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### Residential practices of middle classes in the field of parenthood

Boterman, W.R.

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## 5. Dealing with Diversity

### *Middle-class family households and the issue of 'black' and 'white' schools in Amsterdam*

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### **Introduction**

Although social relations between middle classes and lower classes in diverse areas are often no more than 'tectonic' (Robson and Butler, 2001), diversity is an important theme for many members of the middle-class. Many gentrifiers celebrate multiculturalism and use the ethnic or racial make-up of a neighbourhood to contrast themselves with traditional middle classes in the suburbs (Bridge, 2006; Ley, 2003). However, when gentrifiers become parents, the diversity of the neighbourhood may be perceived as a threat. To paraphrase Bridge (2006:1965), the desire to display symbolic capital may conflict with the need to reproduce cultural capital through the educational system.

The issue of education is indeed a delicate one for middle-class parents in various urban contexts (Ball, 2003b; Bunar, 2010; Hollingworth and Williams, 2010; Maloutas, 2007; Noreisch, 2007; Rangvid, 2007; Vincent et al., 2008). Several studies have shown that middle-class parents in diverse urban contexts fear exposing their children to lower standards of education, the 'wrong' types of socialisation, and even victimisation (Byrne, 2006, 2009; Reay, 2001). For the UK context, it has been argued that the way in which urban middle-class parents handle these issues depends on their resources (capital) (Ball, 2003a) and their identities (Reay et al., 2011). These studies have argued that various middle-class fractions or habituses have different strategies for reproducing social class.

It is often emphasised that residential practices and school choice are tightly interwoven in a 'geography of education' (Butler and Hamnett, 2007; Butler and Robson, 2003a, b). The current understanding of the ways in which the fields of housing and education are interconnected is disproportionately based on findings from the UK and, specifically, London. The UK context of school catchment areas, the stark division of private and public education and the dynamics of the housing market, however, are likely to produce rather specific outcomes. Although studies from other contexts have revealed important parallels with the practices of the middle class in the UK, they have also revealed differences in terms of urban middle-class strategies in the field of education. These differences should be

associated with the specific configurations of the local housing market, national and local education policies and discourses and meanings of social class, ethnicity and race.

In Amsterdam, the Netherlands, national and local housing and educational policies have created a schooling landscape stands out in the following three major respects:

- 1) private and public education are both funded by the state; therefore, the role of economic capital in education is very small but that of life style (religion, cultural capital) is much more important.
- 2) parents have free school choice; therefore, the intertwinement of school and neighbourhood is much smaller than in other contexts.
- 3) most neighbourhoods in Amsterdam are diverse, both socially and ethnically; therefore, the interactions between residential choice and school choice are quite different from those in the UK and other contexts.

These specificities of the Amsterdam context create a schooling landscape that allows for parental school choice strategies that differ from those in the UK and other contexts. The goals of the current paper are as follows: 1) to show how the meaning of diversity for Amsterdam middle-classes changes when they become parents; 2) to identify how configurations of ethnicity, social class and housing and schooling policies in the context of Amsterdam influence middle-class parents' strategies regarding school choice; and 3) to show how school choice strategies are linked to the interaction of habitus and the specific rules of the Amsterdam field of education.

The main questions are, more specifically:

*How does the meaning of diversity change for urban middle-class households when they orientate for primary schooling for their children?*

*What are the socio-spatial strategies for school choice of white middle-class parents in the context of Amsterdam, and how are these strategies informed by their habitus?*

Utilising concepts derived from the work of Bourdieu and inspired by a range of mainly UK-based research on diversity, school choice, habitus and white middle class identities, the present study demonstrates the Amsterdam middle class' struggle with diversity. I will show how white middle-class households develop various socio-spatial strategies for schooling in the ethnically and socially diverse context of Amsterdam and how specific Amsterdam outcomes confirm and challenge the broader literature on the reproduction of white middle class privilege.

## Theory

### *Diversity as distinction*

It has been argued that new middle classes tend to set themselves apart from the suburban old middle class by living in inner-city areas (May, 1996). Living in the city has become part of a life style and a distinction strategy of particular middle-class habituses (Bridge, 2006; Butler and Robson, 2003a, b; Ley, 1994, 1996). An important aspect of their distinctive repertoire lies in the embracement of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, which is also reflected in the political views expressed by many gentrifiers (Butler, 1997; Ley, 1994; Rose, 2004). Furthermore, much of the distinctive potential of inner-city living lies in residing in ethnically and socially diverse areas, which symbolises tolerance and open-mindedness (Blokland and van Eijk, 2010).

Middle-class inhabitants of (formerly) working-class neighbourhoods often emphasise the positive aspects of living in a diverse neighbourhood. Whether they describe the variety of exotic shops or the colourful streetscape, many gentrifiers consider diversity as a neighbourhood asset. Various scholars have rightfully pointed to the hidden power relationships that are played out here (Allen, 2008). Nevertheless, it carries too far to simply dismiss the positive feelings many gentrifiers have toward diversity and to portray it as a cover up for displacement. Although interaction between different social classes is limited, there is real meaning in the middle-class' desire to live in areas that are socially diverse.

