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Choosing a School, Imagining a Childhood. Emotional, Moral, and Social Dimensions of School Choice in Denmark

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Abstract: International studies have shown that concerns about children's academic outcomes and future educational opportunities shape parents' choice of primary school. In Denmark, such concerns are manifested differently due to a less competitive educational system that generally offers broad, flexible pathways. Even so, many Danish parents carefully consider which school will best support their child. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews with 38 parents, this article examines parents' reflections and concerns regarding school choice. A cultural analytical approach that focuses on understanding how parents make choices and set priorities is used to show that, regardless of social class, their primary concern is ensuring their children's well-being and psychological development rather than academic outcomes. However, this emphasis implies awareness of other parents' parenting practices, subtly reflecting but also helping to construct and maintain social distinctions and moral boundaries despite egalitarian ideals and efforts prevalent in Danish society.

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> It has been so demanding and still is…I mean, that you're actually asking yourself: "Can I ruin my child now by choosing the wrong school?"
> [Helle, mother of a 6-year-old girl]

In recent decades, neoliberal reforms in Europe and the United States have given parents greater choice in terms of schools. This shift has sparked a surge in sociological studies examining the relationship between parental preferences, educational options, and broader social structures. However, the conclusions are not clear-cut as education systems vary. Nevertheless, a fairly consistent pattern has emerged—particularly in studies from the UK, US, and France—indicating that the expansion of school choice tends to benefit middle-class parents, who have the time, resources, and cultural capital to navigate the available options (e.g., Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Ball 2003; Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007; Goyette and Lareau 2014). In this sense, free school choice is widely regarded as a mechanism that sustains and can even exacerbate existing class divisions and social inequalities.

This article contributes to this debate in two ways. First, by adopting a cultural analytical perspective that foregrounds parents' values and reasoning rather than class-based strategies, and second, by focusing on Denmark, where education is embedded in a universal welfare system. Here, too, school choice has expanded, but under markedly different conditions than in most other countries. Public and private schools are broadly comparable in terms of resources, funding, and quality; there is no shift between primary and lower secondary schools, and students are not systematically tracked or ranked by ability. Primary school choice, therefore, does not, in principle, determine future educational trajectories. Nevertheless, school choice remains a highly salient issue for many parents, raising questions about why they consider it so important and what they take into account when making decisions.

To address these questions, the article draws on interviews with 38 parents from five school districts in Greater Copenhagen, supplemented by ethnographic observations in a neighborhood where 26 of these parents lived. Despite marked differences in class position, participants shared a lack of concern with their children's academic performance and outcomes when considering schools. Instead, they focused on practical matters (such as distance and route safety) but were primarily concerned with their children's emotional and social well-being. This partly reflects the children's young age, 5-6 years (although half of the parents also had older children), but, as I will argue, it first and foremost reflects a cultural awareness of the formative impor-

tance of childhood. This focus places an obligation on parents to make informed and deliberate choices—an obligation shaped by the compulsory nature of school choice and by the growing emotionalization of upbringing, which has become increasingly subject to moral and social judgment (Elias 2012). The article aims to foreground these emotional, moral, and social dimensions, demonstrating that school choice in this context appears driven less by instrumental strategies to secure educational capital than by broader cultural notions of childhood, responsible parenting, and social status.

The next section provides background information on school choice in Denmark, followed by a presentation of the study's methodological design and theoretical framework. The analysis is organized into four parts, each highlighting a distinct dimension of parents' orientations and decision-making processes. The first examines spatial orientations, focusing on perceptions of the social composition of the local area; the second addresses temporal orientations, including ideas about the future and reflections on the parent's own school experiences; the third focuses on parents' emotional involvement and concerns regarding their child's emotional development; and the fourth considers parent's imaginaries on the type of social environment that will best support their child's development and well-being. The concluding section returns to the central question of why school choice is so important to parents in Denmark.

The Danish Case

Critical sociologists studying a wide range of contexts have argued that the liberalization of school choice has reshaped student populations, transforming schools from meeting places for socially diverse groups (where districts allow) into "marketplaces"—thus reinforcing segregation and the reproductive dynamics of society (e.g., Ball 2003; Reay and Lucey 2003; Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007; James et al. 2010; Goyette and Lareau 2014; Gabay-Egozi 2016; Mayer et al. 2020). Research further indicates that the expansion of choice has exacerbated ethnic and class imbalances (e.g., Reay and Ball 1997; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Karsten et al. 2003; Reay et al. 2007; Byrne 2009; van Zanten 2010; Vincent, Braun, and Ball 2010; Cucchiara 2013). While circumstances and conditions may vary, a consistent pattern emerges across different national and regional contexts, with middle-class parents tending to select schools that consolidate their class position or advance their children's social mobility. As shown by Bourdieu and Passeron's classic study (1970), this tendency is nothing new, but evidence suggests it has been amplified by mechanisms such as school rankings and extended choice options linked to the marketization of education and increased competition for skilled labor (Gewirtz et al. 1995; James et al. 2010).

Denmark has also been affected by economic and educational liberalization. Income inequality has risen since the late 1980s, and residential segregation has deepened, particularly in larger cities (Haandrikman et al. 2023). Thus, despite its universal welfare model rooted in egalitarian ideals, Denmark is far from a classless society; significant disparities in resources and opportunities persist, and the link between social background and educational achievement is well-documented (Karlson and Landersø 2025). Over the past two decades, a number of neoliberal measures have been introduced, including expanded school choice. Municipalities are divided into school districts, with school-age children having a right to a place at a specific school

determined by their residential address. Since 2005, however, parents have been able to choose a municipal school outside their school district, but only if there are places available after enrolling children within that school's catchment area. In practice, this means it can be difficult to get a place at certain popular schools if the family does not live in the school district.[1] As in other countries, there is an increasingly pronounced social and ethnic divide between schools, partly because more parents opt for private or so-called "free schools"[2] (Undervisningsministeriet and Epinion 2017; Andersen et al. 2019; Bomholt and Rasmussen 2019), and partly because schools in ethnically mixed and socially deprived areas are avoided by parents who have the resources to seek alternatives (Rangvid 2007; Søndergaard et al. 2021).

