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# Which School? Criteria and Priorities Driving Households' Agency in School Choice in a Quasi-market Educational System. The Case of Milan

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# **Which School? Criteria and Priorities Driving Households' Agency in School Choice in a Quasi-market Educational System. The Case of Milan**

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Abstract. This contribution aims at providing some new evidence and insights to the studies about school choice as a driver for school segregation in urban contexts, especially those characterized by a quasi-market educational system. It aims at disentangling some of the criteria lying behind the school choice accordingly to the different households' profiles, in terms of level of education and professional status. Data presented have been collected between May and October 2021 through a survey addressing parents living in Milan and enrolling their children in primary school. The decision to opt-out of the local school appears to depend on the composition of the local school, but the factors driving towards the school of destination are still unclear and significantly heterogeneous among households. This analysis investigates these factors and tries to disentangle the choice mechanisms for different households' profiles.

keywords: school segregation, school choice, educational inequalities, educational opportunities

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## 1. Introduction and research question

School choice is a fundamental factor in shaping school segregation dynamics, especially in those institutional settings that have weakened the residential based criteria and have promoted a quasi-market educational system (Bartlett, 1993; Cordini, 2019, Karsten et al., 2003). The “quasi-market” definition refers to a set of features that make the educational systems partially guided by dynamics that foster competition among schools through enhancing freedom of choice, introducing elements of a market type mechanism. The expression “almost” indicates that some attributes remain typical of a public service: one example could be the partial limitation of parental choice through the imposition of the same curricula in state schools. The quasi-market systems can vary accordingly to the institutional settings in different contexts.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, in educational systems where the residential based criterion is still applied, the choice is often exercised in terms of residential strategy, meaning that couples becoming or being parents choose to move into neighbourhoods where popular or performative schools are located. In these cases, a strong correspondence between school and residential segregation is found.

Freedom in school choice has been globally introduced has a demand-side intervention to enhance equality in accessing education. It was expected to soften the link between the place of residence and the school attended. Nevertheless, this goal has not been reached considering that also quasi-market educational systems show relatively high degree of school segregation. Moreover, accordingly to Dumay and Dupriez findings (2014), the quasi-market regulation is not linked to effectiveness and tends to be associated with a stronger link between schools’ social composition and student achievement. Economists have also highlighted the failure of quasi-market in education in increasing the diversity of provision and challenge the reproduction of social hierarchies through school (Adnett & Davies 1999).

Research focusing on choice has shown that there are wide differences in the actual options that families take into consideration, especially depending on their social economic status (Ball, 1993; Ambler, 1994, Bonal & Zancajo, 2018; Potterton, 2020) and on the local school offer (Lubienski, Gulusino & Weitzel, 2009; Andersson, 2012).

In a quasi-market system, where the enrolment is detached from the place of residence, the choice is basically expressed through the decision of staying into the local school (the closest to the residence) or opting out choosing another public school or a private one. This home-to-school mobility results on a city scale in geographies of segregation, exclusion and marginalisation

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<sup>1</sup> In Europe, the “quasi-market education” system was formally introduced in UK by the 1988 Education Reform Act (Glennerster, 1991)

of some segments of the population and schools (Cordini, Parma & Ranci, 2019; Wilson & Bridge, 2019; Boterman, 2022). Several research studies have proved that the freedom of choice have mostly favoured the already resourceful (i.e. middle class) families, who have applied successful strategies to enter into more popular and performative schools, leaving behind the less affluent families (Carroll & Walford, 1997; Olmedo, 2008; Carrasco, Mendoza & Flores, 2021). Low-income and low-educated families are proven not to benefit as expected by the turn toward marketisation. While research has been focused on how middle class chooses, less work has been devoted to understanding the relationship between less affluent households and school choice: they have been called ‘irrational’, ‘disconnected parents’, ‘passive choosers’ (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995), as they would be incapable of choosing strategically. These ones are often the same households that would be segregated in residence-based systems. In fact, cultural, economic and spatial capitals play a relevant role in the way families are able to mobilise their resources and make a successful choice.

This paper draws on the data collected by a survey disseminated between June and October 2021<sup>2</sup>. The survey has investigated the choice of primary school of households living in the city of Milan, in Italy. Recent work has in fact shown that patterns of home-to-school mobility are particularly significant in shaping the geography of the educational system in this city (Cordini, Parma & Ranci, 2019), often resulting in an unequal distribution of students in schools and leading to some cases of school segregation. The weight of school choice in determining the compositions of school intake is due to two main factors. On one hand, Milan school system is a quasi-market system where school enrolment is based on free choice; on the other hand, as many other Southern European cities (Arbaci, 2008; Tammaru et al., 2016), Milan does not show high degrees of residential segregation that are usually likely to be mirrored by schools’ intake. Then parents’ choice plays a major role in shaping the geographies of educational inequalities, especially in terms of access (Pacchi & Ranci, 2017). Because of the relatively low degrees of residential and school segregation, the topic of school segregation has been quite neglected in Italy and just in recent years questions about how this mechanism is shaped and what forms it takes on have emerged and have been partially answered. A topic which is still little investigated is how parents choose: their priorities, the factors taken into consideration, the set of options being envisaged. Yet, it has not been investigated whether the way of choosing a school differs among households according to the socio-economic backgrounds, the levels of education or the nationality. These are the questions which this sur-

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<sup>2</sup> The participants in the questionnaires agreed to the use of data pursuant to art. 13 of the UE regulation 679/2016 of the 27 of April 2016.

vey aims to answer, with the awareness that the decision-making process and the profound reasons beyond this kind of choice could be fully grasped only by accompanying such a survey with a qualitative investigation. Significant patterns of home-to-school mobility in Milan certainly highlight the relevance of the household' agency as it happens in several other urban contexts where the school choice is free or relatively free. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that in many cases the actual level of school segregation is close to that in the hypothetical situation in which students would attend school in their vicinity (Allen, 2016; Boterman, 2019), confirming the persistence of a link between housing and school choice also in quasi-market educational systems (Ramond & Oberti, 2020).

