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Applying a Bourdieusian lens to the school choices of Hong Kong's middle-class parents in public-funded secondary schools

Applying a Bourdieusian Lens to the School Choices of

Hong Kong's Middle-Class Parents in Public-Funded Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Education has been used extensively as a means of social mobility. Parents invest much time and effort in finding the best school for their children, as this is critical to their success. This study identifies the perceptions of middle-class parents about educational quality, their school choice rationales and specific admission strategies. It gives a comprehensive picture of parental school choices across the various types of public-funded secondary schools in Hong Kong, accounting for around 89% of secondary schools. I conducted semi-structured online Skype interviews with 18 middle-class parents selected by purposeful and snowball sampling methods. Bourdieu's habitus, capital and field concepts (Bourdieu, 1986) were used to examine how capital operates within the educational field and what distinguishes middle-class practices. The results were analysed qualitatively.

Middle-class parents select schools primarily based on their perceptions of educational quality, including five major attributes: child-centred learning, teaching quality, academic performance, school culture and socio-economic status. They translate their perceptions of educational quality into school choice factors, which vary according to parents' capital, family values, and children's needs. They value holistic education and enrol their children in academically appropriate schools. They desire that their children grow up in a well-disciplined, English and culturally homogeneous environment. They strategically mobilise their economic, cultural and social capital to gain advantages during the school choice process, which may result in educational inequity.

Keywords
Educational quality, middle class, school choice, Bourdieu's theory, habitus, capital, field, direct-subsidy scheme schools, government-aided schools, government schools, public-funded secondary schools

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Alice Chui

Sep 2022

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: *Alice Chui*   DATE: 27th Sep, 2022

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List of Abbreviations

CA: Central Allocation

CMI: Chinese-medium instruction

DP: Discretionary Places

DSS: Direct-subsidy Scheme

EMI: English-medium instruction

GMC: Global middle class

HK: Hong Kong

HKDSE: Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination

IB: International Baccalaureate Diploma

LMC: Local middle class

MOI: Medium of Instruction

RCT: Rational Choice Theory

SES Socio-economic Status

SSPA: Secondary School Places Allocation

STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

School choice has gained significant scholarly attention worldwide due to globalisation and the marketisation of education. In Hong Kong (HK), schools have emphasised competitiveness, performance, accountability, and choice (Woo, 2016). The Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) is one of the government's initiatives to expand school options, and it exemplifies the adoption of market principles. However, it has sparked numerous debates regarding the top traditional aided schools joining DSS and charging high tuition fees.

Education has been widely used as a vehicle for class reproduction and mobility. School choice is a global phenomenon (Ball & Nikita, 2014; Brar, 2016; Higginson et al., 2019), and local and national education systems continue to shape it for the middle classes (Ball et al., 1996; Ball & Nikita, 2014; Windle, 2015). Parents desire the best education for their children (Kenway et al., 2013) and consider school choice as a way of accumulating capital for their children's future success (Olmedo, 2008). Middle-class parents can leverage their social, economic or cultural capital to gain advantages in the admission process (Olmedo, 2008; Woo, 2016). Nevertheless, there are concerns about the growing inequality caused by the medium of instruction and DSS policies, which may restrict working-class parents' school options (Choi, 2003; Hui et al., 2018; Woo, 2016).

This chapter will set the context for this research. I examine the emergence of the HK middle class and

the modern political climate, the global middle class and school choice, and the growth of Hong Kong's educational landscape. Moreover, I review the background of public-funded secondary schools. Furthermore, I discuss the research objectives, questions and its significance, as well as the framework of the thesis. My fascination with parental school choice stems from my professional and personal experiences that shaped my values and perspectives as an Education Consultant.

1.1 My role as an Educational Consultant

This research helps me better assist parents in my role as an Education Consultant in student-school matching. Understanding middle-class school choice practices and why more middle-class parents choose DSS schools is critical to assessing their children's prospects. I have been working as an Education Consultant in HK for over twenty years. I advise parents (mainly middle- to upper-class) and students on possible career paths, educational opportunities, and job preparation. Among my responsibilities are the analysis of student needs and school curricula. Additionally, I am responsible for conducting in-depth examinations of educational systems, gathering school information, and making recommendations. Before I can advise parents on the most appropriate educational options or possible paths for their children, I need to understand their school selection criteria, perceptions of education quality, habitus, financial background, and their children's needs. My background as a middle-class parent and educational consultant helps me understand parents' needs better. I graduated from a prestigious English-medium (EMI) government secondary school in HK. Parents consider 'elite'

schools where students excel academically and university enrollment rates are high; the above notion serves as a model for middle-class families. I engaged in the government's school allocation system fifteen years ago when it came to my children's secondary school placement. There were few DSS schools available at the time, and the majority were too expensive. I applied to the same public secondary school I attended since my children were more likely to be interviewed during the admissions process.

Children and parents are stressed by the local education system, particularly from primary to secondary school. Students should excel academically and pass a series of interviews and entrance examinations to attend an EMI school. Students are not guaranteed allocation to their target schools via the central allocation mechanism. Instead, students are assigned to schools based on their academic performance and a random lottery number. They often experience considerable pressure and dissatisfaction if they are denied admission to their desired school. The random number assignment placed my daughter in her second choice despite her excellent academic performance and first preference. Therefore, we went through multiple interviews and re-admission assessments in search for a better school, which was stressful. We finally accepted the second school choice due to limited DSS options and high school competition. The unpredictability of the central allocation system has driven many middle-class students to enrol in DSS schools, which account for around 12% of all secondary schools in HK (Census-and-Statistics, 2020). Middle-class students now have more educational options than ever.

Approximately 15% of DSS schools (compared to 4% of public schools) offer a through-train program to assist students in transitioning from primary to secondary education.

This study aims to understand how middle-class parents choose schools (rationales and strategies), which may contribute to the understanding of the HK middle class. Moreover, it may help explain why more HK students study in DSS and overseas. It is also critical to understand parental school choice factors as parents devote considerable time exploring educational options for their children. Parents may struggle to determine the best school for their children without official school banding information. Some parents expressed anxiety during education consultations due to a lack of knowledge as to what factors to consider or how to choose a school that fits their children. These school choice factors may assist parents, especially middle-class parents, reevaluate their school selection criteria. This research also helps me understand how middle-class parents view "high-quality" education and how this influences school choices. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how middle-class parents impart class advantages to their children through the educational system. They generally prefer EMI secondary schools. They are proactive in ensuring their children's success through school selection and mobilising their economic, cultural, and social capital. For example, economic capital can finance shadow education or residential relocation, while habitus and cultural capital can help their children learn and succeed in school admissions. Parents may also use social capital to seek help and information from their networks. All these experiences add to the understanding of middle-class parents.

1.2 Emergence of HK middle class and current political changes

This section provides a historical backdrop for the emergence of the middle class in HK. It investigates why the middle class stayed out of politics when HK's future and democratisation dominated the political agenda. Moreover, it considers the growth of middle-class discontent during the Asian financial crisis and the current political crisis.

1.2.1 HK middle-class changes

In the early 1970s, HK transformed itself from a labour-intensive to an information-intensive economy, expanded its welfare provision, massified higher education, and established itself as a global financial centre. Hence, a new generation of middle-class managers, administrators, lawyers, accountants, professors, and social workers emerged (Ip & Lui, 2019). The middle class benefited from favourable market conditions, including attractive fringe benefits (like insurance and pensions), high wages, and good working conditions. Most of them originated from working-class backgrounds and benefited from a growing educational system and economic opportunities. Thus, the middle class developed an ideology of opportunity and mobility based on competition, equity, and opportunity (So, 2014). What emerged was a different worldview associated with middle-class status, and undoubtedly, school choice played a significant role in this psychology.

Since the 1990s, middle-class families have confronted democratic reform failures, the implosion of an economic bubble, and China's growing political domination (Ip, 2020). After the PRC regained sovereignty in 1997, they feared that HK would be under the control of an authoritarian government, jeopardising their freedoms and way of life. Human rights violations and suppression of resistance have been criticised throughout important historical events on the mainland, most notably the Tiananmen Square Incident. People in HK were historically able to voice political beliefs, criticise colonial authorities, demonstrate, and organise pressure groups despite the colonial rule.

According to Ip and Lui (2019), the Asian Financial Crisis, economic downturns, and resultant changes in employment patterns have harmed the middle class's growth and development since the late 1990s. Their properties have become "negative assets" due to the rapid collapse of the property market since 1997. Against this backdrop, the growth of the middle class is challenged by the intersection of postcoloniality, neoliberalism, and reaction to uncertainties and anxieties (Ip, 2020). Compared to other Asian economies, HK appears to have stronger resilience during the financial crisis. However, with a growing emphasis on corporate delayering, organisational flexibility, and cost-cutting, the middle class has realised that life will never be the same again following the economic downturn, causing anxieties and uncertainties (Ip & Lui, 2019). Thus, they start to reevaluate life in HK and seek political and academic freedom globally to safeguard their capital accumulation. In HK, there is a significant drive for higher education, with parents believing that academic credentials will help their

children cope with the challenges of wage cuts and redundancies in a changing job market.

1.2.2 Current political changes

Education has become the primary channel of upward mobility (Lui, 2014), and middle-class positions are closely related to credentials (Ip & Lui, 2019). Since 2019, HK has experienced various unexpected political changes. The government introduced a new extradition law that would have permitted HK citizens to be extradited to mainland China, sparking various protests and social unrest. The civil unrest intensified in 2019, reinforcing aspirations for democracy and universal suffrage, which are inextricably tied to rising inequality (Tsao, 2018). Additionally, recessions, job restructuring, and increased job insecurity are widespread as a result of the COV-19 pandemic since 2019. The Chinese government implemented a new "national security law" in HK in mid-2020, and several opposition candidates and activists were imprisoned. Following this, electoral laws were amended in 2021 to further restrict the right to protest. Given the pronounced political instability, middle-class parents sought alternatives to local school provision. They expressed doubts about the possibility of a liberal, self-governing HK.

According to local media, a survey in 2020 found that over 40% of respondents would leave the city if given the opportunity (Leung, 2019; Yuen, 2021) and emigrate to countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Taiwan in search of greater stability and democratic freedom following the

national security law implementation in HK (Cheng & Tsang, 2021; Peters, 2021). Additionally, numerous countries have simplified visa rules for HK residents to facilitate the emigration process, allowing lower-achieving middle-class students to pursue secondary and tertiary education abroad (Leung, 2013a). In 2020–2021, over 19,000 students from primary and secondary schools dropped out, accounting for 3% of the total student population, a considerable rise over the previous year (Yuen, 2021). The recent emigration surges reflect parents' desires for a more equitable and democratic environment (Ortmann, 2015; Tsao et al., 2018). A large-scale migration would significantly impact HK's economy as these students are likely to relocate with their well-educated parents. Thus, it is vital to understand the relationship between school choice and the aspirations of middle-class parents.

1.3 Global middle class and school choice

Since the late 1970s, educational reform has swept industrialised countries, with policymakers embracing neo-liberal, free-market ideology to strengthen their education systems (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 1996; Ball & Nikita, 2014; Woo, 2016). Numerous countries have adopted neoliberal market principles into their educational systems, altering school variety, funding, competitiveness, and organisational style (Ball, 1990). School choice is a global phenomenon (Ball & Nikita, 2014; Brar, 2016; Higginson, McLeod, & Rizvi, 2019), and local and national education systems continue to shape it for the middle classes (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Ball & Nikita, 2014; Windle, 2015). Most middle-class parents are capable of navigating the educational system to ensure their children's success

(Beech et al., 2021; Rowe & Windle, 2012)

With the globalisation of education, middle-class families employ various strategies to provide a 'better' education for their children, resulting in social reproduction through education (Ball & Nikita, 2014; Koo, 2016). Most middle-class parents are concerned about education, and their school choices may result in class reproduction and educational inequality. They have accelerated the growth of international education options in global cities (Beech et al., 2021; Windle & Maire, 2019) and developed the required skills for effective operation in different countries (Maxwell et al., 2019). International schools have proliferated worldwide in response to rising demand from the middle classes (Ball & Nikita, 2014). Prior research on global middle-class (GMC) mobility and school choice have primarily focused on international students seeking higher education (Stein & de Andreotti, 2015; Tshibaka, 2018) and utilising education as a migration strategy (Abelmann et al., 2014; Waters, 2015), or on the 'local' school choices of middle-class families moving globally together (Beech et al., 2021).

Both GMC and local middle-class (LMC) parents are motivated by a desire to secure advantages for their children through educational choices and cultivation practices. They seek the best education for their children and secure investment opportunities (Kenway et al., 2013). The fundamental distinction between these two groups of middle-class parents is their aspiration for their children's future mobility (Yemini et al., 2020; Yemini et al., 2019). Contrary to popular perceptions of GMC as rootless nomads,

recent empirical evidence suggests that persistent migration is associated with the home country (Maxwell et al., 2019). Hong Kong parents may emigrate to other countries in response to the current political turmoil, search for freedom or better educational opportunities. GMC parents necessitate the development of 'transnational cultural capital' – foreign language abilities and dispositions required to secure favourable occupations and status in the new knowledge-based economy (Groves & O'Connor, 2018). They accumulate capital through their cultivation of international networks (Paul et al., 2019). Their enthusiasm for global opportunities reflects their belief that education may prepare their children for prestigious university admissions (Maxwell & Yemini, 2019). However, it is challenging for parents and children to adapt to their new environment (Waddling et al., 2019). Meanwhile, LMC parents consider enrolling their children in local elite public, private, or international schools to ensure their children's aspirations. Future research should expand on these conceptual understandings of school choice practices. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge about local middle-class parental practices in public-funded secondary schools.

1.4 Evolution of HK school landscape

In this section, I examine school change in HK after 1997, when the territory was transferred to China. Education reforms have shifted educational resources from the public to the private sector and from the needy to the privileged (Leung, 2013b). Leung (2013b) states that exploitative elitism widens the educational attainment gap between social classes:

It is a form of exploitative elitism that generates social segregation by redistributing resources away from the needy to the already privileged. It attests to the neoliberal logic of rewarding the winner and punishing the less capable (Leung, 2013b: 107).

In general, HK elite schools operate as emotional banks for individuals and social classes, social recognition registers, and community capacity arenas for their premium clients in exchange for social advantages, leading to class reproduction (Kenway et al., 2013). Concerns over recent curriculum changes and fierce competition for limited places at top local universities have thrown elite schools into a frenzy. Some parents enrol their children in local elite schools and any educational add-ons available, like tutoring. While some parents search for local schools that meet their expectations, others stress the importance of globally recognised qualifications, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), which serves as a passport to success (Kenway et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the HK Government has implemented various reforms, including policies on medium of instruction (MOI), direct-subsidy scheme (DSS) policies and school allocation mechanism, to improve educational quality and global competitiveness (Cheng, 2005; Cheng, 2009; Education-Bureau, 2014). However, parents are concerned about the growing uncertainty and inequality induced by these policies, which limit the school options of working-class parents (Choi, 2003; Hui et al., 2018; Woo, 2016). The following section will further examine these policies, including the MOI, DSS and

school allocation mechanism.

1.4.1 Medium of instruction

After 150 years of British rule, HK was returned to China in 1997 (Carroll, 2007). The HK Government promotes native language learning and supports secondary schools that offer Cantonese instruction (Education-Bureau, 2011). Before the handover of sovereignty, schools were free to choose their MOI, with English as the primary language of instruction (Bolton, 2003). A new language policy forcing secondary schools to educate in Cantonese provoked fierce competition and widespread opposition from parents and teachers in 1998 (Education-Bureau, 2011). The MOI and its ideological implications are widely debated. Parents have traditionally valued EMI schools as English proficiency measures cultural and symbolic capital (Tollefson, 2015). Parent dissatisfaction persisted despite 2009 revisions allowing schools to determine MOI based on student and teacher ability. There are around 100 EMI schools, accounting for about 30% of total secondary schools (Education-Bureau, 2021). Thus, competition for EMI secondary schools has increased significantly. The MOI policy has exacerbated educational inequalities (Lui, 2003; Tsao, 2018). This will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3.4.2.

1.4.2 Direct-Subsidy Scheme

The Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) school is an initiative of the Government, granting schools greater

autonomy in curriculum, student enrolment and tuition fees while offering parents more options. Most

DSS schools are EMI schools. The DSS initiative aims to improve student education quality and local

labour competitiveness in the global market (Leung, 2013b). However, educational

opportunities become increasingly unequal as competition reinforces inequality (Leung, 2013b).

Inequality may worsen as these government-aided schools change to DSS schools and begin charging

tuition (Woo, 2016).

1.4.3 School allocation mechanism

All public school students need to transition to subsidised Secondary One through the Government's

secondary school places allocation system (SSPA), including Discretionary Places (DP) and Central

Allocation (CA) stages. During the DP stage, parents can select two secondary schools outside their

district. Secondary schools may select students based on academic and interview performance. If

students fail in the DP stage, they will be allocated to a school depending on their school or home

location, academic results, parental school choice, and a random number in the CA stage. The SSPA is

called a "lottery" system as parents have little control over school choice (Woo, 2016). Parents should

create a feasible set of choices (fewer than 30) within their school district. All primary six students are

classified into three bands and assigned to schools based on their academic performance and school

zone to reduce school segregation (Education-Bureau, 2018c, 2019c). However, students are required

to attend a nearby school regardless of its quality or family preference. Students are not guaranteed

admission to their desired schools unless they are fortunate in the SSPA process. Given elite school entrance requires academic proficiency, parents pay for tuition to assist their children in improving their grades and interview skills. Moreover, some parents are looking for alternatives to central allocation, such as DSS or international schools.

The Government should adopt a parent-focused policy (Thomas, 2021) to improve educational quality in HK. Further empirical research is necessary to identify middle-class school choice factors and practices to understand their needs better. Education reform requires a thorough understanding of secondary school choice factors. Moreover, quality education requires continuous improvement to match parental expectations (Education-Bureau, 2019e). This study emerges from inequalities in access to public-funded secondary schools. It understands how middle-class parents view quality education and how it translates into school choice factors and strategies. While HK provides free education to home students, some parents demand fee-paying elite schools (Chan, 2020). The following section summarises the public-funded secondary schools in HK.

1.5   School choice in HK

Hong Kong offers home students 15 years of free education in public schools, including three stages: three-year kindergarten, six-year primary, and six-year secondary school. One of the Government's policy objectives is to provide a diverse and balanced educational experience for students. Education

promotes whole-person development and lifelong learning (Education-Bureau, 2020a). Hong Kong's

education spending has recently been scrutinised for efficiency. The public education system has been

criticised for its bureaucratic structure, particularly standard curriculum, instructional medium, and

teaching quality. The Government has adopted neoliberal educational policies to reduce bureaucracy

in the public education system and retain middle-class students in public-funded schools (Ho, 2020;

Leung, 2013a; Tai, 2016; Woo, 2016). Marketisation and privatisation are introduced to improve

school competitiveness and educational performance (Mok & Welch, 2002), resulting in the transfer

of educational opportunities and resources from the public to private sectors (Leung, 2013b). As family

expectations for better educational outcomes rise, the Government should focus on improving

educational quality and expanding parental school choice options by understanding parental needs. My

research focuses on middle-class parents' school choice factors and strategies. It examines how middle-

class parents help their children build the capital and habitus necessary for future success.

Public-funded secondary schools

In HK, there are various educational options available, including public-funded schools (public and

DSS schools), international and private schools. Most parents choose public-funded secondary schools

that contribute nearly 89% of the total secondary schools, including 392 public and 59 DSS schools in

2019 (Census-and-Statistics, 2020). Parents also prefer through-train schools (5.5% of all secondary

schools), where all primary students move directly to their associated secondary school (Education-

Bureau, 2019d). In 2020, there were 25 "through-train" schools, including 16 through-train government-aided and nine DSS secondary schools (Education-Bureau, 2020b, 2020c). Due to the restricted number of EMI schools, competition among pupils is strong. Despite the availability of free education, some parents choose to pay for their children's education at DSS or private institutions, a choice that warrants more examination. The different types of public-funded secondary schools are discussed below:

Public schools

Public schools in HK are funded by the Government, including government and government-aided schools, and offer free education to local students. Government schools are operated directly by the Government, whereas Government-aided schools are run by religious or charitable organisations, and managed by the school management committee (Education-Bureau, 2018c). Public schools provide free education for home students and follow a government-approved curriculum (Yung, 2006; Zhou et al., 2015). As discussed in Section 1.4.3, the uncertainty of the school allocation system has placed tremendous pressure on students and parents. Moreover, public school performance is unrelated to government funding, which is widely seen as the root of educational inefficiency and ineffectiveness (Leung, 2013b).