However, this pattern of growing segregation is driven by dynamics different from those in countries with more competitive education systems. As Norwegian sociologists have shown, Nordic welfare models have sought to weaken the direct link between financial prosperity and educational success, for example, by guaranteeing access to education at all levels for all, irrespective of income (Barth, Moene, and Wallerstein 2003; Aarseth 2016). Thus, as noted by Skarpenes and Sakslind (2010:227), there is not the same kind of "existential drama—so noticeable in British and American contexts—which relates educational success (so explicitly) to social class." Although attention to individual performances has increased, the Danish school system does not sort students into different tracks; there are no formal divisions based on tests before the end of lower secondary school, primary and lower secondary schools are not ranked, and poor final grades are not an insurmountable obstacle to students' further education. Moreover, there is no substantial financial disparity between the various types of schools, as all receive public funding. Public schools are entirely free for pupils, while private and free schools receive significant state subsidies and are prohibited from generating profits, which keeps tuition fees relatively low. Furthermore, many private and independent schools reserve places for low-income students to promote social diversity, and these parents are eligible for reduced fees. This is not to suggest that financial considerations are irrelevant, as some parents' decisions may be influenced by costs. However, economic factors alone cannot explain the broader pattern of school choice.

If neither structural constraints—such as future educational tracking—nor economic incentives can fully account for parental decisions, attention must turn to the social and cultural dynamics underpinning these choices. It is important to note that while Danish schools—public comprehensive schools (*folkeskolen*) and various types of private and independent schools—do not differ significantly in terms of access to further education, they do vary in their ideological orientations,[3] pedagogical approaches, learning environments, and curricular emphasis. These value-based differences shape the appeal of particular schools to different segments of the par-

1 School choice is not new in the Danish context. Ever since the mid-1800s, parents have been able to homeschool their children and to set up or choose a privately run school rather than a district public school.

2 The proportion of pupils in 1st grade attending a non-municipal primary school (private or free school) increased from 12% in 2007 to around 17% in 2018. By 8th grade, more than one in five children attend a private or free school (Andersen et al. 2019). See also Statistics Denmark for a 2024 update: Hvert femte barn på landet går på en fri- eller privatskole - Danmarks Statistik, retrieved April 28, 2026.

3 Some private and free schools are religious (Christian, Muslim, Jewish), others are secular. The public school system is predominantly non-religious, although it observes Christian holidays.

ent population. Over time, this interplay between institutional characteristics and parental preferences may generate self-reinforcing reputational dynamics, further accentuating perceived distinctions between schools. Such variations are an important feature of the landscape that parents must navigate when choosing a school for their children.

Methodology and Dataset

The study was initially based in a suburban municipality in Greater Copenhagen, referred to here as Lundeby, with approximately 30,000 inhabitants. Over the past 30 years, Lundeby's population has steadily increased as the area's mixed housing stock—comprising rental and owneroccupied apartments of various sizes, terraced houses, and singlefamily homes—has made it relatively affordable for young families looking for housing close to the center of Copenhagen. Although Lundeby has traditionally been a workingclass and lowermiddleclass neighborhood, its demographics have changed in recent years, with an influx of middle-class families with greater financial resources. As a result, the entire municipality is now characterized by considerable ethnic, economic, and generational diversity. One notable exception is a large apartment complex in the northern part of the municipality, which has a somewhat negative reputation for being socially deprived.

This social and ethnic diversity was one of the reasons why I chose to base the study in Lundeby, as I sought to explore whether it would be reflected in parents' school choices. Using ethnographic and interviewbased methods, the aim was to gain insight into parents' considerations and priorities. The ethnographic component followed children and parents in their everyday lives in the months leading up to choosing a school and involved three months of observations at three local daycare centers, combined with daily walks in the local area—sometimes alone, sometimes with parents—as well as ethnographic observations at local events during the winter of 2023-24. Access was granted through the managers of the daycare centers, followed by contact with staff. This enabled observations of daily activities and the recruitment of parents for interviews.

Observations were followed by indepth interviews with six professionals (a principal and viceprincipal at one local school, a daycare manager, two daycare professionals, and a teacher at another school), conducted at their workplaces, and with 26 parents of children attending the daycare centers. They were interviewed in their family homes (17 mothers and 9 fathers, seven of whom were interviewed as couples). Some of them were in the process of choosing, and some knew the result. Among these parents, none had chosen a private or free school, only six had completed a Master'slevel university degree, and only six had a household income above €100,000 per year.[4] To ensure greater socioeconomic variation, I therefore expanded the sample to include an additional 12 parents (11 mothers and 1 father), interviewed individually in their homes in other parts of Greater Copenhagen. Ten of these parents had Master's level university degrees, and half had opted for either private or free schools.

Three of the additional families lived in a deprived area in a southern suburb of Copenhagen, three in a very affluent northern neighborhood, and the remaining six in or near the city center.

4 According to Statistics Denmark, families with children in Denmark had an average annual posttax income of approximately €96,100 in 2024, see Statistics Denmark: Person- og familieindkomster - Danmarks Statistik, retrieved April 28, 2026.

Only seven interviewees had an ethnic background other than Danish, all of whom were first-generation immigrants who had completed or were currently enrolled in higher education. Despite repeated efforts, I was unable to recruit a more educationally diverse group of ethnic minority parents or parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—that is, parents without formal post-secondary education or labormarket affiliation. This social composition may have influenced the strong engagement with school choice observed in the study.

