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Public Schools and Privileged Families: A Scoping Review of School Choice Studies

Claudia Córdoba, Christian Larotonda, Alonso Laborda, Romina Madrid, Ana Vergara & Karina Rojas

Abstract: This article examines how families with high educational and socioeconomic status relate to public schooling amid the global expansion of school choice policies, identifying patterns, meanings, and emerging tensions in their engagement with public education. A scoping review was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, and SciELO, focusing on qualitative and mixed-methods studies published between 2017 and 2024 in English or Spanish. A total of 39 empirical studies met the inclusion criteria and were analysed thematically. The findings show that these families are not a homogeneous group. While the dominant trend is avoidance of public schooling in favour of private or selective options, a minority deliberately chooses public schools. Such choices are motivated by commitments to diversity, civic values, sense of neighbourhood belonging, or perceived academic quality, but are often selective and accompanied by strategies that reproduce privilege, including opportunity hoarding and parental intervention. The review highlights the progressive erosion of public schooling as a shared common good, alongside ambivalent forms of privileged engagement with the public sector, with important implications for educational inequality, social cohesion, and the democratic role of public education.

Keywords: public schooling, high educational level, high income, educational inequality

1. Introduction

This scoping review examines how families with high educational and socioeconomic status relate to public schooling in a global context characterised by the expansion of school choice policies.

Historically, throughout most of the twentieth century, states played a central role in the governance, funding, and regulation of school systems. This role was grounded in the assumption that education should contribute to the political, social, and economic project of modernity, particularly through nation-building and the promotion of social cohesion (Durkheim, 1922; Weber, 1971).

From their inception, however, educational systems have combined state and private provision, with private education often predating the establishment of public systems. The meaning of this coexistence - and the criteria guiding families' choices between public and private schools - has shifted over time, moving from a paradigm of complementarity or exceptionality, in which public education was central, to one increasingly shaped by commodification and competition. In recent decades, pro-market reforms have expanded worldwide, promoting public-private cooperation, importing managerial practices from the private sector, or directly advancing the privatization of school systems and competition among families and between public and private schools (Bonal and Bellei, 2018; Van Zanten, 2015; Verger et al., 2016). These policies differ substantially across educational systems in their meanings, intensity, funding mechanisms, and scope.

Within this broader transformation, the expansion of school choice has become a key policy mechanism shaping contemporary education systems. Approximately two thirds of OECD countries have implemented school choice models, particularly at the secondary level (Musset, 2012). This expansion has occurred across diverse regions, including countries with historically strong public education systems, such as France (Van Zanten, 2007), the United States (Teske and Schneider, 2001), and China (Liu and Apple, 2024). Consequently, the growth of school choice cannot be attributed solely to neoliberal reforms but also reflects changing educational strategies among middle-class families (Dronkers et al., 2010).

A substantial body of research shows that families with high educational and socioeconomic status are especially well positioned to benefit from school choice policies. These families tend to mobilize their economic, cultural, and social capital to navigate school markets more effectively (Ball et al., 1995; Ball, 2003; Van Zanten, 2003; Pandolfini, 2013). Across contexts, they typically seek access to schools perceived as the "best," which often serve socially homogeneous student populations. For instance, in the United States, these families frequently avoid assigned neighbourhood schools in

favour of charter schools (Wilson, 2019); in France and Italy, they deploy strategies to access prestigious public schools or those located in advantaged neighbourhoods (Cordini et al., 2019; Van Zanten, 2015); while in Chile, the private sector - whether state-subsidized or fully private - remains the most common option (Canales et al., 2016).

Despite extensive research on these dynamics, there is no consensus regarding the effects of school choice on educational outcomes and social segregation. Some studies suggest that the impact of school choice on academic performance and social integration depends largely on program design and contextual features (Jabbar et al., 2022; Swanson, 2017). In contrast, other research argues that school choice policies tend to exacerbate socioeconomic and academic segregation without producing clear gains in student performance (Haugen, 2020; Musset, 2012). Relatedly, Jheng et al. (2022) contend that, because parental choices are strongly mediated by socioeconomic status, these policies have failed to deliver their promised benefits and have instead undermined social justice. From a normative perspective, Saltmarsh (2024) argues that competition-based reforms damage the common good in education and negatively affect public schooling.

Within this debate, several studies explicitly link the weakening of public schooling to the expansion of market-oriented education policies. These works highlight how such policies erode the historical role of public education as a central institution for fostering social cohesion (Durkheim, 1922; Putnam, 2000) and civic learning (Fishman and Haas, 2012; Stitzlein, 2012), thereby challenging its foundational role in democratic societies (Bellei, 2015; Biesta et al., 2022; Hogan and Thompson, 2021).