Direct-subsidy scheme schools

In recent years, numerous government-aided schools have converted to direct-subsidy scheme (DSS) institutions to suit market demand. The change has sparked speculation that these schools changed to maintain their social rank. DSS schools, established in 1991, are HK education reform initiatives that encourage school choice and marketisation (Zhou et al., 2015). DSS schools foster private sector expansion and educational competition in line with global privatisation trends. The Government encourages autonomy, school choice diversity, and overall academic excellence in HK by subsidising schools to join the DSS (Education-Bureau, 2019d). DSS schools have more focused goals and a less bureaucratic framework than public schools. They operate on a decentralised, competitive, and choice-based paradigm with greater autonomy, teacher professionalism, and collaborative teaming than public schools. They allow greater flexibility and independence in allocating resources, staffing, curricula, and student admissions (Woo, 2016; Zhou et al., 2015). Under this scheme, schools can decide on their curriculum, tuition fees, and entrance requirements. DSS schools may charge tuition in addition to receiving government subsidies to provide additional support services and school facilities (Tse, 2008; Zhou et al., 2015). Tuition fees vary significantly among schools. DSS schools operate independently of the government allocation mechanism. They can conduct interviews or assessments with prospective students and determine the MOI (Woo, 2016). They typically announce admissions results earlier than public schools to attract admissions. The DSS policy is enrollment-based, fostering significant competition among schools and a desire to hold schools accountable to consumers to enhance overall school performance and effectiveness (Leung, 2013b). DSS schools are supposed to

offer diverse academic and extracurricular activities, improving choice, accountability, and educational outcomes (Leung, 2013b). The demand for DSS schools over public schools has grown substantially among affluent parents (Woo, 2016; Zhou et al., 2015).

1.6 Research objectives and questions

This study better understood macro-level stratification trends by examining the micro-level mechanisms of middle-class advantages in educational processes. It examined how middle-class parents conceptualised educational quality and examined the factors influencing their school decisions, rationales and strategies. The study objectives are summarised below:

1. To understand middle-class parents' school choice factors and how they translate their quality concepts into their specific school choice factors;

2. To understand middle-class parents' school choice rationales, strategies and their sources of information. To explore how middle-class parents assist their children in gaining admission to their desired school by leveraging their capital and habitus to gain advantages in the field.

This study sets out to answer the following research questions to address the above objectives:

1. What factors influence the decision of middle-class parents to enrol their child in a public-funded secondary school in Hong Kong?

1a. What do middle-class parents perceive as the determinants of 'high-quality' secondary education?

1b. What are the school choice factors of middle-class parents when choosing a public-funded secondary school?

1c. What are the rationales of middle-class parents for selecting different types of public-funded secondary schools?

2. What are the strategies of middle-class parents when selecting a public-funded secondary school?

   2a. How do middle-class parents use capital and habitus to maximise their advantages during the secondary school selection process?

   2b. What are their sources of information when selecting a secondary school?

1.7 Significance of study

Middle-class parents seek educational opportunities for their children to accumulate cultural and social capital that will aid them in maintaining their social status. Given that one of the Government's policy objectives is to retain the middle class in public-funded schools (Ho, 2020; Leung, 2013a; Tai, 2016; Woo, 2016), it is essential to understand the school choice factors of middle-class parents. This study will investigate the micro-level practices underpinning middle-class privilege to address the gap in the local literature. I began my research in early 2020, considering the limited research of middle-class school choice of public-funded secondary schools in HK.

The contributions of this study are: Firstly, public-funded schools contribute around 89% of all secondary schools in 2019 (Census-and-Statistics, 2020). Nonetheless, there is a shortage of research on how market mechanisms influence family choices. In HK, most studies are focused on either private or DSS schools, which cannot reflect the real situation (Chan & Tan, 2008; Mok & Tan, 2004; Ng, 2012; Tam, 2002; Tse, 2008; Woo, 2016; Yung, 2006; Zhou et al., 2015). Woo (2016) focuses on parental choice of aided-turn-DSS schools, whereas Tsao et al. (2018) examines students' dispositions toward higher education and employment concerning their opinions of EMI schooling experiences in HK. Therefore, this research provides a more comprehensive view of parental choice of various public-funded secondary schools in HK, aiming to fill the knowledge gap. Secondly, research on school choice and class in HK has been limited. Parental choices are shaped by their history, experiences, and subjectivity. This study elevates the significant contributions of class to our knowledge of the school choice phenomenon. Thirdly, a typology is constructed based on the literature review, including the common parental school choice factors. This contributes to the theoretical understanding of middle-class parental school choice by comparing factors in HK to previous research. Fourthly, students' well-being is critical to their long-term success during secondary education. Hence, most middle-class parents often devote significant time to seeking appropriate educational opportunities for their children, and their preferences are possibly influential to schools in HK (Chan, 2017). Understanding school choice factors also help parents, especially the middle class, understand what factors to consider. Finally, the ability to understand middle-class parents' current situation, their school choice

considerations and strategies may provide policymakers with insights into improving educational quality and equity while formulating education policies. This may be one of the measures for retaining the middle class in HK.

1.8 Structure of thesis

This research includes seven sections: introduction, theoretical framework, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion. The following summarises the thesis structure:

Chapter one discusses the study's context, including my job as an Education Consultant, the growth of the HK middle class and recent political changes, the global middle class and school choice, and the evolution of HK's educational landscape. Then, I review the background of public-funded secondary schools. Finally, I outline the research objectives and questions, study significance and thesis format.

Chapter two reviews the theoretical framework for this study: Bourdieu's theory of practice. I summarise Bourdieu's three fundamental concepts — capital, habitus, and field — to explore middle-class school choice practice. Economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital contribute to an individual's position in social space. The various forms of cultural capital are addressed, including embodied, objectified, and institutionalised.

Chapter three reviews the literature to identify the central research questions, which include HK middle-class definition, marketisation and school choice, school choice and social class, theoretical framework, methodological approaches, parental school choice factors, and study justification.

Chapter four outlines the researcher's reflexivity, paradigm and qualitative approach, research questions and methods, and conceptual framework. It also discusses the methodological approach, including sampling methods and size, pilot study and interview grid, participant overview, ethical considerations, data analysis and coding strategies, data storage and protection, as well as reliability and validity.

Chapter five reports and discusses the research findings by addressing the research questions on how middle-class parents perceive educational quality and analysing their school choice factors, rationales and strategies. It employs Bourdieu's theory to study middle-class parents' school choice practices.

Chapter six discusses the practical implications, policy implications and recommendations on education policy. Practical implications relate to how middle-class parents' perceptions of educational quality are shaped into school choice factors. Policy implications involve the impacts of the MOI and DSS policies on education. Additionally, this chapter makes policy recommendations for improving educational quality and addressing inequality.

Chapter seven summarises the entire thesis by outlining the thesis's summary, its contributions and

limitations, and making recommendations for additional research.

CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BOURDIEU'S THEORY

This research examines the factors influencing middle-class parents' school choices and delves into their rationale and strategies when making school choices. Parents compete for admission to the public-funded secondary schools, including government, government-aided and DSS schools. Bourdieu's theory serves as the primary theoretical foundation for conceptualising and studying how middle-class school choice practices contribute to inequality. A Bourdieusian lens (Figure 1) was beneficial in elucidating my respondents' parenting choices and behaviours. I examine how capital operates within the educational field in HK and what differentiates the middle-class practices. This chapter outlines my application of Bourdieu within the dissertation and how this theoretical lens fostered a greater understanding of middle-class parents' school choices.
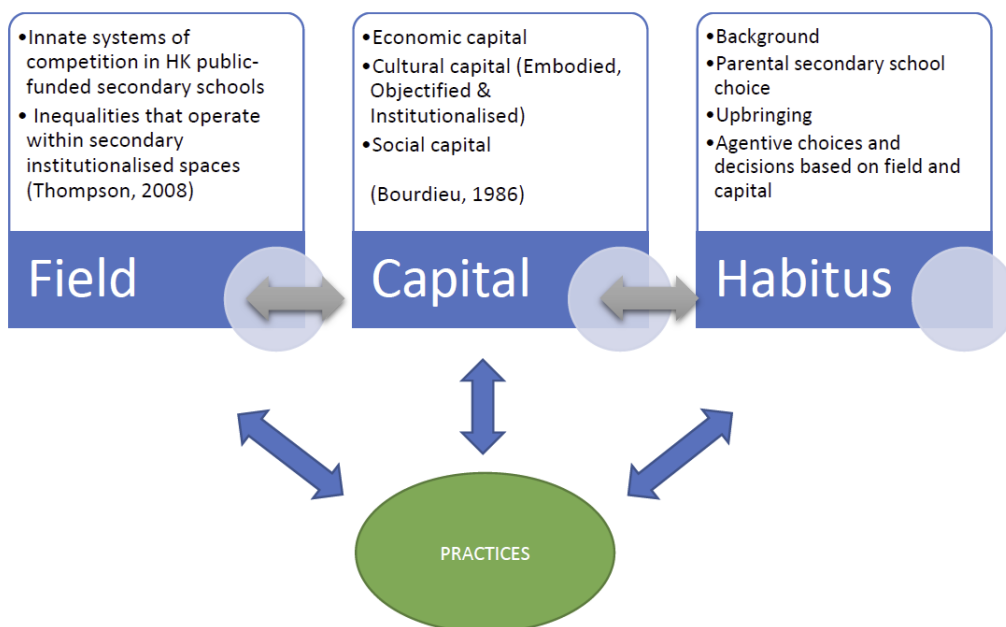
Figure 1 Theoretical Framework based on Bourdieu's theory

Bourdieu (1986) explores the social world's structure and functioning by examining the external living conditions of individuals in the social space and their internalised personal qualities via the lens of capital and habitus. I apply Bourdieu's triadic principles of field, capital and habitus to explore middle-class school choice practice (Bourdieu, 1984). The practise emerges from a synthesis of Bourdieu's notions, as expressed in the equation: "[(Habitus)×(Capital)]+Field = Practice" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). It is essential to consider the logic underlying this equation. Parents leverage their capital and habitus to gain a competitive edge in the field. Bourdieu's theory helps explain the complex social dynamics of school choice in education and elucidates how school choice policies intensify social inequality (Yoon, 2020). The capital, habitus and field concepts of Bourdieu's theory are summarised below.

2.1 Capital

Bourdieu (1986) defines "capital" as the economic, social, and cultural resources that enhance life chances. Individuals' position and power in the field are closely linked to the structure and quantity of capital they accumulate. Capital can be accumulated over time, reproducible in identical forms, transferable or convertible to other forms of capital. Their capital ownership influences individuals' cultural preferences, behaviours, and dispositions. Bourdieu enables me to examine how individuals and social structures interpret, manifest, and react to ownership of various forms of capital, social

positions, and capital embodiment in habitus, dispositions, and behaviours (Abrahams, 2016). The possession of multiple types of capital, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, directly identifies an individual's position in the social space during class formation (Bourdieu, 1986).

2.1.1 Economic Capital

Economic capital refers to the wealth of an individual, which is the dominant type of capital that manifests in a family's overall financial position (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). It can be converted directly into money and institutionalised through property rights (Bourdieu, 1986). While economic capital and cultural capital are closely related, economic capital and habitus significantly influence cultural participation during socialisation (Yaish & Katz-Gerro, 2012). Economic capital enables the analysis of education power, implying that middle classes have more educational options than working-class families as they can afford high tuition fees and extracurricular activities such as music, sports, and art (Lam, 2013; Yoon, 2020), thereby eliminating working-class children from elite schools. Having a proven track record in extracurricular activities is essential for improving competitiveness in the educational field (Vincent & Ball, 2007). While middle-class parents have the financial resources to invest in their children's concerted cultivation, academic learning, and future planning, working-class parents cannot afford numerous extracurricular activities (Lam, 2013; Lareau, 1989).

2.1.2 Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is defined as an individual's ownership of cultural resources such as knowledge, skills, intellect, and education, enabling students to participate in social life and contributing to their social mobility and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986). It refers to parents' knowledge in an educational context, specifically their familiarity with socially differentiated cultivation concepts (Bourdieu, 2011). It can be symbolic resources transmitted through generations to maintain class status and cultural capital (Ra, 2011). Cultural capital appears in embodied, objectified and institutionalised forms (Bourdieu, 1986):

Embodied cultural capital

Embodied cultural capital denotes individuals' long-lasting dispositions of body and mind, including their habitus (individuals' dispositions), behaviours, and general embedded characteristics like accent, knowledge, communication skills and language, referred to as culture or cultivation. It manifests itself in the way parents mobilise resources, organise themselves, and interact with others in the field. Middle-class parents endow their children with embodied cultural capital through their habitus, behaviours, and nurturing. This embodied capital cannot be instantly transferred through purchase or exchange. However, the initial accumulation of embodied cultural capital permits families to bestow significant cultural capital on their children (Bourdieu, 1986).

Objectified cultural capital

Cultural capital manifests as cultural products such as dictionaries, books, libraries, pictures, musical instruments (Bourdieu, 1986) or acquired through participation in highbrow cultural events, such as visiting museums, concerts, or galleries (Byun et al., 2012). This capital is acquired either through economic capital or family inheritance. Thus, middle-class children are more likely to participate in highbrow cultural activities (Xu & Hampden-Thompson, 2012). Other indicators of objectified cultural capital include academic environment, extracurricular activities, reading habits, and family resources (Jæger, 2011).

Institutionalised cultural capital

Institutionalised cultural capital refers to academic qualifications or credentials (Bourdieu, 1986) and positively affects children's academic performance and educational attainment (Evans et al., 2010; Zhao & Hong, 2012). Parents believe that high-quality schools can help their children increase their chances of attending university and acquire institutionalised cultural capital in the future. Academic credentials can be translated into monetary value in the labour market (Bourdieu, 1986). Due to the inflation of qualifications, most parents emphatically prefer high-quality schools to increase their children's chances of entering university in the future.

Education serves as a vehicle for upward mobility. Cultural capital is commonly used to illustrate why

school choice has become a battleground for parents over the cultural space at school (Bourdieu, 1986; Yoon, 2020). Parents strive for cultural capital through school choice to enhance their social status (Rowe & Windle, 2012). In England, Reay (2004) documents how middle-class mothers mobilise their cultural capital, including language, competence, confidence, information and skills, to help their children. In America, Roda (2017) explores the strategies white middle-class mothers employ to utilise school choice and pursue advantages for their children. In HK, this research investigates how middle-class parents support their children in mobilising cultural capital to gain admission to their desired schools in HK. Parents invest in various extracurricular activities and emphasise reading, playing musical instruments, and attending highbrow cultural events to gain objectified cultural capital.

2.1.3 Social Capital

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is the aggregation of resources associated with owning a long-lasting network of institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. It is convertible to economic capital and can be codified as a noble title (Bourdieu, 1986). It is an investment technique aimed at fostering or sustaining social relationships for individuals to benefit from the resources provided by social networks (Bourdieu, 1986), which may include familial relationships, professional organisations, and associations (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). The volume of social capital is closely related to an individual's network size and quantity of capital owned (Bourdieu, 1986).

In England, the socially privileged families are endowed with social networks that give them access to "hot knowledge", providing firsthand information and advice on school choice that contributes to education success (Ball, 2003). In Australia, middle-class parents rely on social networks for school information instead of government websites (Rowe & Windle, 2012). Likewise, in America, social capital plays a prominent role in education (Lareau et al., 2016). Moreover, studies suggest that working-class parents have limited social networks, and their knowledge is constrained to nearby schools and based on relatives, teachers and neighbours (Lubienski & Yoon, 2017). I explore how middle-class parents in HK benefit from their social networks during the school selection process and see if parents make school choice decisions based on "hot knowledge."

2.1.4 Symbolic Capital

Economic capital and symbolic capital are closely linked, implying that reputation and prestige can be converted into material rewards. When given value by other social actors, any form of capital (economic, cultural, or social) can be seen as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2006).

2.2 Habitus

Habitus is a cumulative system of dispositions of individuals due to personal experience and previous behaviours shaped by their social and cultural background (Bourdieu, 1994). It is a form of

classification that influences the resources available to various classes (Winkle-Wagner, 2010) and acts as a means of class differentiation. Habitus and capital construct the borders of social classes. Capital is focused on establishing social boundaries, whereas habitus is concerned with creating a symbolic edge (Fan, 2012). However, habitus involves time-consuming historical accumulation (Hong & Zhao, 2015) and embodies culturally distinctive human cognition, tastes, norms, beliefs, and behaviours (Bourdieu, 1992; Liu, 2003). It is a shared way of thinking, behaving, and engaging in leisure activities established by individuals occupying a similar position (Bourdieu, 1986). Despite differences in experience, each social class has its norms and values, resulting in habitual similarities. It connects lifestyle and class position, reflecting practical activities that gradually build symbolic boundaries between individuals occupying various positions and legitimating the class structure (McLean, 2018). Compared to working-class families that may struggle to make ends meet, middle- to upper-class parents have access to more resources, even luxuries (Liu, 2003). Habitus builds personal patterns based on prior experiences and adapts to new experiences (Bourdieu, 2006, 2000). It influences an individual's parenting style and school choice strategies shaped by the social network, practices, and prior experiences (Hong & Zhao, 2015), including family experiences like parent-child relationships (Bourdieu, 2006).

In this study, parental school choice is a social phenomenon that reproduces and reinforces the middle-class advantage over the working class. Habitus is relevant to my research since it enables me to peer

at each family's story and discover what makes them unique within the field. Drawing on my own experience, I spent plenty of time reading books and journals with my children to encourage them to learn more. I equipped them with a trilingual environment by interacting with them in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese at home. I organised tutorial sessions and extracurricular activities such as STEM, golf, and swimming to ensure they accomplished their educational goals. Habitus is essential in determining the inequalities in the capital invested by parents in their children's education (Bourdieu, 2014). By evaluating parents' educational goals, Bourdieu's theory enables me to conduct a dynamic and nuanced analysis that considers the personal effects and consequences of structurally replicating social class inequalities (Abrahams, 2016).

2.3 Field

The social world functions as a microcosm of society. Bourdieu's field concept encapsulates the relational features of social divisions and functions as a highly flexible theoretical tool, which presents a generalisation of the lived experiences of various social classes. Bourdieu (1998) defines field as:

> A structured social space, a field of forces. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation of presentation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a

result, their strategies (Bourdieu, 1998:40-41).

"Field" is an arena for games, competitions, and a distinct structured space of power relations between positions held by agents or institutions, where parents and schools compete for advantage or prestige (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu asserts that the game in social spaces or fields is competitive, with various actors employing various strategies to maintain or improve their position (Thomson, 2014). Thus, the selection of public-funded secondary schools by middle-class parents in HK serves as the overarching 'field,' while the other components (e.g. educational quality, parental school choice, and school choice strategies) serve as the "magnetic field" in which various forces interact (Grenfell, 2014). The field includes three types of public-funded secondary schools (government, government-aided and DSS schools). Besides public schools, the HK Government established DSS schools to provide extra educational options for parents. However, the affordability of DSS school tuition may be limited to middle-upper class families (Woo, 2016), while working-class families are frequently excluded owing to capital constraints, leading to inequality (Woo, 2016). This study examines how middle-class parents' school choice practices contribute to educational inequality by leveraging their habitus and resources. Middle-class parents actively participate in school selection, believing that schools serve as a field for class reproduction (Roda, 2017; Wu, 2012).

Bourdieu (1986) asserts that each field possesses distinct qualities. The field's unwritten norms, dubbed

"Doxa," are acquired from childhood and in order to function effectively require individuals to adhere to them (Thomson, 2014). An individual's capital produces a habitus that generates a unique behaviour in a specific social field, which assumes that contemporary society results from various cross-penetrations of "fields" that form the "social space." These contexts are reproduced as the process that connects habitus, capital, and field is distorted by legitimising current unequal resource distribution. For Bourdieu (1986), social reproduction, stratification, and change are central to his social theory.

2.4 Justification of Bourdieusian theory

Bourdieu's triadic paradigm of field, capital, and habitus can help explain family social mobility. My research centred on Bourdieu's theory and its application to education and social mobility. Middle-class parents' school choices may reflect their beliefs and values towards educational quality. This study shows how middle-class parents strive for educational distinction and provide their children with a competitive edge. Bourdieu's theory has the following advantages:

Analytical tool for social class

Bourdieu claims that society is divided into upper, middle, and working classes (Bourdieu, 2018). Bourdieu's theory enables us to address class through daily life practices. It is widely employed to understand the current culture, values, and social divisions (Abrahams, 2016; Chui, 2019; Silva & Warde, 2010; Woo, 2016). In this study, Bourdieu's triadic paradigm is employed to explain parental

school choice practices. It provides an analytical tool for viewing classes as a dynamic and ongoing construction process and explains how individuals struggle for social differentiation. The process that links habitus, capital, and field is perpetually distorted by views that legitimise current unequal resource distribution, resulting in social stratification and reproduction.