Table 1. Table of interviewees

Number of interviewees / Place of residence	Lundeby	Rich district	Poor district	City-center
Professionals	4	0	0	2
Mothers	17	3	2	6
Fathers	9	0	1	0
Interviewed as couples	7	0	0	0
With an ethnic minority background	3	1	3	0
With a completed university degree	6	3	1	6
Choosing a private or free school	0	1	2	3

Source: Self-elaboration.

All informants—professionals and parents—were informed both orally and in writing about the study's aims, research ethics, and dataprotection procedures. Names, institutions, identifying details, and references to specific locations have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality. All interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and focused on parents' views on school options, their decisionmaking processes, opinions on child-rearing, and sources of information. The interviews also provided insight into participants' working lives, social and educational backgrounds, reasons for moving to their neighborhoods, local social networks, and reflections on their children's lives, friendships, and future opportunities. Interviewees were encouraged to reflect, in their own words, on processes of choice, preference, and boundarydrawing in relation to schools, upbringing, peer groups, and neighborhoods.

In analyzing the interviews, I found no consistent classbased pattern in parents' schoolrelated values, nor was it straightforward to situate most informants within distinct social classes. Couples often differed in educational level, and incomes varied considerably: some unskilled workers earned more than highly educated professionals, while some younger parents were still studying but close to entering highincome professions. Although the sample ranged from families living in large villas with substantial wealth to those in small rented apartments reliant on welfare, these differences did not yield clear patterns of reasoning about school choice. Previous research from Denmark supports this finding. While higher-educated, higher-income parents are somewhat more likely to choose private schools and actively seek information on the various options, support for public and local schools is broadly similar across socioeconomic groups (Undervisningsministeriet and Epinion 2017; Andersen et al. 2019). Similarly, although most parents care about schools' social composition (Andersen et al. 2019; Bomholt and Rasmussen 2019; Søndergaard et al. 2021), views on whether diversity is positive or negative are not clearly linked to socioeconomic position.

A recurring theme in the interviews was a concern with whether different school options would enable

their children to form close friendships and feel included, or whether they might risk marginalization within peer groups. This concern prompted me to draw on theories addressing the social and cultural dimensions of choice.

Analytical Approach

As the educational sociologist Nihad Bunar (2010:13) argues in his discussion of school choice in Sweden, "freedom of choice in education has many layers and affects many other areas than segregation, grades, and educational costs which hitherto have been the main themes in the debates." Using this insight, which is highly relevant to the Danish context, as a jumping-off point, any attempt to explain parents' preoccupation with school choice, despite the seemingly limited impact on long-term outcomes, must examine how they choose and which values they prioritize—in short, recognizing that choice is culturally embedded.

Advocating such a cultural perspective, sociologist Ori Schwarz (2018:851) contends that:

> …choice processes are cultural practices, culturally specific ways of doing grounded in normativity, which rely on both practical knowledge (culturally specific decision-making skills) and abstract representations and epistemologies (since choice always relies on production and manipulation of knowledge of the options)…Culture offers actors not only repertoires of options to choose from, but also repertoires of ways of choosing, culturally specific techniques of choice.

Anthropologists Åsa Boholm, Annette Henning, and Amanda Krzyworzeka (2013) have likewise argued that choices are always made within cultural horizons of meaning that confer epistemological and moral validity. Yet they are also shaped by the individual's life circumstances, prior experiences, and emotional state when making decisions. Consequently, individuals who have access to the same information and share a structural position will not necessarily have identical preferences or make similar choices. Choices are, therefore, simultaneously individual and fundamentally social, informed by common norms and established moralities. However, values and understandings are rarely universal; their significance and relevance are a matter of ongoing negotiation. Individuals test and adjust their preconceptions and align themselves more closely with some people than others—a dynamic that constitutes a core aspect of decision-making (Boholm, Henning, and Krzyworzeka 2013).

To navigate this terrain, individuals must construct an overview of the social space they are part of (Bourdieu 1989), a "social imaginary" (Taylor 2002). Anthropologist Henrik Vigh (2006:483) has described such an imaginary as "the way in which we comprehend the unfolding of our social terrain and our position and possibilities of movement in it." Understanding the processes that culminate in a decision, therefore, requires attention not only to people's beliefs and aspirations about future possibilities, but also to their engagements with the world—their anxieties, trust, and perceptions of social distinctions and rightness, all of which are also socially and culturally constituted.

Inspired by these theoretical points, I revisited the interview material to gain a better understanding of how parents approach decisionmaking and prioritize among available school options. While practical considerations such as distance to school, the school's physical learning environment, and the safety of the route to school were clearly part of their

deliberations, parents' concerns were overwhelmingly social and emotional. Their primary aim was to place their children in a social environment experienced as meaningful, reassuring, and conducive to wellbeing—as demonstrated in the following analysis, organized around four dimensions of parental orientation: spatial, temporal, emotional, and social.

Considering Place and the Local School Options

One contextual factor that clearly influences parents' school choice is the specific place they live in, the school options available locally, and the social composition of different areas (Reay 1996). As already mentioned, Lundeby is a socially and ethnically diverse area. Historically, the intersections of several major roads have divided the municipality into five school districts, each with its own local school. The buildings on these sites are still in use, now housing three public schools across five campuses. Due to declining enrolment of children from economically stable, ethnic Danish families at two schools, the local council decided to merge them with two other schools ten years ago. As a result, the school with the highest average parental income, which I call Ellebakkeskolen, remained a standalone school, while the other four schools were merged into two new schools, each split across two campuses: Lundeby Public School (campus Mosegrundsskolen and campus Skovhøjskolen) and Bækkegårdsskolen (campus North and campus West). The student population at these schools is more ethnically and socio-economically diverse than at Ellebakkeskolen, albeit with an unequal distribution across campuses. The municipality is also home to a private school that markets itself as academically ambitious. In addition, there are three free schools located just outside the municipality, and many public and private schools with various pedagogical, ideological, and religious profiles in neighboring municipalities.