As school choice expands, public schooling increasingly risks being redefined as a residual option for those deemed "most in need." This shift facilitates the concentration of disadvantaged students in state schools (Gerrard et al., 2017) and alters the original function of public education, which was to provide a shared formative experience linked to the construction of nation-states, relegating it instead to a subsidiary position vis-à-vis the private sector.

Against this backdrop of weakening and redefinition, this article focuses on how families with high educational and socioeconomic status relate to public schooling. Their relationship with public schools is not uniform and ranges from avoidance to deliberate selection. Given their privileged capacity to understand and strategically engage with education systems, it is important to examine whether their views of public schooling align with long-standing research findings or whether new and less explored patterns are emerging that may reshape understandings of public education.

Importantly, families with high educational and socioeconomic status cannot be treated as a homogeneous group. Rather, they comprise differ-

entiated subgroups with distinct expectations, values, and orientations toward schooling (Savage, 2015). This internal diversity gives rise to multiple cultural repertoires, life trajectories, and educational aspirations for children (Méndez and Gayo, 2019), calling for a reassessment of traditional representations of them (Hey et al., 2017). These dynamics have begun to be reflected in school choice research, including studies documenting the voluntary selection of socially or racially heterogeneous schools by specific middle-class groups in contexts such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Hernández, 2019).

Although the reviewed literature refers to these families using different labels -including middle class, upper class, advantaged, or privileged families- this review does not adopt social class as its primary analytical category. Instead, it uses families with high educational and socioeconomic status as the operational criterion for identifying the population of interest across studies. This choice reflects the conceptual heterogeneity of the literature. Accordingly, references to middle- or upper-class families throughout this article correspond to the terminology used in the original studies rather than to an analytical classification adopted by this review.

Building on this literature, this article aims to synthesize recent research on school choice among families with high educational and socioeconomic status, with particular attention to the role of public schooling in their decisions. While prior studies have examined the selection of heterogeneous schools by these groups, their relationship with the public sector remains underexplored. Accordingly, this review addresses the following question: How do families with high educational and socioeconomic status regard and relate to public schooling in their school choice processes? To answer it, the study reviews literature published between 2017 and 2024, identifying key trends, tensions, and emerging transformations in the role of schooling in the production of citizenship and social cohesion.

The following section outlines the methodology of the scoping review. The results section then presents the main findings, including a subsection devoted to families who voluntarily choose public schooling. Finally, the article concludes with a reflection on the contemporary meaning of public education and its prospects.

2. Method

The methodology used in this scoping review is based on Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which has been furthered by other authors such as Levac et al. (2010). The review process followed the main guidelines of PRISMA-ScR, which were systematized by Tricco et al. (2018). This type of study allows for mapping the literature and concepts of a specific field of study.

Although the school choices of families with high educational and socioeconomic status have been widely studied, existing research primarily focuses on private or selective schools. Research centered on their relationship toward public education is more recent and less developed. Therefore, a scoping review is appropriate for identifying and mapping the existing literature in terms of its trends, findings, and knowledge gaps.

According to Sharma and Goyal (2023), despite the flexibility of the scoping review process, planning is important. Population, concept and context should be defined to guide the process, forming the core of the research question. In this review, the question was: with the advancement of school choice policies at the global level, how do families with high educational and socioeconomic status regard and relate to public schooling in their school choice process?

The search comprised the databases Scopus, Web of Science and Scielo. The search was conducted in two stages: an initial search carried out between March and May 2023, and an updated search conducted between August and September 2024 to capture literature published up to that date. Studies with abstracts in English or in Spanish were selected. The period searched ranged from 2017 to 2024.