As mentioned before, Milan has relatively low levels of residential segregation (being the index of dissimilarity 0.38), especially if compared to levels of school segregation (0.44). The primary cycle is composed of 137 state schools and each school is located in one catchment area. The catchment area is an administrative border designed around each state school: this means that each state school belongs to a catchment area (hereinafter 'CA'). CAs are a legacy from the time when the residential criterion was applied for enrolling students to schools. Nowadays the CA resumes its administrative and normative role only in those cases where the school is overbooked, which very rarely occurs in Milan. Private schools do not belong to any CA and they are unequally distributed all over the city, being mostly concentrated around the city centre, with few exceptions. Private schools can be subsidised or independent. The first ones are publicly subsidised and have to follow the same curricula of state schools, whereas the second ones are completely privately funded and are independent in their pedagogical offer (i.e. Steiner schools, International schools, religious schools, etc.). In the public offer, parents can apply to a maximum of three choices during the enrolment process, in order of preferences. They have a granted seat in the CA school if they select it as first choice. They are most likely to enter also in other schools, unless they are overbooked by families living in the school's CA – but this is a very rare case, as said above. Moreover, the system is considered a quasi-market one because there are several choices for opting out and the CA priority criteria rarely applies, as it is proven by the high mobility in the city: as showed from the data of the Municipality of Milan (school year 2018/19, half of the Italian families and the 40% of foreigner families, in fact, opt out from the local school.

## **2. What we know about school choice and school segregation: a literature review**

School segregation regards the uneven distribution of pupils across schools based on socioeconomic, ethnic or other features (Boterman et al.,

2019). School segregation is one of the most evident expressions of educational inequalities since it can have significant effects both on the chances of social mobility of individuals and on spatial equality (Ben Ayed & Popeau, 2009). Especially in those countries involved by significant flows of immigration, socio-economic features and ethnic origins are strongly overlapped and intertwined in shaping school and residential distribution of population.

Understanding the drivers and the mechanisms leading to school segregation is particularly relevant considering the effects that this phenomenon can have in hindering students' achievement (Brunello & Rocco, 2011; Granvik Saminathen et al., 2018; Vivian, 2017), educational career and, more in general, social mobility (Reardon, 2016; Sykes & Kuper, 2013). Cebolla-Boado and Medina (2011) have identified three main groups of causes that can explain the issues in the attainment linked to the higher concentration in a school or in a class of foreign or disadvantaged students: (1) peer group effects; (2) compositional effects, meaning that students are not randomly distributed in schools but according to important features that determine their future school attainment (such as socio-economic status); and (3) school/classroom effects: some schools are more likely to offer a less stimulating environment, given their contextual characteristics. Although the relationship between school segregation and low levels of attainment is not linear (Dronkers & Levels, 2007; Cordini & Parma, 2016; Schnepf, 2007), these three conditions are highly found in schools with serious levels of segregation. Identifying the causes for school segregation is thus crucial for explaining educational inequalities and individuals' life chances (Ramond & Oberti, 2020).

In Italy and in Southern European countries, school segregation has been a neglected topic for a very long time. One reason lies in the peculiarities of the residential settlements of immigrants: in Southern Europe they have in fact followed a particularly heterogeneous distribution, ending in a relevant mix with the native population usually located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and in the lowest brackets of the housing stock (Arbaci, 2008; Tosi, 2017). This lower degree of residential segregation, together with a recent history as immigration countries (Borgna, 2021; Strozza et al., 2021), has led to underestimate the issue of school segregation. However, recent studies (Barberis, 2017; Pacchi & Ranci, 2019; Bonal, Zancajo & Scandurra, 2021) have highlighted that school segregation is an increasing phenomenon also in Southern European cities. The increased concentration of foreign students in schools have drawn some attention on the topic, also emphasising a pre-existing unequal distribution based on socio-economic background (Cordini, Parma & Ranci, 2019).

School segregation is not always a consequence of residential segregation. Systems adopting the residential-based criteria are more likely to strengthen the school/territory link as the freedom of choice can be exercised only

by opting out from the public system, but school segregation is present also in systems where the place of residence is not the main criterion guiding the enrolment. In these contexts, the spectrum of choice, meaning the actual available options, changes accordingly to the institutional settings: some systems limit the number of options, whereas others have ideally expanded the choice to the whole urban area. Such scenarios can be further complicated by the presence of private schools. In these contexts, school choice is particularly relevant in determining school segregation dynamics. Nevertheless, it must be taken into consideration that the link between school and territory is not so weak even in these contexts, considering the strong role played by proximity especially for the youngest and for less affluent students (Ramond & Oberti, 2020; Keer, Dyson & Roffo, 2014).

Reforms promoting more freedom in school choice have been introduced with the purpose of softening the link between school and related neighbourhood and to counteract the reproduction of inequalities deriving by the unequal territorial distribution of the population. Literature has however shown that school segregation persists and sometimes has increased after the introduction of the quasi-market reforms (Lankford & Wyckoff, 2001; Saporito, 2003; Warrington, 2005; Fekjær & Birkelund, 2007). Indeed, these reforms favour those households which are already aware of the rules of the game (Ben Ayed, 2009), confirming ‘the perpetuation of inequality and the on-going middle-class advantage in education field’ (Benson, Bridge & Wilson, 2015, p. 2; Lareau et al., 2016). Furthermore, they have contributed to increase segregation of school systems (Audren & Baby-Collin, 2017) through the so-called ‘white flight’: middle class (or more educated and resourceful parents) mobility from schools with high concentration of foreigners or children coming from low-income or less-educated families (Pacchi & Ranci, 2017). With respect to this avoidance movement, it is particularly complicated to discern to what extent it is caused by the presence of foreigners or by the concentration of socially disadvantaged pupils. The choice of middle-class parents translated in this ‘white flight’ has been explained as a research for homogeneity – or in other terms as a mechanism of ‘social closure’ (Van Zanten & Kosunen, 2013).