### *Diversity and education*

However, when gentrifiers have children, the diversity of the neighbourhood may no longer be primarily viewed positively but may also be perceived as a threat. Particularly for middle-classes, the educational system is crucial in maintaining and legitimising class differences (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Green, 1990; Reay, 2001). Therefore, access to high-quality schooling is one of the foremost priorities of most middle-class parents (Butler and Hamnett, 2007; Butler and Robson, 2003a, b). Beginning with the selection of child care facilities, and continuing into the field of primary and secondary education, middle-class parents carefully plan the schooling of their children (Ball, 2003b; Hollingworth and Williams, 2010; Vincent et al., 2008). Middle-class parents are particularly concerned with the following three main issues: the quality of the school; the atmosphere at the school; the 'wrong' types of socialisation; and even victimisation at the school and in the neighbourhood (Byrne, 2006, 2009; Reay, 2001; Vincent et al., 2004; Vincent et al., 2008).

As Byrne (2006) indicated, these fears are often framed and studied from a class perspective and surprisingly rarely from the perspective of race or ethnicity. However, in multicultural urban contexts, class is often mediated by race (Byrne, 2006, 2009; Reay et al., 2011). Another study confirmed that middle-classes

“associated ethnic difference with material disadvantage and implicitly, whiteness, with social and economic privilege” (Hollingworth and Williams, 2010: 55). Many of the middle-class fears are, hence, related to the socio-economic and ethnic/racial diversity of the school population. Thus, although gentrifiers have a particular urban life style that emphasises ‘political correctness’ and ‘good taste’, their distinctive practices become challenged by the newly acquired responsibilities of parenthood.

Particularly in jurisdictions where access to schools is geographically defined through catchment areas, school choice and neighbourhood choice are closely interrelated. School segregation at the metropolitan level is generally higher than residential segregation, but in most Western cities, these types of segregation are spatially strongly correlated (Burgess et al., 2005). Therefore, the dilemmas of middle-class parents become most apparent in areas that are diverse in terms of class and ethnicity/race. Given that many gentrification areas are rather diverse in terms of class and often also ethnicity/race (Freeman, 2009), the local school population is also quite diverse. Many of these areas have a school infrastructure that was once suited to the needs of working classes (Butler and Robson, 2003b). In many former working-class areas, middle classes may have trouble finding schools to their taste.

#### *Middle-class strategies for education*

It has been suggested that various fractions or habituses within the middle classes may employ different strategies for managing these challenges (Ball, 2003a). Several scholars have linked this to the identities, values and resources that middle-class parents command. An emerging literature that examines school contexts beyond the UK demonstrates that the national and local context of both education and housing also influence the strategies of middle-class parents. Although many similarities have been identified across various Western contexts, middle classes in different national and local contexts develop strategies in line with the specificities of their schooling and housing context. Furthermore, the degree, perceptions and definitions of diversity also differ.

A strategy that is often described for the US context is the suburbanisation of white middle-class families. This strategy is strongly associated with the central role of race in US segregation patterns (Frey, 1979). Nonetheless, white flight is also a phenomenon in European contexts, notably the UK. In European contexts, ‘white flight’ is often understood as the relationships between (white) natives and immigrant groups of various descents (see for Scandinavian examples Bunar, 2010; Rangvid, 2007). Suburbanisation, however, is not an option for those who desire to ‘bask in the warm glow of multiculturalism’ (Reay et al., 2011: 2).

Another strategy, which is related to white flight, is retreating into relatively majority white middle-class areas within the city. This strategy fits with broader trends of middle classes ‘padding the bunker’ (Atkinson, 2006), whereby middle

classes attempt to maintain control of their environment and retreat from public urban space. For some middle-class parents, moving into a particular school catchment areas is a way to safeguard the reproduction of privilege (Noreisch, 2007). This strategy is often a matter of deploying large quantities of economic capital (Butler and Robson, 2003b; Leech and Campos, 2003).

Strategies that do not involve moving into a desired catchment area include travelling greater distances from home to school. Butler and others have demonstrated that as a response to a mismatch between school and residential location, middle-class parents in London have adopted a metropolitan-wide strategy for (secondary) education (Butler and Hamnett, 2007; Butler and Robson, 2003b). This strategy can be considered as an example of elective belonging (Savage, 2010), whereby middle classes select certain aspects of inner-city living and dispose of others. However, this strategy is only viable in contexts with a large private schooling sector, such as in the UK. Furthermore, it applies mainly to secondary education as primary education is much more geographically confined.

A final strategy that is described in various international contexts is the middle-class 'colonisation' of local schools in diverse neighbourhoods. In the UK, this often implies the 'gentrification' of public working class schools with the aim of creating safety in numbers (Vowden, forthcoming). This active shaping of the social and academic conditions of schooling is a relatively risky strategy that does not guarantee the reproduction of privilege. As Reay and colleagues (2011) have shown, first-generation middle classes would have avoided this type of risk-taking. These socially engaged and uncertain strategies are likely to be associated with households endowed with high cultural and social capital, which can be used for compensation. Moreover, these strategies provide parents with specific forms of symbolic capital that fit their liberal and tolerant identities and habituses.