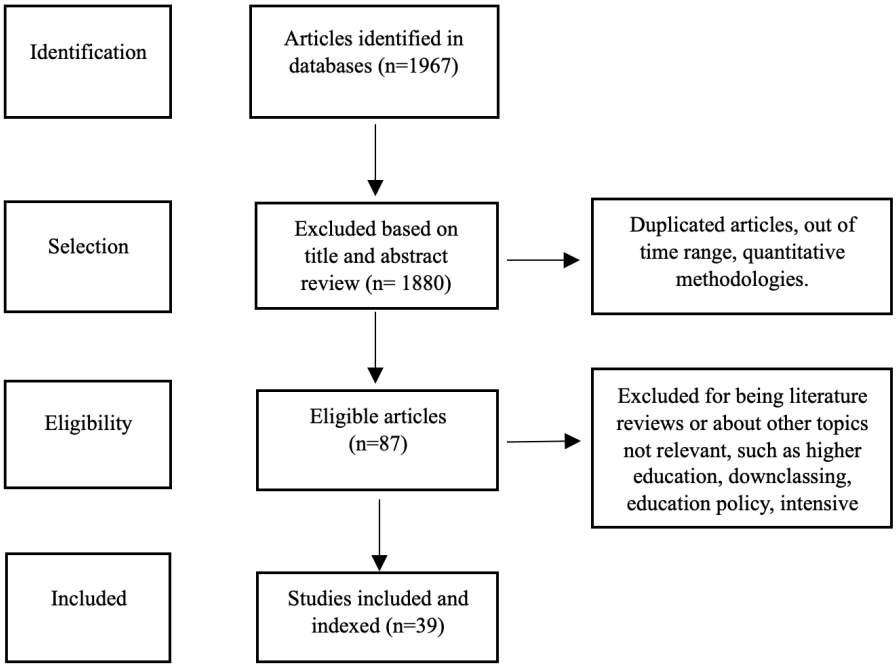
The search process included seven concepts: "familias/families"; "padres/parents"; "clase alta/upper class"; "alto nivel educativo/high educational level"; "altos ingresos/high incomes"; "escuela pública/public school"; "elección de escuela/school choice". These concepts were combined iteratively using the Boolean operators "AND" and "OR", adapting the syntax to the search fields of each database (e.g., TITLE-ABS-KEY in Scopus; Topic search in Web of Science). In Web of Science, searches were additionally narrowed by country to explore studies conducted in specific national contexts across North America, Latin America and Western Europe, the regions where studies on school choice policies are most widespread (Orellana et al., 2018).

Included articles comprised empirical studies employing qualitative and mixed methods, aimed at understanding the school choice phenomenon within the aforementioned population and contexts. These studies emphasized the senses and meanings attributed by individuals (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) to the school choice process.

The articles identified were organised and their titles, abstracts and keywords were revised. The screening process was conducted by five members of the research team. Each article's title and abstract were screened by a single reviewer against the eligibility criteria. Potentially relevant studies were subsequently assessed through full-text reading. Cases of uncertainty or disagreement were discussed collectively by the research team until consensus was reached, following the general approach suggested by Levac et al. (2010) and Tricco et al. (2016). Search results were managed, deduplicated,

and screened using Microsoft Excel. Duplicates, systematic reviews, studies on higher education, homeschooling and other articles that did not address the research question were removed. A total of 39 articles were included in the final corpus and are indicated by an asterisk (*) in the reference list.

Figure 1. Selection process for the article corpus of the scoping review



Source: Created by the authors based on the 2020 PRISMA-ScR model

The included articles were systematized using a structured data extraction instrument developed by the research team. They include the abstract, characteristics of the methodology used, main theoretical concepts, a synthesis of the findings and results, as well as a summary of the conclusions. This material was analysed descriptively and thematically, enabling the identification of patterns, trends and gaps (Levac et al., 2010).

Figure 1 illustrates the selection process for the scoping review article corpus. In the identification phase, 1,967 articles were identified across the databases. During the screening stage, 1,880 articles were excluded following a title and abstract review; reasons for exclusion included duplicates, being outside the established timeframe, or utilizing quantitative methodologies.

87 articles were assessed for eligibility. Of these, 48 were excluded because they did not align with the research question, including studies on

higher education, downclassing, education policy, intensive mothering, or homeschooling. Ultimately, 39 studies were included in the final corpus.

3. Results

3.1 Patterns of conceptual visibility and opacity identified in the analysed studies

The conceptual categories used to examine school choice in the analysed studies draw primarily on the critical tradition. In particular, several concepts rooted in French sociology are prominent, including cultural capital, symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1979), and social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964). This theoretical framework is used for three main purposes: to explain the relationship between different forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) and school choice; to analyse how middle- and upper-class families use education as a mechanism of social reproduction; and to account for the persistence of structural inequalities within the education system. Taken together, the analysis suggests that families' school choices are shaped by *habitus*, cultural capital, and social networks.

The analyses reviewed tend to focus on the relationship between school choice processes and the reproductive role of schooling. Within this framework, the strategies parents use to preserve their capital are interpreted through a reproductive framework, even when families choose public schools for their children. Concerns about maintaining one's position in the social hierarchy - or achieving upward mobility, largely dependent on cultural capital - are consistently reported among the families studied. These concerns translate into a range of practices, including investment in complementary educational activities and socialization spaces for children, active participation in and demands placed on schools, and the formation of networks with other parents in similar situations.

Although most articles report focusing primarily on middle-class families, almost none offers a clear definition of the term. As noted in the Introduction, this scoping review did not rely on "class" as an explicit analytical category; instead, it used "high educational status" and "high socioeconomic status" as criteria for family selection - characteristics commonly associated with middle- and upper-class positions. Beyond this methodological distinction, frequent references to the middle class coexist with a notable lack of definition or critical examination of the concept. When the term is used, authors appear to invoke a taken-for-granted, socially shared understanding that remains largely implicit.