School choice practices and strategies analysis

Bourdieu's theory serves as a lens to understand the dynamic class experienced by my middle-class participants. Individuals who occupy social space are characterised by the type and quantity of capital they own and their relative established position. Hence, it argues that classes are not formed by objectively constructed groups but by the awareness of groups or individuals regarding their social position. It adequately explains middle-class school choice practices, implying that an individual's capital generates habitus that induces specific behaviours within a particular social field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). It sheds light on the social world's structure and functioning by examining the actions and habitus of middle-class parents in social spaces. Parents aim to enhance their social space position by capital accumulation. In this study, middle classes maintain their privileged positions in social space by mobilising their accumulated capital to choose an appropriate secondary school for their children. Capital is critical for parents to maintain their children's educational competitiveness. It is critical to study how school choice contributes to capital accumulation, hence perpetuating power and class domination in HK. Moreover, Bourdieu's theory explains how parents hold distinct forms of capital

ownership, embodiment, and disposition. Thus, it helps address social class reproduction and inequality and illustrates the challenges for working-class parents that hinder their school choices. It demonstrates the crucial role of parents as social actors and the importance of analysing parents' behaviours within their social contexts.

Social reproduction, stratification and inequality

Bourdieu's theory opens up my analysis of how competition and scarcity of resources contribute to social stratification and how school choices exacerbate social inequality in schools (Bourdieu, 1986). In my research, different middle-class families have varying school choice approaches. Bourdieu's triadic paradigm aids in visualising middle-class parents' abilities to compete in the school choice process. School choice may limit options for working-class families due to inequality in knowledge and power (Ball et al., 1995; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Goldring, 1997), leading to educational inequality. The social distinctions and class structure in HK are visualised by examining parents' capital and habitus.

Bourdieu's theory facilitates the examination of class reproduction and the consequences of school choice. Sociologists contend that Bourdieu's work will refocus political debates about education markets on the social sciences (Ball et al., 1995, 1996; Gewirtz et al., 1995), highlighting the critical role of social agents in school selection decisions and advocating for a closer analysis of their social

contexts. Woo (2016) examines why middle-class parents choose DSS schools through Bourdieu's theory and contends that the DSS policy has exacerbated socioeconomic stratification, resulting in school choice inequality. My research reveals how Bourdieu's theory illuminates the inequity inherent in institutionalised class power in the education field. A social justice agenda in education cannot be undertaken without raising concerns about the neoliberal efficiency of educational reforms (Lam, 2013).

Bourdieu's theories on reflexivity

Bourdieu's theory promotes a reflexive project that considers social structure and agency and serves as a valuable baseline for a more detailed study of the middle class. Bourdieu questions the cultural neutrality of school selection, claiming parental experiences and subjectivity impact school choices (Bourdieu, 1986). Schools and parents use school choice to ensure social and class distinction. Parental school choice is not necessarily "rational" or market-driven. Instead, it involves meeting the needs of children and parents. The parental school choice factors in this study cast doubt on the tenets of the Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which postulates that parents make educational decisions primarily based on academic excellence (Bosetti, 2004) and verifies prior research findings (Benson et al., 2015; Reay & Ball, 1998a; Reay, 2003).

2.5 Limitations of Bourdieusian theory

Even though parental school choice is complex, Bourdieu's theory does not help elucidate the relative importance of various factors, the number of schools considered during school selection, how to construct the priority school list, or whether parents consider all feasible alternatives before decision. The Rational Choice Theory (RCT) may help understand rational decision-making in economic and social contexts (Ogu, 2013). According to the RCT, parents make informed choices about their children's education; they weigh costs and benefits and consider all available alternatives in order to enrol their children in the best school with the highest academic option, regardless of their education or income level (Krull, 2016). Nevertheless, combining market theories may better explain the circumstances of some parents. The followings are limitations of Bourdieu's theory:

School choice complexity

Bourdieusian concepts have contributed to a rejuvenation of class analysis. However, recent class engagement is a broader term that emphasises practice and experience over precise class recognition (Davey, 2009). Bourdieu's field concept allows us to contextualise contemporary school choice practices. Nonetheless, one of its shortcomings is the parental school choice development analysis. He underscores intra-field disputes, overlooking that a school choice's symbolic production is founded on a complex and multifactorial context. Certain factors, such as child-focused learning, may influence school choice. Some parents may consider schools based on their children's abilities rather than their

SES. For example, they may choose high-achieving public schools to schools with similar SES.

Importance of various forms of capital

Bourdieu underscores the significance of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. However, the importance of each form of capital over others is unclear. Moreover, there is no clear indication of which resources are associated with the cultural capital of classes or how resources are transformed into educational qualifications. Bourdieu asserts that individuals in the field are perpetually struggling for economic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). However, it is critical to consider the current power dynamics that shape school choice practices in HK. The power struggle can result from competition from students of all levels.

Stable environment

Bourdieu has been critiqued for his highly determinist conception of social reality and lack of agency for the working class (Lam, 2013). Bourdieu's habitus concept may depend on relatively stable social conditions or simple modernity. The anxieties of society necessitate a "reflexive" habitus, which combines both flexibility and reflexivity (Sweetman, 2003). Individuals develop habitus due to their social status, which predisposes them to make such choices over others. However, a recession can alter their school preferences or habitus; for instance, the pandemic has caused unemployment and financial hardship for some middle-class families. Hence, it is necessary to consider the diversity of situations

that may influence parental decision-making beyond education, such as global economic conditions.

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter presented my application of Bourdieu in this study and how this theoretical lens aided in a better understanding of middle-class parents' school choices. I examined middle-class school choice practice using Bourdieu's three fundamental concepts — capital, habitus, and field — as a major theoretical framework for conceptualising and analysing middle-class school choice practices. Moreover, I discussed the pros and cons of applying Bourdieu's theory in this study. Bourdieu asserts that education can be viewed as a stratified social space (field). Power is disseminated through diverse forms of capital that characterise an individual's social position in the field. Economic capital pertains to economic resources, including cash and assets. Cultural capital refers to a collection of dispositions such as linguistic abilities, values, and lifestyles. It exists in embodied, objectified and institutionalised states. Social capital refers to the resources generated by social networks and relationships (Bourdieu 1986). Capital can be used to maintain or enhance an individual's position. For instance, admission to an elite school acts as symbolic capital. Bourdieu asserts that dominant classes monopolise and benefit from cultural capital, enabling social and cultural exclusion.

CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

In HK, education reforms sought to increase educational standards to combat the mediocrity that emerged from mass education in the late 1970s (Lam, 2013). Schools are encouraged to leave the public sector during education reforms to promote private education. Economic and political uncertainties in the socio-historical setting strengthen the value of education as 'capital.' Moreover, school choice and accountability policies seek to improve school efficiency by increasing teacher accountability, fostering pedagogical innovation, and providing diverse curricula to accommodate school population heterogeneity (Resnik, 2018). School choice is intended to assist parents in securing the 'best' education for their children and to drive school competition to improve educational quality (Ball, 1993; Lam, 2013). However, the challenge with educational reforms is inequitable access to resources necessary for exercising choice. Parents are expected to fund their children's education as private investment in the global economy (Choi, 2005; Lam, 2013). A greater role for parents in educational processes and outcomes is likely to have benefited the middle class, which explains the persistence of class inequalities in HK (Lam, 2013).

This research examines the secondary school choice factors and strategies of middle-class parents. I review the literature to identify knowledge gaps on middle-class parental school choice. This literature review establishes the research questions; it reviews the essential themes of this study to continue challenging school choice policies that perpetuate class inequality. Firstly, I examine the rationale and

debate concerning school choice and the global phenomena of school choice policies, which provide

insights for improving HK education policy. Secondly, I establish the context and define the HK middle

class. There is a complex relationship between middle-class psychology and how parents choose

secondary schools for their children to preserve their class status or enable upward social mobility.

Thirdly, I explore how middle-class practices benefit their children while contributing to social

reproduction and segregation. Fourthly, I compare the school choice factors with other studies to

construct a school choice typology. School choice factors identified from the literature review are

categorised as "academic performance," "teaching quality," "child-focused learning," "socio-economic

status," "school culture," "school facilities and activities," and "proximity and siblings". Finally, I

conclude with a study justification and chapter summary.

3.1 School choice

Parents are expected to use their school choice freedom to customise their children's education under

market-based neoliberal education systems. Opponents argue that the educational marketplace

reinforces inequality by allowing middle-class parents to deploy cultural capital and social advantages

(Lilliedahl, 2021). Therefore, several studies show that educational choice policies and extracurricular

activity participation (Lareau, 2011; Vincent & Ball, 2007) contribute to social inequality (Ball, 2003;

Vincent et al., 2010). The marketisation of education and curricular reform are underway in HK.

Parents arrange tutoring and extracurricular activities for their children to support holistic development

and lifelong learning (Choi, 2005; Lam, 2013). Middle-class parents may have more choices as they have the required capital and habitus (Gewirtz et al., 1995). Ball (2003) acknowledges the impact of social class habitus and capital on school choice practices and claims that middle-class parents spend time researching schools for their children (Ball, 2003). Similarly, Posey-Maddox et al. (2014) assert that:

> Middle-class parents devote enormous amounts of time, money, and skilled labour to their children's schools and classrooms, advocating for and securing improvements in facilities, academics, and extracurricular opportunities (Posey-Maddox, 2014: 447).

School choice is often correlated with economic liberalisation policies, including privatisation, globalisation, and deregulation to increase the private sector's societal role (Campbell et al., 2009; Haymes et al., 2015). Neoliberal school choice policies benefited middle-class families over working-class families (Ball, 1993). Middle-class parents employ cultural and social capital to boost school admission chances (Ball, 2003; Ball & Vincent, 2001). They mobilise cultural capital to maximise their advantages and exclude others from high-paid professional jobs. They believe that getting academic qualifications and achieving professional careers can secure their children's social position (Woo, 2016). Academic qualifications serve as social closure in society, creating a "privileged strata" in labour markets. Employers' perceptions of academic qualifications contribute to the social closure of elite jobs (Rivera, 2011; Tholen, 2017), and professional qualifications have monopolised social and

economic advantageous positions (Tholen, 2017).

Hong Kong parents can enrol their children in free public schools or pay tuition to attend DSS, international, or private schools (Education-Bureau, 2018a, 2018b). They can enrol their children in public secondary schools through the school allocation system. Most middle-class parents favour DSS schools because of the English-medium education, smaller class sizes, IB curricula, inquiry-based learning, and middle-class cultural homogeneity (Charles, 2011; Woo, 2016). As a social group, the middle classes wield more power over others and can self-identify symbolically and geographically (Reay et al., 2011). Considering all the above, it is clear that middle-class parents have more educational opportunities than working-class parents (Benson et al., 2015; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014).

3.1.1 School choice rationale

Globally, school choice reforms are advocated to improve educational outcomes, efficiency, equity, and accountability (Lauen, 2009). Marketisation of education enables inter-school competitions by giving parents more power (Ball et al., 1996) and the right to choose their children's school (Põder & Kerem, 2012). Parental choices are believed to foster competition between private and public schools, putting pressure on schools to improve educational quality in order to retain students (Verger et al., 2016).

Educational decision-making may be intuitive, ambiguous, and emotional (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Parents often choose school based on quality, pressuring schools to compete for students and improve academic achievements (Patrinos et al., 2009). Market mechanisms alter parental and student behaviours, supply diversification and funding, and educational structure (Musset, 2012). In Hong Kong, the quality quest is accomplished by encouraging government-aided schools to leave the public sector in order to foster the development of a robust private sector. Launched in 1991, DSS schools promoted parental choice and school marketisation. The DSS policy aims to reduce school segregation and increase educational equality by allowing parents to choose and eliminate underperforming schools (Lam et al., 2019). Nevertheless, neoliberal capitalism resulted in the redistribution of societal resources from the vulnerable in the public sector to the privileged in the private sector, resulting in inequality (Leung, 2013b). Education should act as a vehicle for social justice and opportunity for all students (Kromydas, 2017). Thus, the Government and schools should collaborate to continuously improve educational quality to meet the needs of parents and students, ensure fair access to school choice alternatives for all students and prevent marginalised children from opting out.

3.1.2 Global school choice phenomenon

School choice policies continue to be a popular and contentious reform option globally (Dong & Li, 2019). The desire for a better future encourages middle-class parents to undertake cross-border migration in contemporary neoliberal times (Adams & Agbenyega, 2019). 'Futurescaping' is a

multifaceted act that is dynamic, futuristic, culturally significant, historically grounded, and provides

a unique view into parents' daily lives (Adams & Agbenyega, 2019). School choice is a global

phenomenon influenced by mobility, globalisation, and the emergence of new social class interests and

identities (GMC), which introduces new challenges and opportunities for city development (Ball &

Nikita, 2014; Sassen, 2019). School choice is critical, as schools serve as sites of social reproduction

(Ball, 2003). Despite country-specific regulations, many nations have improved parental school choice

and curriculum variation (Ball, 1990).

In the United Kingdom (UK), parental choice is the cornerstone of current education policy (Ball et

al., 1996). Early in the 2000s, the Government allowed families to choose schools by creating a priority

list. Scholarships or vouchers were used to attain equality or liberty (Ben-Porath, 2009). The market-

based school choice system demonstrates that parental choice may function effectively in an

increasingly autonomous educational system with little intervention (Allen, 2014). Open enrollment,

financing, and unregulated admission methods promote school enrollment competitiveness. Ball (2003)

investigates the risks and consequences of middle-class school choice as a market-based family-

education interaction. Good parenting may be characterised by school choice responsibility, which is

linked to social class inequalities. Despite policymakers in England boosting choice, parents still

show disenchanted and dismayed (Bhattacharya, 2021). Bhattacharya (2021) shows that parents in

England were more likely to show frustration and disempowerment and considered the present school

choice policies an "illusion", contributing to the growing body of evidence that school choice policies have failed to deliver on their promises. Most parents get school performance information via league tables to facilitate the school selection process (Allen, 2014). The tables provide valuable school information that allows parents to compare schools and evaluate school performance to facilitate the school choice process (Burgess, 2013).

In the United States, scholars believe that financial aid (like vouchers) may extend parents' educational options in public schools, increasing school choice competitiveness while establishing a more equitable system (Nichols & Ozek, 2010; Woo, 2016). Parents exercise school choice by residential mobility, open enrollment, and application to private, charter, or magnet schools. Parents have also benefited from measures like education savings accounts and tax-credit scholarships (Ben-Porath & Johanek, 2019). Moreover, some scholars argue that private schools provide higher-quality education than public schools as they are more autonomous and focused on teaching (Woo, 2016).

In Australia, while education is critical for class reproduction, government secondary schools have historically been recognised as vehicles for nation-building. The legislative practices and social dynamics of migration may link schools internationally. The emphasis on skilled migration in Australia is critical when assessing local ties to global middle-class circuits (Higginson et al., 2019). Middle-class families use established strategies for locating and enrolling in their preferred schools and do not

solely rely on website information, despite reviewing it before decision-making (Rowe & Windle, 2012).

In China, the Government encourages pluralism and diversity in schools to entice the private sector to share the financial burden of high-quality education, assuming that people of diverse cultures, values, and lifestyles will coexist in one society and participate equally in the society (Longley, 2021). Dong and Li (2019) contend that school choice has essentially gone through three stages: regulating choice fees and comprehensive governance toward equity and quality. The Chinese Government increased educational equity in 2006 by instituting test-free, proximity-based admissions and abolishing a key school system. These efforts include fostering stakeholder collaboration, improving enrollment policies, sharing high-quality educational resources, accelerating school transformation, reducing class size, standardising school administration practices, and overall school performance improvement. These initiatives attempted to promote educational equality and alleviate the school choice dilemma (Dong & Li, 2019).

In HK, education marketisation promotes privatisation to improve educational quality (Tsang, 2003; Woo, 2016), and middle-class parents emphasise holistic development. However, the expansion of DSS schools leads to intense competition and inequality as educational resources are shifted to privileged families. Many public schools are being privatised under the DSS, denying underprivileged

students access to elite schooling circuits (Ball et al., 1995). Privatisation will likely intensify

segregation in schools and polarise school resources and performance, exacerbating inequalities (Ball,

2003; Tse, 2008; Van Zanten, 2003) by favouring affluent families (Leung, 2013b; Woo, 2016). Tam

(2002) observes that parents can choose from schools with different funding sources, curricula, and

religious backgrounds. The lack of research on reformed choice processes and class reproduction in

HK highlights the need to contextualise class advantage studies within the local educational system

(Lam, 2013).

3.1.3 School choice debate

Since the late 1980s, educational innovations have facilitated competition among schools based on

parental choices. School choice proponents claim that market forces increased school efficiency and

student performance (Resnik, 2018) and that school choice initiatives benefit students by reducing

school bureaucracy, increasing educational performance, and establishing education markets.

Additionally, they view school choice as a means of increasing access to high-quality schools and

matching schools with students (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; Potterton, 2020). Firstly, proponents

argue that school choice seeks to improve educational quality and equity by establishing school

competitions, promoting creativity and expanding access to high-quality schools (Hastings et al., 2007;

Musset, 2012). It relieves public school bureaucracy, allowing schools to be more effective and agile

(Hoxby, 2006; Leung, 2013b). Secondly, they argue that marketisation increases students' educational

opportunities by allowing them to attend high-quality schools and reinforces educational equity by

providing more educational options for underprivileged children (Bell, 2009a). They assume that

private schools are better equipped to provide superior educational outcomes. Thirdly, they regard the

right to choose as a fundamental tenet of the education system (Glenn, 2005; Kahlenberg, 2003),

implying that increasing competition among schools increases public schools' competitiveness and

quality (Hoxby, 2000).

Critics argue that school choice policies benefit privileged classes by increasing their access to capital

and information while marginalising working-class students and contributing to greater educational

stratification (Potterton, 2020). As educational choice relies on family resources, research indicates

that middle-class parents are privileged to be able to influence their children's education (Ball 2003;

Vincent, Braun, & Ball 2010). They are more likely to exercise control over their children's education

(Reay & Ball, 1998a), resulting in educational inequality. Windle (2015) illustrates why school choice

fails to serve culturally diverse groups and sheds light on the international dynamics contributing to

educational inequalities. Individuals who lack options may lack funds, information, or accessible

options (Moore & Davenport, 1990). Due to the uneven distribution of cultural and economic capital

among families, middle-class parents have more power to exercise choice, resulting in an imbalance

in educational opportunities and resources. Moreover, there is concern that the DSS policy could result

in educational injustice and segregation, favouring middle-class parents. Working-class students may

be excluded due to insufficient capital (Batruch et al., 2019; Denice & Gross, 2016; Woo, 2016). According to Hastings, working-class families are less likely to exercise choice in a public school lottery system where choice is restricted to a strict neighbourhood schooling system (Hastings et al., 2007). Finally, school choice may not improve quality if schools do not respond to competitive incentives as expected (Lubienski, 2006a, 2006b). Scholars suggest that market mechanisms exacerbate educational inefficiency (Levin, 1999). Hence, this research is crucial in understanding middle-class parents' school choice practices and investigating if education can be equally accessible to all families.

3.2 Definition of Hong Kong middle-class

There is a complex relationship between middle-class psychology and how they choose secondary schools for their children to maintain their class status and facilitate upward social mobility. As stated in Section 1.2, the HK middle class grew up under colonial rule. They have thrived in a free market economy where competition determines fate. According to Ip and Lui (2019), the middle class is confronted with a fast-shifting socioeconomic environment that undermines expectations for steady and stable professions amid the economic downturn. Economic recessions undermine the middle class's long-held security and employment stability as guaranteed and secure benefits diminish, which has impacted the career structure. The labour market is undergoing significant transformation, with the long-term goal of lowering employment while modifying hiring and deployment practices. Middle-

class parents may experience anxiety under uncertainty and feel that their future employment opportunities will never be comparable to those of their parents' generation during an economic downturn. In the current social and political circumstances, they are prepared to pursue advancement through educational competition as a means to ascend the social ladder (Ip & Lui, 2019). They believe self-effort can lead to upward mobility. The elitist educational system favours those who compete academically, while the economy's rapid structural changes benefit those without credentials. The middle classes are dedicated to education and exhibit unique academic proficiency, individuality, ambition, self-confidence, and competitiveness. Middle-class parents are believed to have driven HK's development as they have a higher education level and professional status than working-class parents (Leung, 2013a; Tai, 2016).

In HK, most middle-class parents cherish political and academic freedom and seek worldwide chances to accumulate capital to preserve their upward mobility. In recent years, they have increased their wealth and social position due to the expanding real estate market and educational opportunities. They actively contribute to their children's social advancement through their schooling experiences. The most common social class indicators are wealth, education, and occupation (Hong & Zhao, 2015; Ip & Lui, 2019; Karsten, 2015; Kraus & Stephens, 2012). The HK middle class has the economic, social, and cultural power to pursue upward mobility, as demonstrated by the following characteristics (Ip & Lui, 2019; Lui, 2003):

(1) *Wealth.* In my research, property ownership proxied middle-class status. In HK, most middle

classes own private housing and accumulate wealth through property ownership due to the

booming property market (Lui, 2003). Property ownership and median household income are

indicators of middle-class status (Leung, 2013a). Parents in this study invest in elite schools,

extracurricular activities, and tutoring.