I established contact with parents during three months of ethnographic fieldwork at three different daycare centers located in the heart of Lundeby. The centers cater to families from all parts of the municipality; when conducting interviews in family homes, I visited various types of housing and all school districts.

I met Henrik, a chef and father of Niels, in front of his home, adorned with festive Christmas decorations, on his return from work. While still on the doorstep, he exclaimed: "I think we lead a really, really good life for children here…I think a lot of families like ours are moving out of the city. Many of our neighbors are just like us." Henrik was optimistic about the local school, Mosegrundsskolen, which is right next to their terraced house. He and his wife have spoken to others in the area, which, he said:

> …has put our minds at ease. It wouldn't be good for Niels to be in a large class—he just couldn't handle that. But down there, they have small classes, and the teachers just seemed so calm when we visited. Plus, it's so close, so he can go on his own and play with kids he knows from the neighborhood or kindergarten.

Later in the interview, Henrik emphasized the importance of social diversity: "I want my kids to meet children from families different from ours." He said that his wife, who has a university degree and grew up in the area, shared his views on their place of residence and the importance of diversity, but was more skeptical about the local school. Although she has agreed to give it a chance, she insisted that their son remain on the waiting list for a free school in the neighboring municipality. She was concerned

that the school might be overburdened by children "from the [local housing] blocks" who lack parental support, which might mean their child receiving less attention. However, Henrik remained convinced: "I just believe that public schools are good."

Trust in public schools was a common theme in most interviews, with almost all parents emphasizing the value of children learning to be part of a socially diverse setting. Meanwhile, perceptions of the individual schools vary. Susanne and Peter, who moved six months earlier from the same terraced houses where Henrik lives to a singlefamily house in a nearby neighborhood, have a far less positive impression of Mosegrundsskolen. In fact, fear of the school's social—and not least ethnic—composition was their primary reason for relocating. As Susanne explained:

> We used to live in a terraced house and had great neighbors with a daughter just a bit older than ours. Their daughter started at the local school—the same one we planned for our kids—but it quickly became a disappointing experience. So we thought, hmm. They decided to move, and we had the same mindset. What should we do? So, we decided to look for a house elsewhere.

When encouraged to explain the problem, Susanne said, "Well, it was that the parents in that parent group did not have many resources, so to speak. Right from the get-go, they were not actively involved in their children's schooling." Peter added:

> And then there was the number of bilingual children. Our neighbors felt like they had to integrate into the groups of parents rather than the other way around. That was challenging, to say the least. We'd also heard quite a few negative things about the school from [people in] our social circle. Many people said, "Oh, Mosegrundsskolen? Probably not the right fit."

Nevertheless, Susanne and Peter remained committed to public schools and emphasized the value of their children mixing with peers from diverse backgrounds, which would help them develop the social skills needed in contemporary society. As Susanne, a nurse, and Peter, a doctor, are both highly educated, I enquired whether their concerns extended to the school's academic standards. Susanne emphatically responded that "Nothing could worry me less. I don't think the school next to our new house has a good reputation either, but honestly, I don't know," before elaborating:

> The most important thing is that they grow up with good values and become good people… that they do well socially. You can't learn that from a book. You have to experience it. Everything else will follow… Our main priority is for school to be fun and engaging for the child.

Surprisingly, few parents mentioned academic level as a factor in their decision-making process, but all reflected on the social composition of the various schools. Many emphasized the value of children learning to be considerate and open-minded by participating in socially mixed groups, but several—such as Henrik's wife, as mentioned above—also expressed concern that there would be too many children from disadvantaged homes.

Not all parents have detailed knowledge of the local neighborhood. Quite a few are newcomers and do not have a social circle that can help them to distinguish between the different school districts. This is the case for Karin and Anders, a graphic designer and a nurse who recently moved to the area and

have tried hard to find out what characterizes the different schools by asking other parents at the daycare center. Karin talked in detail about their considerations, including the local private school with a strong academic profile:

> Well, we also considered Lundeby private school… But then I heard, well, someone said that it was a bit elitist. It was as if it were the elite who went there. And I don't think we like that at all, that something should be hyped as better…I think my children might as well learn to meet all kinds of people. So now we're going for Mosegrundsskolen, which Erik's [a child's friend from the daycare center] mum has spoken highly of.

Those who have lived in the area for longer are generally more attentive to local differences. For example, Charlotte, a medical secretary, and her husband, Per, a self-employed construction manager, both grew up in a deprived apartment block in the northern part of the municipality. They decided to move from a district close to Mosegrundsskolen, where they had settled when their first child was born, and bought a house near Ellebakkeskolen a year before their children started school. To my question of why, they explained:

> **Per:** Well, it's about people… well, at Ellebakkeskolen, there are more parents who live in detached houses.
> **Charlotte:** Yes, and are educated and have jobs.
> **Per:** Are educated and don't live in social housing. And that's how it is.
> **Charlotte:** It's a class thing!
> **Eva [interviewer]:** It's a class thing?
> **Per:** Yes, at the risk of sounding like an idiot, but that's how it is. Yes, that's 100 percent why.
> **Charlotte:** Yes. There's a difference between being educated and having a job, and not being educated and being on welfare, and wanting to be on welfare or cash benefits. And it's a lot like that, right?
> **Eva:** So, when you've considered the different schools, it has mainly been the catchment area that has been the deciding factor? In other words, who attends the school?
> **Charlotte:** Yes. Well, that's it. It's the catchment area. That's it, 100 percent.
> …
> **Eva:** Well, it sounds like you have given this a lot of thought?
> **Per:** Yes, we have because, of course, I'd rather have my children go to school in a neighborhood where people come from an area with detached houses rather than a ghetto.
> **Charlotte:** Well, you want them to play with someone who has the same values at home as we have at home. That you should go to school, that you should do your homework, that you should get an education. You have to listen to what the teacher says. At other schools, there can be someone who says "fuck you" to the teacher, doesn't listen, and is very disruptive. And we don't want that.