Beyond social class, the analysed articles also draw on categories such as gender, religion, nationality, and ethnicity, although these are used far less

frequently. These categories are generally used to address intersectionality and to capture the complexity of school choice processes. Two patterns stand out. First, despite the well-established relevance of gender as an analytical category for understanding systemic inequalities, only four articles include this variable. Its limited presence points to the need for further research on how gender relates to parental roles, children's gender, educational outcomes, lived experiences, and safety concerns in school choice. Second, and by contrast, categories related to racialization are used more extensively. Studies employ a wide range of labels - such as race, racial background, racial context, White, Black, Brown, Latino, and Asian - to identify participants and/or frame analysis. Indeed, more than one third of the selected studies use some form of race-based categorization, often in interaction with social class as a key factor shaping school choice (Kafka, 2022; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021).

3.2 Public schooling and families with high educational and socioeconomic status: patterns of adaptation and dissent

Most of the articles included in this scoping review focus on families as their primary unit of analysis. Only three depart from this pattern: two examine teachers in their professional roles rather than explicitly as parents (Haugen, 2020; Liu and Bray, 2020), while the third analyses the information provided by secondary schools to families (Delale-O'Connor, 2018). Although these studies are situated in different contexts, they converge in showing that school choice mechanisms are not socially neutral but instead tend to favour higher-income groups. In the case of Myanmar, access to better educational conditions depends on families' financial capacity to pay for tutoring (Liu and Bray, 2020). In Oslo, within a predominantly public system, privileged families and schools mutually reinforce one another, contributing to the segregation of other groups (Haugen, 2020). In Chicago, families with lower levels of reading skills, time, or informational capital face unequal access to the information required to make school choices (Delale-O'Connor, 2018).

In school choice processes, factors such as parents' educational trajectories, siblings' enrolment in the school system, and children's gender play a significant role in shaping families' decisions. To inform their choices, families consult both hot and cold sources of information (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Hot sources include coworkers, classmates, relatives, and neighbours, whereas cold sources encompass school websites, meetings with teaching and administrative staff, and formal communication with school authorities (Giovine, 2021; Giovine and Arce, 2024). In addition, certain options are excluded based on specific school characteristics, such as location, reputation, or religious orientation.

Across the analysed studies, at least four ideal types of school choice can be identified. Although not exhaustive, this categorization offers an overview of the main patterns observed in school choice criteria. Notably, most articles describe more than one type of choice.

The first group, identified in almost all studies, is characterised by a preference for private schooling. In the current global context, marked by the widespread adoption of school choice policies, families with high educational and socioeconomic status tend to choose private schools almost exclusively. These schools are commonly perceived as offering stronger academic standards, greater safety, more favourable conditions for building social networks, and both economic and geographic accessibility (Foli and Boterman, 2022). By contrast, particularly in the Global South, public schools are often portrayed as a "failed other" (Giovine, 2021: 193)—that is, as politicized, inefficient, underfunded, deteriorated, and sometimes violent spaces lacking academic rigor. This perception is not observed in countries with robust public education systems, as discussed below.

Studies describing this first ideal type conceptualize school choice as a strategic action aimed at preserving - or reproducing - class privileges (Carrasco et al., 2021; Foli and Boterman, 2022; Freidus, 2019; Ubakivi-Hadachi and Nimmerfeldt, 2020). In all but two cases (Merry, 2023; Roch et al., 2017), this choice is experienced as natural and grounded in taken-for-granted common sense (Schütz, 2011), rather than as a political stance, and is instead framed as normal behaviour or as an expression of good parenting (Merry, 2023; Narodowski and Gottau, 2017). A seemingly contradictory aspect is that these families do not always perceive themselves as privileged, but rather as rational and responsible actors oriented toward their children's future well-being, as previously documented (Ball, 2003). This self-perception hinders both critical scrutiny of, and recognition of, their role in the reproduction of inequality.

Within this ideal type, a subgroup of families displays this pattern of behaviour - choosing private schools and following the mainstream trend - even when they feel this choice conflicts with their personal ethical principles, which are more closely aligned with notions of the common good. Some of these families include a parent who is a teacher and who recognizes the social value of education and the importance of public schooling (Hadley Dunn and Kretchmar, 2022; Merry, 2023). Nevertheless, they prioritize stronger academic preparation for their children and/or exposure to a more demanding educational environment over their stated principles. Other families, such as those described by Hernández and Carrasco (2020), espouse discourses valuing socioeconomic diversity in schools, yet still refrain from choosing public education.

