica are attractive schools, they are able to “keep” their catchment areas enrolments or attract parents that are looking for a specific approach they have. Moreover, they receive “avoiding” parents’ applications, although for them the choice is already done when they exclude their catchment area school, after that other schools may be slightly different but they are already an improvement.

The group of mothers and fathers has different socioeconomic profiles and lives in different portions the same area of the city. We have highlighted their criteria of choice that in combination with school characteristics result in different choices and strategies. The next section is devoted to describing parents’ approaches to the choice and strategies at the light of their socioeconomic and cultural profiles.

6.5 Profiling parents’ approaches to the choice

The forty-three parents in the research occupy different class positions, with middle classes parents – the more numerous and yet heterogeneous group – and lower classes parents, whose mothers (or their husbands if unemployed) are employed in elementary occupations (see Section 3.6.1.1). Moreover, a small part of them has also different ethnic identities, due to a migratory background. Hence, different degrees of awareness about the functioning of the system were expected, where parents belonging to the lower classes, and foreign ones, would have been cut out from the opportunity to know they could choose out-of-the-catchment schools. At the same time, parents with more cultural and social resources were expected to be in the position to choose and, moreover, to do it according to different criteria. Whether the results of this research point in this direction or, instead, they reserve unexpected elements, emerges from a discussion of parental choices at the light of their characteristics, their approach to the choice and their guiding criteria.

6.5.1 Disconnected parents: marginalized inertial choices

This work has shed light on the functioning of the system of freedom of choice and catchment areas, as a common practice, in the city and in the group of parents. All parents appeared aware of the availability of several school options to select among. Despite this

spread awareness of the existence of the possibility to choose out of the catchment area, an exception was represented by three not Italian parents (see 4.2.1). Their stories, are significant because they embody a situation in which parents of lower classes, migrants, and struggling in socializing with the Italian educational system, do not have access to information. Moreover, they are unable to activate their resources to look for this information and their final decision is the result of inertia. They choose the school, fully influenced by a third actor's opinion. According to this passive approach to the choice, they might be defined as *disconnected*, referring in particular to the abovementioned "alien" position they occupy in the field, reason that explains also the enormous difficulty encountered, while interviewing them, in discussing the choice of the school as something relevant.

Yet, other parents in the group have a migratory background and a working-class position, but they are aware of the possibility to evaluate other schools and in different ways they decide among institutes. This divide might be explained including in the picture the role of the extreme fragmentation of practices among schools and institutions in providing information about schools enrolments. This fragmentation might result to be disadvantageous for not Italian parents, with weaker (or only interethnic) social ties and less propensity to contact the school. In fact, we saw that learning about school choice 1) it is left to parents' activation in seeking information – talking with the school or other parents – that may cut out parents with lower cultural resources that for instance do not have a good domain of Italian language 2) it is related to information provided by schools. The latter is not uniform or standardized, hence it does not necessarily cover everybody. This lack of standardized official communication about the characteristics and the functioning of the system might fall back on those parents that struggle in interaction with schools staff and have less connection in social networks, ending relying on one single and only source – a landlord or a work chief – on the basis of which they choose.

6.5.2 Informed parents

If we leave disconnected parents out of the picture – wondering if they might be the tip of the iceberg of not Italian parents in school choice – all other parents in the group share a similar awareness. They know they can potentially enrol in different school from the catchment area one, but they navigate this system differently, using different compasses. As we saw, parents' guiding criteria are influenced by the meso characteristics of the neighbourhood – that result from the class position of parents determining the characteristics

of their house, flats and position in the periphery-centre *continuum* – and by the educational offer in the neighbourhood and nearby. In fact, due to the specificity of the age of their children, different choices are all made looking for proximity to the house or workplace, hence closeness frame parental choices as little as needed to include up to four or five school in the roost of options. Hence, in the attempt to stay relatively close to home, parents, on the basis of the area of the city in which they live, have access to a limited number of schools that may differ in educational offer and reputation. Moreover, talking about meso-level characteristics, parents' choice may encounter a concrete constrain in the existence of a surplus of enrolment in the selected school, reasons why the school is unable to accept all the application and has to apply selective criteria. These criteria privilege pupils living closest to the school, but since each school may approve them autonomously there is a lack of standardized and uniform policy in accepting or refusing application.

All these considered, in the group of participants, two groups of parents can be distinguished on the basis of their approach to school choice. The majority belongs to the group of *concerned* and *interventive* parents – mostly Italians – while the rest are parents who may be defined as *detached*, more heterogeneous with regard to their socioeconomic and ethnic origin.

The difference among these groups lies in 1) how they approached the choice knowing that they could evaluate different options 2) in the criteria guiding their decision. These two aspects overlap frequently since the more parents invested in the choice the more complex are the reasons behind their choice, and the more criteria they applied to select the school, the more their choice is far from the “choosing out of proximity” option.

6.5.2.1 *Detached parents*

The detached parents invested less in the choice in terms of time and energy (emotional energy too) because they did not consider this transition as so important to require a complex evaluation of different schools. Detached parents' choices were mainly based as seen in Section 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 on the practical element at the individual (or family) level, namely closeness to home, grandparents' home or workplace and child preferences. In this sense, their decision results influenced by the proximity of school to home without evaluating other elements beyond. What is interesting about their case is that a detached parent hides a potentially concerned parent. This is testified by some of these mothers' disappointment or disillusion with the choice a posteriori and by the latent possibility to

change school for the future of for other children. In this sense, these parents do not unplug their attention for their children education or do not follow other parents' or acquaintance's choices, but they give priority to the family organization and wellbeing, or to their children's preferences. It can be said that this category is constructed, and defined with the words 'detached' in contrast with the tendency that is dominant in the group: *concerned* and *interventive* parents.

That is to say that the majority of parents in the group lived the choice as very complex evaluation of different factors that involved several arguments to sustain the final choice as the best possible one. In this sense, who described her or his experience of the choice as smoother and more straightforward, based on one single criteria – “it is the closest to home”, “he wanted to attend this school” – represent a kind of “hypothesis 0”. This type would include the choice responding to the catchment area ratio – attending the closest school to home – despite of the awareness of the existence of other options, so holding all the necessary information.

6.5.2.2 *Concerned parents' and strategies of choice*

In contraposition to these “hypothesis 0” of parental approaches to the choice the majority of parents in the group are *concerned* with regard to this decision and in many cases *interventive* before and after the choice. They approach the choice as goldminers, integrating information they receive about catchment areas, reaching out other information from different sources, seeking in the neighbourhood and around it to find the best school. They represent the consumer parent that, facing a certain school offer – within the limits of their own residential area and of educational provisions – assess different options on the basis of several criteria. According to these criteria, as emerged in the narratives presented in chapter V, they have been categorized on the basis of their schooling strategies, in:

- 1) Parents who exited the catchment area school because of its reputation founded on the presence of high concentrations of “foreign” and socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils. Their choices were guided by the importance attributed to the lower secondary school as pivotal for future choices and by the preference of the same class environment.
- 2) Parents who stayed in the stigmatized neighbourhood school but used their ‘voice’ and engaged in a strong campaign to bridge other parents like them to the school.

Their choices were guided by individual ideological principles that gave value to the chance of learning in a diverse environment.

- 3) Parents who choose the “local” school because they were reassured by having a good school as the catchment area one and explored other options before, but ultimately opted for it as the best option. Their choices were guided by the school educational offer and its quality, considered important on the basis of the value attributed to education.

6.5.2.3 Parents avoiding the catchment area school: holding on to the same class environment

Italian mothers (and one father) that put in place a strategy of avoidance of the catchment area school share a common profile in terms of socioeconomic characteristics, as well as in term of the territorial context in which they live.

They all live in an area in between the centre and the periphery – more toward the outskirt – where it is possible to find residential better-off areas together with worst-off people living in public housing. Moreover, they all are homeowners who bought the house when they started a family. The mothers say that most of them clearly could not afford to buy a place in the neighbourhood in which they originally lived (or their husband did); therefore, they opted to move further from the city centre to have a larger house in a more suitable neighbourhood for a family. They have a good opinion of their own neighbourhood because, in many cases, it responded to their needs as a family, but they are also aware of its peculiarity, because different worlds co-exist in the same portion of territory. For this reason, mothers commonly consider neighbourhood the few streets around their block of flats with the garden.

With regards to their occupation, 7 of them are office workers and 7 are professionals, while 1 is a secretary and 1 works in the school canteen. The latter hold a lower secondary school diploma, while the rest of mothers reached upper secondary and tertiary education. What is pivotal in their approach to the choice is the strong investment in their children’s education and a high expectation for their future. Lower secondary choice is already a choice that responds to the need of choosing a good school thereafter, in upper secondary, and being prepared for the next step. These group of mothers shares therefore a similar belief on the role of education – and schools – that is primarily linked to its teaching task of providing pupils with a good education before everything else.

We said that two mothers have different characteristics from the rest, although they live in the same area. The coexistence in the same neighbourhood is explained exactly by its features. Emily and Leonilde live in a public house and in a private apartment in a formerly public building. Both finished school at 16 years of age have service professions. If on paper their choice appears to be similar to other mothers, in fact they struggled with it on different levels, unlikely other interviewees. Emily chose an out-of-the-catchment area school that she and her children can reach only taking the bus, because she does not have a car. This commuting can also require more than 20 minutes in rush hour. Leonilde, rather than finding the good reputation of the Bellatrix school justified in stimulating her two twin daughters to focus on school, encountered many difficulties with teachers and school staff concerning how her daughters were treated at school. She almost moved them to another school. Finally, both were victims, as they say, of a similar ‘block’ in trying to enrol their children in Bellatrix_2. However, Leonilde was told that to enrol her twins, the easiest way to be accepted, when coming from outside the catchment area, was to apply to Bellatrix 1. She placidly accepted this advice, although she still has the feeling that “Bellatrix 2 is a first-class school and Bellatrix 1 is a second-class one”, Michela still holds a grudge when she tells me what occurred at the time of choosing her first daughter’s lower secondary school. She was planning to enrol her in Bellatrix 2 because she knew the school from working in the canteen, but she blames the school for having redirected her to Bellatrix 1 because of her being a low-income mother.

6.5.2.4 Parents staying in the local school: a less stressful choice in search for the best quality education

Shared common characteristics can be identified also among parents who stayed in the catchment area school because it was “a good school” or “the best possible school”. Among this group are mothers who live in owned houses in the most central areas of the city, where the number of mixed intake schools is lower (or absent). It is notable that these parents have more homogeneous characteristics in terms of occupation than the other groups. In fact, five of them are professionals, two are housewives but married to a professional, one is an office worker and three have an autonomous small business. Moreover, seven out of

eleven hold a degree or attended university for several years before dropping out (5 and 2) while only four of them has a diploma (one attained abroad).

They did not declare they faced the lower secondary school decision as a pivotal decision in their children lives, as none of them declared having explicitly considered the choice of upper secondary school. However, this appears mostly because of the certainty of a successful path that was already started. In fact, first, mothers in this group were reassured by the good reputation of the catchment area school, in terms of the teaching and learning environment and in terms of the pupils. Second, they did not investigate whether the school plays a prominent role in ensuring the success of their children, as they have educated and wealthy families that will support them. This does not mean that they choose by chance; on the contrary, they did consider several options, considering school quality and school approach, together with closeness to home, and they eventually opted for the closest school once they were reassured about its quality.

6.5.2.5 *Mothers choosing the neighbourhood school: looking for the right mix?*

Mothers that chose the neighbourhood school, mainly guided by their personal belief towards multiculturalism, share similar characteristics of those who avoided their catchment area school. In fact, they belong even to same social network of mothers who exited from Sirius to opt for Bellatrix or Mimosa.

They all live in the grey area of the neighbourhood mentioned above, and they belong to Italian home-owner families living in the area for a long time. Two of the them are currently not working, and the other two are working as professionals.

They deliberated chosen the stigmatized school even though it was an out-of-the-catchment area school, since they preferred a more diverse environment – which was evaluated as an asset – to a more homogeneous and selective school. Nevertheless, this choice was made because of a strong commitment towards the schools, in terms of involvement and intervention. In fact, this group of parents were already involved at the school level, and they actively participated together with the school management and other catchment area mothers in an attempt to reverse the school's reputation and increase the number of enrolments.

As we mentioned above, looking at this high level of involvement at the school level, before and after enrolment, choosing the local school appears to be more than a desire for

multiculturalism. Rather, it is a first step to change the school's image and attract more Italian, middle-class, involved parents. In fact, they share a similar idea of education as fleeing parents with a high expectation about their children's future choices – upper secondary school and university. That is why they tried to improve the quality of the school that they chose and to back up their children in extra-curricular activities.

As we stressed in Chapter IV, class differences in approaching school choice are more blurred than what would be expected, as in fact also parents defined as working class, move with sufficient awareness of the functioning of the system. Differences emerge with respect to the criteria guiding the choice and how parents evaluate schools and eventually chose to stay in or to go out of the catchment area.

It appears that occupying the lower strata a lower occupation and/or having a migratory background may be linked to a safer choice that privileges closeness to home and children wellbeing, dismissing (or being less influenced) by future educational choices.

Contrarily, there are different occupations and levels of education represented within the group of parents defined as middle-class. Although middle-class parents share a similar political correctness in their narrations – always careful to present themselves as not racist and without prejudices – as well a high investment in their children education, it is difficult to detect groups of professions that may be linked to certain patterns of choice.

Nevertheless, two elements can be stressed looking within and across the abovementioned typology.