### *The Amsterdam context*

The Amsterdam context stands out in the following three respects:

- 1) Measured by ethnic diversity, Amsterdam is one of the most diverse cities in the Western world. Approximately half of the population has a non-Dutch background<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, income and ethnic segregation levels are relatively low (Musterd, 2005). Local and national housing policies have been and continue to be strongly committed to social mix. Partially due to a large social rent sector, most neighbourhoods in Amsterdam are diverse, both socially and ethnically.

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<sup>11</sup> The most common Dutch statistical definition of ethnicity is 'allochtoon'. Dutch statistics define people of whom at least one parent was born abroad as 'allochtoon'. Commonly, a distinction is made between Western and non-Western 'allochtonen'.

- 2) Since 1917, private education<sup>12</sup> and public education have been nearly fully funded by the state. The city of Amsterdam has 111 private primary schools (O&S, 2011b) that offer a wide range of different types of education, based on various didactical or confessional principles (i.e., Montessori, Catholic, Protestant, Islamic), and 98 public schools. The fee differentiation between schools is quite limited; therefore, the role of economic capital in school choice is very small.
- 3) In the Netherlands, parents' freedom of school choice is granted by the constitution. Although caveats apply, parents can select any school in the municipality for their children. Consequently, the intertwinement of school and neighbourhood is much weaker than in most other contexts, notably in the UK. Although some popular schools in Amsterdam have adopted enrolment procedures based on postal code, UK-style school catchment areas do not exist.

These three aspects of the Amsterdam schooling context, in which choice plays an important role, have produced a school landscape that is characterised by high levels of school segregation (Karsten et al., 2006; Karsten et al., 2003). Interestingly, school segregation is largely debated in racial terms rather than academic qualities and social deprivation. Schools with high shares of non-Western minorities are referred to as 'black' schools; schools with high shares of native Dutch students are referred to as 'white' schools (Vedder, 2006). These racial labels, however, do not refer only to the ethnic composition of the school population. In common discourse, 'bad schools', 'black schools' and 'deprived schools' are used interchangeably. Amsterdam parents may use the ethnic composition of schools as a marker of academic quality.

Dutch studies on school choice show that most middle-class parents are quite aware of the ethnic composition of potential schools (Jongejan and Tijs, 2010). For higher educated parents, ethnic composition is mainly a reason not to go to particular schools (Karsten et al., 2003). It has even been suggested that although higher educated parents express a stronger commitment to sending their children to an ethnically diverse school, they eventually do not practice what they preach (Jongejan and Tijs, 2010). Enabled by the free school choice, middle-class parents are more mobile in finding 'the right' school.

If Amsterdam middle-class parents seek to reproduce their middle-class privilege, it is likely that they develop strategies that are in line with the opportunities and constraints of the local schooling landscape. It has indeed been argued that middle-class parents search for a 'match' between home and school, which implies both an ethnic match and a match of values, rules, and didactical approach: cultural capital. Based on evidence from Amsterdam and other contexts,

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<sup>12</sup> Private education (Dutch: *bijzonder onderwijs*) in the Netherlands is a denominator for a wide range of religious (Catholic and Protestant) and education methods such as Montessori, Dalton and Anthroposophy. By far, the largest share of private education is religious.

it could be hypothesised that because economic means cannot help middle-class parents select the school that they prefer, cultural capital and social capital play a greater role in school choice.

Furthermore, because school and neighbourhood are less strongly interrelated than in contexts with school catchment areas, the need for residential relocation for the sake of school choice is reduced. In Amsterdam, freedom of school choice may, therefore, reduce 'white flight' or 'padding the bunker' because it allows white middle classes to circumvent the perceived disadvantages of neighbourhood diversity.

## Data and Methods

This study aims to investigate the changing meaning of diversity for middle-class couples when they become parents and search for primary education for their child and how they handle this diversity in the Amsterdam context. The most suitable method for studying changes in both attitude and practice is detailed in-depth interviews over a long period of time. This paper draws on 53 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 28 middle-class couples that resided within the inner ring road of Amsterdam. The participants were selected from a larger sample of 460 middle-class families, who completed two questionnaires (in 2008 and in 2010), which provided information about their income, education, work and consumption. In 2008, 28 interviews were completed with couples that were in the last stage of their first pregnancy and that lived in the inner-city of Amsterdam. At the end of 2010, 25 interviews with the same couples (three dropped out) were carried out. The interviews were held with both the male and the female partner (except one), took place at the respondents' home and lasted between one hour and two hours. The interviews were analysed with Atlas TI, whereby all fragments of the interviews were coded for the issue of ethnic, racial and class diversity and the issue of school choice.

In the first interview, respondents were extensively asked about their relationship with the city and the neighbourhood, what they expected of their future parenthood and how parenthood would affect their relationship with the city and their neighbourhood.