The second ideal type comprises families who engage in school choice practices that are atypical within their social context. Rather than rejecting the dominant trend of opting for private schooling, these families have internalized the underlying principles of school choice policies and enact them more fully and more rapidly than the majority.

Within this second group, some families can be identified as part of the global middle class (GMC) (Ball and Nikita, 2014). These families typically consist of professional parents who, for work-related reasons, have relocated to a foreign country or are considering such a move and seek to prepare their children for this transition. This atypical situation strongly shapes their school choice practices, intensifying class-based rationales commonly associated with the middle class (Yemini et al., 2018). As a result, education is often framed less in terms of its social dimension and more as an individualized investment aimed at securing future professional advancement or an advantaged position through processes of "futurescaping" (Adams and Agbenyega, 2019).

These families are characterised by a global mobile-minded orientation and by embodying what Beech et al. (2021) describe as "cosmopolitan start-up capital" - a specific form of cultural capital oriented toward facilitating social reproduction in contexts of high mobility. Accordingly, they enrol their children in a range of school types: some attend private schools oriented toward the children of foreign professionals with temporary residency, while others are designed to prepare students for future educational or professional trajectories abroad. In this latter case, schools may be either private or public, as observed in contexts such as China (Liu and Apple, 2024) and Israel (Yemini et al., 2018). Notably, these families do not select schools indiscriminately; rather, they engage in highly strategic decision-making, demonstrating their capacity to navigate school choice processes and preserve their class privileges.

Moreover, in countries such as Ireland and Germany, additional factors - such as fears related to integration with groups perceived as threatening (primarily migrants) or a desire for social distinction - lead these families to engage in processes of elitization (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964; Roch et al., 2017). These families show limited awareness of the broader consequences of their actions and, as noted by Auðardóttir and Kosunen (2020), may choose to send their children to private schools despite feelings of guilt associated with acting against the common good - an attitude that predominates within their social context. In this sense, enrolling children in private schools anticipates the trajectory increasingly expected of the middle class from a pro-market perspective.

A similar dynamic can be observed on Easter Island. In this territory, public schooling places strong emphasis on the revaluation and revitalization of

Indigenous culture and language (Corvalán, 2022). Although this may seem counterintuitive, a significant number of Rapanui families send their children to private institutions that lack an intercultural focus. These families report prioritizing individual and pragmatic considerations, framing school choice as a safeguard for their children's future professional advancement and believing that such choices will facilitate successful integration into the social and labour structures of mainland Chile (Corvalán, 2022).

A third ideal type consists of families whose school choice practices run counter to the mainstream trend in commodified educational contexts. These families send their children to public schools despite having the resources to enroll them in private institutions, thereby diverging from what is typically expected of families from their social class. Studies conducted in the United States emphasize that such parents deliberately go against prevailing tendencies, describing them as families who "go against the grain in choosing" (Ellison and Aloe, 2017: 3; Hill, 2018). A similar pattern is observed in Argentina, where Narodowski and Gottau note that some families actively "resist the majority trend" (2017: 38). Nelson, in turn, highlights these parents' capacity to disengage from or temper dominant social mandates, referring to them as "independent choosers who tune out" (2020: 1). The motivations underlying these choices are heterogeneous and are discussed in the following section.

A final ideal type, identified in only two studies (Bereményi and Carrasco, 2017; Nogueira et al., 2023), consists of families who enrol their children in public schools not out of strong ideological commitments but rather due to economic constraints.

3.3 Public schooling choices among families with high educational and socioeconomic status

One of the main motivations driving parents with high educational and socioeconomic status to choose public schooling is the pursuit of student diversity. These families value schools that bring together students from varied socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, as such environments foster more socially diverse interactions for their children (Ellison and Aloe, 2017; Menegaki, 2023; Hill, 2018). Other studies report that these families choose public schools in defence of public education and of what it stands for, particularly in contrast to private schooling (Bonal et al., 2024; Nelson, 2020). For example, Narodowski and Gottau (2017) argue that public schooling can foster critical thinking and social commitment. They further suggest that these institutions place a stronger emphasis on knowledge acquisition, where academic achievement is attained through effort. This distinguishes public schools from private institutions, which have historically been associ-

ated with religious orientations and in which academic success can, to some extent, be "bought."