Middle-class households seem to take more advantage from this freedom of choice because of their strategic relationship with the school system: this is due to a strong coincidence between norms and values (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), paired with high levels of cultural, economic and social resources (Oberti, 2007; Benson, Bridge & Wilson, 2015). On the other hand, as already mentioned in the introduction, working-class or less affluent parents have often been said to be lacking a strategic relationship with the educational system, as they do not act rationally to take the best chances or they are being excluded by schools as ‘peripheral parents’ (Hanafin & Lynch, 2010; Cahill &

Hall, 2014). This interpretation finds its theoretical root in the so called ‘culture of poverty’ approach (Coleman, 1966) stating that the whole socialisation of poor people limits their rational ability (Bonal & Zancajo, 2018). Together with the lack of economic resources, this limitation results in a less strategic choice when it comes to educational opportunities. Also, the ‘bounded rationality’ theory tries to explain the diversity in choice paradigms (Ben-Porath, 2009): it considers the social behaviours of families, that is affected by constraints and opportunities given by ethnic origins and social class, but also by their place of residence, the available and reachable set of information and their social networks. These produce a *bounded rationality* that does not necessarily mean that these households lack skills or are disconnected, but that they act under peculiar circumstances. Finally, Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ tries to overcome the dualism agency-structure, stating that choice exists in a specific field, when personally and collectively experienced (Bourdieu, 1990): this means that the poverty condition provides a certain habitus, that is a set of dispositions to think, feel and make decisions in a particular manner. Besides social and cultural capitals, that are often mentioned as the main bounds to the choice pattern, spatial capital plays a significant role as well (Yoon, 2020). Spatial capital can be twofold: as positional capital it indicates the inclusion in a space that provides individuals with spatial assets, whereas as situation capital it refers to an area that individuals appropriate globally via a complete range of mobility, in which distance, though still a factor, is controlled (Barthon & Monfroy, 2010). Spatial capital is therefore composed of all means that allow an individual to manage problems of distance in their own interest. Consequently, in a society spatial actors use their spatial capital to implement spatial strategies; spatial goods derive their value from their possible changeability with other goods and ensure the more or less high level of profitability of the other capitals they possess.

We can notice, for instance, how chances of mobility are lower for those populations inhabiting deprived areas (Boterman, 2019; Danhier & Deevleeshouwer, 2017): their spatial capital put them in a condition where they are incapable of improving social and cultural capital, and at the same time these last two do not help in acquiring more or better spatial goods. The scarce levels of mobility and the few cultural and social resources result in people living in deprived areas being trapped in schools where segregation dynamics are more likely to lead to low levels of attainment and entrapment in vocational tracks (Borgna, 2021). In other words, students’ mobility is not simply explained by their socioeconomic status or their ethnicity, but it also depends on the school offer households can find in their proximity areas (Barton & Monfroy, 2010): parents’ willingness and ability to avoid the local public schools increase with the range of schools to choose from (Bischoff & Tach, 2018)



### **3. Questioning parents: the survey and the methodological approach**

The survey presented herein has been conducted between May and October 2021 in the city of Milan. The targeted population was composed of parents of children just enrolled in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of primary school or in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of lower secondary school. This contribution focuses on data regarding children about to enrol into primary schools. The questionnaire has been first conveyed through social networks in the attempt to reach parents with children just enrolled in the primary or lower secondary schools. Enrolments window is usually in January for those who are going to start school in September. Our respondents have answered the questionnaire while having no direct experience about the chosen school or having a very limited experience (for those who have answered in September and in the beginning of October). The questionnaire has been also given out by hand (in paper version) through associations, schools and other territorial services to especially reach the foreign population, which was not responding to the online survey, but also the low-income and low-educated Italian families. Paper questionnaires have been translated into four languages, namely Chinese, Tagalog, Spanish and Arabic, which are those of the most representative foreign communities in Milanese school system. Overall, we have collected 1,254 answers from parents whose children are about to start primary school. Unfortunately, the number of foreign respondents were not high enough to allow statistics representative for the ethnic groups, but only for the whole of foreign households.

Our respondents were mostly represented by mothers (77%). 83% of respondents were born in Italy and the vast majority of them is employed (83%). 17% of the foreigners who have responded is from Egypt. Almost 50% of the sample is composed of couples with both parents holding a degree (high level of education), 22% of respondents include one graduated parent plus a parent holding a degree, (medium-high level of education), 17% is represented by couples in which both parents are graduated (medium-low) and 11% is composed of parents having completed primary or lower secondary school or having obtained a professional diploma (low level of education). The very few couples showing a strong polarisation in their educational levels (primary or lower secondary school + degree) have been aggregated into the low level of education. This distribution only partially mirrors the educational level across the entire Milanese population with children, because of the difficulty to reach some population groups (foreigners and Italians having very low levels of education). Nevertheless, the discrepancy is not so

significant as to compromise the analysis. The survey has considered in fact a relevant quota of parents with low levels of education<sup>3</sup>.

Survey questions were aimed at understanding the main criteria and strategies used by parents for their choice, and also at distinguishing different profiles of families. The questionnaire has been structured in the following sections:

- Socio-economic profile: size of the family, level of education of parents or other adults living with the children on a daily basis, occupation, income, housing conditions.
- Priorities considered during the choice: distance from school, previous knowledge of teachers, pedagogical offer, schools' intake, extra-school activities.
- Information sources: where have parents looked for the information about schools? How have they valued the different sources of information? Does the use of certain sources vary according to the families' profiles?
- Characteristics of the schools considered in the final choice: teaching method, building and equipment, school neighbourhood, reputation.

*Table 1 – Socio-economic status indicator*

Socio-economic status indicator		Household income			
		Low (up to 2,000 euros)	Medium (2,000-4,000)	Medium-High (4,000 -6,000)	High (from 6,000 euros)
Professional position	Low: craftsmen, blue collars, farmers, drivers, unskilled workers	Low	Low	Medium-low	Medium-high
	Medium-low: executive professions in office jobs, qualified jobs in commercial activities and services, armed forces	Low	Medium-low	Medium-low	Medium-high
	Medium: technical professions	Medium-low	Medium-high	Medium-high	High
	High: legislators and senior management, intellectual, scientific and highly specialised professions	Medium-high	Medium-high	High	High

As far as the family profile is concerned, an index of professional status has been developed in order to consider other features than the educational level. The professional status is composed of the type of profession and the income of both parents. The combinations of these two elements end up in different levels of professional status, from low to high, as indicated in the following table (Table 1).

<sup>3</sup> Accordingly to INVALSI microdata 2022/23 (the most recent and available data on the level of education of parents), families with children attending the second grade of primary school are distributed as follows based on their level of education: 21.5% low, 19.5% medium-low, 14.5% medium-high and 44.5% high.