Few of the parents interviewed talked about class and social distinctions as explicitly as this couple, nor did they all assess the schools and their catchment areas the same way, as is apparent from previous excerpts. Some were confident that the assigned school would prove to be good for their child, while others, as illustrated here, went so far as to move house to get access to the right school. However, regardless of what lengths they were willing to go to and class consciousness, most of the parents I interviewed had clearly given considerable thought to choosing a school for their child, with the social composition of the school district emerging as a key concern.

A Prolonged Process

My fieldwork at the three daycare centers was conducted from November to February, when the parents of the oldest children had to inform the municipality of their preferred schools in order of priority. It was, therefore, a period during which they actively sought information by talking to parents of older children and attending open-house events at various schools. The daycare centers were also involved in the process, providing parents with individual consultations on the match between their child and the various school options. At various Christmas events, school choice was a recurring topic of conversation among parents, who eagerly tried to figure out which schools their child's friends would choose and how parents they trusted assessed the various options. By February, everyone had been informed which school their child had been admitted to, and, as one daycare teacher, Mette, remarked while posting an overview, "Now all the considerations and worries are over."

From the perspective of the education system, school choice is a distinct event that takes place within a defined timeframe. In practice, however, it is much harder to determine when the decision is made. For many, it is clearly an extended process. About a third of the parents in the sample, coming from different parts of Greater Copenhagen, recounted registering their children for various private or free schools shortly after birth. "I just thought, you can always say no," explained Frida, an unemployed academic, justifying her decision to register at six different free and private schools within a five-kilometer radius of their city-center home. Many acknowledge that doing so is necessary if one wants to have the option. For example, Mille, a well-educated mother with her own business living in a city-center neighborhood, explained her experiences putting her children on the waiting list for a free school: "We were told, 'Make sure to get on the list.'…So, as a brand-new mother, I realized, okay, this is a game with high stakes, and I turned up before the child was even born. Until then, I had not realized that this was really a game."

It is clearly common practice to register children for alternative school options, even though most parents ultimately choose one of the local public schools. As such, school choice is a process that spans several years. Even after enrolment, the deliberations do not stop. Celeste's father, Poul, an accounting manager in a large company, explained that they had long since put her on the waiting list for two private schools and had now been informed that there was a place for her at one of them. However, after much discussion, he and his partner have decided not to accept the place and let their daughter start at one of the local public schools in Lundeby. Poul explained:

> We think it's too far away. There's something important about being part of the local neighborhood, and several of the children we know from the daycare center are going [to start] there or already go there… And I think that, although it has a somewhat poor academic reputation, we have come to the conclusion that she will reach a sufficient academic level…The concern was perhaps also that the private school—well, it's probably the children of rich parents who go there, and such an environment becomes a bit homogeneous, rather than going to a public school, which is more heterogeneous. You meet people from all walks of life across the entire socio-economic index. So those were probably the considerations…However, if it doesn't work out, we'll move her. I'm not going to let her stay in a class for three months where everything is falling apart.

Similarly, Frida stressed that she would give the public school a chance, but if their son is unhappy, they will move him "right away," which is why he is still on the waiting list for several private schools. Apparently, deciding on a school is a continuous process that, in some cases, can span a child's birth to almost the end of their schooling. It involves ongoing orientations, conversations with others, and deliberations about which school option best suits the child at a given point in time, what experiences the school will provide, and how this will affect the child's development.

Past School Experiences and Imagined Futures

Not only is deciding on a school a prolonged process; it involves a simultaneity of temporalities (Boholm, Henning, and Krzyworzeka 2013:106). In every interview I conducted, parents drew on their own school experiences without prompting to explain their values and priorities. This temporal connection involves reflections on risks, consequences, opportunities, and aspirations. For example, Lene angrily recounted her negative experiences at Ellebakkeskolen, the only school in the municipality with no social housing in its catchment area. The interview took place in a very small two-bedroom apartment where she lived with her two young daughters. At the time, she was studying to become a care assistant and was struggling to make ends meet, which was a recurring theme throughout the conversation. She explained how she felt when some of the teachers at her primary school treated her—as someone living in a rented flat with parents in unskilled jobs—differently from the children living in the detached houses that surround the school: "They spoke to me as if I was stupid." She specifically recalls a math teacher who told her outright, "You'll never amount to anything; you can't even do basic arithmetic." Lene's determination to shield her daughters from such experiences led her to choose Mosegrundsskolen instead of the closer Ellebakkeskolen.

Freddy's father, Morten, likewise drew on his childhood experiences, although they had led him to reject the very school Lene preferred. The interview took place in the modest 1970s terraced house where Morten lived with his wife and two sons, which was located on the outskirts of Lundeby, between a railway line and a motorway. Morten owned a small cleaning business that he had built himself, and he expressed great satisfaction with his family's situation. He contrasted this with his own upbringing on a disadvantaged social housing estate in a nearby municipality that was characterized by "many neglected children and dysfunctional families." While his own family life with a single mother was relatively stable, growing up in that area meant that he "developed a keen eye for socially deprived environments; an eye for signs of deprivation." Explaining why he and his wife had chosen not to send their children to nearby Mosegrundsskolen, he stated: "I just think the majority of kids from more disadvantaged families are at Mosegrundsskolen." He elaborated that he could see it when he was working in the social housing estate adjacent to the school:

> There are certain homes there, aren't there? And you can see it in the way the children behave. That's just the way it is in places like that. I also remember some kids [who lived there] from Freddy's daycare, and I have to say that some of them weren't angels even back then—they were left to their own devices, running around until late at night, just like in my days.