(2) *Profession.* The middle classes are primarily composed of professionals, managers, administrators,

and self-employed individuals perceived positively as successful individuals by the broader

population. They can capitalise on new opportunities created by economic development, which are

considered the embodiment of the "HK experience". They believe in success through individual

efforts and follow guidelines for advancement based on equal opportunity and competition (Ip &

Lui, 2019; Lui, 2003). Their occupations allow them to use their social network to gain advantages

during the school choice process. In this study, most of them are professionals, such as teachers,

physiotherapists, doctors, and social workers. Half of the mothers are housewives dedicated to

supporting their children.

(3) *Education.* Educational attainment is highly valued to gain social mobility and become middle

class. Middle-class parents have developed a class identity due to their shared life experiences and

career paths through professional training and credentialism (Ip & Lui, 2019). Their highest

educational level, typically a bachelor's degree, is used to quantify middle-class parents' institutionalised cultural capital (Ip, 2020; Lam, 2015; Pinxten & Lievens, 2014; Ting & Lee, 2019). They are actively involved in their children's development to ensure their children receive the best education (Ip & Lui, 2019; Lui, 2003). Educational attainment (knowledge and intellectual abilities) translates into cultural capital, enabling parents to maintain a higher social status in society (Bourdieu, 1986). All parents in this research have earned a bachelor's degree, and half have attained master's degrees.

3.3 Middle-class school choice strategies and social closure

Middle-class parents use education markets to gain social mobility and advantage, resulting in "social closure" (Ball, 1993; Olmedo, 2008; Van Zanten, 2003), which means optimising an individual's capital or prospects by confining a particular community with similar characteristics (Woo, 2016). It refers to processes of constructing identities, boundaries, and communities to monopolise scarce resources for an individual or group (Flemmen, 2017). Ball (1996) proposes that inequalities in capital between middle-class and working-class parents impact class-based judgments. He extends this analysis by arguing that the middle classes can reproduce through educational markets to pursue relative advantage, social development, and mobility (Ball et al., 1996). Reay states that middle-class parents work hard to ensure their children get the best educational opportunities, whereas working-class parents lack confidence and feel powerless in school selection (Reay & Ball, 1998b). While the

middle class employs various strategies to maximise its advantages, the less privileged are inevitably

marginalised (Woo, 2016). Middle-class families possess the capital and habitus necessary to benefit

from education in order to distinguish themselves from working-class families; their strategies are

explored below (Woo, 2016; Ball & Vincent, 2001):

Economic and cultural capital

Parents' capital contributes significantly to their children's educational achievement through

investment in extra-curricular activities, private tutoring, and access to elite education settings or the

ability to influence school procedures (Ip & Lui, 2019). Middle-class parents possess adequate

economic and cultural capital to prepare their children for school admissions (Lam, 2013). Most

students attend various extra-curricular activities and seek after-class tutorials to get higher grades

(Chan & Bray, 2014). Cultural capital is distributed inequitably in the education field while the

dominant group controls economic and social capital that is effectively used as educational resources,

resulting in educational inequality (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is critical

for social status since it encompasses individuals' educational attitudes and values and legitimises their

power status (Bourdieu, 2011). The fungibility of capital is critical since it enables the transformation

of diverse forms of capital to varying degrees (Bourdieu, 1984).

Nowadays, parents' expectations and efforts extend beyond ensuring their children acquire a university

degree or professional certification. Their strategic initiatives include life coaching, networking, and university admissions success (Ip & Lui, 2019). Thus, parents' capital is critical to their children's success. Fundraising initiatives in schools driven by middle-class parents may exclude working-class parents due to a lack of financial ability (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014). Similarly, the fact that middle-class parents are directly involved in most school-related decisions may intensify class tensions among parents as it limits the voices of working-class parents (Posey-Maddox, 2013). Working-class parents frequently lack the cultural capital essential to guide their children through school selection processes, including written examinations or English-language interviews. Moreover, they lack the economic capital to finance tuition and extra-curricular activities. Their reported aversion to choices of 'distinction' (Ball et al. 2002) indicates how their absorption of objective patterns of educational inequality manifests as 'practical knowledge' in decision-making (Bourdieu 1984).

Social capital and information sources

Cultural capital and social dispositions are crucial in educational decision-making, especially for elite schools (Lareau et al., 2016). Parents need to differentiate amongst schools and be aware of the game rules, which include submitting applications on time and taking entrance examinations (Jonathan, 2021). Parents' ability to leverage social capital from teachers or friends to support school choice selections is critical (Woo, 2016; Lam, 2013).

Parental school choice is a complicated interplay of values, practical considerations, and information sources. There is limited information regarding how parents construct their 'chosen set.' Ball and Vincent (1998) proposed that parents acquire and assess data in non-rational ways. Unlike cold knowledge (official or formal knowledge), the primary information sources are socially embedded in networks (hot knowledge) and disseminated unevenly across social classes. This recognises parents as educational actors who influence school choice. Parents' tension and anxiety throughout the school selection process stem from various cultural values and economic uncertainty (Ball & Vincent, 1998).

Habitus

Habitus is an individual's internalisation and embodiment of practical knowledge shaped by social and cultural background (Bourdieu 1984). The middle classes differentiate themselves by their privileged access to capital in the elite education market, while the working class feels compelled to drop out (Lam, 2013). The middle class's ability to transmit and accumulate cultural capital is regarded as competence (Bourdieu 1986). Thus, cultural capital is a symbolic capital that supports the middle class through educational practices.

This study considers parental school choice a social phenomenon since it reproduces and strengthens the advantage of the middle class over the working class. Habitus reveals each family's narrative and

what sets them apart in their sector. In this study, some middle-class parents read books with their children to broaden their knowledge and help with homework and revision. Some created a trilingual atmosphere at home by interacting in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Moreover, they arranged tutorial sessions and extra-curricular activities such as STEM and swimming to ensure that children achieved their educational goals.

Concerted cultivation and educational inequality

The globalisation of educational opportunities necessitates social reproduction research (Ying & Wright, 2021). Middle-class parents have actively nurture their children's talents and abilities through involvement in their education. Middle-class engagement is ingrained in social reproduction as it benefits middle-class children, reflecting class inequities in concerted cultivation parenting style (Leyton & Rojas, 2017; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Children's educational achievement is also dependent on their parents' capital and abilities to support them (Crozier et al., 2011; Lareau, 2011; Lilliedahl, 2021). Private tutoring, extra-curricular activities, and educational consulting have developed into global 'new norms' of concerted nurturing as a means of reproducing advantages (Sun & Smith, 2017; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Zhang, 2020). Parenting is believed to contribute to classed behaviours impacted by the dispositions, cultures, and resources of social classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Hong Kong middle-class parents typically support their children's extra-curricular activities and learning (Choi, 2005; Lareau, 2003). This study demonstrates that they have benefited from educational expansion at

the expense of others (Leyton & Rojas, 2017; Woo, 2016). They appear to have a greater influence on the educational system, as they pay for education and are regarded as essential customers (Abrahams, 2016; Kainuwa et al., 2013).

Social class practices can provide insight into current educational inequities (Reay, 2006). Economic integration advocates claim that the middle class benefits students' academic achievement while exacerbating inequality by advocating for policies, practices, and resource allocation that favour their children over working-class students (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Van Zanten, 2003). Middle-class parents infuse public schools with economic, cultural, and social capital (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014). They may contribute financially to schools and harness social networks to identify funding sources for large-scale projects like extra-curricular activities and outdoor facilities. Moreover, they may advocate for certain school policies, curricula, and practices (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014). Middle-class parents are generally more organised in influencing their children's school experiences and home-school relationships. They are likely to feel more confident talking with teachers and school officials (Jonathan, 2021; Lareau, 2011). Furthermore, mothers' employment situation influences their involvement in education. Middle-class mothers can afford to work part-time or become housewives to facilitate their educational involvement (Reay, 1998).

Middle-class families succeed in school by leveraging their economic, cultural, and social capital (Zhou et al., 2016). They are more likely to afford fee-paying schools to avoid working-class students, be familiar with the educational system, and access school information via social networks (Zhou, Cai, & Wang, 2016). School choice tends to segregate students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Ball, 2003). Hence, choice policies cannot ensure wider access to high-quality education. Instead, they solidify the middle-class advantage in the credentials race and exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequalities (Gewirtz et al., 1995).

3.4 Factors underlying parental choices

Middle-class parents are essential stakeholders in the educational system; they perceive school choice as a strategy of social reproduction, social closure, and superiority (Woo, 2016). Some parents believe that educational systems that facilitate choice and competition among parents and schools are more equitable than bureaucratically structured systems, which promote competition in the public sector (Leung, 2013b). Secondary school choice is significant as education policy increasingly views parents as "customers" in a market seeking the best schools (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014). Parental decisions are complex and influenced by various factors, such as social status, religion, and ethnic origin (Allen, 2014; Ball et al., 1996; Lee & Bagley, 2017; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Woo, 2016). All these are valued by middle-class parents; specifically, intellectual growth, academic success, and school enjoyment are hallmarks of high-quality education, as well as collective concern for equality and integration

(Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007). Middle-class parents appear to value peer influence and academic performance, while working-class parents may emphasise staff friendliness, support, and accessibility (Allen, 2014). Working-class families may be excluded from high-performing schools by focusing on non-academic aspects of school or avoiding possible rejection (Allen, 2014; Woo, 2016).

The 17 common factors influencing parental school choice identified in the literature are classified into seven categories: "academic performance," "teaching quality," "socio-economic status," "child-focused learning," "social culture," "school facilities and activities," and "proximity and siblings." A typology was constructed from the literature review to compare factors affecting the secondary school choice of middle-class parents in HK with previous studies, as shown in Figure 2.
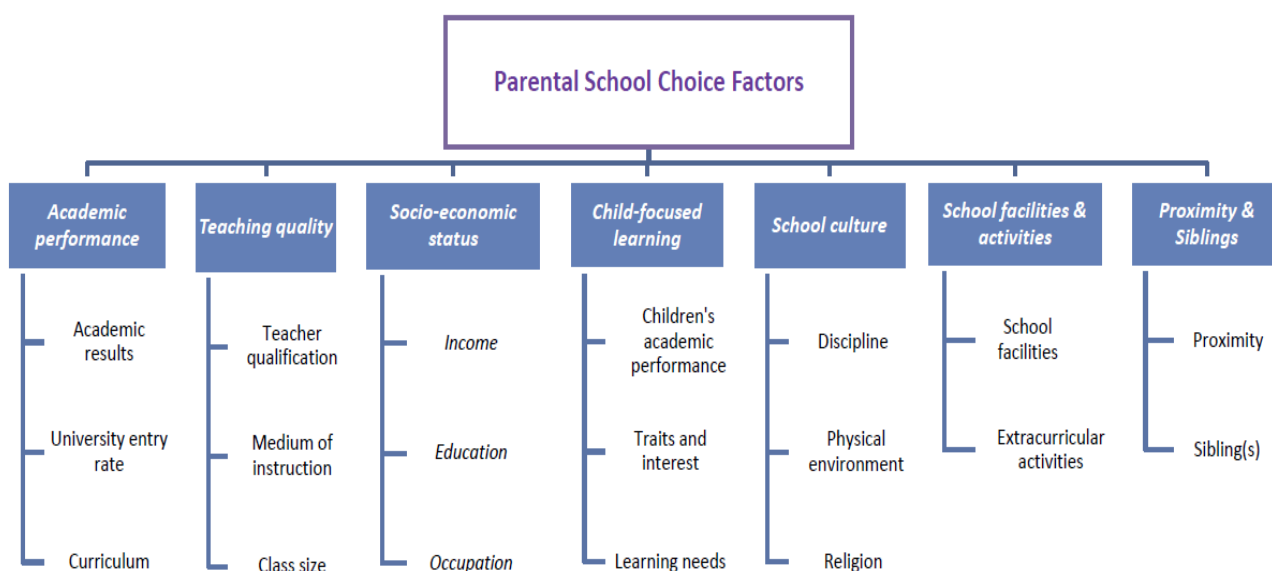
Figure 2 Typology of common parental school choice factors from literature review (Appendix 5)

3.4.1 Academic performance

Academic performance mainly comprises academic or public examination results, assessment, university entry rate, and curriculum (Alsuiadi, 2015; Chan, 2017; Krull, 2016; Ravitch, 2013). It demonstrates the ability of students to perform, achieve, and excel in educational activities. Additionally, it demonstrates how well students are supported in accomplishing their goals and accessing learning opportunities and curricula. Public examination results and university entry rates are vital measures of academic performance. Some scholars believe that educational quality is determined by academic excellence (Bosetti, 2004; Charles, 2011), school culture, and effective leadership (Beamish, 2013). Academic ranking and teaching quality are vital features guiding parental school choices (Bosetti, 2004; Jackson, 2005). Some parents rank academic performance as the top priority for school choice (Beamish, 2013; Burgess et al., 2015; Stein et al., 2011), implying that credentialism plays a substantial part in school selection (Bosetti, 2004; Eble & Hu, 2016; Yaacob, 2014). While some parents may not prioritise academic achievement as their primary priority when selecting a school as each child has distinct needs (Erickson, 2017).

Elite education typically entails outstanding public examinations and admission to prestigious universities. The high public esteem stems from the continuous influential alumni production across professions, government, industry, and social links (Kenway et al., 2013). Some parents believe that private schools outperform public schools academically (Alsuiadi, 2015), and academic credentials are

required for economic returns. Therefore, parents invest in their children's academic success, which increases competition for high-quality schools. Given the increasing importance of educational credentials in determining occupational success and life prospects in the modern era, social mobility patterns may have differed along class lines for class reproduction, explaining why class inequality persists in HK (Lui, 2009).

International Baccalaureate program

School-level strategy, facilitated by neoliberal choice policies, can establish internal curricular marketplaces where branded curricula (like IB) coexist alongside the local government curriculum (Doherty, 2012). The International Baccalaureate (IB) program distinguishes itself from traditional schooling in its emphasis on cognitive and non-cognitive abilities in addition to academic knowledge. It seeks to transcend established curricula by fostering inquisitive, informed, and knowledgeable children (Wright & Lee, 2020). The IB program provides students with a diverse international curriculum and contributes to their academic success. Scholars contended that marketisation policies increased the emphasis on recruiting high-achieving pupils, resulting in competition among schools (Resnik, 2018; Doherty, 2012). Schools have relied on the IB's reputation for an academic challenge to recruit academically motivated students (Doherty, 2012). Doherty (2012) examined the impact of the IB program on teachers' work in Australian schools and discovered that teachers loved the program's design despite higher expectations. Wright and Lee (2020) discovered that IB graduates

possess better critical thinking, creativity, cultural sensitivity, time management, global-mindedness, communication, and leadership than non-IB alumni. Hence, more middle-class students enrol in the IB program, preparing themselves for university and reproducing their social position (Resnik, 2018; Wright & Lee, 2019, 2020).

3.4.2 Teaching quality

Teachers act as role models for students and directly impact their personality and attitude development (Wall & Hall, 2016). Middle-class parents believe that quality education entails smaller class sizes and teachers with solid qualifications and a high level of English proficiency (Alsuiadi, 2015; Woo, 2016; Zhou et al., 2015).

Teacher qualification

Parents believe that students' academic performance is affected by teaching quality (Beamish, 2013), which involves teacher qualifications, medium of instruction and class sizes. Beamish measures academic quality based on teachers' quality, academic achievement, and opportunities for a diverse student population. He suggests that teaching and learning programs significantly impact students' academic performance. Moe (2001) defines academic quality by test scores and teacher quality, whereas Burgess et al. (2015) state that parents value academic performance, teaching quality, and school reputation. Teachers engage students in academic activities to promote learning and critical

thinking. This study examines academic performance and teaching quality separately, as some parents may value teaching quality more than academic performance.

Medium of instruction

The societal demand for EMI schools or IB programs is expanding (Young, 2018). Hong Kong's educational system is distinctive regarding the symbolic significance of the English language, symbolic school banding, and complexity of decision-making systems (Lam, 2013). The colonial heritage of a language symbolic order and socio-economic stratification affect social differentiation in school selection and social segregation in a marketised education system (Lam et al., 2019). Globalisation has influenced and inspired students' future imaginations in HK, considerably affecting students' capacity to achieve that. English is commonly regarded as the language of power and wealth. The current MOI policy benefits those with economic and cultural capital (Choi, 2003). English proficiency acts as cultural and symbolic capital that influence students' achievement (Tsao et al., 2018). Tao (2018) emphasised the advantages of English language proficiency, including effective communication with a better command of English and a greater capacity to articulate a future vision, which signifies a higher social class lifestyle. Academic success at the university level necessitated English skills since leading universities in HK utilised English as their main MOI and English was regarded as a privileged cultural capital. The symbolic significance of English is linked to one's educational and social position (Tao, 2018). Most parents prefer English-medium schools with

effective teachers and support for their children's cultural and symbolic capital (Kenway et al., 2013; Leung, 2013b). The middle class invests heavily in EMI schools to maintain their status (Tsao, 2018), whereas the working class may be marginalised, correlating with the findings of Ball (2003). This study examines the role of MOI in school choice and whether English-medium instruction influences middle-class education selections. It is worth considering how middle-class school choice fosters cultural capital accumulation through language acquisition.

Class size

Several studies suggest that a smaller class size benefits both teachers and students (Bosetti, 2004; Charles, 2011; Denessena et al., 2005). For instance, a class size of 15 students produces better learning outcomes than that of 22, as teachers can manage the classroom more efficiently and foster a collaborative learning environment, leading to improved academic performance (Blatchford, 2007; Ravitch, 2013).

3.4.3 Socio-economic status

Socio-economic status (SES) relates to an individual's economic and social status as measured by occupation, income, and education level (Baker, 2014; Galobardes et al., 2006; House, 2002). Parents' SES is significantly tied to their educational expectations and impacts their children's overall academic accomplishment (Stull, 2013). Parents believe that selecting an appropriate secondary school is critical

to their children's potential success. Hence, they are frequently involved in their children's education and emphasise academic qualifications (Olmedo, 2008). Additionally, parents' education level has a major impact on their children's academic progress, and their active involvement helps their children perform better academically (Stull, 2013). The higher the parents' educational attainment, the more supportive they are of their children's academic endeavours (Farooq et al., 2011).

In HK, middle-class parents tend to make long-term, strategic decisions on behalf of their children (Benson et al., 2015; Reay & Ball, 1998a; Reay, 2003). They typically possess more capital to propel their children into specific strategic fields and trajectories (Farooq et al., 2011). Social culture and SES are critical components of understanding parental choices. Woo (2016) suggests that parents' SES influences their school decisions; they select DSS schools to keep their children out of schools with a bad reputation for discipline. All primary six children are assigned to schools based on their academic achievement and geographic proximity during the school central allocation stage (Education-Bureau, 2019c). Thus, public schools have a diverse population of students of varying SES. However, most middle-class parents are hesitant to network with working-class families because of their socio-economic background, believing that cultural homogeneity is desirable (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Hence, DSS schools serve as an alternate route to social mobility (Woo, 2016).

On the other hand, schools are eager to recruit students who excel academically and come from well-

educated and supportive families. Therefore, resources are reallocated from underprivileged to privileged students (Leung, 2013b), leading to inequality. The dominance of middle-class parents in DSS schools leads to social class reproduction. While most social justice research focuses on socioeconomically disadvantaged children, it is critical to understand the dynamics affecting middle-class students to have a comprehensive picture of educational inequality (Tsao, 2018, Ball 2003).

3.4.4 Child-focused learning

Child-focused learning considers children's academic performance, traits, interests and learning needs. School choice freedom is viewed as the right of parents to select the best educational options for their children (Olmedo, 2008); it differs significantly across families and is closely linked to family habitus. Middle-class parents generally prioritise children's well-being (Ball, 1998; Olmedo, 2008). They believe that child's happiness at school signals a correct school decision and that their teachers and classmates are vital to happy learning (Olmedo, 2008). Carr-Chellman and Kroth (2019) stress the significance of a profound learning culture that encourages students to take ownership of their education in order to increase their motivation and learning effectiveness. This learning culture includes "profound experiences and ongoing exploration that seeks insight, depth, and breadth" (Kroth & Carr-Chellman, 2018, p. 109). Tam (2002) observes that academic-centred and child-centred components are critical determinants of parental school choice. Chan (2017) indicates that children's well-being (happiness, school facilities) and academic performance are essential school choice factors.

3.4.5 School culture

School culture encompasses the beliefs, relationships, behaviours, and policies that shape school operations. Additionally, it entails the physical and mental well-being of students and classroom discipline (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Alsuiadi (2015) comments that school culture involves student discipline and background, physical environment, and religion. The culture of a school is shaped by its values, practices, history, policies, and mission. Principals, students, parents, and teachers are essential stakeholders who contribute to a positive school culture (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). A team of capable, qualified, and dedicated teaching professionals should be led by influential leaders and driven by a clear vision and strategy to help students succeed. An effective principal is visionary and capable of communicating expectations to parents (Beamish, 2013). School culture should be built on mutual respect and provide students with an enjoyable, well-maintained, and safe learning environment. Parents' involvement in school is crucial; parents emphasise discipline and peer influence, believing that pupils will benefit from the "positive spillover" effect of privileged classmates (Coleman, 2001).