## 4. The survey data

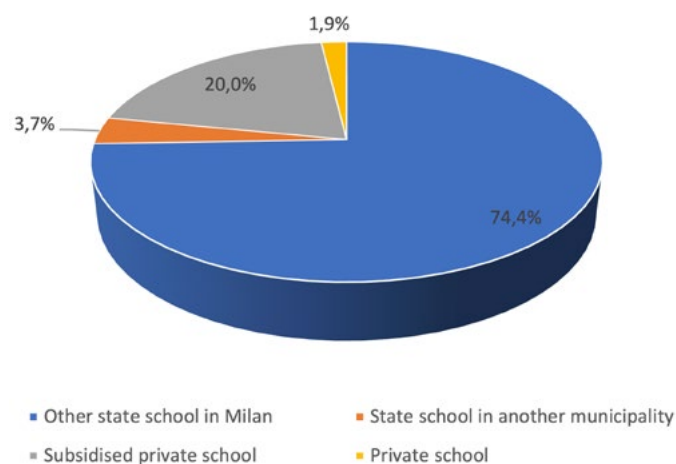
### 4.1. The choice: which is the actual choice set?

As explained, school enrolment in Milan is not based on a residential criterion: households are potentially free to choose every school in the city. Of course, the actual wideness of this possibility is mediated by a set of constraints that belongs to several spheres: the socio-economic conditions of families, the families' expectations in the educational system, the investment they are willing to make in education and school, territorial and local school features. In other words, not all families take into consideration the same options or even all the options available when it comes to choosing the school: the set of options considered can range from one to a very diverse number of schools according to households' and territorial profiles.

First, our data shows that half of the sample attends a school in the catchment area (meaning the local school), whereas the other half opts out from the local school.

As already mentioned, the primary school population in Milan is divided in two halves: 53,7% of the respondents have enrolled their children in the CA school, whereas the rest has opted out from the local school. Among those exiting from the CA, 75% chooses another state school, 20% a subsidised private school and only 2% an independent private school. Respondents' answers indicate that mobility mostly occurs between state schools, even though a relevant rate of students enrolls into subsidised private schools (Figure 1). One of the main differences between subsidised and independent private schools concerns the fees: subsidised schools are largely more affordable than private schools (Parma, 2022).

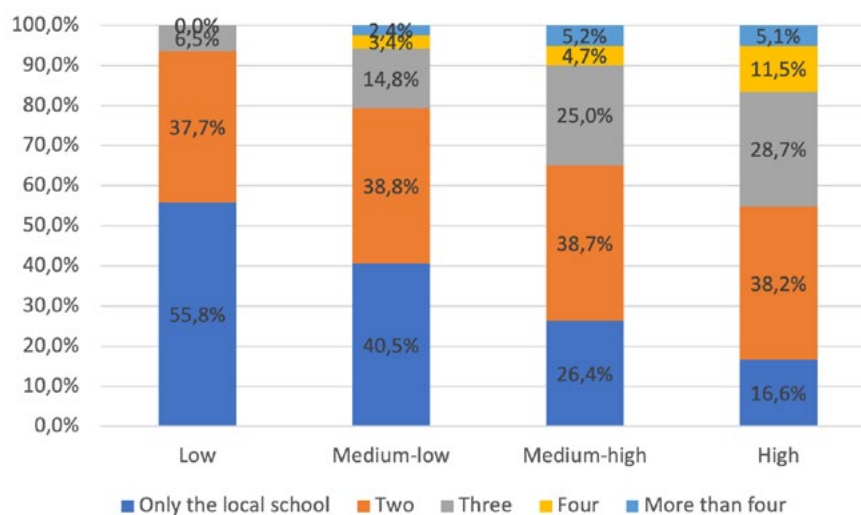
Figure 1 – Choice of households who have opted out from the CA



As already mentioned, the choice only potentially includes all the schools in the Municipality, because of the constraints deriving from households' resources but also from the fact that proximity plays a significant role in affecting decisions for very young children. In fact, almost 70% of the sample has taken into consideration no more than two schools and only 9% has considered four or more schools when starting the choice process.

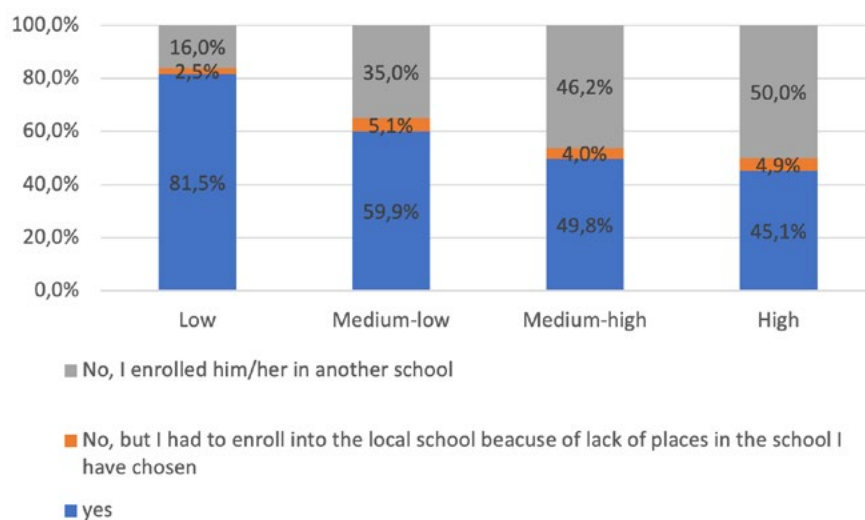
As Figure 2 shows, the level of education has an impact both on the number of schools taken into consideration for the choice and on the possibility of opting out. Half of the households having a low educational level envisages only the local school: this rate decreases to 41,3% and to 30% for those having a medium-low and a medium-high level of education, respectively. Only 23,5% of families with higher education consider only the local school. These results are consistent with evidence from other contexts reporting a reduced mobility for children coming from disadvantaged familiar background (Bonai, Zancajo & Scandurra, 2021; Kuyvenhoven & Boterman, 2021). The more common behaviour among Milanese families, regardless of the educational level, consists in considering two schools. The percentage is the same for all the educational levels if we look at those parents considering two schools. Then high and medium-high educated parents are more likely to consider three or more schools.