Parents' search for an overview they can use to make an informed choice about a school for their children intertwines the past, present, and future. Memories become maps that can help navigate an alien future landscape and offer a sense of control. These connections do more than link timeframes; they serve as guidelines for distinguishing between who and what is acceptable and who and what is not. This is evident in the quotes above: the link between parents' own childhood experiences and the choices they make for their children—emphasized by both Lene and Morten—also signals an explicit distancing from places and people they do not wish to engage with or expose their children to. It establishes a symbolic boundary that is materialized in the avoidance of schools associated with either a more affluent middle-class segment or with lower social classes and/or other ethnicities.

Parents know that experiences at school have formative consequences for the child. Their orientations oscillate over time, creating intergenerational bonds but also leading them to justify their parental decisions through comparisons to recollections of their own childhood. School choice differs from other decisions because parents must balance their own interests with those of the child, recalling what it was like to be a child while projecting their now-and-here child into an imagined adult. They bear the full responsibility for ensuring a school life aligned with their values and hopes while relinquishing control to others. This intensifies the pressure to acquire sufficient knowledge about each option to evaluate its potential impact on the child's well-being and development. In this process of navigation, childhood memories of school life, interactions with peers, and experiences with teachers serve as reference points, interwoven with impressions formed by school visits and accounts from others. In this way, parents view the various school options through the lens of their own experiences, constructing a set of social scenarios for their child that they can evaluate and choose from.

Emotional Considerations and Concerned Cultivation

It was clear from all the interviews I conducted that school choice involves far more than weighing up objective factors such as academic outcomes, school size, class size, routes to school, or outdoor facilities. It also evokes a wealth of feelings and reflections on the social atmosphere of schools and catchment areas, on what parents themselves enjoyed as children, and on the kind of social and educational environment in which they imagine their child will thrive (cf. Cucchiara 2013). In short, the interviews were bursting with emotions—hopes and concerns, worries and trust, positive and negative impressions, alarming and reassuring stories, and both happy and painful memories. Rooted in past experiences, emotions shape what feels right; they are inseparable from values, revealing what guides people, their criteria for assessments, and their moral standards. This is evident, for example, when Frida explained that her search for an alternative to the nearest school was triggered by hearing negative stories: "I've been really, really nervous about Mads starting over there. It really pains me, because what kind of experiences would that give him?" Another example is when Mille, who had chosen a free school, stated that she did not want her children in the local school "under any circumstances":

> **Mille:** It's too big, and there are kids there who are just completely left to themselves. I don't trust that they have things under control. There are so many scary stories about kids attacking each other. You

> know, when there's no one watching, anything can happen. And I don't want my children to be scared. And I don't want to go around worrying myself either.
> **Eva:** So, it was your worries that decided it?
> **Mille:** Yes, definitely…Then the problem with the free school is that all the kids come from the same environment—the parents are very nice and committed, and they all look alike—it is too much, but it's safe.

As these excerpts indicate, two emotional dimensions are at play: one pertaining to the parents' feelings, the other to the child's. These dimensions are interrelated, requiring parents to simultaneously consider their gut feelings and be mindful of their child's emotional state. Interestingly, the latter extends not only to emotions the child actively expresses but also to those that parents fear the child will experience in the future—a yet-to-occur problematic emotional impact that it is their responsibility to prevent. In other words, they feel they must prevent negative experiences that could potentially change the person the child would become.

European parental studies have extensively documented how engagement with children's emotional well-being has become the norm in contemporary parenthood (e.g., Hays 1996; Elias 2012; Lee et al. 2014). Similarly, Scandinavian family research has highlighted that parenthood today entails constant awareness of, and respect for and support of, children's feelings (Stefansen and Aarseth 2011; Sparrman et al. 2017; Akselvoll 2022; Born and Vasbø 2025). For many parents, the complexity of school choice reflects this broader cultural expectation—what sociologist Helene Aarseth (2016) terms "concerned cultivation." Parents feel compelled to make a decision they believe will prove decisive in shaping their child's emotional life and development. The weight of this responsibility—or in Aarseth's phrasing: "experience of oughtness"—is evident, for example, when Helle (an academic working in a government ministry) almost desperately exclaimed:

> It has been so demanding and still is…All this stuff about young people being unhappy. The whole debate about unhappiness has an impact. You don't dare take any chances with your child and the choice of school…I mean, that you're actually asking yourself: "Can I ruin my child now by choosing the wrong school?" It's crazy that you even have those kinds of thoughts when choosing a school. It's so stressful. There's a lot of stress surrounding it. Because you're simply so afraid to make the wrong choice.

Although Helle appears to be the parent most overwhelmed by the process among my interviewees, many of them—particularly mothers and those with a university degree—describe school choice as time-consuming and difficult, particularly in finding a place where they feel confident their children would thrive. As an imposed obligation, the choice itself generates concern. Not all parents feel equally burdened, but none are entirely indifferent; the situation demands engagement and confidence that the child will end up in an environment allowing them to flourish.

Ensuring the Child's Well-Being

In his now-classic book *Paranoid Parenting* (2001), sociologist Frank Furedi coined the term "parental determinism" to denote that parents are causally linked to and held accountable for their children's development and potential failures. Given the importance of childhood in forming psychologically well-balanced adults, one of the central tasks of contemporary parenthood is to ensure a good childhood through positive engagement and the preven-

tion of negative experiences. Furedi's key point is that this responsibility can be overwhelming, as it is clearly impossible to shield children from all adversity. Nevertheless, most parents I interviewed seemed to hold themselves to this standard. There is widespread concern that negative experiences may undermine a child's social confidence and self-esteem, thereby affecting their future opportunities and life satisfaction (cf. Cucchiara 2013). The child's happiness is seen as a prerequisite for learning and development; therefore, parents focus on ensuring a safe and supportive social environment conducive to happiness rather than on academic success in itself. This prioritization is expressed in various ways, for example, when Morten exclaimed, "The most important thing is that they thrive. As long as they're happy, the rest will follow," or when Poul explained why he had chosen not to send his daughter Celeste to the nearest public school:

> I worry that she will be in a class where the teachers are not able to handle… too many pupils who have difficulty listening and learning, and that it will affect the others. I still think Celeste will make it, but if she leaves school with the experience that everything is uncomfortable and the teachers can't handle it, and she loses interest and respect for others, well, that might concern me…She has a delicate soul; she has a soul that should not be exposed to any wrongdoing. So, we chose Bækkegårdsskolen, which has a good social catchment area.