During the follow-up interview, all respondents had one child of approximately two years of age and 14 cases also had a newborn or were in the final stages of a second pregnancy. Most parents were actively engaged with finding a primary school for their oldest child. The second interviews were focussed on what had changed in the lives of these middle-class couples and how the changes had affected their relationship with their residential environment. In all follow-up interviews, respondents were asked about the process of finding and choosing a school, although most parents began discussing it prior to questioning. This was compared with the first interview, in which parents were also explicitly asked about schooling.



### *Amsterdam Diversity*

Although most of the respondents are not originally from Amsterdam, most of them considered themselves urbanites. Most respondents agreed that Amsterdam does not have the metropolitan qualities of larger urban centres. In fact, many of them described Amsterdam as a ‘big village’ because of its modest size and snug atmosphere. Nonetheless, many emphasised—somewhat contradictorily—the cosmopolitan feel of Amsterdam. They attributed this characteristic particularly to the abundance of cultural amenities and the diversity of the population:

*Amsterdam is small, but it has that urban feel, that cosmopolitan feel, that all cultures come together. (Gerreth)*

*I always have a bit of a New York feeling of, you know, when you come here and you have the feeling of the city, then you are an Amsterdammer. Because an Amsterdammer is white and black and everything mixed. (Egbert)*

As Egbert expressed, there is a certain pride among some of the respondents that Amsterdam is such a diverse city. However, this diversity has various realities. At the level of the city, diversity is often associated with cosmopolitanism; however, at the neighbourhood level, diversity is not always appreciated:

*Satellite-dish neighbourhoods: I don't think that's very pleasant. It looks so shabby. I don't feel comfortable with that. Here [Westerpark] it's very mixed, but there it's actually not so mixed anymore. I think it's pretty shabby there. (Dave)*

Dave referred to a former dwelling in De Baarsjes, where he lived before he moved to his current home in Westerpark. Although De Baarsjes is also in both ethnic and class definitions quite diverse, Dave felt that ‘it is not mixed anymore’ and that ‘it’s pretty shabby’. For him, diversity was a positive notion, referring to the cosmopolitan buzz. Dave pointed to the following important issue: the appreciation of diversity also depends on the degree and type of mixing. Satellite-dishes, in the Dutch context, represent the presence of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants. For many respondents, these immigrant groups represented a more negative type of diversity associated with crime and conflicting norms and values. Interestingly, diversity in the city as a whole was considered positively, whereas negative aspects of diversity were nearly always expressed in relation to children’s services such as day-care and primary schools.

### *Thinking about future schooling*

At the time of the first interview, the first child was recently born. Day-care was the respondents’ foremost and immediate concern. Yet, many respondents were already thinking about primary education as well. Of the 28 couples, nine explicitly

stated that they did not think about schools at all. However, the other couples were to some degree already engaged with the selection of schooling for their first-born. In two households, the parents had registered for a particular school in the neighbourhood; in six cases, parents had clear ideas about the type of school they preferred. Another theme that surfaced was the long waiting lists for particular schools and, hence, the necessity to orientate and enrol early. Most of the respondents (15), however, expressed that they preferred a school near their home and checked local schools first.

*I would like it if our child had friends at school who also just live in the neighbourhood; the idea that you live in the neighbourhood with children that attend the same school.*  
(Helene)

*At the end of the day, you want to send your child to a good school, and I think it's important that it's a local school. We are lucky to live in a neighbourhood with two very white and posh schools, which also score very high. If we had lived in De Pijp, our choice would have been much more difficult.* (Bea)

Bea felt lucky to live in a neighbourhood with good schools, albeit they were a bit posh for her taste. She expressed that they would have faced other dilemmas had they lived in another more diverse neighbourhood (De Pijp).

*I think it's funny that we chose this house, because it could have been somewhere else: In De Pijp if there had been a nice home there. Things would have been different then. Then, we would have faced more dilemmas.* (Bea)

Bea's quotes articulate the relationship between 'the neighbourhood' and schooling. The choice for a local school depends on the neighbourhood. For parents such as Bea, the relationship with the neighbourhood is favourable, but the dilemmas associated with living in diverse neighbourhoods such as De Pijp are literally and figuratively just around the corner. Other parents considered the diversity of their neighbourhood and school population a problem:

Marc: It is still quite mixed here and I do notice that! If I see what kinds of parents go there...And I don't even look at the children but more at the parents. Then, I think: well, that's not really my cup of tea.

Willem: So what type of parents attend this school?

Marc: Well, there are a lot of people smoking outside, you know. It's not that I'm anti-smoking per se, but they're just...these women that chit-chat with a cigarette in their mouth [imitates low-class accents].