Figure 2 – Number of options considered per educational level



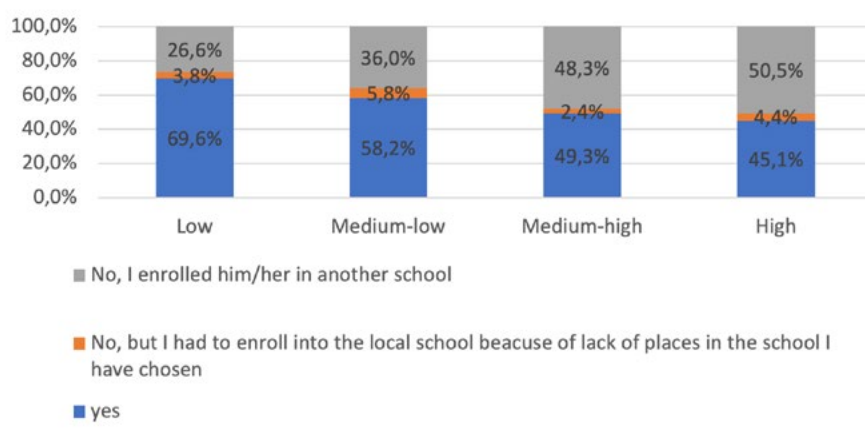
Parents with a higher education are also those who are more likely to opt out from the local school, whereas only 18% of those having a low level of education have chosen to avoid the local school (Fig. 3)

Figure 3 – Parents enrolling their children in the CA school or opting out according to their educational level



If we look at how the number of considered options and the final choice change according to the socio-economic status, we can notice similar trends compared to the level of education, but less marked between different households' profiles (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Parents enrolling their children in the CA school or opting out according to their socio-economic status



#### 4.2. Information sources

As with every decision-making process, choosing a school implies for parents the need to collect information. The kind and the type of information

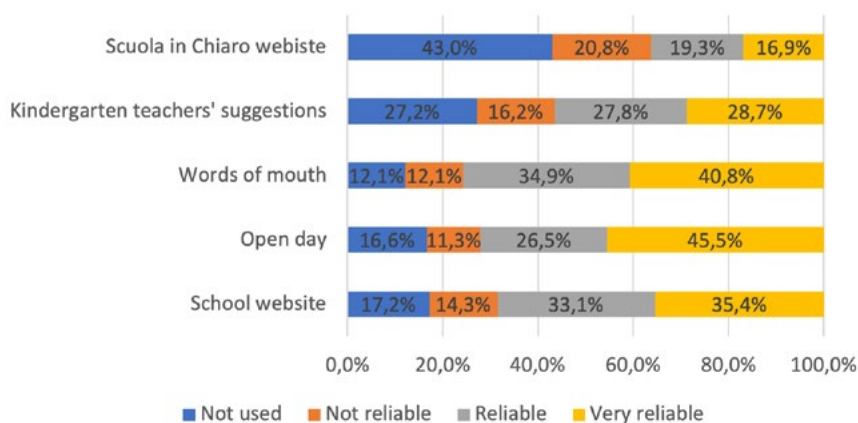
households collect depends on their resources, the available set of information, but also on parents' expectations and priorities. With the introduction of the freedom of choice, communication and information strategies have become more relevant: new information contents and communication instruments have made their appearance, alongside the more traditional ones.

As shown in the literature, we can distinguish between *hot* and *cold* information. The first one indicates the informal ways of conveying information about school, that is mostly through the words of mouth (Kosunene, Carrasco & Tironi, 2015). Ball and Vincent (1998) define it as 'the hot grapevine' of information to highlight how the passage of information can be intricate. Conversely, *cold* information includes all the formal channels and sources that are made available by schools and educational institutions themselves, such as municipalities.

In the case of Milan, the 'cold' means can include the following sources:

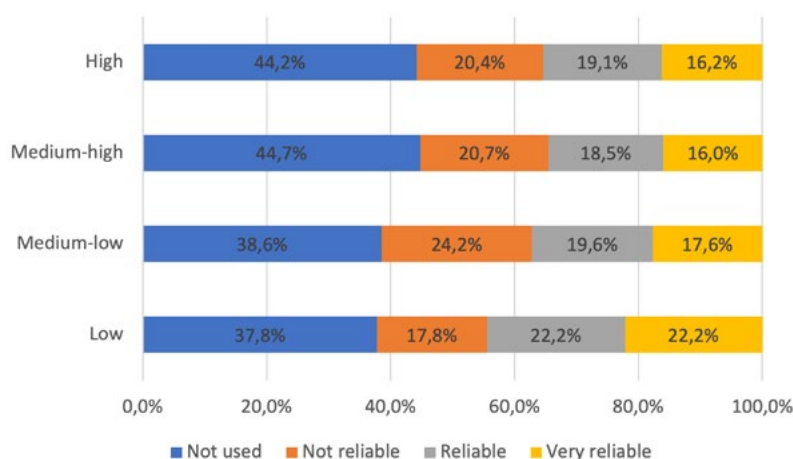
- *Open days*: schools directly organise these events to let parents physically enter the schools, show them the physical environment, introduce the teaching staff and illustrate the curricular and extra-curricular activities. These events are usually organised in the same week in the whole city of Milan, so that a family manages to attend only a limited amount of them due to the overlapping.
- *Scuola in Chiaro platform*: this is a website created by the former Ministry of Research and Education (MIUR), now Ministry of Education and Merit, in 2011 showing data and information about each school. Data regarding the socio-economic composition of the intake, the average age of teachers and their turnover rate, students' and schools' performance (compared with the city, regional and national average) are provided. Although the website is certainly the most complete information repository about schools, it suffers from some flaws that weaken its role as a potential instrument to fight information asymmetry. First, each school is responsible for the voluntary uploading of the information on the website and this causes vast heterogeneity in the amount and quality of data uploaded. Second, the website is not particularly user-friendly and the language being used is more easily accessible to school workers rather than families: a lot of documents need to be downloaded, very formal and complicated words are used, contents are not easily recognisable by the titles of documents/pages.
- *School website*: each school has its own website which contains contacts, news and organisational information. These websites are mostly used by households once children are attending the schools. Parents have been asked about their use of these communication means to gather information about school and to what extent they consider them reliable to understand how they navigate their way to the choice (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Information sources: their use and reliability



The most utilised source of information is the ‘word of mouth’, which is also considered ‘very reliable’ by 40% of the respondents, second only to open days. 60% of the respondents have also considered the suggestions from kindergarten teachers but only 28% has considered this source ‘very reliable’. *Scuola in Chiaro* website, the official channel that collects and spreads information about school, is scarcely used: over 40% of the respondents have not used it. Also, only one third of the respondents has found it reliable. The low rate of users and the low rate of reliability are not affected by the level of education, as Figure 6 shows.

