

# from catchment areas to parental choice: education policy reforms and their effects on school segregation

Isabel Ramos Lobato

Parents' selective school choices play a key role in exacerbating school segregation across the globe. As a result, numerous studies have investigated parents' choice practices, while less attention has been paid to the role of the institutional context itself. Taking the introduction of free primary school choice in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, as an example, in this article, I seek to provide insights into the motivations behind the policy reform and its subsequent effects. The article illustrates how the new admission system changes not only the roles, motivations, and strategies of parents, but also those of primary schools. Consequently, the abolition of primary school catchment areas led neither to more equality in choice nor to a responsible competition between primary schools. Instead, it reinforces social divisions and symbolic differences between primary schools.

Keywords: catchment areas, education policies, Germany, parental school choice, school segregation

## School Choice and Segregation: An Introduction

In many (European) countries, school segregation, which describes the unequal distribution of children with different social and ethnic backgrounds across schools, is on the rise (Boterman et al., 2019). Since parents' selective choices are a key factor in exacerbating school polarisation, education systems in which parents can freely choose are usually characterised by higher levels of segregation (Wilson & Bridge, 2019).

Nevertheless, education policies across the globe have strengthened parental choice within the last few decades (Forsey et al., 2008). Introducing choice is often accompanied by the decentralisation of responsibilities, the introduction of quasi-markets, higher levels of competition, and the heightened surveillance of schools through performance indicators (Klitgaard, 2007; Makris, 2018). The main aim of these policies is to make education systems more efficient and to stimulate innovation and competition – all expected to result in improvements in the quality of education. At the same time, policies about choice are often also advertised as a tool to support low socioeconomic status (SES) families, arguing that they will entitle them with the same opportunities as high-SES families (Forsey et al., 2008; Makris, 2018). This also happened in the German federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the government of which decided to abolish primary school catchment areas and to implement choice in 2008.

Considering the dominant focus of international research on analysing parents' school choice practices, more attention should be paid to education policies, which provide the institutional context parents operate in and set the framework enabling certain practices and exacerbating others

(Boterman & Ramos Lobato, forthcoming). Taking the policy reform in NRW as an example, this article thus seeks to provide insights into the (political) motivations to introduce school choice and its subsequent effects on segregation. Its main aim is to illustrate the ways in which the policy reform changes the roles, motivations, and strategies of both parents and schools, and to discuss what that means for combating school segregation.

## The Spatial and Structural Dimensions of School Segregation

Several factors within and outside the education system influence school segregation in quite intricate ways. Because of this complex interplay, local patterns and levels of school segregation can vary tremendously between countries and cities. Nevertheless, central mechanisms play a key role in shaping the local educational landscape (Boterman et al., 2019):

*First*, the spatial context has an important influence on patterns and levels of school segregation. Since most children still attend a nearby school, the increasing residential segregation levels in (European) cities are tightly linked to the growing polarisation of schools (Boterman et al., 2019). This relationship is mutual. While the specific demographics of cities are key ingredients in the mix of school populations, the spatial distribution of particular schools affects residential patterns by influencing young family households' residential mobility. Moving to areas with highly reputable schools to guarantee for access – and thereby even driving up property prices and reinforcing residential segregation (Cheshire & Sheppard, 2004) – is a widespread behaviour among young (middle-class) family households (Bernelius & Vilkkama, 2019; Hamnett & Butler, 2013; Kauppinen et al., 2021). However, despite the close relationship between residential and school segregation, the latter is often higher than the former (Bonal et al., 2019; Candipan, 2019; Oberti & Savina, 2019).