Catholic secondary schools have a long history of providing a high-quality education with outstanding student accomplishment. Catholic school culture has been shown to substantially impact school effectiveness, including academic performance and students' values and character (Turan & Bektas, 2013; Wu, 2015). This culture permeates disciplinary and student support systems by integrating the

values, beliefs, and shared practices that schools communicate. It is essential to harness the goodwill

of teachers, parents and students to create a cohesive and motivating school climate (Lieber & Tissiere,

2015). Student discipline is a part of the broader domain of school culture, which Beamish

(2013) ranks as the third most critical factor. The school atmosphere is closely linked to the collective

perceptions and morale of students and teachers, reflecting how supportive, respectful, safe, and

disciplined the learning environment feels. Parents consider choosing religious schools that reflect

their religious values and beliefs to ensure their children learn in an environment that integrates religion

into the curriculum (Bosetti, 2004). Religion also facilitates forming a distinct social group (Agbaria,

2019).

3.4.6 School facilities and activities

Middle-class parents typically view extra-curricular activities as "concerted cultivation," while

working-class parents tend to perceive them as a form of "natural growth" (Lareau, 2011). Most

parents who desire well-rounded children prefer schools that integrate academics and extra-curricular

activities (Reay et al., 2007). Parents who emphasise school facilities and extra-curricular activities

tend to enrol their children in schools with well-equipped science laboratories, computer rooms,

libraries, and playgrounds (Alsuiadi, 2015). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital elucidates the

demand for school value-added programs that enable students to acquire cultural capital, which in turn

empowers them to achieve higher academic positions and social status (Roda, 2017; Yoon, 2020).

3.4.7 Proximity and siblings

Bosetti (2004) suggests that parents prefer public schools because of their proximity to their homes. Some parents choose a school based on its accessibility as proximity to school is essential; commuting entails an expense for both a family and society (Olmedo, 2008); proximity is also critical for minimising transit time. In terms of society, a dispersed school population may reduce inequality and provide more choices for parents who live in different areas (Olmedo, 2008).

3.5 Study justification

This research focuses on public-funded secondary schools, including DSS, government and government-aided schools, to comprehensively understand the school choice phenomenon. In HK, little research has focused on the determinants of school choice factors and middle-class strategies for selecting public-funded secondary schools (Chan & Tan, 2008; Mok & Tan, 2004; Ng, 2012; Tam, 2002; Tse, 2008; Woo, 2016; Yung, 2006; Zhou et al., 2015). Since most secondary schools are public-funded, this study can potentially fill the knowledge gap. Additionally, this study aims to advance our understanding of middle-class school choice practices. It may shed light on how the government might improve educational quality by incorporating middle-class quality perceptions and school choice preferences into education policies.

3.6 Chapter summary

This research investigates school choice factors and strategies of middle-class parents. I examine the relationship between unequal access to parental resources necessary for negotiating children's schooling amid education reforms and educational inequality in HK. The literature review section examines school choice (rationale, global school choice phenomenon and debate), the HK middle-class definition, middle-class school choice strategies and social closure, school choice factors, and study justification.

Firstly, I examined the school choice rationale, global policies and debates. Marketisation, privatisation, and choice are discussed to demonstrate how school choice is a feature of an education system constrained by cultural and structural boundaries. Secondly, I define the HK middle class primarily using Ip & Lui (2019), who use income, profession and educational attainment as social class indicators. There is a complex relationship between the middle class's psychology, upbringing, and choice of secondary schools for their children to achieve upward social mobility. Thirdly, I investigate how middle-class families leverage their capital and habitus to win the school choice game. Middle-class parents mobilise their resources to enrol their children in top EMI schools, resulting in social closure. Cultural capital enables parents to support their children during school admissions processes by navigating them through written tests or interviews conducted in English. Economic capital allows parents to pay for tuition and extra-curricular activities. Social capital is critical for acquiring

information from social networks to make school choice decisions. Fourthly, the factors underlying

parental choices are explored, including academic performance, teaching quality, SES, child-focused

learning, school culture, school facilities and activities, and proximity and siblings. Finally, I discuss

the study justification and conclude with a summary.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the factors and strategies of middle-class parents when selecting public-funded secondary schools for their children. I attempt to understand the rationale behind their choices, experiences, and behaviours. Qualitative and interpretive approaches are used to explore the HK middle-class parental school choice practices. I discuss research philosophy and reflexive approach, research questions, conceptual framework, research design and methods, data collection methods, data analysis and coding strategies, as well as data storage and protection. This chapter illustrates how the study's objectives, methodology, and specific data analysis processes are aligned. Moreover, it explores the relationship between my ontological and epistemological ideas and my research. The chapter describes the study's design and demonstrates how I grounded the research questions in the study framework, analysed middle-class school choice experiences, and addressed knowledge gaps about parental school choice practices. In addition, it outlines the consistency of the study paradigm, interpretivist qualitative methodology, research questions, participants and sampling methods, as well as data collection procedures. Finally, it discusses how to understand and portray data using coding and thematic analysis. I began by articulating why I chose this topic through my research reflexivity.

4.1 Researcher reflexivity

Bourdieu explores strategies for researchers to place themselves within cultural production and recognise the influence of their position on the research data as research reflexivity is the route to

objectivity (Bourdieu, 1989). Reflexivity is an ongoing process that aims at enhancing the credibility and richness of research. It is signposting and framing one's assumed knowledge. It exposes researchers' interpretations to biases based on their social class habitus, the study context, and adherence to the epistemological lens of practice theory used to identify constant and static realities for research findings (Swartz, 1997). Understanding how we are part of our research is about recognising the 'scholarly gaze' and the impact of one's position on the data (Abrahams, 2016; Wacquant, 1989). I have been conscious of my background as an Education Consultant and its impact on this study. I have continually reflected on the research topic to situate myself within the research. I consider myself a middle-class parent, and this study has made me reflect upon the interactions that shaped my views on middle-class practices. Like other parents, I assume that attending a quality school will result in capital accumulation and upward mobility. I possess the cultural and social capital necessary to guide me through the school choice process and the economic capital to engage my children in various extra-curricular activities and lessons that prepared them for academic and life success.

Maintaining a reflexive approach throughout the research enabled me to critically examine parental perspectives and apply what I learned to my practice. Indeed, part of my study is a reconstruction of my perspectives. I incorporated my reflective notes, collected alternate views, and contrasted thoughts and ideas to facilitate the reflective process. Regular analysis of these notes facilitated careful

examination of data content and interpretations, revealing underlying assumptions and challenging subjective bias. Additionally, it enabled a determination of the extent to which research methodology and processes influenced field practice. Moreover, I incorporated reflexivity into my analytical frameworks to facilitate self-reflection on procedures, interpretations, and outcomes. Furthermore, participants provided feedback on my transcriptions following the research.

This research shows how middle-class parents employed various strategies to select a suitable school for their child, leading to social reproduction. Middle-class parents in this study are strategic in their school selection and invest considerable effort and time, which corroborates Ball's findings (Ball et al., 1996; Gewirtz et al., 1995). They conduct intensive school searches and comparisons to generate a list of suitable schools, which is complex and time-consuming. They consult educational experts for guidance on school selection, which is a strategy motivated by a desire for their children to attend elite secondary schools. I respect parents' autonomy, decision-making and values. I am conscious of my lexical choices to maintain a neutral attitude as I listen to their comments. I avoided leading questions and allowed them to speak freely in response to my research questions. I constantly asked myself: (1) Did my position as an Education Consultant affect parents' confidence? (2) Had I dominated the interview? Had I influenced the parents' suggestions, or were they free to speak their minds? (3) How did I contribute my experiences to the research process? (4) To what extent did my parental values or feelings influence the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening ability, or my behaviour?

(5) How did I represent the voices and perceptions of parents (McLean, 2018)? How did my perspective influence the interview process? During the interview, some parents might worry about whether their school choices are right for their children. I bolstered parents' faith and trust by informing them that this study recognised their perspectives and experiences about secondary school selection and reassured them that there were no right or wrong answers. I urged parents to be confident in their decisions and encouraged them to speak freely about their experiences. I began the discussion with more general questions about the research context, study motivation, participant rights, and family background to elicit their participation. Then, I addressed the research issues, including educational quality and school choice factors and strategies. My social network enabled me to find middle-class parents more efficiently for this research because of my middle-class background. I solicited referrals from friends and relatives of middle-class parents and avoided approaching parents I was personally acquainted with to prevent prejudice. This research focused on middle-class parents because of my middle-class background and job nature. Therefore, it was easier for me to find participants and develop rapport with them through my social network.

There is an implicit recognition within the HK context that being middle-class and all of the practices associated with being middle-class is valued. In this research, I demonstrated how middle-class parents leveraged their economic, cultural and social resources to benefit in the education field. They aided their children in retaining their social status and advancing their social mobility by making the most

appropriate education choices for them. Bourdieu (2003) suggests that researchers must uncover the behaviours and habitus in the field and recognise their relationships with participants. Bourdieu is concerned with social class inequality, and the accumulation of various kinds of capital individuals bring to the education field (Grenfell, 2018). I considered the educational inequality in HK by adopting Bourdieu's theory to comprehend middle-class parents' strategies and school choice practices. I attempted to bridge my life as a researcher, practitioner, and individual by reflecting on Bourdieu's theory and how this research would assist me in ensuring the reliability and integrity of findings and analysis, as well as help me improve my profession.

The parents' replies were fascinating, demonstrating a depth of understanding of the issues involved and a sense of contentment with the entire process. My middle-class upbringing, my job as an Educational Consultant, and the study topic contributed to my research on this subject. The research questions invited parental responses as they expressed a genuine interest in my story and spoke candidly with me. To eliminate bias, none of the participants were my clients.

4.2 Research paradigm and qualitative approach

The researcher's perspective on the subject under investigation influenced the research's execution and the interpretation of the results. Bourdieu's theory and conceptual framework shaped my views on parental school choice experiences (ontology), how those experiences should be understood

(epistemology), and methodology. Hence, I contextualised my research by stressing the study of social

life through an interpretive and qualitative approach (Cohen et al., 2011).

Interpretivism

Interpretivism, as a philosophical position, entrusts researchers with the responsibility of observing

phenomena and incorporating human interest into a study (Myers, 2019). Qualitative research and

interpretative epistemology are inextricably linked (Pulla & Carter, 2018). Kelliher (2005)

acknowledged the significance of interpretivism in recognising the social construction of reality.

Interpretivism is widely applied in qualitative research disciplines such as in-depth examinations of

parental choice variables, cross-cultural disparities, ethical dilemmas, and leadership (Khan, 2014;

Kroeze, 2012; Ryan, 2018). It is associated with idealism and various approaches that reject the

objectivist interpretation of the universe in which meaning occurs independently of consciousness

(Collins, 2010).

The research regarded school choice as a social reality and allowed parents to express their opinions

on it. The study investigated how parents conceptualised this social reality and demonstrated how their

viewpoints influenced their practices. It provided comprehensive contextualised narratives of middle-

class school choice behaviours in the public-funded secondary schools. Alvesson (2011) suggests

considering trustworthiness, identity, and language issues. I believe that middle-class parents' school

choice practices are subjectively constructed based on their personal lived experiences. The

interpretivist view enabled me to investigate the essence of human behaviour, relationships, and culture

to develop a holistic, subjective view of people's lives (Pulla & Carter, 2018). According to the research

objectives, interpreting the school choice factors of middle-class parents involved a detailed

understanding of their subjective interpretations and perceptions of the social world. The key

disadvantages of interpretivism were its subjective nature and the potential for researcher bias, as

personal beliefs and values directly affected data (Ryan, 2018). Thus, its validity relied on the

researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity (Alvesson, 2011), and data auditability used to construct

interpretations.

Qualitative approach

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study owing to the nature of the research questions. In

contrast to quantitative research, which relies on statistical methods and superficial data, qualitative

research focuses on the meanings, values, opinions, feelings, perceptions, and characteristics of the

studied phenomenon, allowing for a more in-depth examination (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, I

collected data naturally through interviews, presuming that reality could be reached through social

constructions such as research instruments, shared meanings, consciousness, and language (Creswell,

2007; Myers, 2019). Research findings had a high level of validity due to the ability to conduct in-

depth analyses of human behaviour (Khan, 2014), which was critical for understanding parents' school

choice factors. Accordingly, this philosophy underscored qualitative analysis rather than quantitative analysis.

The qualitative approach had the following advantages: Firstly, this research aimed to better understand middle-class parents' practices by analysing their school choice factors. I attempted to achieve both depth and breadth by probing for key points during interviews. Understanding parents' expectations, feelings, and school choice strategies provided insight into their behaviours, values, and motivations. The qualitative approach equipped me with the necessary tools to study dynamic phenomena in parental school choice contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2010). It explored the connection between social class and school choice processes through Bourdieu's habitus, capital, and field principles. Qualitative research resulted in more detailed responses as I engaged parents actively throughout the data gathering process. Secondly, an in-depth interpretive and inductive inquiry enabled understanding of parents' behaviours through semi-structured interviews (Allen, 2004; Bosch, 2006; Davies, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Mouton, 2001). It took place in a natural setting focusing on the study context; it examined the perspective and meaning of experiences, sought insight, and identified social structures or processes that explain individual behaviours (Wong, 2008). This study relied on extensive interaction with parents, allowing me to uncover unexpected or unanticipated facts and transform parents' views into specifics, which would have been impossible with quantitative methods (Brandon, 2018; Wong, 2008). Instead of selecting pre-determined reasons from a list, participants might think

'outside the box' to offer their ideas. Thirdly, the qualitative approach was flexible because it allowed data collection in new directions whenever necessary and interpreted data in various circumstances (Yin, 2009). It was critical to delve deeper into parental school choices and strategies to get insights into improving educational quality and equity. Qualitative research enabled me to examine the similarities and differences between parents in different public-funded secondary schools, thus adding value to the literature. Fourthly, while qualitative interviews typically entail smaller sample sizes and non-representative population sampling (Ting & Lee, 2019), this research was not concerned with generalising the sample size or testing hypotheses (Creswell, 2007; Myers, 2019). Given the multiplicity of parental perspectives, this study could not have been pre-designed, nor could the interview procedure have been strictly controlled. The interview questions shifted as the researcher progressed through the data collection. Finally, the qualitative approach shed light on idea development and laid the groundwork for future research on educational quality and parental choice.

To develop meaningful understandings of parental school choice experiences, this research adheres to broadly qualitative traditions: data were collected in naturally occurring contexts, multiple data sources from different schools provided multiple perspectives and lenses, data were analysed inductively, and researcher subjectivity was valued as a research tool (Cohen et al., 2011). The data collection technique and procedures were adapted to the research questions.

4.3 Research questions

While well-defined research questions help establish the scope and boundaries of a study, it is equally critical in a qualitative inquiry that the research questions do not constrain the study by framing it too narrowly (Bryman, 2012; Punch, 2012). The research questions are summarised below:

1. What factors influence the decision of middle-class parents to enrol their child in a public-funded secondary school in Hong Kong?

    1a. What do middle-class parents perceive as the determinants of 'high-quality' secondary education?

    1b. What are the school choice factors of middle-class parents when choosing a public-funded secondary school?

    1c. What are the rationales for selecting different types of public-funded secondary schools?

    These questions investigated how middle-class parents conceptualised and translated quality concepts into specific school choice factors. Parents were encouraged to brainstorm the factors they considered when enrolling their children in a public-funded secondary school. This allowed me to understand the significance of various school choice factors. Additionally, the rationales for selecting different types of schools were investigated.

2. What are the strategies of middle-class parents when selecting a public-funded secondary school?

2a. How do middle-class parents use capital and habitus to maximise their advantages during the secondary school selection process?

2b. What are their sources of information when selecting a secondary school?

This study analysed middle-class parents' strategies for selecting a public-funded secondary school for their child, examining how they use capital and habitus to maximise their advantages and attempting to determine whether inequity exists. Additionally, it examined the information sources on which middle-class parents depend when making decisions.

4.4 Conceptual framework

This research then proceeded to the HK context, where I built a conceptual framework (Figure 3) to guide the study through the Bourdieusian lens. Bourdieu's theory aided in understanding the school choice practices of middle-class parents (Bourdieu, 1986). It presented an in-depth examination of middle-class parents' perspectives on school choice options, including how they related educational quality to their school choice factors and rationales. It shed light on parents' school choice strategies and the link between their socioeconomic status and their selections. For example, how middle-class parents gain advantages through their capital and habitus and what sources of information they acquire during the school selection process. It incorporated practical aspects of daily life and social action, power and dominance relationships, and reflexive sociology. Bourdieu contended that habitus and

capital forms influence middle-class school choice practices (Bourdieu, 1984).
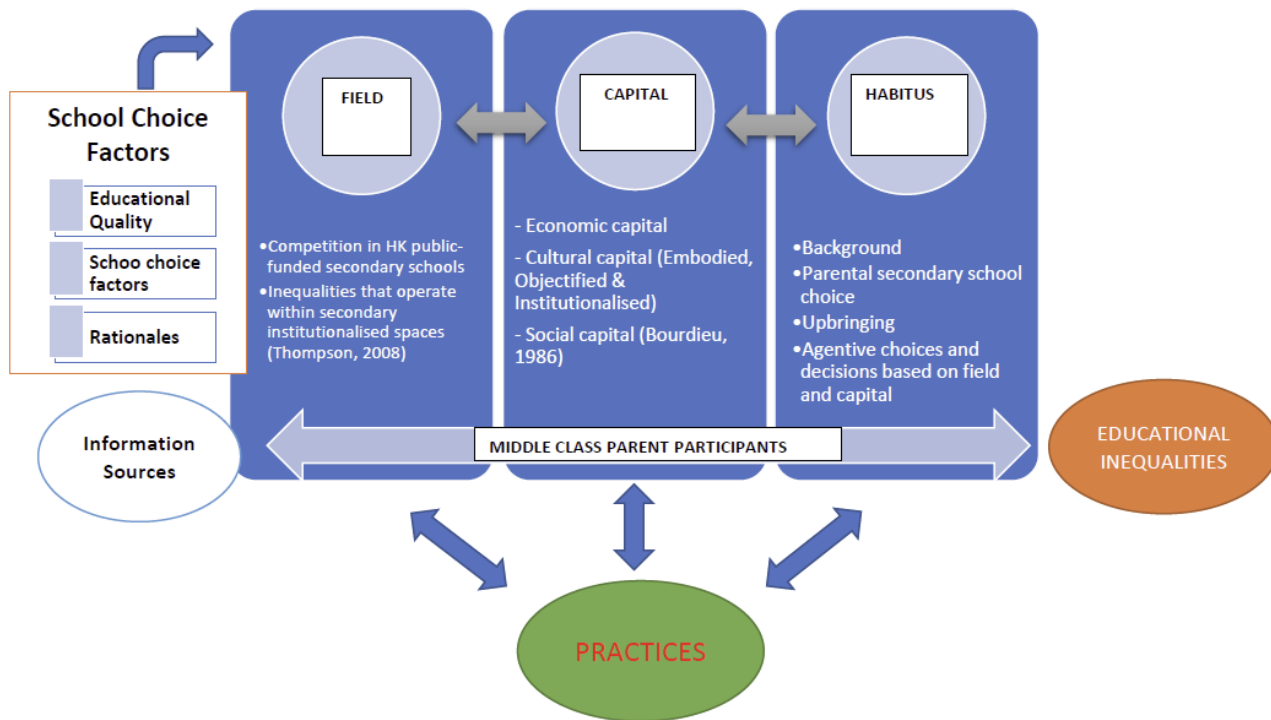
Figure 3 Conceptual framework of the study

4.5 Research methods

This section considered the research design and methods used to address the research questions. This study aimed to identify the school choice factors and strategies of middle-class parents. Qualitative study is beneficial when analysing complex human behaviours. An interview enables me to delve into an individual's vast and nuanced knowledge (Cavana et al., 2001). Thus, I conducted individual semi-structured Skype interviews with 18 middle-class parents from various public-funded secondary schools (six government, six government-aided and six DSS schools). This broader sample of schools

resulted in more compelling conclusions. Previous research on parental choice has typically taken a qualitative or mixed-method approach, with interviews and questionnaires being common methods used (Cohen et al., 2011; Robson, 2011; Tam, 2002; Woo, 2016; Zhou et al., 2015).

Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews serve as an inductive tool to determine how to apply Bourdieu's principles to parental school choice. It is a common qualitative research technique for understanding information about the values, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences of participants (Roda, 2018; Woo, 2016). Using the qualitative inquiry approach, I delved into specific subjects and responses during the interview. After establishing rapport with middle-class parents, I inquired about their school choice factors, rationales and strategies. I began the conversation by asking general questions about the research and their family backgrounds. Then, I asked follow-up questions to clarify meanings depending on their responses; participants were free to talk without coercion or restriction. To understand the practices of middle-class parents, I had initially identified their lifestyle patterns that were constructed from capital and habitus, shedding light on the volume and structure of their capital (Bourdieu, 2018). I realised that different parents based their practices on different rationales.