One is that parents' social position affects also where they live, differentiating who own a place more toward the periphery – sharing the neighborhood, and the school, with less advantaged families – from who has the family home in a more central area – with more selected families and schools. In this sense, the second has always lived – even before forming a family – in the school area, their property is inherited (their parents where living there before them) or related to their larger families. While the latter have invested in less central areas – more recently urbanized – to buy a family home, privileging comfort and space more than the neighborhood prestige. Therefore, while living in a more central area – where parents, professionals or married to a professional, meet similar parents – has been observed to be more linked to the choice of staying in the local school, living towards the

outskirts of the city is often related to concerns for the school population. As in fact this heterogeneous group of parents is not satisfied with a similarly heterogeneous environment.

The second element that can be stressed is that, apart from their constraints in terms of neighborhoods and schools provision, in generic terms, more educated Italian parents – having a more secure social position, as professional or office workers or more insecure as freelance – are always able to activate and may rely on decisive cultural resources to 1) Assess their catchment area school on the basis of their own criteria of choice (for instance evaluating its intake through their social networks) 2) Intervene within the school ensuring that everything functions as expected to the end of their children educational success. In this they have been observed to be more advantaged than less educated parents, mainly not Italian and lower-classes.

6.6 Conclusions: insights for a broader reflection on Italian middle-class schooling strategies

This work was not explicitly thought to be about class, at least in its embryonic stage. Nevertheless, educational choices have also been explored as practices through which specific social groups may distinguish themselves from other social groups. And since individuals' positions in the social ladder influence, shape, determine (according to different approaches) their preferences and options, associated to certain opportunities and constraints, looking at school choice may also shed light on mechanism of social reproduction or social mobility, since schooling choice may be also decisions through which parents, worried about transmitting to their children a relevant asset such as education, route their offspring in the “right” path.

Hence, this work is inevitably about class and in particular it is about the choices of an Italian group of parents that, for its heterogeneity it is simplistic to define as middle class. It would be better defined them using the Italian expression “*ceto medio*” that refers to status-group stratification (Bagnasco 2008) and it helps overcoming the difficulties of drawing the borders of complex and heterogeneous middle classes.

Italian parents in this research that can be defined as middle-class, are described very well by one possible way to look at *ceto medio*, as presented in (Bagnasco 2016:99): a cultural and political construction of a relatively homogeneous whole, structured in certain circumstances (original: “costruzione culturale e politica di un insieme relativamente

omogeneo, strutturato in certe circostanze”). These circumstances have emerged as the educational decisions and, specifically, schooling decisions in the neighbourhood. Vis a vis these particular circumstances, *ceto medio* parents, through the choice of a single institution – escaping the neighbourhood school or staying in it – choose a social and cultural space they want their children to be part of. This of course might require more or less intense efforts, depending from the school assigned by default with the catchment area system and from educational offer in the neighbourhood: the better the school and the wealthier the intake, the higher the guarantee that choosing local is safe, and vice versa. These informed parents are not passive subject to institutional or school decisions on enrolments, neither to what is or may be decided in everyday school life, that may affect their children.

What it is interesting to observe is that, although all these *ceto medio* parents invested in the choice of lower secondary school, only for avoiding parents this decision convey an explicit will to stay as far as possible from lower classes and foreign families, similarly to what research has showed elsewhere (see for instance Ball et al. 2004). Fleeing parents’ goal is to obtain a place – their children attending a certain school – that is not secured by the system, as in fact they dislike and exit the school assigned on the basis of the catchment area. Their decisions seek for their children something more than what they could get passively, out of proximity, instead they look for a good school with a good intake, with people like them and consequentially a good quality education. Their choice is aimed at ensuring a long-term education to their children not only in terms of years of schooling, but in terms of what schools means with regard to chances of socialization, for pupils and families, in the same class and “Italian” environment.

The residential stability of Italian families together with the availability of schools relatively close in the territory leave out the option of “voting with the feet”, moving in order to reach a better school: therefore, for those parents that had to give up to a family home in the city central areas, school choice is also a mean to protect children from the social disadvantaged inhabitants of more peripheral areas. Other parents experienced less explicitly this urgency to escape the catchment area school, yet their accounts point at the relevance of the intakes characteristics in their decisions and at the school choice practice as a bonding decision that reinforce already existing exchanges among members of the same social group.

Although all these parents’ choices are not exhaustive in explain all parental flows in and out of the catchment areas in the city, it is legitimate to believe that they are those whose consequences on schools’ polarization might be more marked. In fact, on the one hand their choices combine with disconnected or detached parents’ that might tend to stay in the

catchment area school – not aware of freedom of choice or unwilling to move further. On the other hand, in the case of exit but also in other strategies they strongly rely on same class parents' grapevine information and they are attracted by schools with higher parental involvements.

Conclusion

This research has taken the moves from the relevance of school choices in individuals' lives, since the beginning of the educational path, and a fortiori because of the possibility granted by the Italian law to families, to choose a primary or lower secondary school irrespectively of the catchment areas. Parents can on paper choose the most suitable school according them for their children, without being bind by her family home. If it is so, the proximity between school and home – ratio at the basis of the catchment area system – might not be the leading principle guiding assignment of pupils to school and parents might base their decision on other criteria. Therefore, the study presented here find is rationale in a starting, complex question referred to a complex social phenomenon: how do parents choose their children lower secondary school. This broad question, leading the work contained in this dissertation, talks about and respond to the relevance that the choice of a lower secondary school, overlooked until now, may have on schools and pupils in urban context. It focused on this transition with the aim of understanding on the basis of which criteria parents make their decisions – in relation to their set of resources and constraints influencing their preferences – and to what extent individual choices might constitute class strategies of avoidance of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Research on educational transitions have widely pointed to the relevance of individual ascriptive characteristics – family socioeconomic background, ethnic origin, gender – in determining pupils' chances of access and success in education. In this scenario, the literature that has explored the choice of specific schools, at the primary level of education, within different catchment area systems, have focused on consequences in terms of inequalities, showing the relevance of parents' class position in influencing their capability of knowing different options, be able to choose, and get access to the preferred option.

In Italy, an important change has been introduced with the Autonomy Reform that excised the catchment areas as the leading criteria in the assignment of pupils to school, favouring instead parent's freedom of choice. Even though the role of families and their decisions has been enhanced and attributes and functioning of catchment area have remained unclear, no public or academic debate has developed around the topic, exploring the characteristics of primary level transitions. Nevertheless, the choice of the lower secondary school is relevant at least for two reasons: on the one hand, the peculiarity of this level of education. Lower secondary school is invested with an advising role for future choices and

at the same time it was born with the aim of keeping all students in the same, equal, school. In fact, lower secondary school precede the differentiation in tracks typical of the upper secondary segment in Italy, and are a common core curriculum level, despite some autonomy provided by the law in the elaboration of the educational offer. This means that formally the choice observed can be addressed as a choice among similar institutions: they are compulsory, they grant access to the next level of education, they are based on the same curricular program, teaching the same subjects etc. On the other hand, several researches recently undertaken in the city of Milan, seem to point to a risk of socioeconomic and ethnic segregation among primary and lower secondary schools, that cannot be fully explainable with the spatial segregation but could be related with Italian parents' choices within the city. In this sense, understanding how school choice works – where school choice is intended as a decision among common core curriculum schools – may provide insights on class practices in urban areas characterized by high social and ethnic mix that could in part explain school segregation.

At the light of these two elements, I decided to move a step back and start from the exploration of how parents decide the school in this transition to lower secondary level, vis-à-vis the system of catchment area and schools' characteristics in the territory of Milan. In fact, the exploratory nature of the research was necessary in order to not give anything for granted about different aspect of this choice, involving the individual level of parents but also schools and neighbourhood's characteristics as well as local policies and the educational system at the national level. That is why this work was based on data that were generated through 43 semi-structured qualitative interviews to parents of children enrolled in a public lower secondary school or recently exited from one. Moreover interviews to school principals and other key informants were conducted, together with observation during lower secondary schools' open days, and secondary analysis of data at the school level (including the location and number of pupils by gender and nationality; curriculum and timetable characteristics; closeness and dislocation of schools in the territory; and capacity of the building and catchment area extension) and at the city level (on parents' enrolment decisions in or out of the catchment area of schools.).

Freedom of choice and catchment area system in practice

First, the research had shed light on the attributes of the catchment area system whose functioning was explored by examining Municipality decisions and schools' and parents' practices.

Seeking the formal basis of catchment areas and their characteristics, three important elements emerged. 1) Although the expression "*bacino d'utenza*" (Italian word for catchment area) has disappeared from the national law on schools' enrolment, catchment areas are still active and exist. They maintain an orientating role for parents and respond to the need of the Municipality of pupils' allocation for schools to be able to receive all students that are in the city. 2) Their configuration and role depend on local decision at the municipality level of governance. In fact, the Municipality of Milan, in cooperation with the representatives of the government in the territory designs borders and extensions of the catchment areas of each primary and lower secondary school in the city, on the basis of the census tract, which is a smaller-scale of analysis of the city and is the basis of neighbourhood divisions. 3) Catchment areas are subject to change over time, according for instance to the population of pupils of a certain age in the territory and the displacement of schools. Nevertheless, parents' decisions do not play a secondary role. In fact, the Municipality can and does observe parents' *flows*, checking pupils' schools and residences to track in-and-out of the catchment area enrolments; and these factors appear to influence the decisions to modify catchment areas in one way or another.

If parents' decisions, in combination with other elements, could affect catchment areas, it is also because in the case of Milan parents *de facto* opt out from their catchment areas schools, as showed by municipal aggregated data on enrolments. Parents exercise their freedom of choice at the city level – slightly more in the case of Italian parents and in the lower secondary school track. Similarly, the group of participants in this research is divided between who enrolled their children in the catchment area school and who opted for an out-of-the-catchment area school.

Therefore, that parents are enrolling their children choosing a school different from the one *suggested* by the catchment area is a fact. Different, although, is their awareness of not being bind to the territorial principal. That is why the research explored parental subjective perception and imaginary on catchment areas functioning and how they learned about it. It emerged that all parents taken for granted the existence of catchment areas and how they work, but their functioning became more blurred when mothers continued to discuss their process of choice. Catchment areas begin to become tangible barriers when mothers consider or encounter them as possible obstacles in accessing the preferred school.

In fact, if parents succeeded in accessing their preferred school, they have different perceptions of catchment areas, often showing a lack of understanding of existing institutional divisions of the territory. Nevertheless, these perceptions do not affect them directly until they experience catchment areas as a real limitation if they want to leave the catchment area school. In this case, when schools are in a situation of oversubscription, parents initially see their freedom limited if they do not comply with some criteria. Second, schools' admission policies and procedures can vary significantly and are not required to follow a national standard.

In accessing information about both school choice and possible constraints, more-diverse practices emerged, mostly linked to parents' personal activation in seeking information and to receiving second-hand information from other actors. Although some schools provided forms of communication, doing so cannot be described as a uniform practice designed to reach all parents.

Disconnected, detached and concerned parents

Three parents' stories remain separated from this general tendency and constitute a relevant exception: two mothers and one not Italian father, from the first approach to the topic, through both direct and open questions revealed them as lacking understanding. They did not share the same story, but they appeared immediately as lacking knowledge on school choice, which is why they relied on someone else, a work chief or a landlord. Their stories, are significant because they embody a situation in which parents of lower classes, migrants, and struggling in socializing with the Italian educational system, do not have access to information. In fact, the extreme fragmentation of practices among schools and institutions in providing information about schools' enrolments might result to be disadvantageous for not Italian parents, with weaker (or only interethnic) social ties and less propensity to contact the school. In fact, we saw that learning about school choice 1) it is left to parents' activation in seeking information – talking with the school or other parents – that may cut out parents with lower cultural resources that for instance do not have a good domain of Italian language 2) it is related to information provided by schools. The latter is not uniform or standardized, hence it does not necessarily cover everybody. This lack of standardized official communication about the characteristics and the functioning of the system might fall back on those parents that struggle in interaction with school staff and have less connection in social networks, ending relying on one single and only source which suggestion they follow.

These parents and a larger group they might represent, have been defined as *disconnected*, referring to the “alien” position they occupy in the field and to their being unskilled to approach school choice since its first step because they are not aware of the functioning of the system.

Looking at how parents approach the choice, two other groups of parents have been distinguished, among those that knew they could evaluate different options. The majority belonged to the group of *concerned* and *interventive* parents – mostly Italians – while the rest are parents, defined as *detached*, were more heterogeneous with regard to their socioeconomic and ethnic origin.

The detached parents were those that invested less in the choice in terms of time and energy (emotional energy too) because they did not consider this transition as so important to require a complex evaluation of different schools. Detached parents’ choices were mainly based on the practical element at the individual (or family) level, namely closeness to home, grandparents’ home or workplace, or children’s wellbeing.

The other groups of parents were *concerned* with regard to this decision and in many cases *interventive* before and after the choice. They approached the choice as goldminers, integrating information they received about catchment areas, reaching out for other information from different sources, seeking in the neighbourhood and around it to find the best school. They represented the consumer parent that, facing a certain school offer – within the limits of their own residential area and of educational provisions – assessed different options on the basis of several criteria. Results on the criteria of choice and schooling strategies of *concerned* and *interventive* parents will be resumed below.

Parents declared criteria of choice

The research has also analysed parental criteria of choice as they are presented in mother and fathers accounts. Although these accounts are often very complex and parents constantly construct and reconstruct their stories, it was possible to grasp the main criteria guiding, to a different degree, different parents’ decisions. The two most important criteria are relatively to school quality and school mix, nevertheless, other elements emerge in this complex picture.

First of all, parents in the research opted for a public lower secondary school and the public choice emerged as the “second best” only in few cases, in which economic constraints prevented the choice of a private school.