Marc lived in the mixed neighbourhood of De Pijp. The school he referred to is next door to his home. Without directly referring to it, Marc's concerns with the school population were related to issues of class. The women who smoked and stood outside after school were not Marc's 'cup of tea'. Later in the interview, when discussing pre-schools, he described his cup of tea:

*That was a very special pre-school, according to some Italian pedagogical scheme. Once every week an artist comes by. He will work with the children. I think that's really interesting. And they make music every week: someone comes and plays the violin and these kind of things. I think I'm mainly going to pay attention to these kinds of things. But then you'll end up automatically with white schools. (Marc)*

The type of education that emphasises the high-brow cultural development of children is restricted to particular schools. Often, these schools are special schools<sup>13</sup> with a particular teaching method such as Montessori. As Marc remarked, there is a correlation between the learning methods and the school's population. Implicitly, some of his remarks about the type of education also refer to the ethnic composition of the school. However, other parents were much more outspoken about this issue:

*There are a couple of really black schools around here. Well, we wouldn't want that. Uh, just a bit mixed: fine, but it's just really important that children speak Dutch well, that in the class there are no children with language deficiencies or whatever else. (Thea)*  
*It concerns me what school he'll go to. I mean nothing to the detriment of the other kids, but yes I rather have him in a classroom with 25 children that are all the same than that he'll be the only white kid. And that he'll come home with all kinds of strange rituals. (Fiona)*

Thea and Fiona both made strong statements concerning the ethnic or racial composition of the school. Interestingly, class 'race' and ethnicity were combined. 'Black schools' have children with language deficiencies and may lead the only white child to 'bring home strange rituals'. Yet, during the first interview, only seven participants made explicit remarks about the ethnic or 'racial' composition of the school. Even fewer made indirect remarks about class issues:

*It shouldn't be a dangerous neighbourhood but a neighbourhood where just decent people live. Uhm, yeah, I think that's just very important, and schools! Good schools! (Dan)*

Dan used the term 'decent people' to describe the type of neighbourhood population he preferred in his vicinity. Later, he specified 'decent' as 'higher educated'. Nonetheless, such utterances were rare. Despite a looming concern

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13 Dutch: *Algemeen Bijzonder Onderwijs*

for ethnic and class issues, often expressed through reference to the academic quality of the school, most parents did not directly refer to these issues in the first interview. In the second interview, however, class and ethnicity were much more explicitly discussed.

### *Choosing a primary school*

After two years, the issue of primary education had become a much more relevant topic for most of the parents. Some had received an invitation from the municipality to orientate for schools in the neighbourhood. Others had discussed it with their friends who were in the same position. Most of the respondents had also taken action, which ranged from biking along the neighbourhood's schools to checking the schools' scores on the Internet. At the time of the first interview, nine respondents had not yet thought about schools. In the second interview, this was only the case for two couples, which was because they planned to emigrate.

In the second interview, respondents were mainly orientating for schools in their neighbourhood. Naturally, in most cases, having a school nearby was considered most practical, but some schools also maintained some type of selection on postal code. In the first interview, only seven respondents referred directly to the ethnic composition of school; however, in the second interview, 23 of the 25 couples referred to the ethnic or 'racial' aspects of school choice. Most did so by making reference to the ideal 'racial' composition:

*If you're the only white kid I don't think I would like that. But it also depends on the other impressions one has of such as school. What kind of teachers and such things. Ideally I would have a small, mixed school. Actually a school where it's 50-50. Or uhm, 40-60. But 10-90 or 20-80, that's...well...I don't think so. (Natalie & Robert)*

Most couples made a similar argument. They desired a mixed school for their children but preferred a composition in which 'black' kids did not outnumber the 'white' kids. Most parents were quite aware of the heterogeneity of the Amsterdam population and preferred a school population that mirrors that diversity:

*I wouldn't like a posh white school where there are only these Ralph Lauren kids, you know, I want her to go to a school that is a fair representation of society, so that she also learns what other cultures are. (Jade)*

Yet, some parents believed that this ideal mixed school did not exist. At the neighbourhood level, schools can be rather segregated. However, when this was not the case, some felt that they had to choose between 'black' or 'white'. When faced with this dilemma, they often chose white:

*Anna: Apparently that doesn't exist, because everybody really wants it. It's nice that your child meets some Moroccans, some Turks. To let them know there's something else, you know. But the standard of education shouldn't be compromised of course. But apparently that's almost impossible to find.*

*Sean: We ourselves also go for quality. Or well quality, we chose by these scores.*

Sean and Anna preferred a mixed school, but they also 'go for quality', which implies that they would not compromise the quality of the school for an ideal ethnic composition. Most of the respondents stressed their adherence to multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the ethnic composition of schools manifested itself as the foremost concern of the respondents. The notion that the quality of the school is negatively correlated with the ethnic composition was partially confirmed by the publically accessible school performance scores. Interestingly, the most important fears concerned the effect that a 'black' school would have on the language development of the respondents' children:

*But yet you wonder like, hey, Anne will be at that school and she speaks, I think, much better Dutch than the rest. How will that affect her language development? (Esther)*

Other parents were anxious that their children would be outsiders at a school with a non-white majority:

*That he will be excluded, as a white kid, or that it... There is really a lot of Antilleans here, and a lot of Moroccans and they are really isolated communities, so that he won't join in, because he's the exception. I think that's very important for children. That, yeah I think that's every parent's worst fear that his child is left out, excluded. (Hally)*

This fear that their children would be outsiders at a school with a large majority of children from a non-Western background was common among the respondents. It was also common for the participants to voice their concerns about the ethnic or racial composition of the school in cultural terms. Particularly, the development of language seemed to be a legitimate way of voicing these concerns. As suggested by these quotes, the respondents combined issues of ethnicity and race with issues of class and culture. Most of the concerns were related to class, but expressed in racial/ethnic terms. In this way, 'black schools' became bad schools and white schools were good schools. In spite of the quite general concerns about the school populations, parents handled this in various ways. The next empirical section will show the various socio-spatial strategies that middle-class parents adopted in the search for primary education for their children.