Individual semi-structured interviews were judged advantageous as participants would feel more relaxed discussing specific issues, facilitating an in-depth understanding of the experiences and

perspectives of parents. First, interviews offered insight into parental habitus that affects their attitudes

(Jamshed, 2014). Their facial expressions and intonation broadened the significance of verbal cues.

Second, synchronous communication allowed spontaneous interactions, leading to open discussions

that improved the accuracy of results. The interaction fostered by interviewers resulted in the collection

of 'quality' data in response to research questions (Roulston, 2010). Nonetheless, several constraints

existed, notably the difficulty of capturing massive data volumes concurrently and a relatively small

sampling size. Additionally, conducting interviews and transcribing audio recordings took

considerable time. Furthermore, interviews are frequently focused on individual viewpoints, which

leads to methodological individualism when elucidating. This bias is not inherent in the process but

frequently manifests itself, as interviews assume people have characteristics and that features influence

outcomes (Lamont & Swidler, 2014).

Online Skype interview

I conducted interviews using the online tool "Skype for Business" to better cope with data security

issues, encryption, and the global coronavirus pandemic that began in December 2019. As group

activities were limited due to the COV-19 pandemic, online Skype interviews became an essential

alternative for achieving the same research goals (Lobe et al., 2020). The public was encouraged to

stay at home, minimise social activities or gatherings, and maintain as much social distance as possible

from others. Due to the public health concerns, online interviews were the most effective method of

lowering infection risks. Moreover, it was more convenient and efficient as I could minimise commuting time and conduct interviews at times mutually agreed upon by participants.

I chose a distraction-free place for the online interview, which lasted around an hour and was conducted in a semi-structured, naturalistic manner. I began by establishing relationships with parents and emphasising my interest in their children's educational options. I responded to their replies with a series of open-ended questions and encouraged parents to share their experiences, opinions, and ideas (Legard et al., 2003). Moreover, I made a concerted effort to listen intently, taking notes and allowing them to speak freely on topics that interest them, keeping in mind that interviewing encourages systematic consideration of research design, particularly comparisons between contexts, circumstances, and individuals (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Parents brainstormed and prioritised the elements that influenced their school choice. They also discussed their rationales and strategies for selecting secondary schools for their children. I continued interviewing parents until the data became saturated, at which point no new evidence was identified.

Being an attentive and respectful listener was essential in encouraging parents to continue speaking. Simple head nods would help foster my interest in their story without interfering. Parents who felt secure and trusted were more likely to share their thoughts and experiences. Additionally, to prevent leading questions, parents were not explicitly asked whether a particular factor influenced their school

decision. While this may occasionally result in the conversation drifting into unrelated areas, allowing parents to talk freely could provide a new perspective on specific issues. Sometimes, I had to redirect their attention to the topic at hand. The interviews were only audio recorded to protect the privacy of participants. It was critical to take notes along with audio recordings during the interview. Telephone follow-ups aided in clarifying or validating acquired data; I validated parents' responses following the interviews to eliminate bias or mistakes.

However, there are drawbacks to conducting interviews online. There may be technical challenges, and it is impossible to guarantee that hardware, software, or a network will operate without technical failures. Additionally, the researcher and participants should ensure access to a secure computer and internet connection. Nevertheless, online interviews are the best option for both the researcher and parents due to technological advancements, middle-class parents' economic capital and the health concerns raised by the COV-19 pandemic.

4.6 Data collection methods and procedures

Taking an interpretivist philosophical position, I investigated how middle-class parents interpret, select, and experience the school selection process, focusing on their practices (Myers, 2019). Interpretivism integrates human interest into a study and facilitates comprehending parents' holistic lived experiences (Mason, 2002) through conversations in a natural setting (Creswell, 2009). It provides context for an

individual's experiences and serves as the mechanism for shaping behaviour. I adopted individual semi-structured Skype interviews to collect data from parents in an informal, relaxed environment, which was more convenient to manage than focus groups. Due to the global coronavirus pandemic, participants were reticent to participate in group activities. I considered interviewing as an alternative method in the data collection process (Creswell, 2007).

4.6.1 Participants and sampling methods

Based on the definition of the middle class in Section 3.2, I chose parents who owned private housing, held professional or management positions, and had a university education. In this study, parents had bachelor's degrees or higher (with half holding master's degrees), and their children attended public-funded secondary schools. Participants were chosen based on their ability to inform the research questions and improve knowledge of the study phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). They were either fathers or mothers who were in charge of their children's school selection and were best qualified to respond to the questions.

Purposeful sampling (or purposive sampling) is the process by which the researcher selects individuals and settings to better understand the study problem and central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It is widely used in qualitative research, particularly in studies examining specific attitudes, behaviours, strategies, and roles in dynamic social processes (Palys, 2008). It efficiently identifies and selects

knowledgeable or experienced participants despite operating on a limited budget (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Patton, 2002). In this study, purposeful sampling was initially beneficial in identifying and selecting parents who met the middle-class criterion through social contacts (Sharma, 2017). Snowball sampling was then used for identifying people with specific knowledge, skills, or characteristics through referrals from social contacts like principals, friends, or parents. Participants who could provide valuable input on research questions were identified and approached.

Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were appropriate because this research involved sensitive data such as family wealth, education level, and parents' occupation (Ghaljaie et al., 2017). Cohen et al. (2011) argued that snowball sampling is a suitable method for locating a population with restricted access. Similar challenges were observed in the current investigation; it was challenging to identify the target parents because HK does not have a formal list of middle-class parents. Hence, I asked parents to recommend other middle-class parents. Participants aided in recruitment by sharing their social contacts for this research. I could contact more participants with specific requirements and be aware of their family backgrounds through the social relationships of parents. I adopted a snowball philosophy to recruit parent participants, which led to 18 families getting involved. This strategy was suitable for this study, considering the difficulty of accessing middle-class parents during the COV-19 pandemic. Finally, I allowed sufficient time for participant recruitment and referrals from current participants to increase the likelihood of reaching more parents.

4.6.2 Pilot study and interview grid

Before the research, a pilot study was beneficial in validating and fine-tuning the research approach and methods. Three different middle-class parents from various public-funded secondary schools participated in a one-hour online Skype interview. Parents' interests were identified through analysis of pilot study data, which prompted the evaluation of theory and research literature. Thus, the pilot study served as a starting point for constructing the conceptual framework, design, overarching purpose, and research questions. It was conducted to ascertain the interview questions' consistency, appropriateness, and accuracy based on parental feedback. In this study, pilot testing was used to fine-tune the interview questions and procedures, including refinement of research questions, development of research instruments, collection of background data, adaptation of research procedures, and detection of observer bias (Sampson, 2004). I double-checked that all questions and directions were clear and eliminated unnecessary items (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001; Bell, 1999). Additionally, a pilot study can assist in optimising data gathering strategies and generating appropriate lines of inquiry (Yin, 2009).

An interview grid (Appendix 2) was revised upon reflection on the pilot interviews. It was effective in gathering data on parental school choice factors and strategies. These are open-ended, generic queries that aim to reveal the central phenomenon of investigation. Frequently, the questions are sub-questions

derived from the study and framed so that participants understand. These are the fundamental components of the interview protocol, bounded on the front end by questions designed to elicit responses from the participants.

4.6.3 Sample size

Qualitative research demands a smaller sample size than quantitative research as it focuses on an in-depth analysis of phenomena. Scholars differ on the size of the sample needed for interviews in a qualitative study: Flick et al. (2007) suggest a minimum sample size of 15, while Guest et al. (2006) indicate a sample size of 12; Crouch and McKenzie (2006) argue that a sample size of fewer than 20 allows for a closer relationship with participants and encourages naturalistic validity. There is no fixed rule for determining the optimal qualitative sample size, which should be adequate to obtain sufficient data to address the research questions. Most scholars agree that the saturation concept is critical when determining the sample size for qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Forsey, 2012; Mason, 2010). Data saturation occurs when no new information is discovered during data processing (Forsey, 2012), and the researcher begins to obtain the same set of responses. This redundancy indicates the possibility of data collection ceasing (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). Woo (2016) conducted qualitative research in three DSS schools by interviewing three principals, one teacher, and 18 parents.

Similarly, eighteen middle-class parents from different public-funded secondary schools (six

government, six government-aided, and six DSS schools) were invited for interviews until data saturation was reached in this research. Interviews were examined to identify the need for more sampling using theoretical saturation as the criterion. It was challenging to recruit middle-class parents whose children attended public schools; thus, I spent additional time collecting data. This study is more comprehensive than previous studies since it considered a greater variety of public-funded secondary schools.

4.6.4 Overview of participants

A brief overview of the participants is presented. Eighteen middle-class parents were interviewed, nine fathers and nine mothers. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Before data analysis, I labelled all data according to children's schools before conducting formal analysis. For example, G1–G6 for middle-class parents whose children attended government schools and assigned names that began with the letter "G". For example, G1 Gil denoted the first parent from a government school named Gil. Similarly, I used A1–A6 for parents whose names began with "A" who attended government-aided schools and D1–D6 for parents with "D" who attended DSS schools. The participants' key particulars were summarised in Tables 3 and 4 (Appendix 3), categorising them according to the type of school their children attended. Their occupations and educational attainment reflect their middle-class backgrounds. The data collection began in 2020, with interviews starting with Ana on 19 July, Doris on 8 August, and Gandy on 10 August. Details and quotations reflecting the participants' thoughts will

be presented in the "Findings section" of Chapter 5. The following is a summary of typical middle-class practices:

Educational level and parenting

All middle-class parents hold a bachelor's degree or above in this study, with more than half holding a master's degree. Most of their children attended 'elite' Band 1 secondary schools, while some attended Band 2 schools. None of them attended schools classified as Band 3. This demonstrates that parents' high academic level, capital possession, and habitus may help their children get admission to prestigious schools in HK. Some middle-class mothers (8 in 18) give up their employment to stay at home as housewives and devote their time tutoring their children and assisting with the school application process through information searches and school participation. Most middle-class parents are willing to invest in their children's education. For example, tutorial and interview lessons and extra-curricular activities such as STEM, football, badminton, violin, and drawing classes improve their academic performance and embodied cultural capital. This increases their chances of admission to prestigious secondary schools.

School choice factors

Most parent participants consider five school choice factors during the selection process: teaching quality, academic performance, child-focused learning, school culture, and socio-economic status.

First, all parents preferred EMI schools because they assume that English is an international language that will boost their children's chances for admission to university and employment. Most of them favoured high-quality schools with strong academic performance and teaching quality. They preferred competent teachers who efficiently manage students and allow students to explore freely, adapting their activities to their interests and growth while fostering respect and friendship. They believed that good academic results and effective teachers might influence their children's academic performance and, consequently, their chances of entering university to acquire institutionalised cultural capital in the future. If middle-class parents could not enrol their children in EMI public schools, they tend to invest in English-medium DSS schools, which signify their middle-class status. Second, besides academic factors, most DSS parents believe that child-focused learning is the most critical school choice factor. They compared their children's academic achievement to the school's banding and chose schools with comparable academic standards. Third, like Ana, most parents believe that schools should foster an environment conducive to learning, and students should have the confidence to learn. Most parents advocated for incorporating more real-world learning experiences into the curriculum to assist students in developing general skills such as academic, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, personal, and social. International Baccalaureate (IB) education is recognised as a high-quality worldwide curriculum designed to help students build capital for future success. However, only DSS or private schools in HK can offer IB programs. Most middle-class parents, especially DSS parents, desired cultural homogeneity and prioritised school culture with good discipline and like-minded peers.

Some parents (like Audrey, David) preferred government-aided or DSS schools that shared their religious beliefs.

4.6.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were critical in ensuring that participant wellbeing, anonymity and confidentiality, as well as informed consent, were prioritised from the start. Before the interview, I sent invitation letters to prospective participants via email outlining the specifics and benefits of research and encouraging them to participate. I forwarded the consent forms or recruitment letters to prospective parents to recruit more participants by snowball sampling. I briefed the prospective participants about the study's purpose and interview process, which included the length and audio recording of the interview, the intended use of the interview data, and the official consent form (Appendix 1). Middle-class parents voluntarily participated in this research by signing and returning the informed consent form before the study. Then, parents were grouped according to the secondary school they attended. I scheduled the date and time of each interview for every participant.

Following the interview, I compiled an executive summary of the findings. I forwarded the transcribed interview data to parents for verification to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. I conveyed my gratitude to the parents for their participation by sending letters of appreciation following the interviews. This established trust with the parents, which facilitated future contact and cooperation. I

told them of the possibility of contacting them in the future to elicit their perspectives. Additionally, all data was securely kept, individuals were given pseudonyms, and the schools were not named to safeguard participants' identities.

4.7 Data analysis and coding strategies

Qualitative data analysis involves the examination of textual sources such as interview transcripts, observation notes, or audio recordings. It is a continuous, recursive process that entails a creative, dynamic, intuitive process of inductive thinking, theory development, and reasoning (León & Jane, 2020; Wong, 2008). Qualitative data analysis comprises coding or categorising data and making sense of it by identifying unique patterns, data reduction and interpretation, and constructing a logical chain of evidence (Patton, 2002). The data analysis phase began concurrently with the data collection phase as I was close to the data and had a clear sense of what was happening. A thematic approach was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) "six-phase model" and Saldaña's (2016) "streamlined codes to theory model" to enable multi-layered analysis.

4.7.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis enables researchers to uncover recurring themes, patterns and relationships of meaning within a dataset to answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To study parental school choices in HK, I was the primary coder and utilised thematic analysis to elicit meaning from

qualitative data regarding middle-class parents' experiences, knowledge, attitudes, and values. This approach provided flexibility in interpreting the data and categorisation into broad themes. Systematic thematic analysis required six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) elaborated here:

(1) Familiarising yourself with your data

This phase entails a thorough examination of interview data to identify meanings, patterns, and trends. After transcribing the audio recording, I read through and familiarised myself with the text so as to identify patterns and relationships. I re-examined the data set numerous times through theoretical lenses, highlighting pertinent code concepts along the way.

Data reduction is a continual process (Guest et al., 2014) that ensures the data selected for deeper level analysis are representative (Cohen et al., 2011). Thus, this phase involved systematic data analysis in determining the relevance of parental school choice factors and strategies. It necessitated data analysis and documenting of initial areas of interest for each strand of research questions. While this process was crucial for familiarisation, it was critical not to jump to conclusions at this stage (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Guest et al., 2014).

(2) Generating initial codes

The second stage is coding, which provides a platform from which to systematically analyse and

interpret data in response to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; León & Jane, 2020; Miles et al., 2014). Coding is the systematic categorisation of qualitative data extracts to uncover themes and patterns (Cohen et al., 2011). Data analysis includes coding and thematic analysis. In this study, codes emerged from data immersion rather than being pre-established. I highlighted text sections and assigned "codes" as thematic identifiers. Complementary and comparative data extracts were collated into discrete codes. Each code represented a textual concept. I read over each interview transcript and highlighted anything relevant or intriguing. I added more codes and categorised them as I read the text using Nvivo 12. These codes enabled me to summarise common interpretations and key themes of school choice factors and strategies.

Coding promotes self-awareness and reflexivity. Continuous reflection and analysis of the entire data collection and individual data items may uncover essential components that shape themes. In this investigation, Nvivo 12 was used to code text by tagging and identifying selected text within each data item. For instance, academic results, MOI, curricula, class size, teacher qualifications, discipline, and religion. Saldaña (2016) describes qualitative data analysis as a process that spans coding, category development, and theme generation stages which leads to theoretical claims about the research phenomena (Figure 4).
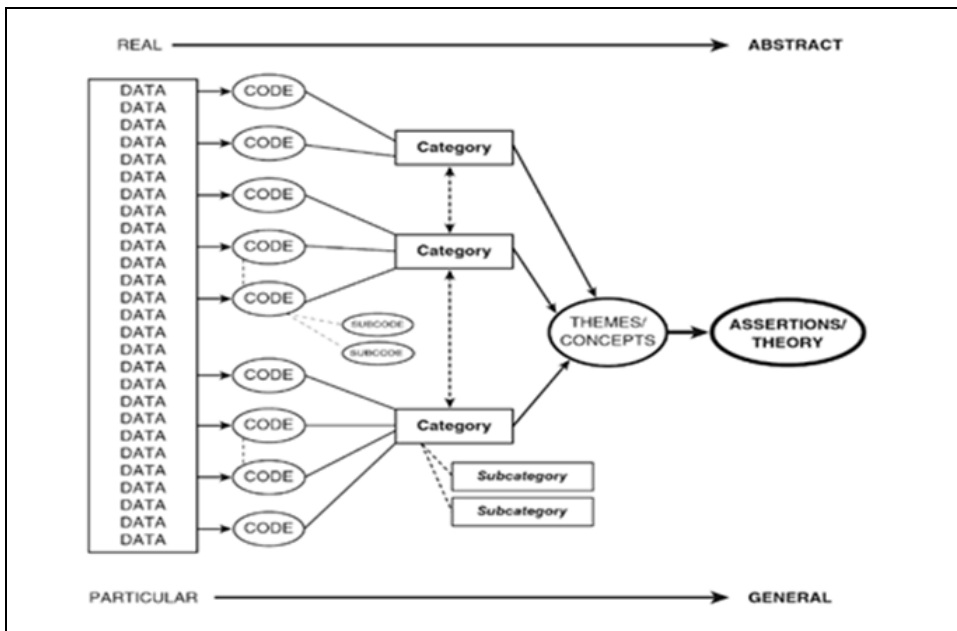
Figure 4: A streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry (Saldaña, 2016, p.14)

To give the reader an overview of the codes generated and examples of associated data, I summarised

the coding of the sub-theme "Academic Performance" from interview extracts on parental school

choice factors in government-aided schools in Table 1. The interview excerpts conducted with DSS

and government schools parents were included in Appendix 8 (Tables 8 and 9).

Parents	Code	Interview extract
A1- Ana	Academic performance	University entry rate, good academic results, and the school can train students to be all-rounded
	Curricula	I prefer curriculum to incorporate more real-world learning experiences to help students develop generic skills such as academic, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, personal, and social skills. Curriculum should match with my children's needs such as sports. Curriculum with the flexibility for us to choose IB or DSE.
A2 – Alex	Academic results	Academic results not too high pressure is better, enjoy learning is more important…Match his academic banding to choose a good academic quality history school is good. Academic quality is related to the teaching quality and resources.
	Academic performance	Acquire knowledge is most important, good academic, basic requirements, if school's academic is good, it will increase the chances of entering university. This is the aim of study in secondary school.
A3 - Andrew	Teaching quality	I prefer professional and experienced teachers. Teachers need to teach concept clearly. They need to be patience and explain until students understand, use interactive way to create a happy learning environment.
	MOI	EMI school is vital since English is an international language and can increase competition in future.
A4 – Aria	Curricula	Curriculum with the flexibility for us to choose IB or DSE.
	Academic performance	Students' academic performance is significant to aid mobility since a university degree is vital in the future.
A5 - Alice	Academic results	I prefer high academic but not too high pressure and students can enjoy learning. Acquire knowledge at school is most important. Good academic level increases the chances of entering university. This is the primary aim of secondary education.
	MOI	EMI is vital
A6 - Audrey	Academic performance	Academic is the basic needs for a secondary school.
	MOI	EMI school is important because proficiency in English will increase competition in the future.
	Teaching quality	I prefer professional and experienced teachers.

Table 1 Coding of the sub-theme "Academic Performance" from interview extracts of parental school choice factors

(government-aided schools)

(3) Searching for themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), pattern-based analysis enables the researcher to find prominent

characteristics of the data that are relevant to addressing the research questions. Phase three focused

on pattern-based analysis, which comprised grouping codes into themes and combining all related

coded data extracts inside the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are typically broader than codes,

and I combined several codes into a single theme. It began once all data have been coded and

aggregated, which generating an overarching theme. Nvivo 12 was used to categorise various codes

into sub-themes and cross-cutting themes (Figure 5). When identifying patterns in data, it is necessary

to examine the frequency and significance of each code. The significance of code was decided by the

priority of factors ranked by parents (Figures 14, 15 in Appendix 4).