Within an aware and deliberate public-school framework, mothers evaluated options on a micro-territorial level, considering the school (or schools) in their neighbourhood and in adjacent ones. In this sense, the school's relative closeness to home transversally characterizes the decision at this level of education, although with a different order of priority. For the majority of mothers, closeness was always considered but it was never the first criteria, as in fact it could be given up in favour of other elements. Only for a small group of parents the choice was mainly influenced by home-school proximity, and this group of few parents overlap almost completely with the identikit of the *detached* parents.

Moreover, the research shows that children's preferences and wellbeing – evaluated as important only by few mothers – were residual compared to mothers (and fathers) ideas of good school. The first were based on two elements: school quality – declined as academic performance or school approach – and school mix, thus pupils' socioeconomic and ethnic background – which entails both the concern with the academic level and the preference for a culturally homogenous setting. In the first case, mothers were animated by the search for a school that could guarantee a certain level of educational performance to ensure their children further educational success. Nevertheless, other mothers assessed school quality looking at the school “human” approach – devoted to the care of pupils and to alternative teaching approaches – more than caring about grades and rankings.

With regard to school mix, the school population composition was central in majority of mothers' accounts. It was related to school academic quality, since pupils ethnic and social origin was associated with lower level of educational performances and a poorer cultural environment. But it was also a main concern for mothers who were interested in a school whose setting was socially and culturally homogeneous. In this sense, school mix called out mothers' identities as Italian and as belonging to a (although diverse) middle-class group of parents. Finally, school mix has also been considered as an asset, therefore it has been valued by parents who chose mainly on the basis of their ideological belief sustaining social and ethnic mix as enriching.

These criteria intersect and combine in the decision-making process in which mothers – who are the main characters in this decision – engage in the evaluation and selection of up to five school options in their neighbourhood and adjacent area. In the process, mothers engage in the information-gathering on schools, learning and asking about what they are or may be interesting in finding in the school.

The research has highlighted that mothers generally learn about schools and their characteristics through the neighbourhood grapevine and schools' self-presentation during

open days. While the latter are a sort of ritual to which all parents participate, it is considered as secondary in making the decision. The importance attributed to the choice of lower secondary school collides with the kind of information that they are able or willing to gather regarding possible school options. Although mothers appear to be well-informed about schools, the kind of knowledge that they hold mainly results from information-gathering over a short distance through weak social ties. Most importantly, parents that engage in a thorough evaluation of several options, ultimately value as highly relevant the opinion or experience that other parents “like them” have on what mothers were originally interested in.

Parents strategies of choice

On the basis of their guiding criterion (or combination of criteria), parents faced the neighbourhood educational offer which has specific characteristics. Schools involved in the research – together with adjacent schools – are represented in parents’ accounts on the basis of their reputation. Reputation is central in parents’ accounts, despite schools’ website and informative documents have been recently enriched with several information about schools’ building, activities, teachings, population etc. Through their fame, schools appear crystalized in the territory, especially if they carry a bad reputation, due to a socially and ethnically mixed intake – a possible cause of troubles and difficulties. To a school bad fame may contribute also parents’ assessment of schools’ resources. In particular, the existence of an involved group of parents is considered an asset, since it may bring economic and time resource to the benefit of public schools, that have recently suffered from budget cuts.

The research has shown how parents, on the basis of their idea of good school adopt schooling strategies to respond to the educational offer in the neighbourhood and to their catchment area schools. With respect to this it was possible to distinguish among:

- 1) Parents that, guided by the importance of ethnic and social origin of pupils had a socially and ethnically mixed catchment area, with a bad reputation and a low level of parental involvement. Their strategy was to take a first order decision to avoid the catchment area without engaging in information-gathering to verify schools’ characteristics. They took a second-order decision, to opt for another school in the neighbourhood, on the basis its higher educational level or the presence of “people like us”.

In this group there were Italian mothers (and one father), living in an area in between the centre and the periphery – more toward the outskirts – where it is possible to find residential better-off areas together with worst-off people living in public housing. Even if they have a good opinion of their own neighbourhood, they are aware of its peculiarity, because different worlds co-exist in the same portion of territory. They don't appreciate this characteristic when it is reflected in their catchment area school. This group is very heterogeneous in terms of social profiles but what is pivotal in their approach to the choice is the strong investment in their children's education and a high expectation for their future. At the same time, their concern for putting their children in a more "safe" environment – where he or she stays with people similar to the family – bypasses more objective evaluation of the school academic level.

- 2) Parents that, guided by the importance of the academic level or the school "human" approach, had a good reputation catchment area school or a school offering an alternative teaching style, while valuing education. After having been reassured about the validity of this good reputation and having gathered more information about these schools, their strategy was to stay in the local school, benefiting from its proximity to home. Among this group are mothers who live in owned houses in the most central areas of the city, where the number of mixed intake schools is lower (or absent). Although most of them they did not declare they faced the lower secondary school decision as a pivotal decision in their children's lives, as none of them declared having explicitly considered the choice of upper secondary school. However, this appears mostly because of the certainty of a successful path that was already started. In fact, first, mothers in this group were reassured by the good reputation of the catchment area school, in terms of the teaching and learning environment and in terms of the pupils. Second, they did not investigate whether the school plays a prominent role in ensuring the success of their children, as they have educated and wealthy families that will support them. This does not mean that they choose by chance; on the contrary, they did consider several options, taking into account school quality and school approach, together with closeness to home, and they eventually opted for the closest school once they were certain about its quality.
- 3) Parents that, guided by their multicultural belief, knew or learned about the existence of a socially and ethnically mixed school, criticised and avoided in the

neighbourhood. Their strategy was two-fold: they decided to enrol in the school because it responded to their idea of diversity they wanted their children to grow in. But, since the school was carrying a bad reputation and other parents were avoiding it, they wove a proper safety net, before and after the enrolment. First of all, these mothers gathered information – through visit to the school talking to teachers and other parents – to be sure about the academic level of the school. Second of all they got involved once in. In fact, they actively participated together with the school management and other catchment area mothers in an attempt to reverse the school's reputation and increase the number of enrolments. In particular, since they are neighbours of (and even friends to) some of the avoiding parents, their goal is to attract parents similar to their social networks.

This research observed parental choices in an urban context in which they are provided with at least one option beyond the catchment area, at a relatively close distance and in neighbourhoods in which a type of diversity in pupils' composition can be visible as such and can influence parents' choices. In parents' flows observed in the different areas of the city considered, it emerged an existing strategy of a group of Italian parents, to flee out of their catchment area school on the basis of its characteristics in terms of ethnic and social origin. It is important to stress that parents, particularly when choosing on the basis of school population characteristics, choose a social and cultural space they want their children to be part of.

This aim might require more or less intense efforts, depending from the school assigned by default with the catchment area system and from educational offer in the neighbourhood: the better the school and the wealthier the intake, the higher the guarantee that choosing local is safe, and vice versa. In particular, although all these middle-class parents invested in the choice of lower secondary school, only for avoiding parents this decision convey an explicit will to stay as far as possible from socially disadvantaged and foreign pupils and their families, similarly to what research has showed elsewhere. Fleeing parents' goal is to obtain a place – their children attending a certain school – that is not secured by the system, as in fact they dislike and exit the school assigned on the basis of the catchment area. Their decisions seek for their children something more than what they could get passively, out of proximity. Their choice is aimed at ensuring a long-term education to their children not only

in terms of years of schooling, but in terms of what schools means with regard to chances of socialization, for pupils and families, in the same class and “Italian” environment.

The residential stability of Italian families together with the availability of schools relatively close in the territory leave out the option of “voting with the feet”, moving in order to reach a better school: therefore, for those parents that had to give up to a family home in the city central areas, school choice is also a mean to protect children from the social disadvantaged inhabitants of more peripheral areas.

Although these parents’ choices are not exhaustive in explain all parental flows in and out of the catchment areas in the city, it is legitimate to believe that they are those whose consequences on schools’ polarization might be more marked. In fact, on the one hand their choices combine with disconnected or detached parents’ that might tend to stay in the catchment area school – not aware of freedom of choice or unwilling to move further. On the other hand, in the case of exit but also in other strategies they strongly rely on same class parents’ grapevine information and they are attracted by schools with other parents ‘like them’. Finally, their choice – in or out certain catchment area – may be considered by local educational policy administrators has one element to modify and readapt schools catchment areas. If this is the case, the possibility that the most active chooser parents are also making schooling decisions on the basis of pupils social and ethnic characteristics must be addressed to avoid an increase of schools polarization in the city of Milan.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Field notes on access to the field

I devoted the spring of 2015 to define my sampling strategy and work on the research design, and ready with my homework done I was about to start my fieldwork. Due to the characteristics of the field – schools start in September and end in June – May is usually a very busy month for principals and school staff. That is why I had to wait until September. Researching *around* schools often means being able (forced) to adapt to school time, which is something that all of us is used to, but can be tricky when accessing the field. The following is an account of my experience of access to my field of research: where I started, what I encountered, where I had to stop and so, I believe it is important to stress that differently from one's common thinking, doing educational-research around schools may be difficult in term of access as in other more controversial field.

During the fieldwork, I wrote a small journal to keep track of my strategies to access the field, get in contact with the selected schools, their principals and parents. The journal contains both success and failure, compared to the original version, here there is an anonymized version, without original names, address and other elements that may be reconducted to schools and interviewees. It is divided in four parts. The first one is devoted to the description of the step taken in order to contact schools and principals and seek their availability to be involved in the research. The second and third part contain an account of the official and unofficial paths taken to recruit parents willing to participate. Lastly, the fourth part regard extra-school contacts in the last part of the fieldwork, thought to include in the group of participants, parents that are difficult to find inside schools.

1) SCUOLE – canali ufficiali

a) Posta elettronica – Settembre 2015

La ricerca nella scuola, o a latere di questa (vedasi famiglie con figli iscritti a scuola) deve naturalmente adattarsi ai tempi della scuola stessa. Ho dedicato i mesi di marzo e aprile, oltre che al completamento della *literature review*, alla definizione della strategia di *sampling*. L'importanza di questa fase è stata legata principalmente alla natura esplorativa e già forse

limitata della mia ricerca, e dunque alla necessità di riflettere sul contesto territoriale e scolastico in cui sarebbero state inserite le famiglie che avrei intervistato. Ho concluso questa fase, confrontandomi con le mie supervisor, a maggio. La scuola finisce nelle primissime settimane di giugno, e maggio di norma è un mese dedicato alle ultime verifiche, agli scrutini, se non in alcuni casi alle ultime gite di istruzione. Ho deciso dunque di non contattare le scuole a fine anno scolastico, ma di rimandare a settembre.

La settimana prima dell'apertura ufficiale delle scuole (l'inizio delle lezioni in Lombardia, come in altre regioni era previsto per il 14 settembre) ho inviato via mail la presentazione della ricerca alle 8 scuole scelte (tra cui poi avrei dovuto scegliere 4 scuole su cui concentrarmi). Il corpo della mail sintetizzava ciò che poi veniva spiegato approfonditamente nella lettera di presentazione allegata (firmata dal coordinatore del dottorato).

Egregio/a Dirigente,

Con la presente inoltro una richiesta di partecipazione ad un progetto di ricerca nell'ambito del Dottorato in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research, amministrato congiuntamente dalle università di Milano e di Torino.

Mi chiamo Cristina Cavallo e sto conducendo una ricerca sulle strategie educative delle famiglie italiane e straniere nella scelta della scuola secondaria di I grado. L'elemento di novità di questa ricerca risiede nel portare l'attenzione su una decisione che riguarda non solo *cosa* i figli studieranno, ma anche *come* e *con chi* lo faranno. Diviene dunque essenziale acquisire informazioni sulle famiglie e sulle scuole per comprendere bene il contesto in cui si sviluppa questa importante decisione.

Lo studio prevede il coinvolgimento di altre scuole del territorio del Comune di Milano, selezionate per la loro vicinanza territoriale e le loro caratteristiche in termini di concentrazione degli alunni non italiani.

Nel documento allegato potrà trovare la presentazione del progetto da parte del coordinatore del dottorato di ricerca e maggiori informazioni sulle fasi in cui si articolerà lo studio.

Qualora si ottenga la sua gentile autorizzazione, si dà massima garanzia del rispetto della privacy, essendo la ricerca condotta entro l'Università e al solo fine di ricerca scientifica. Resto disponibile ad incontrarla, secondo le sue personali esigenze, per approfondire o chiarire gli scopi della ricerca e le modalità di coinvolgimento della scuola stessa.

Con la speranza che il progetto possa trovare attuazione,
Distinti Saluti

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Ho lasciato passare la prima settimana di scuola, e, alla seconda, non avendo ricevuto alcuna risposta, ho iniziato a chiamare le scuole.

Non mi aspettavo di ottenere una risposta alla prima mail, anzi, la mail era più un pretesto per poter agganciare il/la DS chiamando le segreterie delle scuole. In generale gli indirizzi email delle scuole (e anche gli indirizzi personali dei DS, quando resi pubblici sul sito) sono un buco nero. I loro server di posta ricevono tantissime comunicazioni al giorno, di diversa natura, e non avendo avuto, io, la possibilità di usare la PEC, non ho potuto accedere a quel canale preferenziale.

b) Telefonate & incontri faccia a faccia²³⁶ - Settembre e Ottobre 2015

i) Scuole scelte in zona est (zone 3 e 4)

Dalla seconda settimana di scuola ho iniziato a contattare le scuole della zona 3 e 4 (Scuola 1, Scuola 2, Scuola 3 e Spica), per sondare il terreno a Milano est, e non iniziare a contattarle casualmente. In una di queste quattro scuole, Scuola 3, mi è stato detto molto chiaramente, e subito, no. Con gentilezza, ma fermezza, la Dirigente mi ha detto che sono già coinvolti in altri progetti e non avrebbe trovato il tempo. Le ho chiesto se potessimo anche solo incontrarci, che le avrei solo chiesto di fare due chiacchiere, ma anche quella richiesta ha trovato un no come risposta.