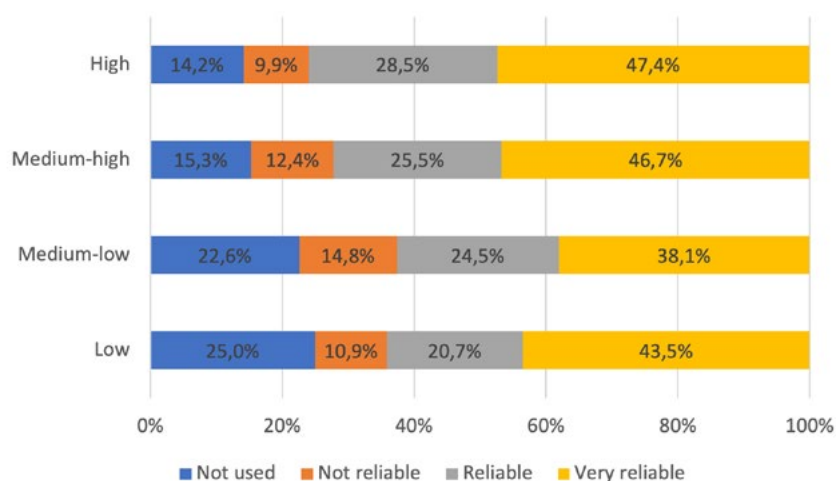
Figure 6 – Use and reliability of Scuola in Chiaro website according to the education level



A slight difference is instead shown for the open days if we consider the level of education (Figure 7). Parents having a higher education level seem to have benefitted more from this channel: 85% for high and medium-high educated compared to 78% for medium-low and 75% for low educated parents. Also, more educated parents consider open days more reliable than parents with lower levels of education (70-75% compared to about 60% of lower educated parents). The same can be observed if we consider the socio-economic status.

There are no considerable differences in the access and use of information among those who choose the local school and those who opt out. Only a very light difference in the use of *Scuola In Chiaro* website has been found: the website is in fact used by 44% of those who stay in the CA and by 60% of those who exit it. This may prove a tendency to look for more information by those who eventually choose to opt out compared to those who stay – or at least to use more cold means of information.

Figure 7 – Use and reliability of the open days according to the education level



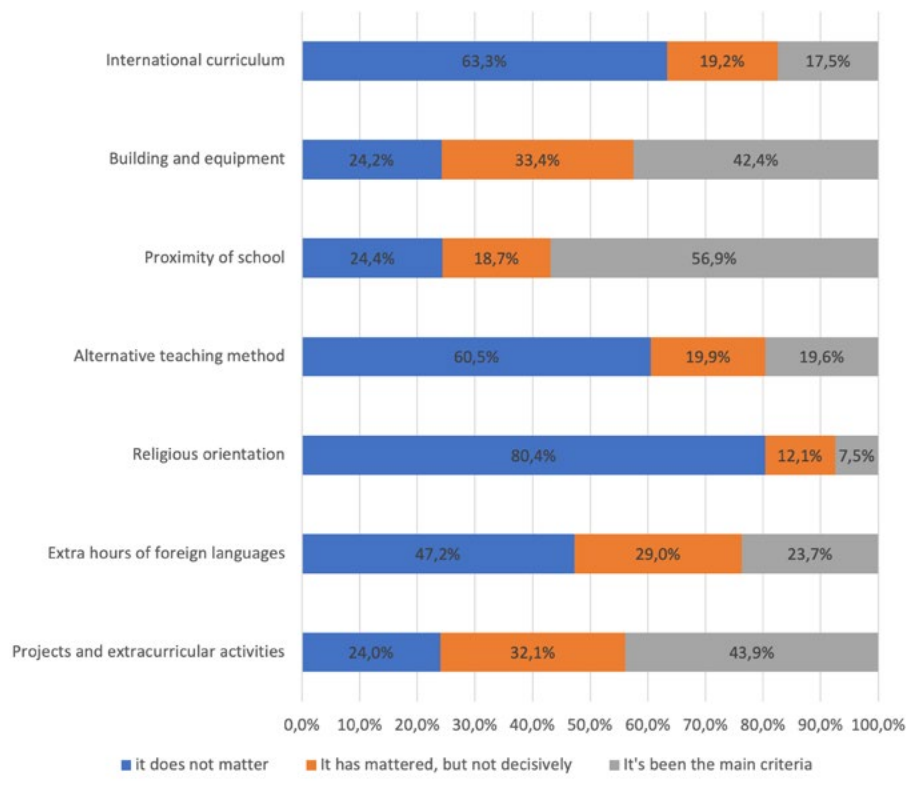
### 4.3. School features and criteria

Literature on school choice in different countries indicates how parents value some criteria rather than others in choosing their favourite school. These criteria can be considered a proxy of the school quality, meaning by ‘quality’ a very wide range of characteristics that can be connected to performance but not only. Research has in fact also highlighted how, especially in lower school forms, the achievement level is not parents’ only and main worry but is accompanied by evaluations concerning the possible integration of their children, of their daily wellbeing and also on the family daily



arrangements (which is why proximity is one of the top criteria) (Reay and Ball 2006). Parents have then been asked to indicate the relevance of some criteria on a scale. The criteria considered in the submitted questionnaire were taken from literature and from previous qualitative research.