A *second* crucial dimension is the institutional context including education policies regulating the school system's differentiation, the extent and role of private schools, and the actual enrolment of pupils (Boterman & Ramos Lobato, forthcoming). The degree to which parents (can) make choices is a decisive part of it since their choice options as well as the strategies they use to gain access to the 'right' schools depend strongly on the institutional context and its specific regulations. As shown, most families opting for school choice and knowing how to enforce it have a higher-than-average educational level (Cordini et al., 2019; Kosunen, 2014). Based on the widespread tendency to associate a school's composition with its performance, parental school choice is increasingly informed by the school's social and ethnic composition and thus often feeds into growing levels of school segregation (Wilson & Bridge, 2019). Moreover, the higher the school autonomy in admitting pupils and the more schools struggle with competition and surveillance, the more likely it is that principals will seek to act as gatekeepers and may be biased for or against specific types of parents and pupils (Jennings, 2010; Ramos Lobato, 2017; van Zanten, 2009; Voyer, 2019). The institutional context thus sets the framework for both the extent to which parents can choose schools and the number of options they can choose from, as well as to which schools can autonomously decide on their intake.

## From School Catchment Areas to Parental Choice: Implementing Market Mechanisms in Education in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

The North Rhine-Westphalian decision to introduce school choice marked a shift within the political and public perception of primary education. For decades, access to primary schools had been regulated through catchment areas enabling efficient planning and guaranteeing short distances

between home and school. Primary schools are the only comprehensive school type in Germany, in which all children within one age group are taught collectively. The four (in some federal states six) years of primary school thus build a clear contrast to the highly segregated secondary school tracks and have for a long time been perceived as the “egalitarian basis” (Breidenstein et al., 2014, p. 166) of an education system generally known for its comparatively high level of social selectivity and inequality.

However, this ‘one school for all’ ideal has started to crumble. Primary school profiles have become more diversified (Altrichter et al., 2011) and private education is expanding (Klemm et al., 2018). Since switching from a lower to a higher secondary track remains the exception in Germany (Bellenberg & Forell, 2012), the transition to secondary school has broad implications for children’s educational career, with the choice of the ‘right’ primary school increasingly perceived as a crucial first step. All these strongly interrelated processes have been cultivating doubts about primary schools’ egalitarian reputation. In NRW, this development culminated in the abolition of catchment areas. *1*

The policy reform’s main aim was to strengthen parental choice (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2005). It was part of a paradigm shift in North Rhine-Westphalian education policy towards an educational market with more competition, assessment, and transparency. At the same time, primary school choice was advertised as a tool to reduce inequality of choice arguing that not all children attended the catchment area schools in the old system, with mainly higher-SES parents knowing how to do so. Nevertheless, a clear reference to school segregation or the intention to create more mixed school populations is missing.

The assumption (and hope) behind the reform was that parental choice induces an education market, in which “responsible” (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2005) competition between primary schools induces quality improvement. Therefore, the question arises about what effects the reform actually had on school segregation levels but also on both parents’ and schools’ role in the new admission system.

## Local Effects of the Policy Reform: New Geographies of Allocation and Segregation

The following results are based on a research study in the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr combining both quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews with parents, heads of childcare centres and primary schools as well as politicians and administrative staff (for more information on the study, see Ramos Lobato, 2019).

Quantitative analyses of parents’ school choices reveal that primary school segregation levels in Mülheim have increased substantially after the policy change (Groos, 2015; Ramos Lobato & Groos, 2019). This is a direct result of the growing numbers of parents choosing a school other than the nearest school and the social selectivity of their choices. The latter means that choice increasingly depends on the schools’ social and ethnic composition and parents’ educational attainment – and on their connection. In general, parents still prefer the nearest primary school, but only if it has the ‘right’ composition. While less educated parents are still more inclined to send their children to the local school, the majority of well-educated parents in Mülheim tends to shy away from schools with a high proportion of children of welfare recipients and with a migration history (Groos, 2015; Ramos Lobato & Groos, 2019).

In light of the vast amount of international research on the impact of parental choice on school segregation, these results are not surprising. However, the ways in which choice policies effect both parents' opportunity structures and value systems are less discussed.