Across the interviews, parents expressed confidence that their children will learn what they need to learn as long as they "thrive" and "have a good childhood." Such phrases crop up repeatedly, almost like a mantra, regardless of parents' economic or educational background. Of the two fathers quoted above, Morten lives in a modest terraced house next to a motorway, while Poul owns a newly built, architect-designed 200 m² home in a sought-after leafy neighborhood. In a very affluent area at the other end of Copenhagen, I met Andrea, an interior decorator with a Ph.D. in economics and heir to a large family fortune, in her spacious villa. Andrea and her family could easily afford to send their children to a private international school, which her husband, educated at an English boarding school, initially favored. However, Andrea emphasized that she "really likes the priority given to social life in Danish schools" and had, therefore, chosen the nearest public school, Ågårdsskolen, for all three of her children:

> **Andrea:** I'm really not concerned with the academic side of things in terms of what they come out with on the other side…So, what's important to me is that they feel safe and that they have friends living nearby, someone to play with. And the fact that we live close to the school at least makes it possible for us, hopefully, to be allowed to be part of our children's social lives.
> **Eva:** What had you heard about the schools?
> **Andrea:** What I'm told is that they do more homework at Fuglsangskolen than they do at Ågårdsskolen and that there is more structure and a higher academic level. But since I am not concerned with the academic level, this [Ågårdsskolen] suits me very well. I didn't bother, well, I didn't think it was much fun doing homework as a kid either, so the less homework they get, the better…and it all seems very nice and safe.

Regardless of social background and privilege, children's emotional well-being is a recurring theme that most parents[5] see as a prerequisite for learn-

5 A notable exception to this pattern is five of the seven parents with immigrant backgrounds. All five came to Denmark as adults (the other two as young children) and expressed their determination to find an academically ambitious school for their children.

ing. Academic outcomes are not irrelevant, but at this stage, the priority is to ensure a safe environment where children can build relationships, develop social skills, and pursue personal interests. This involves empathic engagement in the child's emotions, interests, and social life, as well as minimizing their exposure to negative influences and bad experiences in the form of "unruly," "neglected," or "selfish" children from "disadvantaged," "vulnerable," or, conversely, "too rich" or "spoiled" families (all terms used by parents during the interviews). In short, it seems to be among parents' main responsibilities to do whatever they can to protect their children from anything that might negatively impact their well-being, self-confidence, and motivation—both here and now and in the long term. Frida described how her concerns about the local school compelled her to take action:

> **Frida:** So already when he was just nine months old, I signed him up for all sorts of private schools…But then I just started hearing more and more about this one [a public school in another district], and it just sounded like a really safe and calm place…So, I called the school secretary there and talked to her.
>
> **Eva:** Yes, because it wasn't a given that you'd get a place there?
>
> **Frida:** No, and we didn't get a place at first, and they don't have a waiting list, so you have to be very pushy, even if that makes you feel uncomfortable. So, I wrote an email every day. And then it happened, she called me up and said, "You're a bit eager, I've got a lot of emails from you already," and then she said, "I've got a place today, and you can have it." It was just such a huge relief…He's just not a child who would thrive in a harsh environment.

Frida's statement illustrates a deep emotional commitment and sense of responsibility to support her children's well-being. At the same time, it conveys an expectation of action—an expectation that schools appear to acknowledge. The study provides several examples of how the most persistent parents, such as Frida, who regularly contacted their preferred school, often succeed in securing a place. Engagement in children's emotional lives functions not only as a normative expectation of good parenting but also as a symbolic marker of respectability—actively used to show and to assess who counts as a responsible parent.

Social Imaginaries and Perceived Divisions

Explicit displays of social hierarchy and putting personal interests ahead of the collective good are generally viewed negatively in this cultural context (Gullestad 1992). In institutions such as daycare centers and schools, emphasis is on the well-being of the whole group rather than individual achievement (Gilliam and Gulløv 2017). This was evident when the preschool teachers, Maria and Tine, sighed and lamented parents "who only have an eye for their own child," or when Lisa dismissed the local academically profiled private school as "for rich people who only care about their own children's success." However, when school choices are justified in terms of a child's emotional needs, they seem to escape such moral criticism. At least, I heard no negative remarks about parents who make an effort to secure their child's access to a particular school; indeed, their efforts appear to be respected by other parents and rewarded by schools.

Reading through interview transcripts, I found that a key concern was what their children's everyday social life would be like. Parents opted out of large schools where "my child can be bul-

lied without anybody noticing," as Sarah said, or "where anything can happen between the children," as Morten explained. Although most of them did not know much about individual schools, they did their best to gain the necessary insight to assess what everyday life would be like so they could send their child off to school with confidence. Perhaps it is precisely because all schools in Denmark offer similar opportunities for further education that parents primarily focus on the social and psychological implications of the various options. The key difference between schools lies in their social composition, prompting parents to reflect on what these differences might mean for their child. Social considerations thus become a legitimate—and almost expected—way for responsible parents to justify their choice of school.