Flashforward: il 23/11/2015 sono stata all'open day della scuola di cui sopra, Scuola 3, e ho compreso anche la risposta della DS. Sono una scuola che ha dei fondi da impiegare in numerosi progetti, tra cui l'insegnamento con metodologia CLIL. Ha infatti, come la DS stessa ha detto, un trend di crescita delle iscrizioni.)

Per le altre 3 scuole di quella zona (tra cui Spica):

- Spica: il DS mi ha chiesto di ricontattarlo dopo 2 settimane, cosa che ho fatto e ha acconsentito a incontrarmi il giorno 13 Ottobre 2015 (vedi sezione ii);

²³⁶ Non ho trascritto i diversi tentativi e le numerose telefonate fatte alle scuole per riuscire a parlare con il/la DS, o per riuscire ad incontrarlo/a, come neanche i diversi rinvii della presentazione del progetto, come i nuovi invii a diversi indirizzi.

- Scuola 1: prima di contattare direttamente la DS ho contattato il vicepresidente, che avevo intervistato per la mia tesi di specialistica. È stato molto disponibile fin da subito, mi ha detto che avrei potuto incontrarlo, anche con le referenti che si interessano di orientamento, per poi eventualmente passare a parlare con la DS. Nonostante uno scambio di mail, è riuscito ad incontrarmi solo il 15 Ottobre 2015 (vedi iv).
- Scuola 2: ho provato a chiedere un appuntamento alla DS ma hanno solo preso i miei contatti e detto che mi avrebbero ricontattata se interessati. Non ho più avuto notizie, anche provando a ricontattarli.

ii) Incontro con DS di Spica, giorno 13/10/2015 ore 11

Avevo sentito il DS al telefono la prima settimana di scuola, mi aveva con gentilezza detto che era troppo preso, che non aveva neanche gli insegnanti nelle classi e che avrei dovuto dargli tempo. Temevo si parlasse di mesi, ma in realtà si trattava di un paio di settimane. Mi ha comunque detto di inviargli tramite l'indirizzo della scuola, il progetto, in modo che gli avrebbe dato un'occhiata. Devo dire che pensavo fosse soprattutto un modo per farmi desistere, quindi ho aspettato poco più di due settimane per ricontattarlo. Sono riuscita a parlargli subito (ho dovuto richiamare perché era in riunione) e mi ha stupito per la disponibilità, data la difficoltà avuta nelle ultime settimane nell'accesso. Abbiamo subito fissato un incontro.

Sono andata alla sede della scuola elementare di Via [] che è la sede delle segreterie e degli uffici, ma è vicina (praticamente attaccata) alla sede delle scuole medie di Spica. Sono arrivata un po' in anticipo e ho aspettato nell'androne della scuola, mentre un gruppo di quattro (quelli che mi sembravano essere) bidelli [personale ATA] discutevano animatamente. Ho visto un paio di insegnanti di sostegno in giro con i bambini di cui si occupavano e un discreto via vai di insegnanti. Poco prima che arrivasse il DS, che si trovava nel plesso della scuola media, è arrivata la mamma di un bambino in seconda elementare. Il DS è arrivato abbastanza trafelato, ha lasciato una cosa nel gabbiotto dei bidelli e mi ha invitato a seguirlo. L'ufficio più piccolo dell'ultimo DS che ho visto²³⁷, con delle sedie verdi e parecchie carte e raccoglitori in giro.

Chiedo al preside se abbia avuto modo di guardare la mail o il progetto, mi dice che non ha proprio avuto tempo. Allora gli spiego un po' cosa faccio e cosa vorrei fare. Mi lascia finire

²³⁷ Faccio riferimento al DS di Bellatrix vedi 2.2.1.

e mi dice subito sì, che è interessato. Quando faccio cenno al fatto che alcune famiglie scelgono una scuola diversa da quella del loro bacino d'utenza, mi dice subito che loro quest'anno hanno avvertito molto questa dinamica, che hanno formato classi in più perché hanno avuto un flusso in ingresso di alunni iscritti alle elementari Libra. Mi segnala il nome della vicepresidente e mi dice di andare a parlare con lei (che lui mi segnalerà telefonicamente), che è molto disponibile e può anche presentarmi ai docenti responsabili per la riunione dei rappresentanti di classe del 20 ottobre. Poi mi dice che forse c'è stato un accavallamento di appuntamenti e quindi c'è una persona che aspetta. Gli dico che non gli rubo altro tempo e lo saluto, ma mentre parla al telefono si accorge che dev'esserci stato un malinteso quindi non c'è nessuno che lo aspetta. Quindi rimaniamo ancora qualche minuto a parlare, ma in piedi. Mi dice che quando arrivano i nuovi iscritti consegnano un questionario molto breve alle famiglie, per capire perché scelgano quella scuola. Lo cerca per farmelo vedere ma non lo trova, mi dice che me lo darà la prossima volta che ci vedremo. Mi dice che comunque è molto interessato a questo argomento, perché si è accorto che la sua scuola ha sperimentato questi cambiamenti e cambiamenti di scelta delle famiglie. Mi dice chiaramente che ora attirano molte più famiglie, perché la scuola ha fatto "un restyling" (cit.) negli ultimi anni. Lui è lì da 6 anni, e prima, quando è arrivato, perdevano molti alunni delle scuole elementari che invece andavano nella scuola da cui adesso arrivano. Si sono invertiti i flussi. Dice anche che alcuni genitori appena iscrivono i figli e vanno ad incontrarlo, gli dicono che hanno scelto quella scuola per lui. A lui questa cosa non piace, e lui risponde che in classe poi ci sono gli insegnanti. Sottolinea che tengono molto al rapporto scuola famiglia, che faranno anche una riunione con tutti i rappresentanti di classe per conoscere tutti. Alla fine mi dice che è anche reggente in un'altra scuola, l'IC [nomescuola], che ha dentro la scuola media di [nomescuola]. Gli dico che sarei molto interessata anche a quella scuola. Lo ringrazio ancora e ci salutiamo.

iii) Incontro con Vice DS Spica, 14/10/2015 ore 12

Chiamo in segreteria la mattina del 14/10/2015 per sapere quando posso passare per parlare con la vicepresidente. Me la passano subito e ci accordiamo per mezzogiorno. Arrivo qualche minuto prima e aspetto veramente poco. La scuola di Via [] al suo interno ha molte parti rivestite in legno, la cosa mi sembra strana ma rende l'ambiente molto caldo. Lei arriva e mi dice subito di seguirla, il suo studio è proprio lì al piano terra. Si scusa per il casino in giro e mi indica la sedia su cui posso sedermi. È una donna con i capelli corti e grigi, molto bella,

non saprei dire l'età, non sono brava a intuirlo di norma. Vestita molto semplicemente, porta due orecchini che sembrano fatti a mano, li guardo perché mi piacciono.

Mi dice che ha parlato velocemente con il dirigente ieri sera, le spiego di nuovo brevemente chi sono e cosa faccio. Le dico le stesse cose che ho spiegato ieri al DS. Mi dice subito che per lei va bene tutto, che è molto interessata al tema e che non ci sono problemi per la riunione di martedì. Veniamo interrotte di frequente ma per pochi secondi, sembra essere un punto di riferimento per le scuole medie. Sta organizzando un'uscita serale con le classi per portarle a teatro, quindi alcuni studenti bussano per dirle se andranno o meno. Ci accordiamo che martedì potrò presentare la mia ricerca in due riunioni di classe terza. Mi dice che i genitori delle terze sono molto partecipativi, i più partecipativi. Mi segnala 3° A o 3° C per il tempo prolungato e 3° D per il tempo normale (la coordinatrice in questo caso è la prof. B.). Poi mi dice che ieri al telefono con il dirigente si sono detti che questa cosa li interessa proprio, che è una cosa che commissionerebbero loro se potessero, opportunisticamente dice, gli conviene partecipare. Ribadisce che è un tema che li interessa. Mi ridice quello che il dirigente mi spiegava ieri, e dice che questa scuola media era la scuola dove i genitori andavo perché era la scuola di quartiere, ora invece la scelgono (enfattizza questa parola). Dice anche che un'idea di alcune cose se la sono fatta, ma non di tutto. Aggiunge che infatti è incuriosita da come si formi la fama di una scuola, il passaparola e il fatto che spesso una scuola è considerata il top ma senza reali motivazioni. Mi dice che farebbe volentieri una chiacchierata su queste cose. Le dico, come le avevo detto prima, che ci accordiamo per parlarne con calma. Le lascio i miei contatti nel caso in cui ci fossero problemi per martedì, e in ogni caso la richiamo lunedì per accertarmi dell'orario delle riunioni.

In entrambi gli incontri con dirigente e vice dell'IC Spica, la sensazione che ho è che siano molto coinvolti nella vita della scuola, ma che non abbiano un atteggiamento di promozione della scuola. Sospetto, senza che questo sia fondato in alcun modo, che il loro interesse venga anche dal coinvolgimento personale (e non solo professionale) in un certo tipo/idea di scuola e istruzione.

iv) Incontro con Vicepreside di Scuola 1, 15/10/2015

Ho contattato il Vicepreside tramite il suo indirizzo personale, perché lo avevo già intervistato durante il mio lavoro di ricerca alla fine della magistrale. Nonostante fosse stato più che disponibile abbiamo faticato ad incontrarci, a causa dei suoi impegni. Mi ha ricontattata per darmi l'ok per oggi. Sono arrivata un po' prima e l'ho trovato al gabbiotto

del personale ATA, mi ha detto di seguirlo. A scuola c'era un bel trambusto, dovuto penso al cambio dell'ora. Ci siamo seduti e gli ho spiegato cosa sto facendo. Mi ha subito detto che non poteva promettermi niente, che lui sarebbe disponibilissimo ma che alla DS di solito queste cose non piacciono, che è molto scettica. Gli ho detto cosa avrei chiesto a loro e quali possibilità ci fossero di contattare delle famiglie, magari partecipando alle riunioni per i rappresentanti di classe. Mi ha detto che lui sarebbe comunque disponibile in linea di principio, qualora la DS fosse d'accordo a partecipare. Ma che sul resto non può veramente dirmi nulla fino a quando non la sente. Mi lascia anche intendere che deve riuscire a trovarla di buon umore, e che è tutto molto delicato, bisogna essere cauti.

Comunque rimaniamo a parlare una mezz'ora abbondante, mi racconta un po' della scuola, del fatto che è una scuola che attrae, che attira genitori da fuori, che è scelta proprio per la buona fama che ha. Che è tra le scuole medie considerate migliori a Milano, con la [nomina altre tre scuole, tra cui Vega].

Dice che in effetti è una scuola difficile, ma che prepara bene. Mi dice però anche che rispetto a 7-8 anni fa quando un'altra dirigente tendeva a renderla poco inclusiva, adesso sta diventando una scuola accogliente (fa riferimento a dva, dsa etc.). Comunque mi parla molto del fatto che i genitori chiedono, si informano, chiedono riguardo l'andamento scolastico, se i docenti sono di ruolo o meno. Mi suggerisce di andare all'open day (a gennaio) per capire anche il tipo di richieste che fanno i genitori. Mi dice che hanno questo sistema dell'open day ormai molto strutturato, per cui tutti i genitori si incontrano nell'aula magna (dice che è così piena che se venissero i vigili del fuoco farebbero evacuare), mentre i figli in piccoli gruppi fanno il giro della scuola, partecipano a dei laboratori. Organizzano anche dei momenti in cui classi di 5° di altre scuole (anche se mi dice che è complesso...perché, non lo dice esplicitamente ma lo lascia intendere, è come fare concorrenza a quegli IC da cui provengono) possono andare lì e fare laboratori e assistere alle lezioni.

Poi mi racconta alcuni aneddoti, per esempio che si sono presentate il giorno prima due mamme da un'altra scuola ("non le dirò quale", dice) per iscrivere le loro bambine perché nella loro scuola di quartiere, in classe c'erano persone con cui queste bambine non potevano stare. Nel raccontare, lui fa chiaramente intendere di essere in disaccordo. Non hanno accettato il trasferimento, perché le mamme non avevano inserito la scuola tra le opzioni, né provenivano dal bacino. Le figlie erano già iscritte e quindi non c'era motivo di trasferirle. Mi dice anche che in generale il corpo docente è molto stabile, e molto anziano, e questa cosa sta un po' cambiando. E che spesso le famiglie fanno delle domande che denotano come

non sappiamo nulla di come funziona, e danno peso a delle cose che magari non sono così importanti (per esempio l'essere o meno di ruolo).

Aggiunge che ci sono ottimi risultati a livello scolastico, poche bocciature e voti di uscita al di sopra della media. E che di fatto hanno un riscontro anche con le superiori. In generale quella scuola viene scelta come pre-*Liceo*, quindi molti genitori la scelgono perché possa preparare i figli ad entrare al *Liceo*.