Nevertheless, these families ensure that their children attend public schools with reputations for excellence or with innovative educational projects, selectively targeting a limited set of institutions (Bonal et al., 2024; Ellison and Aloe, 2017; Giovine, 2021; Kafka, 2022; Lareau et al., 2018; Menegaki, 2023; Potterton, 2020; Rowe and Lubienski, 2017; Ubakivi-Hadachi and Nimmerfeldt, 2020). Paradoxically, even when these choices are motivated by commitments to diversity or to public education itself, they may reproduce exclusionary dynamics when access to these schools becomes competitively structured. In New York, Sattin-Bajaj and Roda (2020) use the concept of "opportunity hoarding" to account for this pattern. Securing access to schools deemed appropriate requires substantial investments of time, effort, and planning, which may involve mastering complex admissions rules, paying tutors to prepare children for entrance exams, or hiring specialized educational consultants.

Building on this paradox, Roda and Sattin-Bajaj (2024) report that these parents are aware that such practices contribute to the reproduction of inequalities affecting less favoured social groups; nevertheless, they view their actions as legitimate because they operate within the formal rules of the system. In Germany, Roch et al. (2017) show that middle-class parents take advantage of established alliances between preschools and primary schools, enabling cohesive groups of children to transition together across institutions. Parents also form networks to coordinate enrolment in specific schools. In this context, the most sought-after schools are those with a high proportion of students whose home and family language is German.

Drawing on the Australian case, Rowe and Lubienski (2017) argue that these families favour so-called "popular schools," defined as institutions with high demand and socially homogeneous student bodies - predominantly white, middle- and upper - socioeconomic status, and of Australian or British origin. Similarly, Giovine (2021) shows that a segment of the upper class in Córdoba, Argentina, opts for prestigious public schools on the basis of academic quality, drawing a clear distinction between these institutions and other public schools, which they view negatively. In India, where public schooling is also widely discredited, Ullah and Mukherjee (2023) report that some middle- and upper-class parents nevertheless choose specific public schools because of their reputation, teachers' credentials, extracurricular offerings, or facilities. For these families, such schools are perceived as comparable to certain private institutions, making them less susceptible to negative rumours about their children's schooling.

Several studies from the Global North link the choice of public schooling among families with high educational and socioeconomic status to processes

of gentrification (Ellison and Aloe, 2017; Freidus, 2019; Hill, 2018; Nelson, 2020). In this literature, gentrification refers to the settlement of middle-class families in urban areas historically inhabited by lower-income populations. As Ellison and Aloe note, these parents are part of "recent urban migration trends in the US [that] constitute a reversal of the late 20th-century model of middle-class White flight to the suburbs" (2017: 21).

In many cases, the decision to move out of, or remain in, central urban areas also entails enrolling children in public schools. Lareau et al., in turn, examine contexts of high socioeconomic segregation in which "elite public-school districts" emerge (2018: 4). Within this framework, studies by Nelson (2020) and Hill (2018) show that some families are motivated by a desire to cultivate a sense of community through neighbourhood public schools.

Some studies characterize families who choose public schooling as exhibiting a liberal, progressive, or explicitly left-wing habitus (Çelik and Özdemir, 2021; Narodowski and Gottau, 2017; Nelson, 2020; Roch et al., 2017). Menegaki (2023) documents the self-perceptions of some mothers who have chosen public schools. These women describe themselves as having an "awakened mindset" or being "open-minded," thereby drawing a clear symbolic boundary between themselves and other social groups (Menegaki, 2023: 262).

Furthermore, several studies show that choosing public schools generates concerns, including fears of low academic performance or children's exposure to situations they might not encounter in other contexts. These concerns are addressed through a range of strategies.

First, parents tend to seek out public schools that are not perceived as "ghettos" predominantly attended by ethnic or migrant minorities, but rather as spaces offering a "balanced" or "appropriate" social mix (Bonal et al., 2024; Ellison and Aloe, 2017; Freidus, 2019). Parents also look for schools where they can find other families with a similar social profile (Nelson, 2020), as well as a "controlled" mix that allows them to preserve their own cultural identity (Roch et al., 2017; Seghers et al., 2019). Bonal et al. (2024) further show that preferences for public schools are considerably more fluid when schools are located in affluent neighbourhoods and enrol student populations that reflect this context; by contrast, greater tensions emerge when schools are situated in more socioeconomically heterogeneous areas.

Second, these parents organize collectively to pressure schools to undertake actions they consider relevant. Nelson (2020) highlights the influence that parent organizations may exert, particularly when they focus on improving neighbourhood schools by mobilizing additional resources. Hill (2018) describes a network of parents in central Detroit who chose to remain in or relocate to the area and organised to improve local schools by promoting, among other measures, a more flexible and appealing curriculum to mit-

igate the effects of standardised testing. Menegaki (2023) examines a public school founded by teachers and middle-class families that, despite its public status, operates through alternative pedagogies and parental financial contributions, illustrating processes of privatisation within a public institution driven by privileged families. Lareau et al. (2018) likewise show how families organised collectively to challenge school administrations, mobilizing their various forms of capital to demand that their children be assigned to specific public schools.