### *Dealing with diversity*

Evidently, reasons to move are only partially related to school choice. Yet,

geographical location has consequences for the options available. Even in the free-choice school landscape of Amsterdam, geography and education are related. Access to the schools that are perceived as good is to some extent determined by the postal code, that is, the neighbourhood. One-third of the respondents considered schools when they moved at the time of the first interview. At the time of the second interview, more than half of the respondents considered schools to be important for their residential choices. Nearly all respondents were concerned with the ethnic composition of schools in the city and neighbourhood schools in particular. In spite of this rising awareness, only few moved, and some considered moving to a particular area because of good schools. The strategies of managing school choice varied by residential location and parents' preferences for school characteristics. I identified the following five strategies:

- 1) Moving to another municipality with a less diverse population and good schools.
- 2) Moving to or staying in a neighbourhood within Amsterdam with a less diverse population in both the neighbourhood and school.
- 3) Staying in (or moving to) a relatively diverse area but sending children to a 'white' school within or outside the residential area.
- 4) Staying in a relatively diverse area but, together with other more highly educated 'white' parents from the neighbourhood, 'mixing' a 'black' school.
- 5) Staying in a relatively diverse area and sending children to a local school with a diverse or predominantly 'black' population.

#### Strategy 1:

Only two of the respondents moved outside of Amsterdam into a relatively homogeneous suburb. For Minou and Henk, the issue of diversity did not surface as the key for understanding their residential practices, although it did play a role. However, for Fiona and Mike, diversity and the issue of schools were among the main reasons to leave the city of Amsterdam:

*Well, eventually it comes down to schools. To put it a bit sharply: I just want my children to know what Christmas is and not what the Eid-ul-Fitr is; or that they come home with things like: 'why do we not slaughter a lamb?' So I do think that it's important that they know how to get along with all kinds of people but it shouldn't tip the other way and that's what I think is the case in Amsterdam. (Fiona)*

Fiona considered the diversity of Amsterdam as a threat to her cultural norms. During the first interview, she and Mike expressed their concerns about negative socialisation at their pre-school. At the time of the second interview, they had moved to a homogeneous suburb (6% non-white) where the problems that they associated with ethnic diversity were less severe or did not exist at all:

*I lived in very diverse areas and those norms and values are just very different from those that I would like to pass on to my children. And I don't feel like explaining to my children all the time that that's their culture and not ours. I think that these issues are played out much less here. Actually I'm quite sure of that. (Fiona)*

### Strategy 2:

Eleven couples were in this category. Nearly all of them lived in a homogeneous area because they moved there before their first child was born. Some moved to these areas after the birth of their first child. For those couples that already lived in these areas, schooling was presented as a secondary issue, almost a coincidental bonus of living there. During the first interview, Bea and Nigel explained that they almost resented the fact that the two schools that they considered were overly white and posh. In the second interview, they repeated their arguments but also indicated that other schools with a more mixed population were situated in another neighbourhood:

*Firstly, I look at neighbourhood schools, but I think it's a pity they're so white. There is also another Dalton school which is much more mixed, but that's in De Pijp but that feels quite far: it's another neighbourhood. (Bea)*

Apparently, choosing a mixed school in another neighbourhood because the local schools are overly white or upper-class was a bridge too far. Another couple, Sally and Mart, also lived in a relatively homogeneous middle-class neighbourhood. They did not mention the ethnic composition of schools:

*Well, there are two good schools that are just close by. And then I think it's important that they attend a local school. So that they come home with friends that they also see at school and with whom they play together in the street. (Sally)*

For them, the local schools were 'naturally' fine. There was no need to discuss any of the issues associated with diversity, simply because they felt that issue was not pressing for them. In this type of situation, parents seemed to be concerned with other less pressing issues such as traffic safety and having friends at school and in the neighbourhood. These themes may have also played a role for other couples; however, in the interviews, these themes were eclipsed by the issue of ethnic diversity.