Il giorno successivo al nostro incontro il vicepresidente mi invia una mail in cui scrive che “mi spiace comunicarle che la Dirigente non consente allo svolgimento, nel nostro istituto, della ricerca da lei proposta. Spero che la nostra conversazione di ieri sia stata comunque utile alla sua ricerca.” Gli rispondo chiedendo se comunque potrei riparlare con lui, magari avendo a disposizione più tempo, e se potrebbe mettermi in contatto con qualche genitore. Non ricevo più risposta.

c) Scuole scelte in zona ovest (zone 6 e 7)

I primissimi giorni di ottobre, dopo essermi confrontata con le mie supervisor, ho iniziato a ricontattare le scuole della zona ovest (Bellatrix, Sirius, Vega e Scuola 4)

- Scuola 4: non sono riuscita a parlare con il DS, come in S. Caterina mi è stato detto che mi avrebbero richiamato loro se il DS fosse stato interessato ad incontrarmi. Non sono stata ricontattata;
- Bellatrix: sono riuscita subito a sapere quando poter incontrare il DS (vedi i))
- Sirius: avendo visto il rischio di non avere alcuna possibilità di parlare faccia a faccia con la/il DS, il giorno in cui sono andata a parlare con il DS della scuola Bellatrix ho deciso di passare dalla scuola Sirius che si trova lì vicino. La DS non era in sede e ho chiesto se potevo lasciare la lettera di presentazione e i miei contatti e poi richiamarla. Ho provato a richiamarla il 12 Ottobre 2015, ma era impegnata. Nell'attesa di riprovare, mi ha ricontattato lei e ci siamo incontrate il 22 Ottobre 2015. L'ho intervistata e lei mi ha messo in contatto con alcune mamme.
- Vega: data la difficoltà incontrata per parlare con il DS (mi avevano detto di rimandare la mail etc.) ho pensato di intercettarlo all'assemblea dell'associazione genitori e in effetti sono riuscita a fissare un incontro per intervistarlo (vedi ii)).

i) Incontro con DS Bellatrix, 06/10/2014 ore 8.30

Dopo alcune settimane e svariati tentativi di trovare la disponibilità dei dirigenti delle scuole scelte, e/o di incontrarli, ieri sono riuscita a fissare un incontro con un dirigente. O meglio, mi è stato detto che sarei potuta passare da una delle due sedi della scuola oggi (06/10) e avrei trovato il DS dalle 8.15 alle 10 circa.

La scuola è l'istituto comprensivo Bellatrix, e il plesso dove sono andata è Bellatrix 2, impelagato tra alti edifici in una zona che senza dubbio definirei residenziale, a 10/15 min a piedi da una fermata della metro.

L'edificio mi è sembrato abbastanza nuovo, ad una rapida occhiata. Dentro sono riuscita a vedere solo l'androne, e il primo piano dove si trovano le segreterie e l'ufficio del preside. Ho fatto in tempo ad arrivare e dare uno sguardo ad una bacheca in vetro con molti trofei e coppe vinte dalla scuola o da alunni e alunne della scuola. Sport, teatro e altre competizioni di cui non mi era chiara la natura.

Il DS, è arrivato puntualissimo, alle 8.25. Era stato avvisato che sarei andata a parlare con lui e mi ha subito fatta accomodare. L'ufficio molto grande ma molto semplice, forse un po' spoglio ma non ho prestato attenzione. Lui un uomo sui 60, baffi e capelli grigi, un lieve ma presente accento del sud Italia. Ha un vestito grigio.

Si è mostrato subito interessato a capire cosa avessi studiato e fatto, ma più perché lui stesso si è laureato in scienze politiche proprio qui alla statale che per, credo, un reale interesse nei miei confronti. Mi ha fatto molte domande sul mio percorso, sul dottorato, su come funziona e su cosa vorrei fare dopo. Non mi lasciava rispondere e mi incalzava subito con un'altra domanda. Abbiamo parlato anche brevemente di come vanno le cose in Italia, di cosa funziona e no. Ha fatto cenno alla scuola media, come scuola carica, caricata di responsabilità, e ha rimpianto, sebbene non acriticamente, la distinzione tra avviamento professionale e scuola media.

Sono passata a spiegargli il progetto di ricerca e la volontà di inserire anche le scuole come attore fondamentale nella scelta delle famiglie. Dopo avergli spiegato cosa mi sto domandando e quello che vorrei fare, nonché cosa chiederei a lui in quanto DS, mi ha subito detto alcune cose sulla loro scuola.

È una scuola che attrae, che ha 12 classi prime, quasi il doppio della media degli altri istituti milanesi. Assorbe quasi tutti gli alunni del bacino d'utenza e in più molti altri da fuori, anche da quartieri molto lontani. Mi ha detto che secondo lui le famiglie hanno iniziato a dare importanza alla scuola e quindi cercano un determinato ambiente e contesto sociale. A differenza di altre scuole, loro hanno più alunni in secondaria di I grado che in primaria.

Dopo questo suo breve quadro, gli ho chiesto nuovamente la sua disponibilità ad essere intervistato, mi ha detto blandamente che lui è sempre lì. Quindi dovrò risentirlo. E in più sono riuscita a farmi dire sì riguardo la possibilità di essere presentata ad alcune famiglie in un'occasione specifica: l'elezione dei rappresentanti di classe, che si terrà il 20 ottobre. Mi ha suggerito che potrei essere introdotta dai coordinatori di classe e che lui stesso potrebbe segnalarmi le classi più partecipative.

Gli ho lasciato la lettera di presentazione del Prof. Cardano e il mio biglietto da visita con i contatti.

Dopo questo incontro, oltre alla possibilità di recarmi alle riunioni dei genitori, ho provato a fissare un appuntamento per intervistarlo ma non ho ottenuto nessuna disponibilità.

ii) Assemblea genitori Vega con DS Vega, 14/10/2015 ore 20.30

Dopo aver visto sulla pagina facebook dell'associazione dei genitori delle scuole elementari Vega che il 14 Ottobre si sarebbe tenuta un'assemblea dei genitori, ho scritto, sempre via fb all'associazione. Mi sono presentata brevemente e ho chiesto se fossi potuta andare all'assemblea e parlare anche solo con la presidente o il vice. Mi hanno risposto (ho scoperto, dopo, chiedendo, che mi ha risposto il vicepresidente) "Ciao Cristina, sei la benvenuta! La sera del 14 ci saranno sia la presidente sia il suo vice Luca Testoni. A presto".

L'assemblea inizia alle 20.30. Arrivo alla scuola elementare Vega verso le 20. Ho pensato di arrivare prima e intercettare il vicepresidente Luca Testoni con cui avevo parlato via fb. In realtà quando arrivo c'è solo il DS, nella stanza dove si sarebbe tenuta la riunione. Legge il giornale e viene interrotto, prima di me, da una persona che si sarebbe occupata dell'orto della scuola (il fatto che la scuola avesse un orto mi ha abbastanza sorpreso). Appena questo signore va via, mi sono presentato al DS che si mostra molto gentile. Gli dico che non ero sicura di trovarlo lì, avevo provato a contattarlo nei giorni precedenti ma era occupato.

In generale è molto aperto, gli spiego cosa sto facendo. Mi dice subito che ci possiamo incontrare da lui. Fissiamo dunque un incontro per il martedì mattina successivo.

Il DS mi dice inoltre che fa questo lavoro solo da 2 anni, dopo aver insegnato per 13 anni accenna al fatto che quella scuola è una scuola con una buona fama, molto conosciuta. Che attrae anche genitori, famiglie della zona ma anche da fuori.

Dopo aver parlato con il DS, ho aspettato ancora un po' che arrivasse il vicepresidente, nel frattempo mi sono insospettita che la riunione fosse solo per i genitori delle elementari. Dato che alcune persone (prevalentemente mamme) erano già arrivate e si erano sedute nella sala,

sono entrata e ho chiesto a loro. Mi hanno detto che la riunione era per i genitori delle elementari. Allora ho aspettato il vicepresidente, l'ho intercettato sulla porta e gli ho chiesto se ci fosse modo di parlare con i genitori delle medie. Mi ha detto di scrivergli oggi e ricordarglielo. Dopo avergli scritto ho atteso risposta, l'ho poi sollecitato e mi ha indicato la persona da contattare per le medie. Ho scritto a questa persona di riferimento, la quale nonostante si sia mostrata disponibile non mi ha più risposto quando ho chiesto di fissare un incontro.

2) GENITORI – Assemblee di classe, Ottobre 2015

Tramite l'approvazione dei DS ho potuto presentare la mia ricerca in 3 scuole, ma con modalità diverse che, a mio parere, hanno anche inciso sullo “squilibrio” nel reclutamento di partecipanti intervistati (o potenzialmente tali).

a) Bellatrix (20/10/2015)

Nel caso di Bellatrix, il DS ha acconsentito a farmi partecipare all'assemblea di classe, anche se ho dovuto scrivergli una mail e chiamarlo il giorno prima dell'assemblea per ricordarglielo. Quando l'ho sentito al telefono mi è apparso un po' scocciato, ma mi ha comunque dato i nomi di due coordinatrici a cui avrebbe segnalato il mio nome, e che sarebbero state in due classi dove avrei potuto presentarmi. Mi ha consigliato di presentarmi poco prima della fine dell'assemblea di classe (che sarebbe finita alle ore 18) prima che iniziassero le votazioni per l'elezione dei rappresentanti di classe.

Quel giorno, il 20 ottobre sono arrivata alla scuola alle 17.40, dopo aver percorso in taxi (e non in meno tempo che con i trasporti pubblici, a differenza di quello che pensavo) Milano da est a ovest, in quanto provenivo dalla scuola Spica (vedi sotto). Le assemblee erano già iniziate, naturalmente, il DS non c'era, il custode non ha saputo indicarmi dove fossero le due Prof. sse (di II e di III). Sapeva però il piano, e mi ha detto di chiedere a qualcuno. Mi sono messa in corridoio e un'altra professoressa che aveva ascoltato la conversazione mi ha detto in quali classi avrei trovato le due professoressa. Ho pensato che sarei entrata quando sarebbe finita l'assemblea e prima delle votazioni. Sono riuscita a presentarmi alla Prof. S. perché in II la riunione si è conclusa prima, e mi sono resa conto che il DS le avesse informate male. Probabilmente non ricordava la mia ricerca (nonostante ne avessimo parlato e gli avessi lasciato la presentazione), e aveva detto alle due insegnanti, che avrei fatto delle domande ai genitori sulla scelta della scuola superiore. Ho dovuto quindi ri-presentarmi alla

classe, e spiegare anche che cercavo dei partecipanti, qualcuno che volesse fare due chiacchiere con me sulla scelta della scuola media. Avevo preparato dei fogli di presentazione e un elenco in bianco dove potessero lasciare i loro contatti. Li ho lasciati sulla cattedra e sono uscita. Ho fatto la stessa cosa nella classe III, ma lì la professoressa B. mi è sembrata più entusiasta, e anche gli sguardi dei genitori più interessati. Sono tornata in corridoio ad aspettare la fine delle votazioni, in modo da poter raccogliere i fogli e capire le adesioni.

Mentre aspettavo un paio di mamme si sono fermate a parlarmi, una, Janis, mi ha detto che era molto interessata, che aveva anche 3 figli in quella scuola, e mi ha direttamente lasciato nome e numero, nonostante lo avesse già scritto sul foglio. Un'altra, N. egiziana (che però poi non mi ha più ricontattata nonostante le mie numerose telefonate) mi ha detto che avrebbe parlato con me volentieri.

A riunioni concluse sono andata a recuperare i fogli: 10 persone avevano lasciato i loro nomi e contatti per essere richiamati e fissare un appuntamento per un'intervista.

Parlando con le mamme intervistate mi sono resa conto che

- 1) il DS mi ha segnalato solo l'assemblea di classe del plesso di Bellatrix 2 che, sembra, sia il plesso meno "rigido" e "d'élite" dell'IC.
- 2) il DS mi ha 'dirottata' (?) verso due classi di due sezioni specifiche, la L e la M, uniche due sezioni con il tempo prolungato e il tedesco come seconda lingua (nella L) che sono anche note – sempre stando alle 'voci' – per essere più rigide e con un'utenza selezionata, ovvero con figli e figlie con genitori molto interessati alla loro istruzione.

b) Spica 20/10/2015

L'assemblea di classe per l'elezione dei rappresentanti di classe della scuola Spica era fissata lo stesso giorno di quella di Bellatrix. Le due scuole sono in due zone parecchio distanti, facendo la via più breve sono circa 9 km. Era quindi da escludere che io potessi presentarmi personalmente in entrambe le scuole ai genitori presenti. Data la disponibilità della vicepresidente, ho pensato che sarebbe stato più semplice spiegarle la situazione e chiedere a lei o agli insegnanti di distribuire i miei fogli di presentazione per raccogliere le adesioni. Come pensavo la vicepresidente non ha opposto alcuna resistenza. Sono andata alla Spica alle 17 per portarle il materiale, lei mi ha presentato ad alcune professoresse coordinatrici di classe, e mi ha detto che avrebbe pensato lei a presentare il progetto (o le professoresse stesse). Sono poi passata a raccogliere i fogli. Avevo ottenuto 17 nomi di genitori. Ritengo che la mia presenza fisica sarebbe servita anche ad 'agganciarli' meglio al primo contatto.

Invece ho l'impressione che, l'appoggio della scuola non sia bastato. Alcuni genitori hanno lasciato solo l'indirizzo mail e non mi hanno mai risposto, altri erano molto impegnati e hanno rimandato molto in là nel tempo, altri ancora ho faticato molto a capire se volessero essere intervistati o meno.

c) Vega 29/10/2015

Quando ho incontrato il DS (il 20/10) per intervistarlo e gli ho chiesto se avrei potuto partecipare all'assemblea di classe (spiegando come avevo fatto nelle altre scuole) la sua posizione non è stata molto chiara. Sì, sembrava disponibile, ma mi ha detto che mi avrebbe fatto sapere entro la settimana successiva. Non ho avuto nessuna notizia nei giorni successivi ma ho pensato di non fare troppa pressione. Il giorno precedente all'assemblea, il DS mi ha inviato una mail in cui diceva di aver "riferito agli insegnanti del suo lavoro. Avviseranno i genitori della sua presenza a scuola."

Il giorno dell'assemblea mi reco alla scuola Vega un po' prima delle 17. Incontro subito il DS che però non mi dice in quali classi potrei andare, ma mi dice che posso mettermi in corridoio e parlare con i genitori. Mi presenta al personale ATA e mi dice che comunque i professori ne parleranno in classe.