### *Free School Choice: The Reform's Selective Effects on Parents' Choice Opportunities*

Like other international attempts of introducing market mechanisms into education, the policy reform in NRW assumes that all parents start from the same position, have the same information, and the same capacities to enforce their choice (James et al., 2010; Makris, 2018). However, drilling deeper, this rhetoric of choice hides both the strategic investment of capital still necessary to make full use of choice as well as parents' unequal positions in this new admission system.

In general, official information on primary school performance, such as rankings or test scores, do not exist in Germany. School reputation thus plays an important role in parental school choice (Ramos Lobato, 2019). Little information about primary schools can be accessed through the schools' websites or open days, which is not objectifiable and often difficult to interpret. This means that making an informed decision is arduous, and it requires a certain level of social capital to collect the available knowledge and cultural capital to 'decode' it. An example is the transition rate to the *Gymnasium*, the highest and most prestigious secondary school track in Germany. Since this proportion is often (mistakenly) associated with school performance, it becomes highly requested information. However, since this information is not officially published, mostly well-educated parents manage to access it through parental networks or by directly approaching school principals (Ramos Lobato, 2019). Besides the lack of information, economic and organisational constraints borne by many low-SES parents clearly limit their choice options. Often, they just cannot 'afford' to consider primary schools outside their neighbourhood. Thus, instead of alleviating existing inequalities in choice, the reform seems to perpetuate them.

The growing significance of reputation for school choice is all the more critical in light of international research demonstrating how little schools' reputation is related to 'objective characteristics'. A recent study from Helsinki, Finland (Bernelius et al., 2021), reveals a clear link between neighbourhood and school reputation. Since schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are viewed through the perceptions attached to the place, they struggle with negative reputations despite their excellent institutional quality and high overall performance in educational outcomes. Consequently, there are schools with bad reputations even though parents' experiences of them are good and they perform well (Kosunen, 2014). The 'stickiness' of reputation often leads to self-perpetuating social dynamics, e.g., by further deterring parents or exacerbating schools' opportunities to recruit staff (Bernelius et al., 2021),

### *Choice as a Duty? The Reform's Impact on Norms of School Choice*

Besides their power to either restrict or enable parental school choice, education policies seem to have an additional effect by influencing parental discourses on norms and values. Most parents interviewed for this study appreciated the abolition of catchment areas. At the same time, the opportunity of choice also fuels uncertainties and concerns, predominantly among well-educated parents. The (rumours about) varying school profiles, compositions, and transition rates nourish their vague perceptions of existing differences between primary schools – and of how significant a deliberate choice might therefore be. Instead of appreciating choice as a simple option, some parents seem to interpret it as a clear request (Ramos Lobato & Groos, 2019). The reform not only

enables choice; it also triggers and intensifies an implicit pressure parents feel when it comes to their children's education. Shifting the 'opportunity' of decision-making from the government to the individual (Makris, 2018) also conveys the burden for making the 'best' choice for their own child and creates an environment in which the 'good parent' is increasingly associated with the 'choosing parent' (Noreisch, 2007; Ramos Lobato & Groos, 2019).

### *School Choice or Schools' Choice? The Changing Role of Schools in the Admission Process*

Due to residential segregation and neighbourhood composition, in most cities, some primary schools are challenged more than others to compensate for context- and composition-related disadvantages. However, these divisions have become sharper after the reform in Mülheim. While some schools face decreasing application numbers and elevated shares of children of benefit-recipients, others rather 'benefit' (Ramos Lobato & Groos, 2019). Choice thus seems to reinforce already existing (symbolic) distinctions and contrasting reputations.

However, schools are not as passive as the previous explanations might make them appear. Interestingly, the policy reform not only broadened parents' options, but also principals' scope of discretion with respect to the enrolment of students, although not intentionally. Interestingly, the responsible competition for which the NRW government strived resulted in quite different logics of action. While many principals interviewed for this study downplayed their promotional role in active canvassing, others admitted a feeling of increased competition culminating in advertisement activities such as the schools' open days. Their varying practices are based on a range of external and internal conditions, such as the schools' intake and its position in the citywide 'hierarchy' of schools, but also their personal values and beliefs in the possibility to improve the school's position (Jennings, 2010; Ramos Lobato, 2017; van Zanten, 2009). For instance, one highly reputable school advertised skiing holidays at its open days, which even though not mandatory, would be likely to deter low-SES parents. Thus, schools' advertisement activities and newly created profiles/offers create (intentionally or not) social distinctions that sometimes even go beyond a symbolic level.