### Strategy 3:

The third strategy was practiced by six families. Two of these couples chose a 'white' school in their neighbourhood and four intended to send their child to such a school outside their residential area. These families gave much stronger voice to their concerns about the ethnic composition of schools than the families in the relatively homogeneous areas. Mandy and Marc, for instance, resided near

a school that they described as a ‘terrible school’. They inscribed their child at two well performing and predominantly white schools outside their residential area but within walking distance (less than 500 metres) from their home. Another couple, Helene and Garry, chose the same strategy. They considered some schools in the direct vicinity overly black and poor; therefore, they decided to send their child to the ‘whitest school’ in the area. Other parents had to cover much larger distances to find the right school. Hally and Richard, for instance, lived in a very ethnically diverse area that was surrounded by predominantly native Dutch but generally working class areas. They considered only one school in the entire borough of Amsterdam North as suitable for their child:

*Well, good schools are sporadic here in Amsterdam North. But, as I said, we have some schools just around the corner but that’s really black, black. So I had a look, but it makes me feel uncomfortable. I would prefer a grey school, black and white mixed, but if I have the choice between black and white, then I’ll go for white. So close to our day-care is a white school and there we will enrol him. (Hally)*

#### Strategy 4:

A fourth strategy was the ‘mixing’ of ‘black’ schools. This strategy almost always occurred on the initiative of more highly educated native Dutch (‘white’) parents who agreed to send their children simultaneously to the same neighbourhood school. At the time of the interviews, this strategy for creating a more middle-class and ‘white’ environment for children only existed in the minds of the respondents. Whether they will proceed is uncertain, but some respondents seemed quite serious about it and did not consider any alternative actions. Two couples that resided in one of the most diverse neighbourhoods of Amsterdam discussed the option as follows:

*Actually what I plan to do is to contact the local authorities and ask who in the neighbourhood white [laughs]... what other white parents...this sounds quite bad, but what I want is that you just decide together with other parents to inscribe for a local school because here they’re really black schools. I just think that’s not representative for how the neighbourhood’s changing. There are really coming more families. (Esther & Ralph)*

*Well, one can also take other action, but that’s very laborious. That you say: well we are all stuck here in this neighbourhood and these schools are not good. So we’re gonna try together to make them good. The question is: do you want to expose your child to this kind of idealism? (Tania & Mart)*

#### Strategy 5:

Almost all parents expressed that they preferred a mixed school, in terms of ethnicity and class. However, only few seemed to opt for such a school. The



choice for a mixed or a 'black' school depended on factors beyond the school population, such as the type of education, scale, and proximity. In fact, if parents chose a school with a population that was not their first choice, proximity was an important factor in this decision. Nevertheless, it is important not to confuse idealism and pragmatism. The fact that some parents chose a diverse school in their vicinity does not indicate that ideology did not play a key role. After all, most parents that lived in diverse areas chose a 'white' school within or outside their residential area. For some respondents, choosing a local black school was closely linked to political ideals. Esther and Ralph, who also considered the possibility of mixing a school, were politically opposed to the idea that higher educated parents should find the perfect school:

*I would find it terrible if you will have a situation of white flight to all these schools outside the neighbourhood. Because then all those white parents will take their children elsewhere.*

*Actually we really want her to go to school here. Because she will go out of the front door and be almost literally already at school. (Esther)*

*No, we didn't choose the best school in Amsterdam. (Ralph)*

In addition, other parents had serious problems with their own ideas about school choice. Some connected their own behaviour to the reproduction of school segregation at the city level. In some cases, parents deliberately chose a less 'white' and 'elite' school. Yet, for most parents that lived in very ethnically diverse areas, this was not an option.

### *Class fractions and Strategies*

As evident from the descriptions of the strategies, the households displayed a combination of motives for school choice. These motives were based on their identities, values and resources, but they were also related to their housing positions and other practical considerations. This taxonomic overview of strategies suggests that strategies are related to specific habituses within the middle class. The present small set of interviews allows only for a tentative coupling of strategies and habitus or class fractions. This paragraph will provide an analysis of the forms of capital (cultural, economic) of the studied households and how they relate to the strategies.

Economic capital is defined by self-reported annual household income, whereby an income between 90,000 and 200,000 euro is defined as high economic capital, and an income below 90,000 euro is defined as low economic capital. Cultural capital is defined by binary scores on several questionnaire items, with a maximum total score of 14 points. Households scoring 6–14 points on the scale were classified as having high cultural capital (50%); those scoring below 0–5

points were defined as having low cultural capital (50%) (see Table 5.1) Table 5.2 shows how capital orientation is correlated with four strategies (type 4 and 5 are merged because the same respondents considered both strategies). As shown in the table, suburbanisation was practiced by two households with different orientations of capital. Strategy 2 was evidently dominant among high income, high cultural capital households, although these households also commuted for their schooling. Mixing strategies were mainly practiced by lower-income, but higher cultural capital households.