Third, these families express confidence in their ability to compensate for what schools fail to provide by drawing on their cultural and economic capital, either by directly supporting their children's learning or by hiring private tutors (Çelik and Özdemir, 2022; Ellison and Aloe, 2017; Narodowski and Gottau, 2017). This strategy is observed even in contexts where middle-class forms of capital have been devalued by neoliberal or Islamization policies, as in Turkey (Çelik and Özdemir, 2021). Despite these efforts to closely monitor their children's educational trajectories and school experiences, Nelson (2020) shows that parents may still face criticism from family members and friends for choosing - or failing to avoid - neighbourhood public schools. Potterton (2020) similarly reports that parents often experience distress stemming from uncertainty about whether they are making the "right choice" and from the persistent sense that no school choice will be entirely satisfactory.

The arrival of these families in public schools during processes of gentrification has significant consequences. It is associated with shifts in the sociodemographic composition of schools, the emergence of barriers to the participation of less privileged parents, increased social distance among families, and heightened feelings of exclusion among minority groups (Alvarado and Butler, 2023; Freidus, 2019; Menegaki, 2023; Nelson, 2020). These dynamics, in turn, reduce, or even prevent, effective communication, collaboration, and mutual understanding across social groups. Indeed, Ellison and Aloe (2017) challenge the assumption that the arrival of middle-class families in central urban areas fosters social integration, arguing that these families are willing to tolerate only limited forms of diversity and therefore selectively choose specific schools.

Finally, some studies note that families choose public schools not out of principle but because they lack the financial means to access private schooling. For example, Nogueira et al. (2023)[1] show that in the Brazilian context - where middle-class families tend to prefer private schools - opting for public education is primarily driven by financial constraints. Similarly, Bereményi

[1] The participating families were described as middle class. They held higher education diplomas but did not necessarily had well-paid occupations or were going through an economic crisis.

and Carrasco (2017)[2], in their study of the Spanish case, report that for some parents, choosing a public school is perceived as a "necessary evil," viewed as offering lower quality than private institutions and enrolling student populations that these families tend to devalue.

In such cases, families seek out prestigious public schools located in specific areas, where they are more likely to encounter students with social profiles similar to their own. Moreover, these families adopt a vigilant stance toward schools, closely monitoring their practices, demanding the fulfilment of established standards, and actively mobilizing their knowledge of the regulations that underpin them (Bereményi and Carrasco, 2017; Nogueira et al., 2023).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The research question guiding this study was: How do families with high educational and socioeconomic status regard and relate to public schooling in their school choice processes? The reviewed literature suggests, first, that these families do not constitute a homogeneous group. Rather, they exhibit diverse patterns shaped by contextual factors, including the presence of minority groups whose relationships with public schooling diverge from more prevalent orientations identified in the literature. This scoping review proposes four analytically constructed ideal types that capture distinct ways in which families relate to public schooling. These types range from outright rejection, to the active defence of public schooling as an option aligned with social justice and the common good, and they encompass both strategic choices made in specific institutional contexts and choices shaped by circumstantial economic constraints.

Several studies suggest that, in many school choice systems, public schooling is not the preferred option among families with high educational and socioeconomic status. Many authors interpret these preferences through the lens of social reproduction, highlighting how perceptions of educational quality are often associated with social exclusivity and distinction.

The literature frequently discusses these patterns in relation to school segregation and processes of "residualisation" (Rowe and Lubienski, 2017), which may contribute to the declining social prestige attributed to public schooling in some contexts. Studies conducted in Latin American and Asian contexts describe similar dynamics in education systems where public schooling has experienced processes of structural and symbolic weakening. Within this body of literature, these dynamics are frequently discussed as

[2] The participating families were characterised by experiencing a downward mobility process after a decade of prosperity in the context of Spain's economic crisis.

contributing to increasing differentiation between public and private educational sectors. A number of authors argue that such differentiation may be associated with patterns of segregation along socioeconomic, ethnic and, in some contexts, gender lines (Haugen, 2020).

It is noteworthy that this dominant trend is partially counterbalanced by minority groups that diverge from the prevailing pattern of avoidance of public schooling, as documented in previous literature reviews (Hernández, 2019). Several studies describe these families as endorsing values associated with social diversity, inclusion, and civic engagement, and as valuing opportunities for their children to interact with peers from diverse social backgrounds. However, their choices are usually selective, as they tend to favour specific schools characterised by a perceived fair or balanced social mix, while expressing reservations about schools perceived as highly concentrated in disadvantaged or minority student populations.