Figure 8 – Main criterion considered for the school choice



The most relevant criteria for parents in choosing a school are proximity (almost 60%), existing projects and/or extracurricular activities (44%) and the building, meaning school equipment and facilities such as laboratories, gyms, green spaces (42%). Apparently, all parents consider these three criteria as decisive for the choice of schools. Delving into this, we can see that there are some differences in how much these criteria are relevant for those who opted out from the local school compared to those who stayed. For instance, half of the households who have opted out from their CA school has considered the presence and the quality of projects and extra schools' activities a very relevant criterion compared to 38% of those who have chosen to stay in the local school (Figure 9). Also, the presence of extra hours of foreign language teaching seems to be a little more relevant for those parents who have opted out (Figure 10).

Figure 9 - Relevance of projects and extra school activities in choosing a school (according to the choice of staying or opting out)

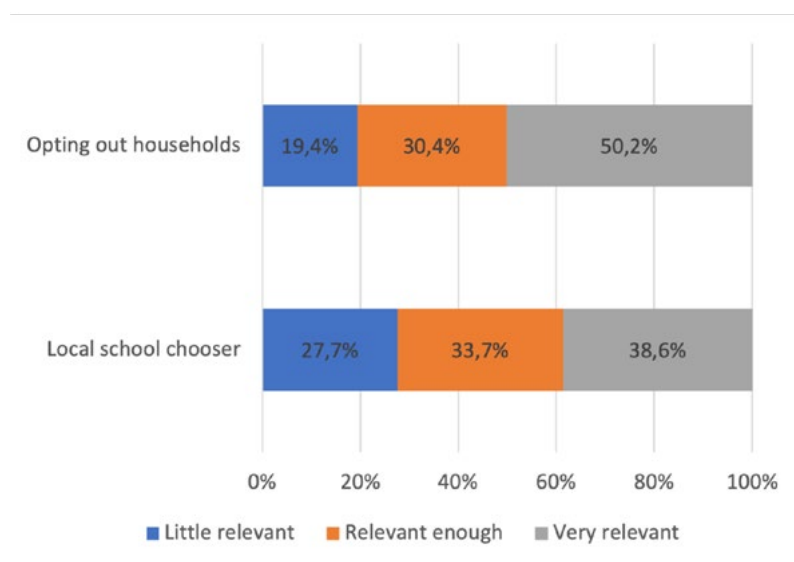
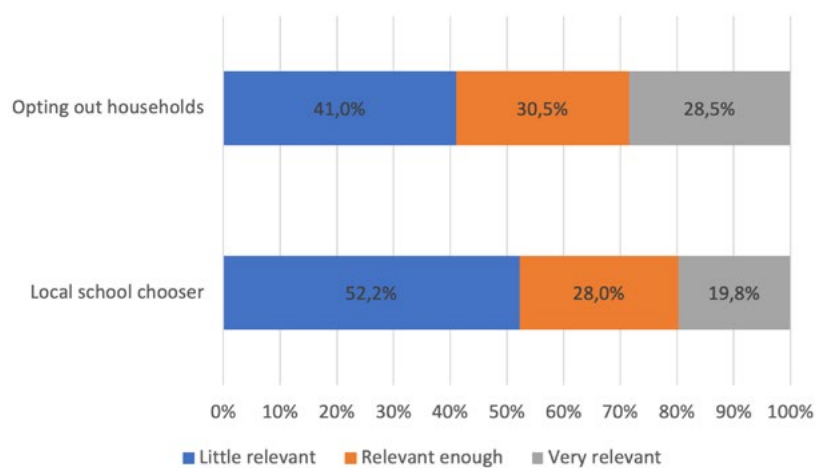


Figure 10 - Relevance of extra hours of foreign languages teaching (according to the choice of staying or opting out)



Another difference is found in considering the building and the facilities: for almost one third of the households who have chosen the local school this was not a relevant criterion, whereas it has been for more than 80% of those who have opted out (Figure 11). Not surprisingly, proximity has finally been much more valued from those parents who have decided to stay in the catchment area (Figure 12).

Figure 11 – Relevance of the building and the equipment (according to the choice of staying or opting out)

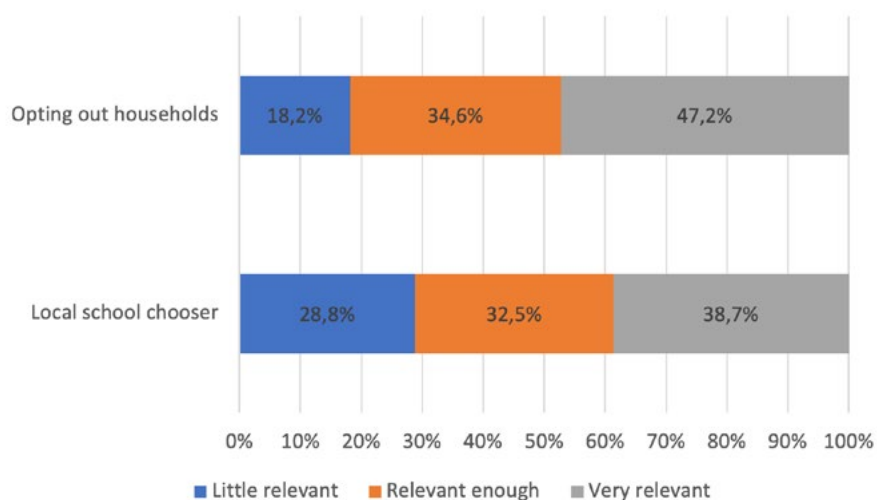
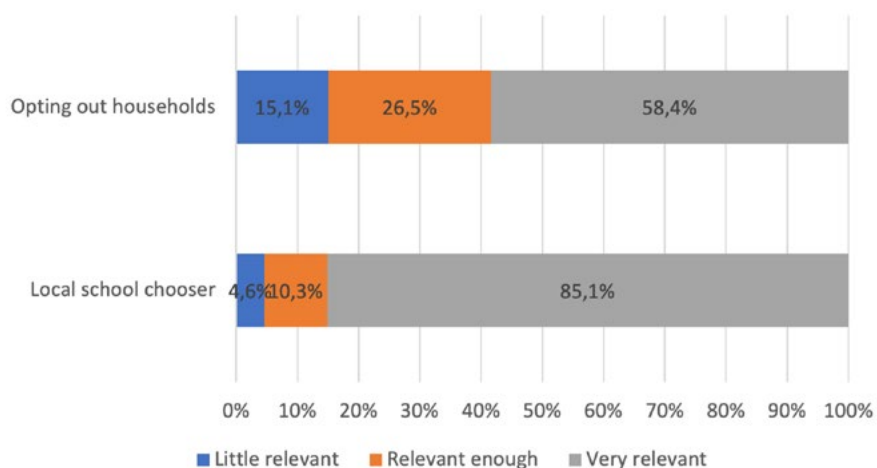