This interpretation involves a social imaginary, a mapping of the social space to ascertain which types of parents send their children to the various schools, which schools have families who share the same parenting values, and which offer potential classmates who can be trusted. In this way, parents seek to prevent their child from experiencing psychological suffering or following an undesirable developmental trajectory. This was evident, for example, when Charlotte explained why she did not want her children to go to Mosegrundsskolen:

> It's about the types of people who live around there and what kind of catchment areas there are. And it might be people like the boy I mentioned that we didn't want our son to have playdates with because he hit [other children] and the parents smoked even though they had a child in a pram, and I think they also smoked cannabis. It's important to me that they become friends with children of parents who are on top of things and engaged in their children's lives.

As this quote illustrates, Charlotte is attentive not only to her children's peers but also to the values and parenting practices within their homes. Although she articulated such social distinctions more explicitly than most participants in my study, parents commonly expressed an awareness of the types of families their children encounter through classmates. A key criterion in these assessments was the perceived level of parental involvement in the child's everyday life, regarded as an indicator of responsibility and stability. This was not driven by competitive logic as much as by a belief in the formative forces that operate within a group of children, for better or worse, where like-minded peers are assumed to provide the child with the most secure psychological foundation. Anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1992) has identified "egalitarian individualism" as something assigned a cultural value in Scandinavia, which resonates strongly with the priorities expressed by these parents. Although many emphasized social and ethnic diversity as contributing positively to their children's development, there was also a fairly consistent concern with placing the child in settings where they were likely to feel included, rather than risking experiences of dominance, distance, or exclusion. With a certain irony, the effort to ensure that children would thrive in their new school entailed a search for imagined sameness, a community of likeminded individuals, which, paradoxically, required close attention to difference. Parents carefully scrutinized other parents to assess whether they appeared to share similar views on children and upbringing and demonstrated a comparable level of commitment to their offspring. In this sense, engagement in school choice follows a logic of distinction: an evaluative process through which parents determine whom they can trust, who may pose a potential risk, and whom they should therefore prevent their children from encountering.

This is demanding work, as it requires investing time and resources to determine whom and what to rely on. Of course, parents have different resources, and the empirical material indicates that this has an impact on school choice in the sense that the most highly educated parents or those with the most time available (who, in this sample, are also the most affluent) explore more options and, if necessary, push to get their child into a particular school. Consequently, parents with the means and resources tend to opt out of schools they believe have an unfavorable social composition. More precisely, they avoid schools attended by children whose parents lack the interest or resources to research the various options, do not have access to the same sources of information, or are unaware that demonstrating commitment to their child's well-being—by attending parent-teacher meetings, information events, or social activities at kindergartens and schools—serves as a public display of engagement and responsibility, a way of positioning themselves within the social space. The material shows that the most highly engaged parents tend to choose the same schools, leaving the schools they reject to children of less dedicated or less knowledgeable parents.

In this sense, as in many international studies in this field, I found that school choice both reflects and helps construct and maintain social distinctions. However, unlike in Bourdieu and Passeron's classic study (1970), the dynamic at play here is not that the school reflects and legitimizes the cultural tastes of the bourgeoisie or regulates access to the next level of the education system. Nor is it clearly linked to fears of academic decline, as the Danish education system—grounded in an inclusive ideal—is not primarily organized around competition. Instead, the material presented here points to a dominant concern with the school's role as a social meeting place. At least initially, what happens academically is less important than how others influence the child's well-being and formative processes. Thus, while social capital and fear of downward mobility are part of the decision-making process, they do not primarily involve securing access to lucrative networks, but rather shield the child from influences considered incompatible with parents' values. School choice is, therefore, driven by a child-sensitive awareness and a protective impulse that nevertheless functions as a moral boundary (Sayer 2005; Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015)—or what Gullestad (2002) terms an "invisible fence"—between people and groups who possess different resources, have other values and priorities, or display varying degrees of engagement in their children's lives.

School Choice as Moral and Emotional Boundary Work

This article has analyzed parental school choice in a Danish context, demonstrating that the process extends well beyond academic and practical concerns to encompass a wide range of reflections and emotions—from parents' own memories of schools and neighborhoods to their experiences as parents of young children and how they envisage the implications of different social scenarios for the child's future. When weighing the options, parents draw on cultural notions of what constitutes a good childhood, navigating across time and social space to decide what to embrace and what to avoid to secure the best possible experiences for their child.

This study's key contribution to international research on school choice is the centrality of childhood and the sensitivity to children's emotional and social needs. Across a range of financial, social, and educational backgrounds, parents prioritize ensur-

ing a happy and safe childhood above all else. This means tailoring choices to the child's personality and needs while shielding them from influences perceived as negative—particularly peers whose parents are seen as insufficiently involved. Such "concerned cultivation" differs from the existential drama of securing academic success reported in more competitive systems (Skarpenes and Sakslind 2010; Aarseth 2016). Yet the strong emotional engagement shows that, even in this seemingly lower-stakes context, school choice can be a dramatic event. Protecting a child's psychological well-being is not only a core expectation of good parenthood, but it is also part of a status game. Choosing a school involves drawing symbolic boundaries—distancing oneself from parents perceived as having different views on upbringing or as lacking control and insufficiently engaged in their children's social and emotional lives. Such engagement thus functions as a hallmark of moral respectability, legitimizing social distance from those who fall short.

This moral distinction comes to the fore when choosing schools. The choice itself intensifies doubts and concerns about how best to ensure the child's well-being. It triggers a symbolic escalation of assessments—not only of schools but also of people—of who can be trusted and who is worthy of respect. As such, it reinforces cultural distinctions and social boundaries by serving as a broader guideline for evaluating not only individual parents and their interactions with their children but also groups, places, and neighborhoods. In this way, school choice becomes integral to a social imaginary, providing a means of understanding what is up and down in social space and determining which social circles one should align oneself with. School choice does not in itself create segregation, but it can contribute to systematizing and institutionalizing divisions between children, families, neighborhoods, and schools.

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