This selective engagement often generates tensions within families, particularly regarding concerns about academic performance, peer influence, and school climate. Many studies describe families mobilising economic, cultural, and social resources in attempts to shape school practices or respond to these concerns, particularly in research conducted in the Global North. In parallel, several studies report that parents respond to perceived school shortcomings by providing their children with additional educational, social, and cultural resources that complement or deepen their learning, friendships, and overall development. Taken together, these findings suggest a form of privileged engagement with public schooling, characterised by families' greater capacity to understand, navigate, and strategically engage with education systems.

A number of studies describe the presence of these families in public or neighbourhood schools as being associated with changes in schools' socioeconomic composition, as well as with processes of exclusion or self-exclusion affecting more disadvantaged groups. In sum, the choice of socially heterogeneous or public schools is characterised by ambivalent experiences, practices, and outcomes. Although these families may be motivated by ideals of social integration, they often experience contradictory emotions and deploy strategies that may contribute to the preservation of educational advantages and, in certain contexts, to forms of exclusion affecting the very groups with whom they seek, in principle, to engage.

Consistent with previous research (Orellana et al., 2018), this review found that most studies on school choice draw on Bourdieu and Passeron as their primary theoretical framework, particularly the theory of social reproduction and the concepts of social, cultural, and economic capital. In addition, the literature incorporates Bernstein's theory of linguistic codes and contributions from Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. Despite the widespread

use of the term *middle class* in this body of research, explicit definitions of the concept are relatively uncommon. By contrast, analytical categories related to racialized groups and racialization processes are much more frequently specified and, together with social class, emerge as key analytical categories for understanding school choice dynamics.

This study makes two original contributions. First, it documents a broader geographical diversity in the countries where the reviewed studies were conducted. Whereas previous systematic reviews have focused primarily on the United States and the United Kingdom, this review extends the scope to include Continental and Eastern Europe, as well as countries in the Global South. The reviewed studies suggest that the choice of public schools by families with high educational and socioeconomic status is not limited to the Global North and has also been documented in other regions, where it appears to take context-specific forms. For instance, studies conducted in the United States frequently relate this phenomenon to processes of gentrification and efforts to "improve" neighbourhood schools, whereas studies from South America and India often describe a preference for public schools with established prestige. Second, this review identifies an emerging body of research on school choice among the global middle class, extending debates previously developed in national contexts and highlighting similar patterns of educational distinction, resource mobilisation, and selective engagement with public schooling.

In summary, the reviewed studies consistently point to processes of material and symbolic weakening of public schooling in a range of national contexts, while also showing that some privileged families continue to choose public schools, often attributing new meanings to them. The literature suggests that traditional understandings of public schooling as a shared civic institution increasingly coexist with interpretations centred on individual educational projects and strategic school choice. Some of these emerging interpretations frame public schooling as a valuable and limited resource and are associated with the mobilisation of social and cultural resources aimed at securing access to desirable schools. Taken together, these studies suggest that the meaning and public character of schooling are being reinterpreted in diverse ways, and that, in some contexts, they may be subject to processes of redefinition or erosion.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature suggests that school choice among families with high educational and socioeconomic status cannot be understood solely as an individual decision-making process. Many studies interpret these choices as embedded within broader processes of educational marketisation and privatisation, which may reshape understandings of public education and its social purposes. The literature frequently associates these processes with increasing differentiation, competition, and hierarchy

within education systems, dynamics that many authors identify as important consequences of school choice policies. Similar patterns are discussed in studies of school choice operating within predominantly public systems, including the cases of China and Norway.

In contrast to classical conceptions that assigned public schooling a central role in the production of citizenship and social cohesion, many studies reviewed here suggest that the expansion of school choice and privatisation contributes to greater differentiation in access to educational opportunities and to the persistence of educational advantage. These developments raise broader questions about education's role as a common good and about the place of public schooling within increasingly competitive educational environments. In this context, the reviewed literature highlights the need for renewed reflection on how state-provided education can be strengthened and prevented from becoming a residual option within stratified school systems. From this perspective, the meanings attributed to public education by families who also have access to private schooling may provide valuable insights for initiatives aimed at strengthening public education as a key institution for democratic citizenship.

Finally, the limitations of this study are primarily related to the design and scope of the review. The search was restricted to publications in Spanish and English and focused preferably on qualitative studies, which limited the geographical coverage of the studies included and did not allow for an assessment of the magnitude of the phenomenon and its broader trends. Future research should incorporate studies published in additional languages, as well as research employing quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, in order to more accurately map the scale and evolution of the relationship between public schooling and the families examined in this review.

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The research was conducted with the approval of the ethics committee of Universidad de Santiago de Chile.

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