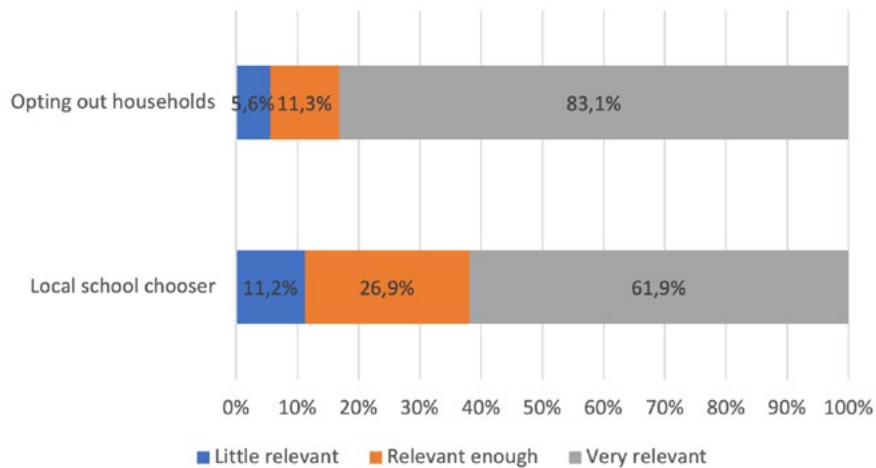
Figure 12 – Relevance of proximity/reachability (according to the choice of staying or opting out)



Among the relevant features in choosing to opt out from the local school there is also the pedagogical offer, meaning alternative teaching methods (i.e. Montessori, Senza Zaino, Pizzigoni Method<sup>4</sup>) (Figure 13).

<sup>4</sup> These methods are alternative to the traditional pedagogical offer. Some of the main aspects are the outdoor activities, the non-frontal lectures, more hours dedicated to manual activities, music, laboratories, gardening.

Figure 13 - Relevance of the pedagogical offer in choosing a school for the families who opted for the local school and for those who opted out



The relevance of the same criteria have been analysed according to the socio-economic status of families, not showing actually relevant differences if not a slightly higher percentage of parents valuing either the extra-hours of foreign languages or the building and the equipment or a specific pedagogical offer among those having an higher socio-economic status. The difference in relevance given to the diverse criteria is much stronger when we consider the level of education.

### Final remarks

Data just discussed confirm that the idea of rational choice is misleading in understanding the school choice patterns: the actual range of schools taken into consideration varies already according to individuals and territorials' features, leaving apart the institutional setting characteristics that can further extend or narrow the range of options. The choice process is then constrained to varying degrees for varying households. A common constraint, at least for most families having children aged 5 or 6 (in their first year of primary school), is the need for a reachable school, being that by car, by public transports or by foot. Nevertheless, although proximity takes on the priority over other criteria for most families having a low socio-economic and/or low educational level, this is negotiated with other criteria among other population strata. This means that the set of considerable options change according to the type of family and that some families are subjected to more and harder constraints. In the case of Milan, these constraints lead half of the families having a low educational level to make the choice of attending

the local school without any comparison with schools outside the catchment area. On the other side, the weaker constraints (or the possession of resources to deal with them), lead half of the Italian population, mostly having high level of education, to abandon certain schools in favour of others, bringing to an unequal and polarized distribution of the population across the education offer. In addition, the criteria which are considered relevant are almost heterogeneously distributed all over the population despite their socio-economic status and their educational level; this indicates that it is not the offer itself that mostly drives the choice. Apparently, the most decisive and detrimental choice is the initial one, that is when the family must trace down the boundaries of their set of options. These boundaries are likely to be drawn according to very practical and ordinary criteria, such as distance from home, timing, daily routine, previous knowledge of a school or a neighbourhood. Wilson and Bridges (2019) too have suggested that a crucial factor is the range of school options that are realistically available to parents. The increase in the number of options derives from a negotiation between the advantages of attending a school further away and the possibility of bearing the economic and organisational costs. This inevitable negotiation leads to a significant widening of the set of options for the more affluent families. The idea of proximity - or the acceptable distance - is not objective and changes based on households' profiles and territorial features.

In addition, the fact that the 'word of mouth' plays a relevant role as a source of information seems to also indicate that what parents look for is not simply evidence of performance or achievement levels nor the presence of special programmes or projects. This information is used as a proxy for something else or as corollary or addendum of other information, conveyed by rumours, chat, informal communication channels. Parents' strategies are nebulous and not easily explicable by the fact that different profiles of parents look for diverse characteristics of the school system. On the contrary, they apparently search for similar features but are subject to diverse constraints that inhibit them since the beginning. As Burgess *et al.* (2015) stated, the actual preferences for high quality education may not be so differentiated across social classes after all. Our survey suggests that the two factors, namely parents' preferences and availability of options, are strongly intertwined in defining the final choice.

Finally, when it comes to the formal sources of information, the asymmetry linked to the language used to convey information but also to the channels and the types of contents, could be addressed through policy instruments, such as targeted information contents or tools, in order to reduce the gap in accessing information among different groups of population.

Further analysis is needed and further qualitative research must be done to complement these results, but they open several applicable questions such

as: is the set of choices of lower-educated or lower-income parents reduced by the relevance of proximity or are different expectations from the educational system, so that the investment is reduced compared to middle class or higher educated parents? How do families read the information about the performance? How should the territorial inequality in school supply be addressed by educational, but also social and urban, policies?

Answering these questions is relevant to elaborate intervention acting on the school offer to drive parents' choice, but also to understand which policies interact with the educational ones to design the different outcome of the school choice in terms of school composition and avoid segregation mechanisms.

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