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Teaching quality	14	18	12/12/2021 11:18 am	SS	12/12/2021 1:09 pm	SS
Academic performance	18	30	12/12/2021 11:19 am	SS	12/12/2021 1:11 pm	SS
School facilities & activities	8	9	12/12/2021 11:20 am	SS	12/12/2021 1:07 pm	SS
Child-focused learning	15	23	12/12/2021 11:20 am	SS	12/12/2021 1:09 pm	SS
School Culture	18	27	12/12/2021 11:44 am	SS	12/12/2021 1:11 pm	SS
Proximity	9	11	12/12/2021 11:45 am	SS	12/12/2021 1:12 pm	SS
SES	11	16	12/12/2021 11:47 am	SS	12/12/2021 1:10 pm	SS
DSS	5	9	12/12/2021 11:56 am	SS	12/12/2021 1:00 pm	SS
Tuition fees	2	3	12/12/2021 12:01 pm	SS	12/12/2021 12:07 pm	SS
School reputation	4	4	12/12/2021 12:06 pm	SS	12/12/2021 1:11 pm	SS
Inequality	1	1	12/12/2021 12:07 pm	SS	12/12/2021 12:07 pm	SS
Class size	1	1	12/12/2021 12:11 pm	SS	12/12/2021 12:11 pm	SS
Quality of education	2	2	12/12/2021 12:12 pm	SS	12/12/2021 1:06 pm	SS
Through-train school	2	2	12/12/2021 1:02 pm	SS	12/12/2021 1:07 pm	SS
Participative leadership	1	1	12/12/2021 1:05 pm	SS	12/12/2021 1:05 pm	SS

Figure 5 Initial thematic analysis of parental school choice factors

I examined the coding produced, searched for patterns, removed ambiguous or irrelevant codes, and began developing themes to deliver pertinent information related to my study aims. I started combining codes into themes in my study, as shown in Table 2.

Code	Sub-themes	Themes
Academic results	Academic performance	Parental School Choice Factors
Curricula		
Teacher qualification	Teaching quality	
Medium of Instruction		
Class Size		
Child's academic performance	Child-focused learning	
Traits & Interest		
Learning needs		
Discipline	School Culture	
Religion		
Parents' occupation, income & education	Socio-economic status	
School facilities	Others	
Proximity		
Tuition Fees		
Through-train school		
School reputation		

Table 2 Turning codes into themes for Theme 2 "Parental school choice factors"

(4) Reviewing themes

Phase four entailed developing and refining potential themes. I examined the themes to ensure they were relevant and accurately represented the data. Although the data within themes should be thematically related, visible distinctions should exist between them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I reviewed the coded data extracts by reading through collated themes and identifying coherent patterns to create a thematic map in response to the research questions. The theme findings were developed as a result of this entanglement of elements.

(5) Defining and labelling themes

Phase five involved defining and labelling the themes. I compiled a final list of themes, and reflexivity was crucial to ensuring that the themes were originated from this study. Each theme was unique and interconnected to form the main narrative of the study. The interview data were initially classified to identify five primary themes for assessing the educational quality and school choice factors: "academic performance," "teaching quality," "children-focused learning," "school culture," and "socio-economic status." Additional themes emerged due to ongoing data analysis, the grouping of codes into themes. Finally, in accordance with the research questions, I identified the macro, meso, and micro themes of the middle-class school choice study.

Research question 1: Middle-class parental school choice factors

This question investigated how middle-class parents conceptualised and translated quality notions into particular school selection considerations. Parents explained the factors that affected their choice of a public-funded secondary school for their children. This allowed me to assess the significance of various school choice factors and compare them to those identified via literature review. Additionally, the rationales for selecting various types of schools were studied. Three macro themes had been identified: educational quality, school choice factors, and school choice rationales.

Research Question 1: Macro Themes

Theme 1: Educational quality (Figure 6)
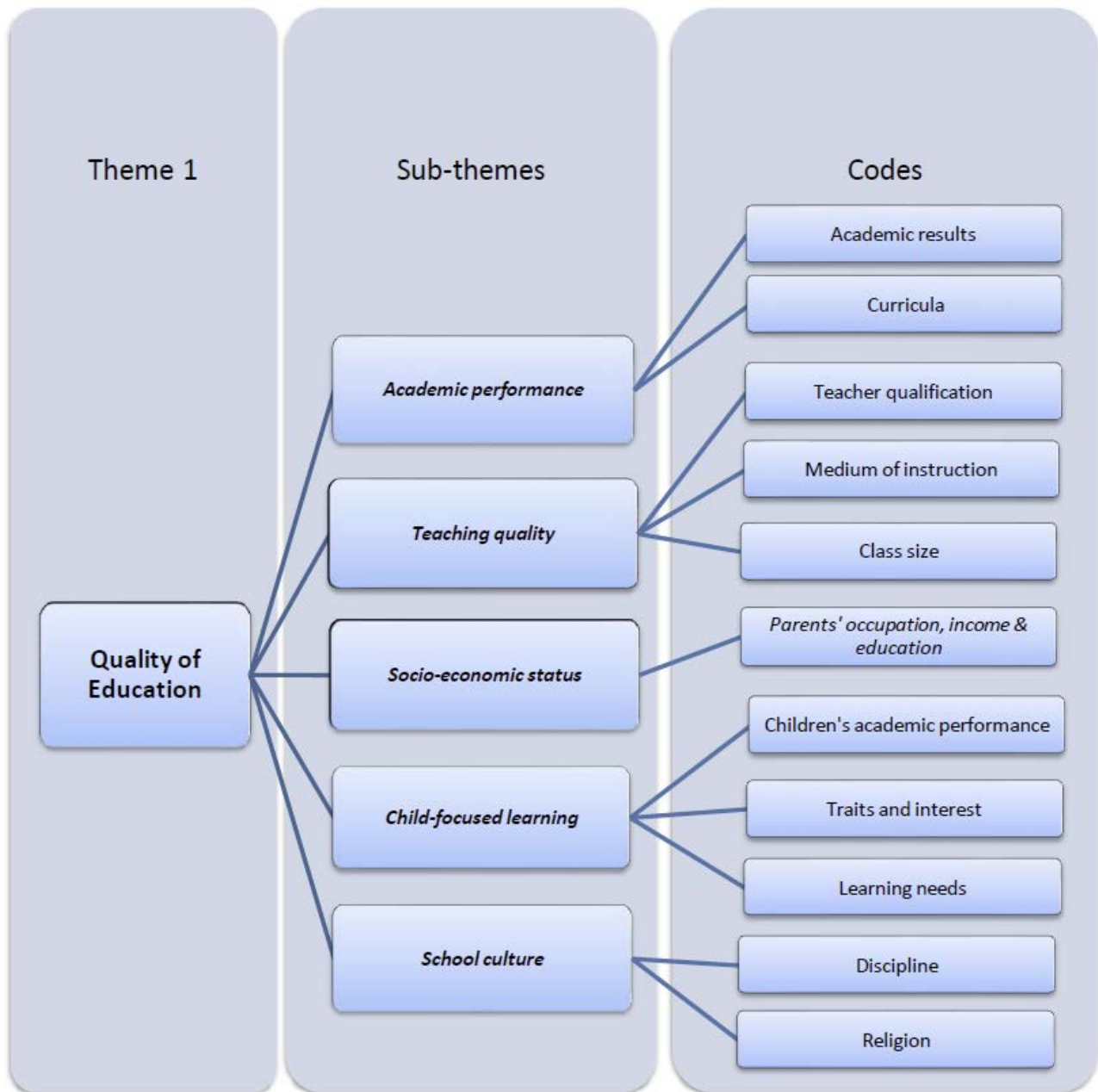
Figure 6: Coding and thematic analysis of educational quality (Theme 1)

Theme 2: School choice factors (Figure 7)
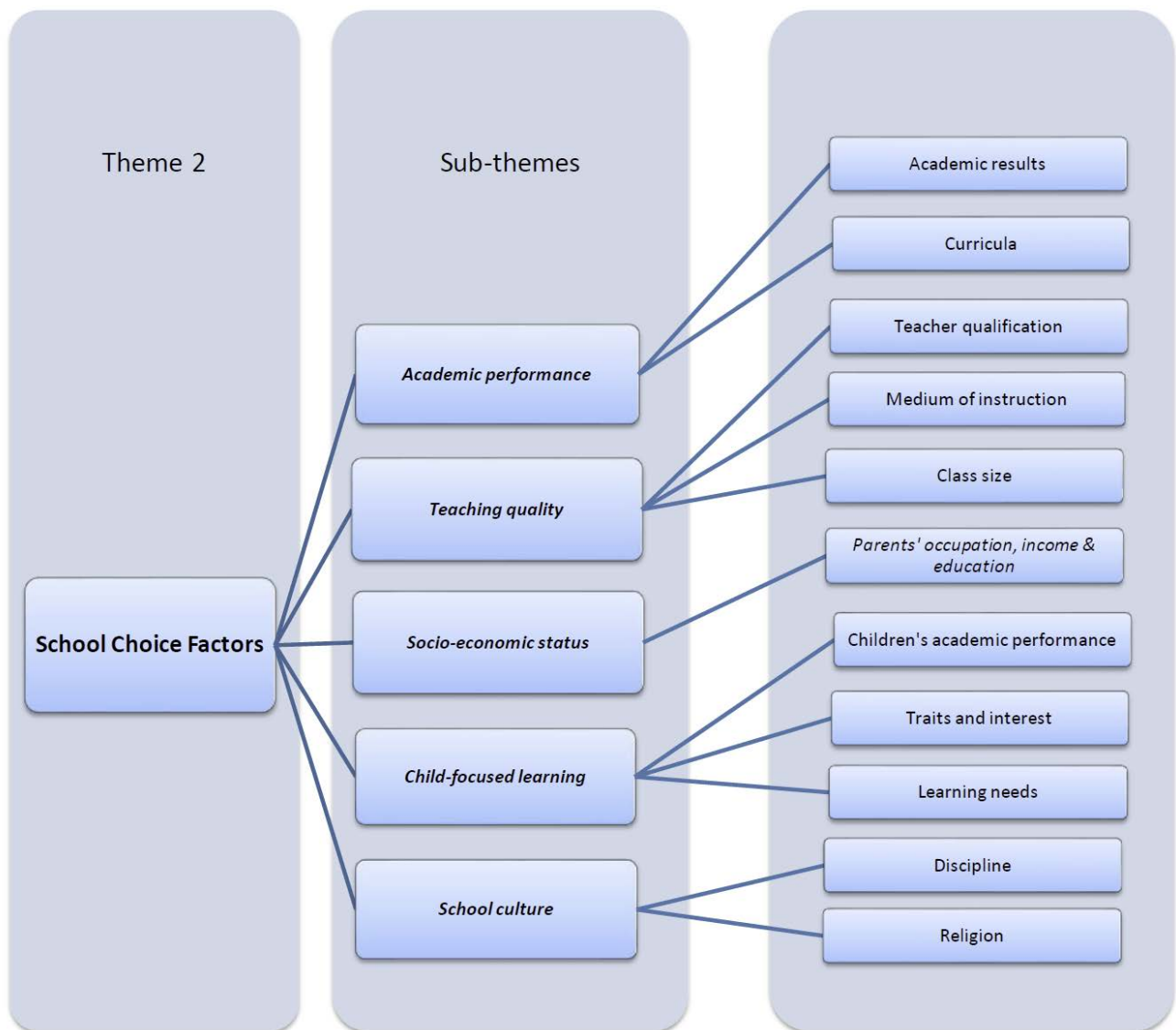
Figure 7: Coding and thematic analysis of middle-class school choice factors (Theme 2)

Theme 3: School choice rationales (Figure 8)
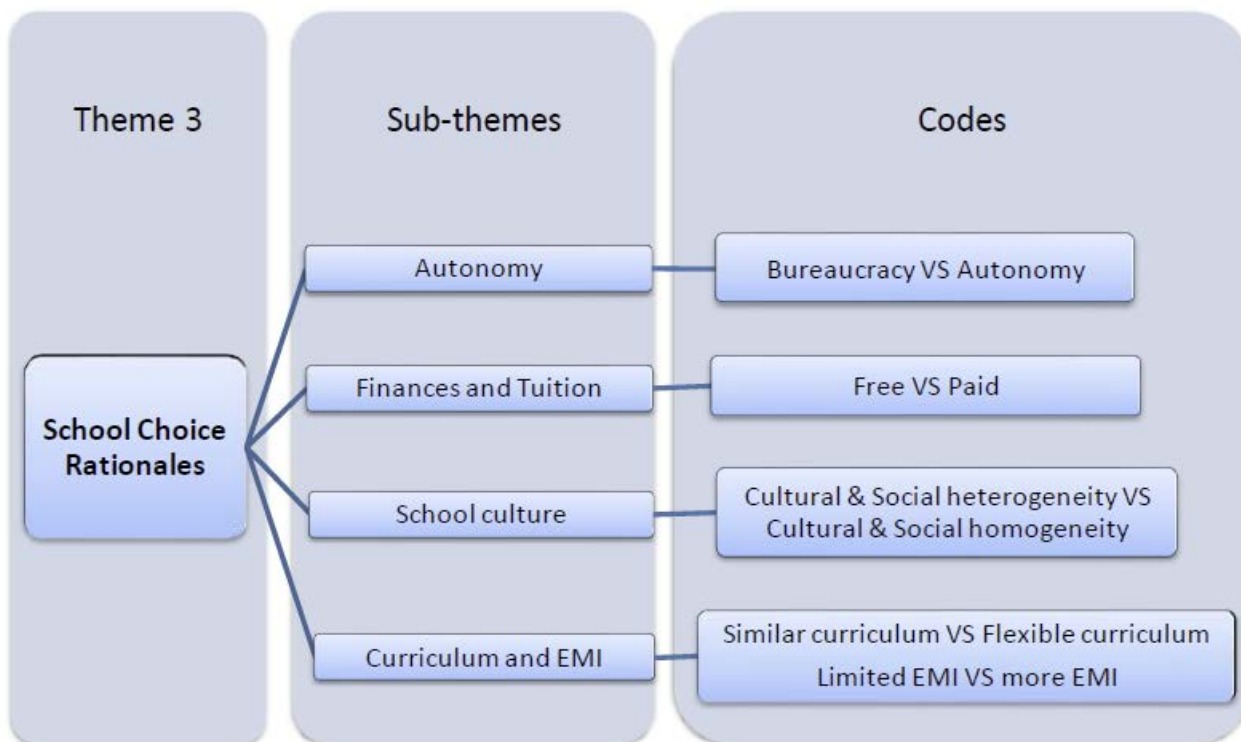
Figure 8: Coding and thematic analysis of middle-class school choice rationales (Theme 3)

Research question 2: Middle-class parental school choice strategies (Figure 9)

This question analysed middle-class parents' strategies during the school choice process. I examined how they use capital and habitus to maximise their advantages. Additionally, I examined the information sources on which middle-class parents rely when making judgments.
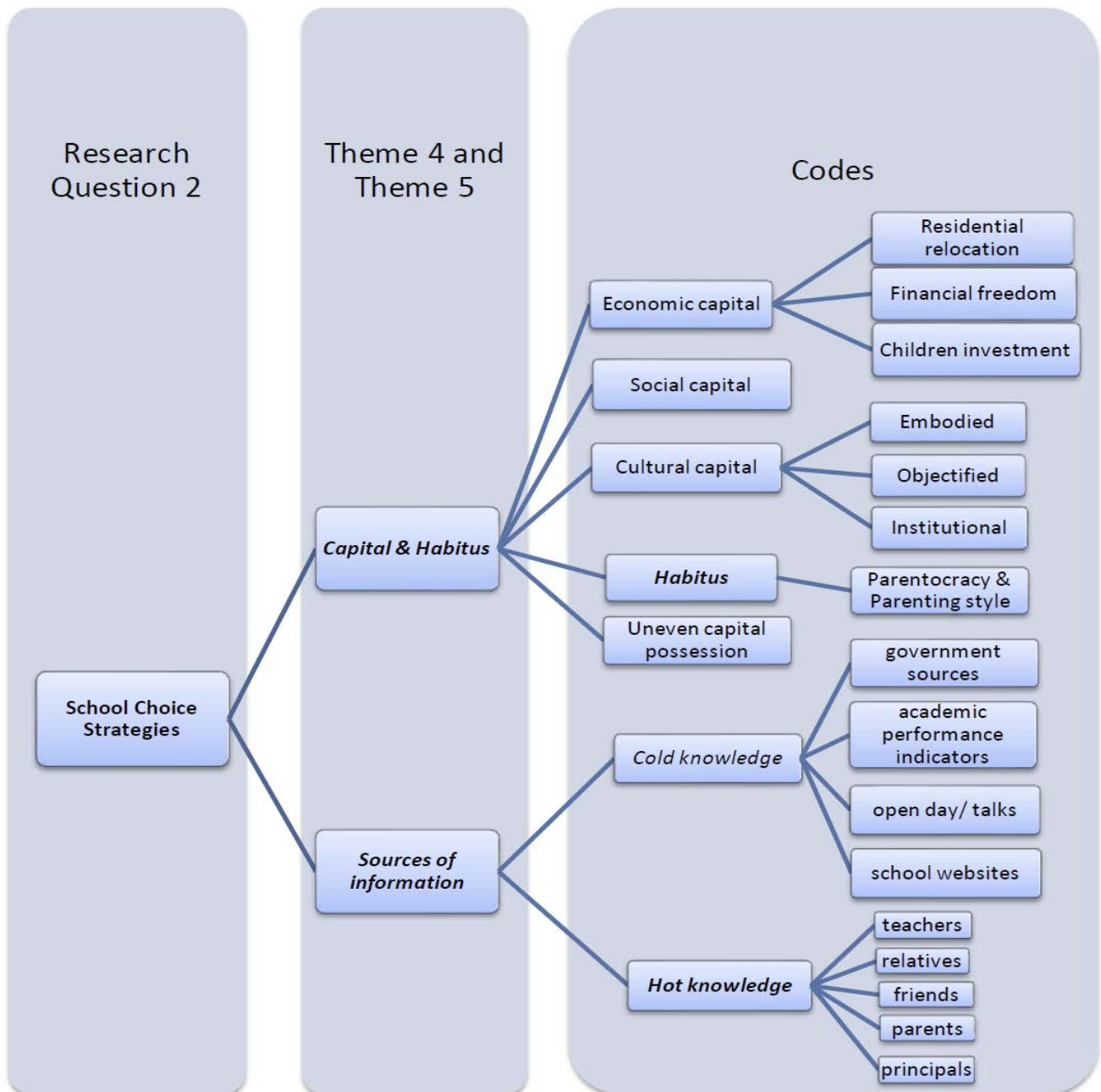
Figure 9: Coding and thematic analysis of middle-class school choice strategies (Theme B)

(6) Producing the report

Phase 6 examined chosen extracts and their link to the research topic to develop a scholarly report on the investigation. The objective is to convey deeply contextualised findings informed by middle-class parents' practices. Nevertheless, thematic analysis is frequently highly subjective and is highly dependent on the researcher's judgment. Thus, I reflexively considered my themes and interpretations, which resulted in the thematic summary in Table 3. Chapter Five would discuss the thematic findings in detail.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	MACRO THEMES	MESO THEMES (Common themes across families)	MICRO THEMES
Research Question 1: Factors affecting middle-class school choice	Theme 1: Quality of education	Academic performance Teacher quality Child-focused learning School culture Socio-economic status	
	Theme 2: School choice factors	Academic performance	• Academic results • Curricula
		Teacher quality	• Teacher qualification • Medium of instruction • Class size
		Child-focused learning	• Children's academic performance • Traits and interest • Learning needs
		School culture	• Discipline • Religion
		Socio-economic status	• Parents' occupation, income & education
	Theme 3: School choice rationales	Autonomy Finances and Tuition School culture Curriculum and EMI	Public schools VS DSS schools • Bureaucracy VS Autonomy • Free VS Paid • Cultural & Social heterogeneity VS Cultural & Social homogeneity • Similar curriculum VS Flexible curriculum, Limited EMI VS more EMI
Research Question 2: School choice strategies	Theme 4: Capital & Habitus	Capital (Economic, Social & Cultural capital) Habitus	Capital • Economic capital: Residential relocation, Financial freedom, Children investment • Social capital: Social connections • Cultural capital: Embodied, objectified & institutionalised states, School application and highbrow activities, Home culture Habitus • Parentocracy and parenting style
	Theme 5: Sources of information	Cold knowledge Hot knowledge	Cold knowledge: • Government sources, academic performance indicators, open day/talks, school websites Hot knowledge: • Teachers, relatives, friends, principals

Table 3 Thematic summary of the study

4.7.2 Nvivo 12

In this study, I used both computer-aided and manual data analysis. Nvivo 12 data management software was used to create themes, coding and in-depth analysis. I also used manual data analysis to explain middle-class practices and strategies using Bourdieu's theory. While manual data analysis is sufficient for small-scale research (Saldaña, 2021), facilitating the process with computer-aided data analysis tools can be more efficient. Nvivo 12 software offers several advantages: First, it can centralise data from multiple sources and effectively accommodate a large amount of data (Dollah et al., 2017). Second, it is a computer-aided data analysis software that facilitates qualitative inquiry in addition to data coding, sorting, and retrieval. Third, it makes data management possible by combining coding with qualitative linking, shaping, and modelling. It is helpful in indexing text segments to specific themes, linking research notes to coding, conducting complex search and retrieval operations and assisting researchers in exploring potential links between themes (King, 2004).