Mi sistemo su un tavolino e vedo che iniziano ad arrivare alcune mamme e papà. Mi rendo conto che sarà impossibile intercettare qualcuno dopo l'assemblea, o comunque molto complicato, e che non posso sicuramente capire chi potrebbe avere figli in I, II o III media. Penso allora di iniziare ad avvicinare qualche mamma in attesa. La sensazione, devo dire, è molto simile a quello che provavo quando facevo lavoretti di promozione (per esempio quando mi capitò di dover raccogliere adesioni per la promozione del sito yelp.it) e quando lavoravo al call center. Alcune mamme infatti mi liquidano in fretta dicendo che non hanno tempo. Qualcuno invece si mostra disponibile e si avvicina con me al banchetto per lasciare il proprio nominativo.

Aspetto in corridoio che finiscano tutte le riunioni, e quando la gente inizia ad uscire, approssimativamente verso le 18.30, fermo alcune mamme. In realtà non le fermo con un criterio sensato, cerco di non bloccare chi sta proprio correndo via e cerco di intercettare più di un genitore, quindi persone che camminano accanto. Per poter almeno raggiungere più di una persona con una sola spiegazione. Devo dire che sono tutti abbastanza gentili e quasi tutte le persone che fermo in uscita mi lasciano il loro contatto, anche solo 1 o 2 mamme per 'gruppetto'. In totale ho raccolto 15 contatti, per lo più però indirizzi mail. L'indirizzo mail, se non c'è stata una comunicazione sufficiente per cui il/la partecipante vuole realmente

essere intervistata perché è interessata, e si è riusciti a farlo/a interessare, diventa un modo per essere comunque gentili e disponibili e dire di sì, ma senza un “impegno”, senza un accordo. Difatti penso che sia molto più scomodo ‘liquidare’ qualcuno al telefono, quindi venendo richiamati, che farlo non rispondendo ad una mail. Difatti, dei 15 contatti raccolti: 7 non mi hanno mai risposto alla mail (neanche dopo il secondo invio).

La modalità di presentazione di me stessa e della mia ricerca, anche in questo caso ha un effetto sulla risposta dei genitori una volta ricontattati. Sebbene io abbia cercato di condensare in pochi minuti lo scopo della ricerca e quello che avrei ‘chiesto’ a loro, bloccarli nel corridoio e in uscita da una riunione, forse stanchi o comunque non preparati a sentirsi coinvolti in una ricerca, non è sicuramente stata la strategia migliore.

d) Sirius & altro

Quando la DS dell’IC Sirius mi ha ricontattata, era già troppo tardi per poterle chiedere di partecipare all’assemblea di classe dei genitori. Data la sua disponibilità le ho chiesto se potesse mettermi in contatto con qualche genitore potenzialmente interessato a parlare con me. Appena dopo il nostro incontro ho inviato una mail alla DS allegando la presentazione del progetto, e lei mi ha risposto mettendo in copia 6 mamme. Mi hanno risposto tutte molto velocemente, dandomi la loro disponibilità. Una di questa ha però ancora i figli alla scuola primaria e le ho detto che al momento avrei sentito solo genitori con figli alle medie, ma qualora avessi esteso il campione l’avrei sicuramente ricontattata. Un’altra al momento non ha figli alle medie, ma dato che si trattava di un caso ‘particolare’ (la figlia si era trasferita in seconda media nella scuola Sirius, provenendo da Bellatrix) ho pensato valesse la pena sentirla.

Da 2 di queste 5 mamme, ho ottenuto 8 nomi e non solo provenienti dall’IC Sirius.

3) GENITORI – canali non ufficiali & insuccessi

Prima di iniziare a contattare le altre 4 scuole delle zone ovest di Milano, ho proceduto, nell’ordine a: contattare due genitori (una mamma e un papà) che conosco personalmente e che hanno dei figli (un figlio e una figlia) iscritti alla scuola media. Nello specifico, la mamma ha il figlio iscritto in una delle scuole che avevo scelto (Scuola 2), mentre il papà una figlia iscritta in una scuola a forte processo migratorio in zona Loreto.

Entrambi mi hanno dato subito disponibilità, ma mentre la mamma ha rimandato l'incontro per due week end (lavora, quindi mi ha dato disponibilità solo per il week end), e poi sono riuscita a intervistarla, il papà non mi ha più risposto.

Purtroppo per l'accesso ad altri genitori, la mamma mi ha detto che non ha contatti con i genitori dei compagni di classe del figlio, né contatti di altro tipo. Il papà invece sarebbe stato molto utile essendo molto coinvolto, facendo parte del comitato dei genitori.

Ho anche scritto a una docente di italiano come L2 con cui ho collaborato in passato, pensando potesse essere un modo per accedere alla scuola da un'interna. Lei però quando l'ho contattata doveva ancora essere assegnata, quindi la porta è rimasta chiusa.

Parallelamente ho scritto una mail di presentazione ad alcune associazioni genitori delle scuole scelte, in particolare Scuola 1, Vega e Spica. Ho ricevuto risposta solo dalla prima, con la promessa che avrebbero fatto circolare la cosa tra i genitori. Via fb ho contattato anche l'associazione genitori della scuola di Sirius, ma la loro pagina sembra aggiornata molto tempo fa.

Mentre aspettavo di essere ricontattata o contattavo a mia volta, ho deciso di attivare anche altri canali informali e percorrere anche un'altra strada non prevista. Ho creato un profilo fb ufficiale, perché quello che uso al momento ha un pseudonimo. Ho contattato un gruppo di mamme a Milano (che ha anche un sito, appunto <http://www.mammeamilano.com/>) e ho parlato con chi si occupa di gestire la pagina. È stata molto gentile, e alla mia richiesta di poter avere uno spazio in cui chiedere alle mamme la disponibilità a fare due chiacchiere con me, questa persona mi ha consigliato che, in base alle sue esperienze precedenti, sarebbe stato più utile un piccolo questionario. Ho pensato allora di sfruttare la sua disponibilità per far inserire un brevissimo questionario, con lo scopo di chiedere il consenso ad essere ricontattate. Il questionario è stato linkato sia sulla pagina web che sul gruppo fb l'8 Ottobre ma ha ricevuto una sola risposta e senza l'autorizzazione ad essere ricontattata.

Per quanto riguarda i contatti informali, ho chiesto a conoscenti (una collega, mia madre che ha vissuto con me a Milano nel 1989 e aveva delle amiche con cui è in contatto, un'altra conoscente e un'amica se avessero tra i loro contatti delle mamme e/o dei papà con dei figli alle medie. Nessuno di questi contatti ha generato altri contatti.

Ho contattato una volontaria della scuola di italiano dove io stessa insegno, la quale ha 3 figli, di cui due alle medie (ma uno disabile quindi con bisogni speciali). Lei ha acconsentito ad essere intervistata.

4) ALTRI ATTORI: associazionismo di (e nel) quartiere

Ero consapevole fin dall'inizio dell'accentuato *bias* di selezione del campione in cui sarei incorsa utilizzando le scuole (e i luoghi istituzionalizzati di partecipazione dei genitori) per intercettare le famiglie da coinvolgere nella ricerca. La partecipazione a scuola, come è stato mostrato anche dalla letteratura interazionale sul tema scuola-famiglia, va di pari passo con il possesso di una serie di risorse culturali associate all'appartenenza ad una classe medio-alta. Inoltre in molti casi, le famiglie di origine non italiana sono meno presenti a scuola, per ragioni di diversa natura (poca familiarità con il sistema scolastico italiano, difficoltà nel comprendere il ruolo della famiglia nella scuola e le richieste di quest'ultima, minore disponibilità di tempo etc.).

Sapevo dunque che sarei incorsa in questo problema, e che con molta probabilità sarei riuscita a parlare con mamme/papà italiane/i e già molto coinvolti a scuola. Così è stato. E nonostante i miei tentativi di chiedere sia ai DS che alle mamme intervistate, di segnalarmi altri nomi (e non solo amici/amiche conoscenti e già coinvolte) ciò non è avvenuto. In molti casi, neanche le rappresentanti di classe riescono ad interfacciarsi con le famiglie straniere delle loro classi (non hanno neanche i numeri di telefono per esempio).

Per questa ragione, dopo aver condotto un buon numero di interviste tramite i contatti raccolti tra scuole e altri genitori, ho iniziato, a Dicembre 2015 a cercare di sentire l'esperienza anche di famiglie spesso ai margini delle scuole (e in molti casi ai margini della società), con figli o figlie che incontrano più difficoltà a scuola, con rapporti più critici con l'istituzione scolastica.

Ho contattato un amico, e dottore in sociologia alla Statale, che 3 anni prima si era occupato (per la sua tesi di dottorato, appunto) di orientamento in uscita dalla scuola media. All'epoca aveva preso contatto con il Comitato inquilini del quartiere che era il suo campo di ricerca e ricordavo avesse avuto rapporti con i responsabili del doposcuola. Mi racconta infatti che uno degli educatori con cui si era confrontato, non si trova più in quella zona ma si è sposato in una delle zone dove sono collocate le scuole della mia ricerca.

Questo ragazzo si chiama L. e lavora, appunto, come educatore per una onlus, nella quale gestisce le attività di centro di aggregazione giovanile.

Sono andata a parlare con lui il 1° dicembre 2015, l'ho raggiunto al Centro alle 15.30 (il doposcuola è dalle 15 alle 16.30 e dopo sono previste altre attività). Gli ho raccontato un po' cosa stessi facendo e cosa pianificavo di fare. Mi ha raccontato quello che fanno lì e in generale le attività del laboratorio di quartiere. Mi ha detto che la questione scuole è molto critica, che ci sono scuole di serie A e scuole di serie B, e che nelle scuole di serie B finiscono tutti gli studenti delle case popolari, che in molti casi iniziano a perdere terreno già dalle 2 o

3 media. I loro studenti sono prevalentemente della scuola di Sirius e di Scuola 5. Collaborano a stretto giro con le scuole, e hanno trovato un corpo insegnanti molto ben predisposto.

Mi dice anche che potrei andare lì qualche pomeriggio e vedere un po' cosa fanno, poi mi parla di questa scuola di italiano per mamme straniere che vorrebbero fare a scuola, in modo che possano proprio portare i bimbi con sé, ma servono volontari (mi lascia il numero di chi se ne occupa, F.). Mi dice anche che dovrebbero organizzare una riunione dei genitori nelle prossime settimane e che potrei andare a presentare la mia ricerca a loro. Mi dice che volendo, dato che mi sono occupata di orientamento, potremmo pensare di fare una chiacchierata con i ragazzi e pensare ad una forma per farlo.

Da quell'incontro ho iniziato a frequentare, in un modo o nell'altro, il CDE Creta come volontaria una volta alla settimana. Ho partecipato agli incontri organizzati tra i ragazzi, ho avuto modo di parlare con le altre due educatrici del centro e infine ho preso parte alla riunione organizzata con i genitori.

Durante questa riunione, alcuni genitori dei ragazzi che frequentano il centro, si sono riuniti con gli educatori e una psicologa, per trattare temi legati ai conflitti con i loro figli. Nonostante la presenza di quasi solo genitori non italiani, e la possibilità avuta di presentare la mia persona e la mia ricerca a fine riunione, solo pochi dei presenti hanno acconsentito ad essere intervistati (3).

Nei mesi successivi, continuando a frequentare il Centro, l'educatore L. mi ha ancora supportato nel mettermi in contatto con altre 5 persone (non solo straniere) che hanno voluto partecipare.

Appendix 2 - Participants occupation and educational level

Table 1 Participants' characteristics

Participant	School	Civil status	Participant's occupation	Participant's education (title)	Participant's years of education	Partner's occupation
Alda	Sirius	separata	Ironer	Lower secondary (abroad)	8	<i>missing</i>
Mercedes	Bellatrix	married	Unemployed (previously baby-sitter)	Lower secondary (abroad)	8	caregiver
Violeta	Sirius	married	Unemployed (previously cleaner)	Lower secondary (abroad)	8	courier worker
Ada	Sirius	married	Housewife	Upper secondary completed	13	freelance
Cristina	Spica	married	Translator	Upper secondary completed	13	freelance
Dacia	Spica	married	Housewife	Upper secondary completed	13	lawyer
Elsa	Mimosa	married	<i>Missing</i>	Upper secondary completed	13	<i>missing</i>
Gertrude	Mimosa	partenered	Office worker	Upper secondary completed	13	dental technician
Joan	Sirius	married	Guesthouse manager	Upper secondary completed	13	policeman
Malala	Sirius	separata	Waitress	Upper secondary completed	13	<i>missing</i>
Marie	Sirius	married	Baby sitter	Upper secondary completed	13	taxi driver
Mary	Mimosa	married	Office worker	Upper secondary completed	13	insurance worker
Natalia	Libra	married	Office worker	Upper secondary completed	13	freelance
Sarah	Spica	married	Housewife	Upper secondary completed	13	<i>missing</i>
Tom	Andromeda	married	Manager	Upper secondary completed	13	<i>missing</i>
Mariangeles	Vega	married	Employee in the family small business	Upper secondary completed (abroad)	13	freelance
Emily	Mimosa	separata	Serving food in schools canteen	Upper secondary incompleted	10	garbage collector
Leonilde	Bellatrix	married	Secretary	Upper secondary incompleted	11	street vendor
Anna	Bellatrix	married	Freelance	Tertiary incompleted	15	production manager
Eva	Bellatrix	married	Office worker	Tertiary incompleted	15	<i>missing</i>
Mahmoud	Mimosa	divorced	Office worker	Tertiary incompleted	17	clerk
Mina	Sirius	married	On redundancy scheme (previously project manager)	Tertiary incompleted	16	property manager
Fatima	Sirius	married	Cleaner	Tertiary education (abroad)	18	cleaner
Jorge	Sirius	married	Health worker	Tertiary education (abroad)	12	housewife
Amelia	Vega	married	Engineer	Tertiary education	18	<i>missing</i>