<b>Items included</b>	<b>Possible score</b>	
University degree female spouse	1	0
University degree male spouse	1	0
University degree mother of female spouse	1	0
University degree father of female spouse	1	0
Humanities, arts and social science female spouse	1	0
Humanities, arts and social science male spouse	1	0
Knowledge and creative job female spouse	1	0
Knowledge and creative job male spouse	1	0
Frequently visit classical concerts	1	0
Frequently visit museums	1	0
Frequently visit galleries	1	0
Frequently visit theatre plays	1	0
Subscription to high standard newspaper (NRC, Volkskrant)	1	0
Supports liberal political parties (D66, Groenlinks)	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>0-14</b>	

	<b>Suburbanise Strategy 1</b>	<b>White middle-class school Strategy 2</b>	<b>Commute for schooling Strategy 3</b>	<b>School Mixing Strategy 4 and 5</b>	<b>Total</b>
low cc' low ec	0	1	0	1	2
low cc high ec	1	1	1	0	3
high cc low ec	1	0	1	3	5
high cc high ec	0	9	4	1	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>24</b>

Source: Author

### *Amsterdam School-Choice Strategies in a European Context*

In Amsterdam, school choice is a practice that lays bare the Janus face (Reay et al., 2011) of middle-class habitus. Most of the parents in the current study enjoyed the diversity of the city but also voiced an aversion to the homogeneity that they associated with suburbs. Simultaneously, they viewed this diversity as a threat to the intergenerational transfer of their class position through good education. Although most of the parents could not be described as frantic about schooling, not a single family was unconcerned with the quality of education. All families expressed that they wanted an environment that would enable their child to thrive academically and socially. Although they genuinely seemed to prefer social mixing, their practice often contributed to the process that they politically opposed. Some were quite aware of this but felt that they could not 'expose their own child to some social experiment'.

It is interesting that the discourse that urban middle-class parents used to describe their half-heartedness about diversity is almost identical to that in different contexts such as the UK. Comments on feeling 'lucky' to live in good neighbourhoods with good schools (compare Reay et al., 2011: 55) or wordings such as: *I wouldn't like a posh white school* could literally have been taken from interviews in London (Byrne, 2006) or Stockholm (Bunar, 2010). Apparently, class fractions within middle classes across various urban contexts have similar or *homologous* positions in this field. The various strategies identified for the Amsterdam context also show many parallels with the strategies described in various studies. To some degree, white flight, hunkering down, commuting for schooling and engaging diversity through mixing or colonising are all practices that the present study has demonstrated in the Amsterdam context. These homologies, which are also found in comparative research between other contexts, suggest that urban middle classes across the Western world, to some extent, constitute a global class (fraction) (Atkinson and Bridge, 2005).

Nevertheless, the Amsterdam context also produces specific outcomes. The minor role of economic capital and the diverse context of nearly all Amsterdam neighbourhoods makes all strategies depend less on economic capital and more on other forms of capital (social, cultural). Parents cannot buy access to good schools and thus must exercise caution in the selection of both neighbourhood and school. Freedom of school choice fosters more hidden and subtle ways in which parents create distinction and seek to reproduce their white middle class privilege inter-generationally. Although the current study did not compare middle-class parents with lower-class parents, it can be hypothesised that knowledge of the enrolment procedures, access and understanding of formal school information and informal knowledge from the 'grapevine' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) are unequally distributed, favouring middle-class parents with the right capital.

Furthermore, the distribution of various forms of capital also plays a role between middle class fractions. Despite the small sample, the present study has

demonstrated that strategies differ between households with various types of capital. The mixing of schools was associated with high cultural but low economic capital. Households endowed with high cultural and high economic capital were clearly orientated towards the relatively homogeneous, but still urban, neighbourhoods of the city. Commuting to school was particularly an option for parents that wished to remain urban but did not trust local schools to provide the right education. Although not substantiated in the present paper, commuting for schools is often facilitated by special private education such as Montessori (Karsten et al., 2006).

## Conclusion

It is evident that nearly all middle-class couples that became parents in the course of the current study struggled with the issue of diversity in relation to their residential area and school choice. It is also clear that as the issue of schooling became more concrete, other aspects such as type of education and practical issues such as proximity seemed to be eclipsed by issues of school quality, which were often associated with and marked by the class and ethnic or racial composition of the school population. Notwithstanding the concerns with the diversity of the school population, nearly all parents preferred a mixed school for their children. Many parents expressed that they wanted their children to be aware of the ethnic diversity of Amsterdam. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents resented the parents that opted for a white elite school and 'retreated' from Amsterdam reality.

Parents' clear commitment to multiculturalism and social engagement clearly mirrors experiences from other urban schooling contexts. However, the position of the households differed in both geographical and social terms. The strategies they developed to manage the issue of school choice were informed by their neighbourhood context and their identities and resources. It is argued that both positions are related to their habitus. Strategies of school choice are not only a matter of deploying economic resources; they are also the result of various time-space trajectories associated with different class fractions. The various strategies identified in the present study are similar to those described in other schooling contexts. It is remarkable that in spite of the clear differences in terms of housing market and school policies, the strategies of the middle class are quite similar. Therefore, a further and more structural approach to comparing various national and local contexts is needed. I argue that any such comparative research should include at least the following three dimensions: 1) a scale of the role of economic capital and corresponding cultural capital; 2) a scale that measures the degree of integration of school and neighbourhood; and 3) an analysis of the types and degrees of diversity that play a role in segregation and integration processes caused by middle-class school choice.