The pressure around funding and surveillance of schools (Hamnett & Butler, 2013; Jennings, 2010) might be comparatively less pronounced in Germany and school closures are far less threatening as they were years ago due to rising numbers of pupils. However, these rising numbers are also likely to lead to more competition, with parents competing for access to the more reputable schools and principals being forced to deny it.

## Conclusions

Considering the higher economic, cultural, and social capital of high-SES parents, it could be argued that they always have more chance to access 'better' schools. However, the research study in Mülheim illustrates that the implementation of market mechanisms in the field of education not only fails to offer equal choice opportunities for parents, but also to provide equal conditions for competition between schools. Although there is no direct institutional link between primary and specific secondary school types in Germany, these divisions can nevertheless have severe effects – on children's educational achievements and their attitudes to learning (Alegre & Ferrer, 2010; Sykes & Kuyper, 2013), as well as on their (in)ability to deal and interact with diversity (Hanhörster & Weck, 2020).

Thus, the question arises about how can or should urban education policies react to the increasing

levels of inequality and segregation already existing at early educational stages. The previous critique should not disguise the fact that the relationship between education policies and school segregation patterns is more complex than suggested by findings of ‘more choice leading to higher, and less choice to lower segregation levels’ (Boterman & Ramos Lobato, forthcoming). Considering the growing levels of residential segregation in many cities, catchment areas are no panacea against school segregation either. However, what became clear is that it is the political institutions and education policies, which create both the context and the legitimisation of choice. School boards in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, for instance, recently implemented a centralised enrolment system strengthening the ties between neighbourhood and school. By reducing the direct competition between schools, limiting the schools’ scope of discretion in admitting pupils, and reducing the negotiating space for parents, the reform may already take away some of the dynamics leading to segregation (Boterman, 2018). The Dutch example shows that education reforms limiting parents’ choice options are possible despite the topic’s sensitivity – provided there is the (political) will to enforce them. The opposite seems to be the case in NRW. Considering the strong (middle-class) parents’ lobby behind school choice, the social-democratic and Green Party coalition, former opponents of the reform, did not dare to roll it back and to withdraw parents’ right to choose when they were elected in 2010. Rather, they shifted the responsibility to the local level (Ramos Lobato, 2019).

Besides the numerous attempts to combat school segregation, other policies focus on alleviating its consequences. They are based on the idea that equal learning opportunities require an allocation of additional resources systematically oriented towards the individual needs of schools (Sugarman et al., 2016). Supplementary funding also exists in NRW, where a new, more targeted index based on school-specific instead of solely area data shall be introduced in 2021 to allocate around 5,200 teacher positions to those schools facing the strongest challenges (e.g., regarding student poverty rates) (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2021). Ironically, the same coalition implementing the policy reform in 2008, which contributed to the growing social divisions between primary schools in NRW, now celebrates the new index as an “important step on the way to a higher equality of education and opportunities” (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2021). This is not only ironic but might also be a bit problematic because focusing exclusively on alleviating the negative effects of school segregation might disguise the ongoing need for serious efforts in preventing segregation, e.g., by reducing (middle-class) parents’ negotiating space.

However, schools face different challenges depending on the specific socio-spatial context in which they operate. Therefore, targeting supplementary funding more effectively than before to those schools that really need it is a crucial step in the right direction. In the long run, the supplementary funding’s success depends on its ongoing monitoring and readjustment, the right balance between funding flexibility and accountability, a non-stigmatising way of distribution, and, last but not least, its long-term political support.

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1. This is possible since the sixteen federal states are responsible for education in Germany and can therefore decide on their own regulations.