Angela	Bellatrix	married	Lawyer	Tertiary education	18	clerk
Carla	Sirius	married	Freelance	Tertiary education	18	sales
Claudia	Sirius	married	Sales	Tertiary education	18	illustrator
Diane	Spica	partenered	Editorial coordinator	Tertiary education	18	bank clerk
Emmeline	Andromeda	married	Psychologist	Tertiary education	18	<i>missing</i>
Frida	Vela	divorced	Librarian	Tertiary education	18	university professor
Hypathia	Vega	partenered	Social worker	Tertiary education	18	<i>missing</i>
Jane	Bellatrix	married	Lawyer	Tertiary education	18	<i>missing</i>
Janis	Bellatrix	married	Information technology consultant	Tertiary education	18	<i>missing</i>
Judith	Spica	married	Office worker	Tertiary education	18	clerk
Nina	Sirius	divorced	Office worker	Tertiary education	18	<i>missing</i>
Rita	Mimosa	married	Physician	Tertiary education	18	nurse
Rosa	Spica	divorced	Nurse	Tertiary education	18	social worker
Sibilla	Vega	widow	Freelance	Tertiary education	18	freelance
Susanna	Sirius	divorced	Pharmaceutical representative	Tertiary education	18	<i>missing</i>
Thelma	Vega	married	Researcher	Tertiary education	18	business consultant
Tina	Spica	married	Lawyer	Tertiary education	18	consultant
Virginia	Spica	divorced	Public servant	Tertiary education	18	<i>missing</i>

Table 2 Parents that avoided the school on the basis of its socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics

Participants	Actual school	Catchment area	Occupation	Level of education	Involvement at the school level
Mahmoud	Mimosa	OfC	Office worker	Tertiary education incompleted	Yes
Emmeline	Andromeda	OfC	Psychologist	Tertiary education	Yes
Janis	Bellatrix	OfC	Information technology consultant	Tertiary education	No
Jane	Bellatrix	OfC	Lawyer	Tertiary education	Yes
Rita	Mimosa	OfC	Physician	Tertiary education	No
Claudia	Sirius	CS	Sales	Tertiary education	Yes
Judith	Spica	OfC	Office worker	Tertiary education	Yes
Thelma	Vega	OfC	Researcher	Tertiary education	No
Hypathia	Vega	OfC	Social worker	Tertiary education	Yes
Tom	Andromeda	OfC	Manager	Upper secondary education completed	Yes
Elsa	Mimosa	OfC	<i>Missing</i>	Upper secondary education completed	Yes
Mary	Mimosa	OfC	Office worker	Upper secondary education completed	No
Gertrude	Mimosa	OfC	Office worker	Upper secondary education completed	No (in the past)
Marie	Sirius	CS	Baby sitter	Upper secondary education completed	Yes
Natalia	Vela	OfC	Office worker	Upper secondary education completed	No
Leonilde	Bellatrix	OfC	Secretary	Upper secondary education incompleted	No
Emily	Mimosa	OfC	Serving food in school canteen	Upper secondary education incompleted	No

Table 3 Parents that stayed in the local school on the basis of its academic level and approach

Participants	Actual school	Catchment area	Occupation	Level of education	School involvement at the school level
Anna	Bellatrix	CS	Freelance	Tertiary education incompleted	Yes
Eva	Bellatrix	CS	Office worker	Tertiary education incompleted	No
Diane	Spica	OfC	Editorial coordinator	Tertiary education	Yes
Tina	Spica	CS	Lawyer	Tertiary education	No (in the past)
Rosa	Spica	OfC	Nurse	Tertiary education	No
Amelia	Vega	CS	Engineer	Tertiary education	Yes
Sibilla	Vega	CS	Freelance	Tertiary education	No
Dacia	Spica	CS	Housewife	Upper secondary education completed	Yes
Sarah	Spica	CS	Housewife	Upper secondary education completed	Yes
Cristina	Spica	OfC	Translator	Upper secondary education completed	No (in the past)
Mariangeles	Vega	CS	Employee in the family small business	Upper secondary education completed (abroad)	No

Table 4 Parents that chose the neighborhood school because of their multicultural beliefs

Participant	Actual school	Catchment area	Occupation	Level of education	Involvement at the school level
Angela	Sirius	OfC	Lawyer	Tertiary education	yes
Carla	Sirius	OfC	Freelance	Tertiary education	no
Mina	Sirius	OfC	On a redundancy scheme (previously project manager)	Tertiary education incompleted	yes
Ada	Sirius	OfC	Housewife	Upper secondary education completed	no

Table 5 Parents that chose on the basis of their children's preferences and wellbeing

Participant	Actual school	Occupation	Level of education	Catchment area	Involvement at the school level
Susanna	Sirius	Pharmaceutical representative	Tertiary education	CS	No
Virginia	Spica	Public servant	Tertiary education	OfC	No (in the past)
Malala	Sirius	Waitress	Upper secondary education completed	CS	Yes
Fatima	Sirius	Cleaner	Tertiary education (abroad)	CS	Yes
Joan	Sirius	Guesthouse manager	Upper secondary education completed	CS	Yes
Frida	Vela	Librarian	Tertiary education	CS	No (in the past)

Table 6 Parents that enrolled their children out of proximity or of a third person influence

Participant	Actual school	Occupation	Level of education	Catchment area	Involvement at the school level
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Alda	Sirius	Ironer	Lower secondary education	CS	No
Violeta	Sirius	Unemployed (previously cleaner)	Lower secondary education (abroad)	OfC	No
Mercedes	Bellatrix	Unemployed (previously baby-sitter)	Lower secondary education (abroad)	OfC	No
Jorge	Sirius	Health worker	Tertiary education (abroad)	CS	No

I PARTE (uguale per tutti)

1. INFORMAZIONI DEMOGRAFICHE (& STORIA MIGRATORIA)

➤ *Iniziamo da qualche informazione base su di lei e sulla sua famiglia*

- Quanti anni ha? In che anno è nato?
- È mamma/papà di quanti figli?
 - Quanti anni ha/hanno?
- Da dove viene?/E' di Milano?
 - Ha sempre vissuto a Milano?
 - Da quanto tempo vive in Italia/a Milano?
 - Suo figlio/i suoi figli sono nati qui?
- Che titolo di studio ha?

(ricordarsi di capire gli anni di studio oltre al titolo in sé)

- Com'è formata la sua famiglia?
- Al momento lavora?
 - Che lavoro fa?
- Se non lavora: da quanto tempo?
- Dove vivete a Milano?
- Avete sempre vissuto in quel/questo quartiere?

2. INFORMAZIONI SU SCUOLA FIGLI/O e ISCRIZIONE

- La scuola in cui è iscritto/a vostro figlio/a è la scuola del vostro bacino d'utenza? → prendere traccia BACINO o FUORI BACINO
- A che anno di scuola è suo figlio/sono i suoi figli?
- Se ha almeno 1 figlio alle medie → Suo figlio ha frequentato la scuola elementare in questo stesso istituto comprensivo?
- Se ha altro/i figlio/i → Gli altri figli sono iscritti alla stessa scuola?/ Gli altri figli hanno frequentato la stessa scuola?
- Quando avete presentato l'iscrizione online avete indicato più di una scuola?
 - Se NO → Scuola 'prima scelta'
 - Se SÌ, questa era la vostra prima opzione?
 - Se NO → passare a Scuola 'seconda scelta'
 - Se SÌ → passare a Scuola 'prima scelta'

II PARTE #1 TRACCIA BACINO

3. LA SCELTA DELLA SCUOLA

A. Scuola 'prima scelta'

Se solo 1 opzione → *Dunque la vostra scuola di bacino è stata la prima e unica opzione che avete considerato...*

- Sapevate di avere altre scelte?

Se più di 1 opzione →

- Quali altre scuole avevate considerato come seconda e terza scelta?
- Come ne siete venuti a conoscenza?

a. Criteri di scelta e preferenze

- Le chiederei adesso di raccontarmi un po' com'è andata...come mai avete scelto la vostra scuola di bacino?
- Avete mai pensato di scegliere una scuola che non fosse quella di bacino?
- Cosa non vi convinceva delle altre scuole?
- Cosa vi ha colpito particolarmente di questa scuola?
(alcuni esempi: qualità dell'insegnamento? Risultati? Vicinanza a casa, vicinanza al lavoro, presenza di mezzi pubblici?)
- Cosa ha avuto più peso/ha contato di più nel farvi scegliere la scuola di quartiere? (alcuni esempi: qualità dell'insegnamento? Risultati? Vicinanza a casa, vicinanza al lavoro, presenza di mezzi pubblici, tipo di ragazzini che la frequentano, reti amicali)?

→ Se sto intervistando solo una persona

- Lei e suo marito/moglie/compagno/compagna avete condiviso questa scelta?

→ Se la scelta è dipesa principalmente dalla vicinanza a casa o al lavoro:

- Avevate qualche altra scuola altrettanto vicina che avete escluso?
- C'è qualcosa per cui avreste rinunciato a questa comodità? Per esempio un'altra scuola con attività particolari, metodi differenti...?

- *Molti genitori nella scelta della scuola media considerano già anche la scelta della scuola superiore, per esempio ritengono che in alcune scuole gli studenti/le studentesse vengano preparati meglio per es. per i percorsi liceali...*
 - Mi chiedevo se voi aveste fatto lo stesso ragionamento...
- Riuscirebbe a descrivermi com'è questa scuola...a livello di estrazione sociale dei bambini per esempio...?
- *So che per molte famiglie è importante il tipo di ragazzini che frequenta la scuola...*
 - Per voi è stato importante capire che tipo di alunni e alunne frequentavano questa scuola?

(Capire se ha influenzato la scelta. Se non viene esplicitato chiedere, sia su classe che su nazionalità)

- *Adesso siete in una scuola pubblica...*
 - Mi chiedevo se aveste mai pensato a una scuola paritaria privata...

b. Raccolta informazioni

(capire come hanno raccolto le informazioni sugli elementi di cui parlano, se l'hanno fatto)

- Come avete raccolto informazioni su questa scuola? (esempi: siete andati a visitarla? Avete chiesto, a chi? Avete trovato del materiale informativo? Dove?)
- *Ho visto che il ministero ha attivato un sito per sapere quali scuole ci sono sul territorio..si chiama cerca la tua scuola (<http://cercalatuascuola.istruzione.it/cercalatuascuola/>)*
 - Lo conoscete? Lo avete utilizzato? ...

c. Negoziazione della scelta

- *Prima di passare a parlare un po' delle vostre reti sociali e della scuola, volevo chiederle un po' come è stata vissuta/gestita la scelta della scuola in famiglia...*
 - Quando avete iniziato a pensare alla scuola in cui iscrivere vostro figlio/a?
 - Chi è stato coinvolto nella scelta?

- Si è occupato/a lei di raccogliere le informazioni di cui mi parlava prima?

B. Scuola 'seconda scelta'

- Cos'è successo? mi racconti com'è andata...
 - *Non tutti sanno di poter iscrivere i propri figli ad una scuola diversa da quella di quartiere...*
 - Voi in che modo siete venuti a sapere che potevate scegliere una scuola diversa?
 - a. Criteri di scelta e preferenze**
 - Che tipo di scuola era invece quella in cui volevate mandarlo/a?
 - Come mai avevate scelto quella scuola...?
 - *Nella domanda avevate comunque inserito il nome della scuola dove siete adesso, giusto?*
 - Mi racconti un po' come mai avevate scelto la vostra scuola di quartiere come seconda opzione...
 - Cosa non vi convinceva della scuola di bacino?
 - Cosa vi ha colpito particolarmente dell'altra scuola?
(alcuni esempi: qualità dell'insegnamento? Risultati? Vicinanza a casa, vicinanza al lavoro, presenza di mezzi pubblici?)
- Se la scelta è dipesa principalmente dalla vicinanza a casa o al lavoro:
- Avevate qualche altra scuola altrettanto vicina che avete escluso?
 - C'è qualcosa per cui avreste rinunciato a questa comodità? Per esempio un'altra scuola con attività particolari, metodi differenti...?

- *Molti genitori nella scelta della scuola media considerano già anche la scelta della scuola superiore, per esempio ritengono che in alcune scuole gli studenti/le studentesse vengano preparati meglio per es. per i percorsi liceali...*

- Mi chiedevo se voi aveste fatto lo stesso ragionamento...
- *Per molte famiglie è parecchio importante il tipo di utenza che frequenta la scuola... per es. la loro estrazione sociale...*
 - Per voi è stato importante capire che tipo di alunni e alunne frequentavano questa scuola?
 - Cosa sapevate quando avete scoperto che vostro figlio avrebbe iniziato l'anno scolastico qui?
 -

(Capire se ha influenzato la scelta. Se non viene esplicitato chiedere, sia su classe che su nazionalità)

- *Adesso siete in una scuola pubblica...*
 - Mi chiedevo se aveste mai pensato a una scuola paritaria privata...

b. Raccolta informazioni

(capire come hanno raccolto le informazioni sugli elementi di cui parlano, se l'hanno fatto)

- Come avete raccolto informazioni sulle scuole? (esempi: siete andati a visitarla? Avete chiesto, a chi? Avete trovato del materiale informativo? Dove?)
- *Ho visto che il ministero ha attivato un sito per sapere quali scuole ci sono sul territorio...si chiama cerca la tua scuola*
(<http://cercalatuascuola.istruzione.it/cercalatuascuola/>)
 - Lo conoscete? Lo avete utilizzato? ...

c. Negoziazione della scelta

- *Prima di passare a parlare un po' delle vostre reti sociali e della scuola, volevo chiederle un po' come è stata vissuta/gestita la scelta della scuola in famiglia...*
 - Quando avete iniziato a pensare alla scuola in cui iscrivere vostro figlio/a?
 - Chi è stato coinvolto nella scelta?
 - Si è occupato/a lei di raccogliere le informazioni di cui mi parlava prima?
 - Come avete vissuto il fatto di non essere stati ammessi nella scuola che avevate scelto come prima opzione?

4. RETI SOCIALI

- *Vorrei farvi ora qualche domanda sulle vostre reti sociali, le vostre amicizie e le persone più o meno vicine a voi...in particolare vorrei capire che ruolo hanno avuto nella scelta della scuola, per esempio...*
- Vi siete rivolti a qualcuno per chiedere consigli sulla scuola? O per raccogliere informazioni?
- E queste persone sono...? parenti, amici, colleghi o..altro?
- Di che nazionalità sono prevalentemente? italiane?
- Che tipo di informazioni vi hanno dato?
- Ritenete invece di essere stati importanti per la scelta di qualche altro genitore (amico, conoscente) che si è rivolto a voi per chiedere informazioni?

5. RAPPORTO CON LA SCUOLA E IL PERSONALE SCOLASTICO

- *Parliamo adesso del rapporto con la scuola (con questa scuola) e lo staff scolastico...*
 - Vi siete messi in contatto con questa scuola prima di sceglierla?
 - Ne avete contattate altre?
 - A chi vi siete rivolti? Con chi avete parlato?
 - Che tipo di informazioni cercavate?
 - Che tipo di informazioni avete ottenuto dalla scuola?
 - Che impressione vi ha fatto questa scuola/lo staff quando siete venuti qui per la prima volta?
 - Adesso che siete qui già da X mesi/anni...partecipate alle attività della scuola?
- *In molti casi la partecipazione alle attività della scuola è un'occasione per stringere amicizie...*
 - A voi è successo lo stesso?

- *Per quanto riguarda il rapporto tra scuola e famiglia*
 - Secondo lei che ruolo dovrebbero avere le famiglie nella scuola?
 - E rispetto a questo....che ruolo pensa che abbia di fatto la famiglia nella scuola?

6. VALUTAZIONE – BILANCIO

- *Abbiamo parlato del passato, di quello che è successo ormai X anni fa...*
 - Adesso le chiederei di parlarmi di come vi trovate in questa scuola...
 - Come si trova suo figlio/sua figlia...?
 - Come vi trovate con gli insegnanti?
 - Mi racconti cosa l'ha sorpresa di questa scuola...una cosa che non si aspettava...
 - Se tornasse indietro cambierebbe qualcosa nella scelta?
- Per finire volevo chiederle un paio di cose più generiche...
- Cosa si aspetta in generale dalla scuola?
- Quanto quello che vede tutti i giorni corrisponde alla sua aspettativa?

C'è qualcosa che vorrebbe aggiungere a ciò che ci siamo dette?

II PARTE #2 TRACCIA FUORI BACINO

3. LA SCELTA DELLA SCUOLA

A. Scuola 'prima scelta'

Se solo 1 opzione → *Dunque questa scuola è stata la prima e unica opzione che avete considerato...*

- Quali altre scelte avevate?
- *Non tutti sanno di poter iscrivere i propri figli ad una scuola diversa da quella di quartiere...*
 - Voi in che modo siete venuti a sapere che potevate scegliere una scuola diversa da quella di quartiere?

Se più di 1 opzione →

- Quali altre scuole avevate considerato come seconda e terza scelta?
- E in generale quali altre opzioni avevate (oltre la scuola di bacino e oltre questa che avete scelto)?
- Come ne siete venuti a conoscenza?

a. Criteri di scelta e preferenze

- Le chiederei adesso di raccontarmi un po' com'è andata...come mai avete scelto questa scuola?

- Cosa vi ha colpito particolarmente di questa scuola?
- Cosa non vi convinceva della vostra scuola di afferenza?
- Cosa avete considerato per selezionare le scuole? (alcuni esempi: qualità dell'insegnamento? Risultati? Vicinanza a casa, vicinanza al lavoro, presenza di mezzi pubblici, tipo di ragazzini che la frequentano, reti amicali)

➔ Se sto intervistando solo una persona

- Lei e suo marito/moglie/compagno/compagna avete condiviso questa scelta?

- *Considerando quello che mi ha appena detto sulla vostra scelta...*
- Cosa ha avuto più peso/ha contato di più nella decisione finale?

➔ Se la scelta è dipesa principalmente dalla vicinanza a casa o al lavoro:

- Avevate qualche altra scuola altrettanto vicina che avete escluso?
- C'è qualcosa per cui avrebbe rinunciato a questa comodità? Per esempio un'altra scuola con attività particolari, metodi differenti...?
- *Molti genitori nella scelta della scuola media considerano già anche la scelta della scuola superiore, per esempio ritengono che in alcune scuole gli studenti/le studentesse vengano preparati meglio per es. per i percorsi liceali...*
 - Mi chiedevo se voi aveste fatto lo stesso ragionamento...
- Riuscirebbe a descrivermi com'è questa scuola...a livello di estrazione sociale dei bambini per esempio...?
- *So che per molte famiglie è importante il tipo di ragazzini che frequenta la scuola...*
 - Per voi è stato importante capire che tipo di alunni e alunne frequentavano questa scuola?

(Capire se ha influenzato la scelta. Se non viene esplicitato chiedere, sia su classe che su nazionalità)

- *Adesso siete in una scuola pubblica...*
 - Mi chiedevo se aveste mai pensato a una scuola paritaria privata...

b. Raccolta informazioni

(capire come hanno raccolto le informazioni su questi elementi, se l'hanno fatto)

- Come avete raccolto informazioni sulle scuole? (esempi: siete andati a visitarle? Avete chiesto, a chi? Avete trovato del materiale informativo? Dove?)
- *Ho visto che il ministero ha attivato un sito per sapere quali scuole ci sono sul territorio...si chiama cerca la tua scuola*
(<http://cercalatuascuola.istruzione.it/cercalatuascuola/>)
 - Lo conoscete? Lo avete utilizzato?

c. Negoziazione della scelta

- *Prima di passare a parlare un po' delle vostre reti sociali e della scuola, volevo chiederle un po' come è stata vissuta/gestita la scelta della scuola in famiglia...*
 - Quando avete iniziato a pensare alla scuola in cui iscrivere vostro figlio/a?
 - Chi è stato coinvolto nella scelta?
 - Si è occupato/a lei di raccogliere le informazioni di cui mi parlava prima?

B. Scuola 'seconda scelta'

- Cos'è successo? mi racconti com'è andata...

➤ *Non tutti sanno di poter iscrivere i propri figli ad una scuola diversa da quella di quartiere...*

- Voi in che modo siete venuti a sapere che potevate scegliere una scuola diversa?

a. Criteri di scelta e preferenze

- Che tipo di scuola era invece quella in cui volevate mandarlo/a?
- Come mai avevate scelto quella scuola...?
- Cosa non vi convinceva delle altre scuole?
- Cosa vi ha colpito particolarmente di questa dell'altra scuola?

(alcuni esempi: qualità dell'insegnamento? Risultati? Vicinanza a casa, vicinanza al lavoro, presenza di mezzi pubblici?)

➤ *Nella domanda avevate comunque inserito il nome della scuola dove siete adesso, giusto?*

- Mi racconti un po' come mai avevate scelto questa scuola come seconda opzione...

→ Se la scelta è dipesa principalmente dalla vicinanza a casa o al lavoro:

➤ Avevate qualche altra scuola altrettanto vicina che avete escluso?

➤ C'è qualcosa per cui avreste rinunciato a questa comodità? Per esempio un'altra scuola con attività particolari, metodi differenti...?

➤ *Molti genitori nella scelta della scuola media considerano già anche la scelta della scuola superiore, per esempio ritengono che in alcune scuole gli studenti/le studentesse vengano preparati meglio per es. per i percorsi liceali...*

- Mi chiedevo se voi aveste fatto lo stesso ragionamento...

➤ *Per molte famiglie è parecchio importante il tipo di utenza che frequenta la scuola... per es. la loro estrazione sociale...*

- Per voi è stato importante capire che tipo di alunni e alunne frequentavano questa scuola?

- Cosa sapevate quando avete scoperto che vostro figlio avrebbe iniziato l'anno scolastico qui?

(Capire se ha influenzato la scelta. Se non viene esplicitato chiedere, sia su classe che su nazionalità)

- *Adesso siete in una scuola pubblica...*
 - Mi chiedevo se aveste mai pensato a una scuola paritaria privata...

b. Raccolta informazioni

(capire come hanno raccolto le informazioni sugli elementi di cui parlano, se l'hanno fatto)

- Come avete raccolto informazioni sulle scuole? (esempi: siete andati a visitarla? Avete chiesto, a chi? Avete trovato del materiale informativo? Dove?)
- *Ho visto che il ministero ha attivato un sito per sapere quali scuole ci sono sul territorio...si chiama cerca la tua scuola*
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 - Lo conoscete? Lo avete utilizzato? ...

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 - Quando avete iniziato a pensare alla scuola in cui iscrivere vostro figlio/a?
 - Chi è stato coinvolto nella scelta?
 - Si è occupato/a lei di raccogliere le informazioni di cui mi parlava prima?
 - Come avete vissuto il fatto di non essere stati ammessi nella scuola che avevate scelto come prima opzione?

7. RETI SOCIALI

- *Vorrei farvi ora qualche domanda sulle vostre reti sociali, le vostre amicizie e le persone più o meno vicine a voi...in particolare vorrei capire che ruolo hanno avuto nella scelta della scuola, per esempio...*
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- *In molti casi la partecipazione alle attività della scuola è un'occasione per stringere amicizie...*
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9. VALUTAZIONE – BILANCIO

- *Abbiamo parlato del passato, di quello che è successo ormai X anni fa...*
 - Adesso le chiederei di parlarvi di come vi trovate in questa scuola...
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C'è qualcosa che vorrebbe aggiungere a ciò che ci siamo dette?

Appendix 4 - Research presentation letter

Milano, Settembre 2015

Alla cortese attenzione del Dirigente Scolastico

Egregio/a Dirigente,

La dottoressa Cristina Cavallo è una dottoranda del corso di Sociology and Methodology of Social Research, amministrato congiuntamente dall'Università degli Studi di Milano e dall'Università di Torino, nell'ambito del progetto NASP-West (Network for the Advancement of Social and Political Studies in the North-Western part of Italy).

Il suo progetto di ricerca, seguito dalla Prof.ssa Manuela Olagnero e dalla Prof.ssa Cristina Solera del dipartimento di Culture, politica e società dell'Università di Torino, riguarda le strategie educative delle famiglie italiane e straniere nella scelta della scuola secondaria di I grado.

La caratteristica importante delle scuole secondarie di I grado in Italia è il loro essere un vero e proprio luogo di orientamento per il futuro formativo e professionale dei giovani allievi che stanno attraversando una fase di crescita e trasformazione profonde del corso di vita. Dunque, la scelta che le riguarda è cruciale per il percorso successivo, che le famiglie ne siano consapevoli o meno.

L'obiettivo dello studio è quello di esplorare i modi in cui i genitori arrivano a scegliere uno specifico istituto, anche spostandosi dalla zona dove abitano, alla ricerca della scuola ai loro occhi migliore per i loro figli.

L'elemento di novità di questa ricerca risiede nel portare l'attenzione su questa decisione che riguarda non solo *cosa* i figli studieranno, ma anche *come* e *con chi* lo faranno.

Risulta dunque importante acquisire informazioni sulle famiglie e sulle scuole per comprendere bene il contesto in cui si sviluppa questa importante decisione.

La raccolta dati si articolerà in due fasi:

- La conduzione di interviste ai Dirigenti Scolastici delle scuole selezionate, con l'obiettivo di delineare le caratteristiche degli istituti scolastici nello scenario entro

cui le famiglie agiscono. Ci si concentrerà sull'offerta formativa, sulla storia della scuola, sui suoi punti di forza e di eventuale debolezza, etc.

- La conduzione di interviste ai genitori i cui figli sono già iscritti presso le scuole cui si indirizza la ricerca, con l'obiettivo di comprendere come siano giunti a quella scelta. Ci si concentrerà sui criteri e le preferenze dei genitori, la loro partecipazione a scuola, i canali tramite cui raccolgono le informazioni, le loro risorse culturali, sociali ed economiche etc.

Lo studio prevede il coinvolgimento di altre scuole del territorio del Comune di Milano, selezionate per la loro vicinanza territoriale e le loro caratteristiche in termini di concentrazione degli alunni non italiani.

Qualora si ottenga, come auspico, la vostra gentile autorizzazione alle interviste, si dà massima garanzia del rispetto della privacy, essendo la ricerca condotta entro l'Università e al solo fine di ricerca scientifica. Si assicura inoltre massima disponibilità a operare per il raggiungimento del risultato con il minimo disturbo per le vostre attività didattiche, oltre che una fedele restituzione dei risultati emersi dalla ricerca, qualora possano incontrare il vostro interesse.

Le sarei dunque molto grato se vorrà fornire alla dott.sa Cavallo la collaborazione necessaria alla realizzazione di questa ricerca. Qualora volesse raccogliere maggiori informazioni non esiti a mettersi in contatto con me.

La ringrazio anticipatamente

Cordiali Saluti

Prof. Mario Cardano

Coordinatore del dottorato in

Sociology and Methodology of Social Research

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