I created a project using the Nvivo 12 software to store parental school choice factors (Figure 16 in Appendix 6). The browsers' attribute feature enabled me to refer to data features such as school selection criteria and gender (Wong, 2008). A node treemap visualised the nodes in terms of the number of coding sources or references (Figure 17 in Appendix 6). Following the interviews, the Chinese audio recordings were transcribed and analysed in English. Then, I imported the interview

transcripts into Nvivo, where I codified them and created categories and diagrams to aid in the analysis.

The data analysis process via NVivo (Figure 10) employed a cycle procedure that started importing

interview transcripts (Dollah et al., 2017). Afterwards, I identified keywords and searched with queries

to analyse the data. Finally, I returned the transcribed data to the parents for verification and validation.
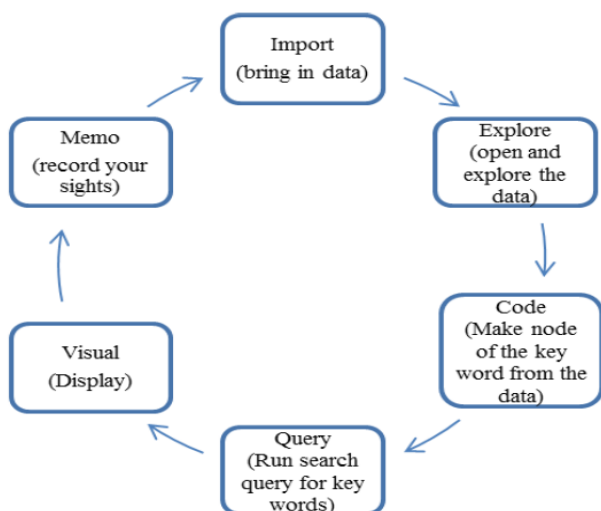
Figure 10 Qualitative analysis process using NVivo

4.8 Data storage and protection

The Data Protection Act grants individuals the right to protect their data and safeguard it against data

misuse (UK-Government, 2018). Additionally, it establishes obligations on organisations that handle

personal data and requires them to adhere to fundamental principles and legal requirements. The

records were precise, accurate, and well-written. I safeguarded personal identifiers in order to assure

data security. Sensitive personal data was safeguarded through the use of appropriate technical and

organisational safeguards to prevent unauthorised access and disclosure. All the information was kept

strictly confidential, encrypted, and stored on a computer to protect participants' anonymity. The

information was backed up regularly on another computer to prevent data loss.

4.9 Reliability and validity

This study aims to contextualise findings within the school choice practices of middle-class parents

and to offer theoretical insights that may be applicable beyond the situations examined. The importance

of data reliability and validity has been emphasised throughout this chapter. The term "reliability"

refers to the consistency, replicability, and trustworthiness of research findings (Leung, 2013a), which

are assessed using various criteria for establishing their "truth value," including a systematic data

collection during the research period (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). I maximised the study's reliability by

taking several precautions: Firstly, I did not recruit friends or clients as participants because they might

have provided desired responses as they would have felt obligated to assist me in gathering the essential

data. There is a possibility that the data gathered would not have adequately reflected their genuine

ideas and experiences. I boosted reliability by interviewing only volunteers who met the criteria but

were unfamiliar to me. Secondly, I avoided leading questions to maximise reliability and asked

appropriate questions to ensure that each participant understood the subject in the same way.

Validity refers to the extent to which a method explores what it intends to study so that qualitative

research can result in legitimate scientific information (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Wellington, 2015).

It is the process of developing the truth value of facts so that the data inspires trust while correctly

reflecting diverse realities (Drost, 2011). I have attempted to stay close to the data in constructing the data portraits, and the analytic comments reflected my perspective on middle-class parents' school choice practices. I minimised research bias throughout the data analysis stage by adopting systematic coding and avoiding subjective data interpretation and selective data usage. Additionally, I returned the transcribed data to the parents for accuracy and validity verification, and followed up with them following the verification. Moreover, research reflexivity is beneficial for avoiding research bias. While acknowledging my subjectivities and experiences, to maintain objectivity, I attempted to detach myself from my role as an Education Consultant by seeing myself as a middle-class parent and being reflexive when contemplating the situations of parents.

4.10 Chapter Summary

This study examined middle-class parents' school choice practices in greater depth and provided insight into their preferences. This methodology chapter demonstrated the coherence of the research reflexivity, research paradigm, conceptual framework, interpretivist qualitative methodology, research questions, data collection methods, data analysis and coding strategies, as well as data storage and protection. It detailed the framework and procedures used to analyse, interpret, and portray data.

Firstly, research reflectivity was discussed as an 'attitude' that permeated the entire study. Acknowledgement was made of the potential for the researcher's influence on the research findings.

Secondly, I explained how the research is grounded in an interpretivist qualitative paradigm that emphasises the study of social life. Qualitative research was used to enable middle-class parents to generate narratives about their experiences of educational choice. I gained access to their school choice factors and strategies through their educational practices and social milieu. Thirdly, this research focused on the HK context, where I developed a conceptual framework to guide the study through the Bourdieusian lens and summarised the research questions. I considered the research design and methods to address the research questions. Fourthly, I described how I conducted qualitative research using semi-structured Skype interviews with middle-class parents from various public-funded secondary schools in HK to acquire a holistic picture of parental school choice in HK. I selected participants using purposeful and snowball sampling and conducted a pilot study to verify and enhance the interview guide. Fifthly, ethical considerations were critical in ensuring the participants' well-being, anonymity, and confidentiality, and informed consent was prioritised from the beginning to ensure voluntary involvement. Finally, I facilitated coding and theme analysis by utilising Braun and Clarke's thematic model, Saldaña's codes-to-theory approach, and Nvivo 12 software. Following the interview, participants received an acknowledgement letter and transcribed data to assure the accuracy, dependability, and appreciation of their efforts. Additionally, I removed any personally identifiable information and frequently backed up data to protect participants' anonymity and prevent data loss. Furthermore, the study's validity and reliability have been emphasised. Following the methodology chapter, I examined the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS

This study examined the middle-class school choice practices in HK. Through a Bourdieusian lens, I examined middle-class school choice factors and strategies and how these dynamics contributed to educational inequality. I used thematic analysis to interpret middle-class secondary school choice based on the two overarching themes and five subthemes outlined in Chapter 4. My research findings were discussed with respect to the following research questions:

Research question 1: What factors influence the decision of middle-class parents to enrol their child in a public-funded secondary school in Hong Kong?

Theme 1. What do middle-class parents perceive as the determinants of 'high-quality' secondary education?

Theme 2. What are the school choice factors of middle-class parents when choosing a public-funded secondary school?

Theme 3. What are the rationales for selecting different types of public-funded secondary schools?

Research question 2: What are their strategies when selecting a public-funded secondary school?

Theme 4. How do middle-class parents use capital and habitus to maximise their advantages during the secondary school selection process?

Theme 5. What are their sources of information when selecting a secondary school?

I applied Bourdieu's theory to examine the middle-class school choice practice (Bourdieu, 1986). In this chapter, firstly, I examined whether middle-class parents' perceptions of educational quality were translated into school choice factors. I identified their school choice factors and rationale when choosing a public-funded secondary school. Secondly, I studied their school choice strategies, concentrating on how they maximised their advantages through capital and habitus, as well as identifying their information sources. Finally, I presented a summary of the findings.

5.1 Research question 1: What factors influence the decision of middle-class parents to enrol their child in a public-funded secondary school in Hong Kong?

5.1.1 Theme 1: What do middle-class parents perceive as the determinants of 'high-quality' secondary education?

Education aims to ensure that all students have access to opportunities for lifelong learning (Education-Bureau, 2019a; Rieckmann, 2017). A high-quality education is vital for learners to develop sustainable learning goals and enhance their well-being. It ensures that students acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to enhance their quality of life and productivity, thereby generating new revenue sources and stimulating the economy (Farooq et al., 2011). A widespread belief exists that a high-quality education prepares younger generations for their future lives (Wui, 2018), and fosters economic development and upward mobility (Van der Berg, 2008). Quality is defined as customer satisfaction with the service offered in a marketised school context (Jidamva, 2012; Manyanga, 2007). It embodies perfection, excellence, empowerment, enhancement, and suitability for people of different perspectives (Jidamva, 2012; Weir, 2009). Robey (2018) defines a quality school as follows:

A school based on warm, caring relationships focuses on the useful and relevant application of

knowledge with a goal of competence and uses a lead-management approach to promote self-

evaluation and continual improvement (Robey, 2018: 16).

This study examined how middle-class parents selected secondary schools. They frequently strove to

provide their children with the best educational options possible. While most parents preferred high-

quality schools, their perceptions of what constituted an excellent education differed according to their

values. They thought that high-quality schools provided students with an educational environment that

prioritised individual care and attention and provided opportunities for students to acquire cultural

capital and social status. Most parents in this study translated their quality concepts into school choice

factors and generally believed that the following elements (Figure 11) contributed to educational
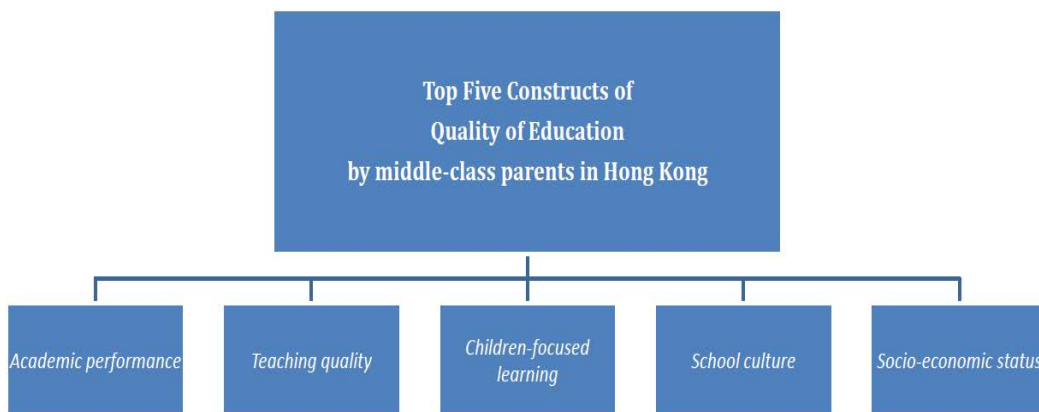
quality:

Figure 11 The top five characteristics of high-quality education by middle-class parents in HK

5.1.1.1 Academic performance

Academic performance, including academic ranking, HKDSE results, university admission rates, and

curricula, is a critical quality element most middle-class parents appreciate in this study. It is considered a vehicle for economic and social mobility, endowing students with "positive" symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Gil perceived academic performance as:

> the demonstrated ability to perform and excel in educational activities. It is related to excellent grades and superior performance on standardised tests, university admissions exams, and curricula (Gil).

Academic performance was defined in this study by middle-class parents as the demonstrated ability to achieve educational goals associated with good grades and curriculum: standardised tests, public examinations, and percentage of university enrollment, which corroborates previous studies such as Chan (2017) and Krull (2016) discussed in Section 3.4.1. Middle-class parents appreciated schools' academic performance since it boosted their children's chances of attending university and thus their institutionalised cultural capital. Parents concurred that employment opportunities were intrinsically linked to educational attainment, enabling their children's social advancement. Their ability to accumulate capital also determined their social position in the field (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, high-quality secondary schools were vital for children's well-being and academic achievement, which acted as a field for capital accumulation. The potential future return attracted parents and students. Hence, most middle-class parents demanded a high-quality education for their children and were strategic in their school choice process, correlating with Ball's findings (Ball, 2003; Ball & Nikita, 2014).

5.1.1.2 Teaching quality

Traditional Chinese cultural attitudes toward schooling affect middle-class parents' educational expectations. Parents value academic performance, teaching quality, and school reputation (Burgess et al., 2015). For example, they believe that teachers' qualifications directly affect their children's behaviour and academic progress. Alice highlighted the definition of teaching quality:

Teachers are role models for students. Teacher qualifications, instructional medium and class size all contribute to teaching quality (Alice).

Middle-class parents, like Alice, believed that teachers served as role models for students and that teaching quality comprised teacher qualifications, instructional medium, and class size, which corroborated the findings of Wall & Hall (2016) and Beamish (2013) in Section 3.4.2. Thus, middle-class parents are anxious about the teachers' credentials and English proficiency. Gandy and Alice's statements indicated that they chose competent teachers who were knowledgeable and supportive of learning for their children to attain academic achievement:

Teachers should be knowledgeable, supportive, and creative in their approach to motivating and engaging students (Gandy).

Teachers should incorporate interactive elements into English-medium instruction to ensure that

students enjoy learning (Alice).

Gandy and Alice stressed the critical role of teachers in assisting students and incorporating interactive English instruction into their classes. As noted in Section 3.3, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is vital for social status as it incorporates an individual's educational attitudes and values and legitimises an individual's power status (Bourdieu, 2011). Parents believed that assessment results reflected the teaching quality and academic success of students, therefore boosting their cultural and symbolic capital. Student performance is highly correlated with teaching standards, as students might acquire embodied cultural capital through skills taught by teachers. Effective teachers contribute to students' learning outcomes by adopting an interactive approach when teaching various academic and life skills. Successful learning outcomes might pave the way for future success in the education field by amassing capital. As described in Section 2.1.2, education catalyses upward mobility. Thus, parents mobilised their capital to gain advantages in school selection (Bourdieu, 1986; Yoon, 2020) and thus improve their social status (Rowe & Windle, 2012).

5.1.1.3 Child-focused learning

This study indicated that approximately 61% of middle-class parents (11 in 18) ranked the children-focused learning factor as a significant decision criterion when selecting a high-quality school. They typically looked for a school committed to their children's personal development, and one that instilled

a sense of belonging and confidence in them. Parents, like Doris and Gemma, preferred an educational environment that fostered student-teacher interactions and relationships:

> Student taking pride in their education, being motivated to attend class each day and excited about what they have learned and done requires child-centred learning. The school should meet my kids' personalities and learning styles ... Children must enjoy learning… Education on innovation and creativity is also critical (Doris).

> Academic performance is not my primary concern. I'd pick a school that matches my kids' academic level. So, child-focused learning is vital. There is high competition for happy schools. So we must prepare our children for school entrance exams by teaching them skills like piano, art, or horse riding (Gemma).

Middle-class parents stressed the well-being of their children. First, they chose schools that met their children's academic, learning, and development needs and provided extra-curricular cultural capital possibilities for acquiring cultural capital. Second, they valued high-quality schools for the skills, habitus, and capital they instilled in children. For example, Gemma felt that children should gain embodied cultural capital through piano practice and horse-riding. Third, parents appreciated a joyful environment and a robust learning culture to increase study motivation (He et al., 2017). As indicated in Section 3.4.4, a strong learning culture empowered students to take responsibility for their education,

increasing their motivation to study. My research confirmed Carr-Chellman and Kroth's conclusion that creating an environment that fostered innovation and creativity was crucial in preparing students for future success (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2019).

5.1.1.4 School culture

School culture, which encompasses discipline and religious beliefs, is critical in school selection. As Doris revealed, discipline and religion have a major impact on parental attitudes toward school selection:

School culture, which includes student discipline and religious values, is critical in school selection (Doris).

Most parents (94%, 17 in 18) were concerned about students' discipline. Gil defined high-quality schools as follows:

A high-quality school has a safe, well-maintained, disciplined, and joyful environment. It can engage students in academic instruction and tailor activities to foster critical thinking and drive learning (Gil).

Middle-class parents typically desired a high-quality school that provided a well-maintained, disciplined, safe, and joyful environment for their children to improve skills and learning experiences.

Gil stressed the importance of cultivating a pleasant and disciplined learning culture to improve students' motivation. As stated in Section 3.4.5, Catholic secondary schools in HK have a long history of providing a high-quality education with high student achievement. School culture influences school effectiveness, including academic success and students' values and character development (Turan & Bektas, 2013; Wu, 2015). Discipline and religious values have played a significant role in shaping school culture.

Discipline

Academic instruction and well-planned programs that promote learning and critical thinking are essential components of a high-quality school. As mentioned in Section 3.4.5, parents emphasised discipline and peer influence at school, expecting that students would benefit from the "positive spillover" effect of privileged students (Coleman, 1988). Doris's quote demonstrated the critical nature of discipline:

> Education is incomplete without discipline. Children can be easily affected by others. Thus, discipline is critical (Doris).

Most middle-class parents favoured DSS schools as a way to benefit from the positive spillover effects of middle-class students or avoid the negative spillover impact of working-class students. They cherished cultural homogeneity, which refers to individuals who share a common background and

similar behaviours, values or beliefs (Calabuig et al., 2017). Middle-class parents believed that discipline was more than a collection of punitive measures when children misbehaved. More importantly, it was a continuous process that reinforced students' behaviours and assisted them in internalising positive values and developing self-discipline. Hence, middle-class parents prioritised cultural homogeneity to minimise peer negative spillover effects.

Religion

Most middle-class participants selected a high-quality school that suited their children and reflected their family values. Religious adherents viewed schools associated with their faith as high-quality schools endowed with symbolic and cultural capital. They enrolled their children in religiously affiliated schools. Numerous religious schools are affiliated with Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism (Education-Bureau, 2016). Audrey's comment illustrated that faith-based schools, particularly those affiliated with Christianity and Catholicism, were typically regarded as elite schools and were popular among middle-class parents:

> We believe that a school with Christian beliefs encourages students to explore the world and
> prepares them for university. Therefore, Christian and Catholic schools are the most popular in
> HK (Audrey).

Parents preferred DSS or government-aided schools with the same religious beliefs, as David's quote

illustrated:

> As a Christian, I will only consider schools that share my religious beliefs; this is my priority when selecting a school. I think Christian schools have a good reputation in HK (David).

Gabriel believed that school discipline was vital in fostering a positive learning environment and ensuring children's future success:

> School discipline is required for a positive learning environment, which needs awareness, skills, sensitivity, and confidence. Disciplined students have better academics and learning attitude (Gabriel).

Some middle-class parents emphasised the importance of transmitting religious values down the generations to instil their values in their children. Parents typically perceived that religious schools were warm and caring while maintaining a higher educational quality with a tighter discipline. Parents like Audrey and Gabriel believed that students who studied in a disciplined environment might improve their concentration and pay close attention to lessons, thus improving their academic performance and chances for university admission. Some middle-class parents felt that teachers should act as moral role models for their children. Hence, they chose a religious school education to complement their home education and influence their children's moral and religious choices. As noted in Section 3.4.5, parents valued religious schools that mirrored their religious values and beliefs to

ensure their children learned in a religiously integrated setting (Bosetti, 2004). Additionally, religion aided in forming a distinct social group (Agbaria, 2019).

5.1.1.5 Socio-economic status

Socio-economic status (SES) includes income, educational achievement, professional recognition, and subjective perceptions of social class and status (Baker, 2014). School serves as a field for generating peer group dynamics, habitus, social classes, and capital. Childhood habitus and cultural capital are associated with children's socialisation, which encompasses their behaviours, tastes, and preferences. Students who are instilled with cultural capital from an early age have a greater chance of academic success (Andersen & Hansen, 2012). Della exemplified the preference for cultural homogeneity:

I prefer DSS schools for their like-minded community since peer influence and discipline are significant. The acquired habitus and capital of childhood will be carried forward to the adult (Della).

Most schools prioritise the values and habitus of middle-class students during the admissions process: schools select students who exhibit specific desirable attributes during school interviews, including physical appearance, style, clothing, communication, and presenting talents. As Diana mentioned, middle-class students benefited from their habitus and capital:

DSS schools typically choose students with desirable appearance, style, clothing, and

communication and presentation skills during school interviews. So, middle-class habitus and

culture are an asset. School reputation is related to parents' SES (Diana).

Diana remarked that there was a considerable association between school reputation and family SES.

Around 56% of middle-class parents (10 in 18) preferred that students accumulate social and symbolic

capital in a culturally homogeneous environment. Middle-class parents assumed that school choice

would unite families based on mutual interests, beliefs, or cultural features. Networking among

community members is critical for developing distinctive social structures that generate social capital.

Bourdieu defines habitus as an internalised embodiment of external social structures acquired over a

lifetime (Bourdieu, 1986). Most parents in this study agreed that different social classes had distinct

habitus and favoured cultural homogeneity to gain social capital and advance their social status.

Bourdieu's field concept refers to a venue for competitions and a distinct structured space of power

relations between positions held by agents or institutions (Bourdieu, 1986). Individuals often perceive

power differently depending on the particular field they are immersed in, which affects habitus.

Bourdieu states that every field possesses unique characteristics and stakes. He suggests that habitus

generates distinctive behaviour and that modern society results from field cross-penetrations within

the social space (Bourdieu, 1977). Accordingly, middle-class parents frequently perceive students' SES

as critical in determining educational quality. This section examined middle-class perceptions of

educational quality attributes, whereas the following examines school selection factors.

5.1.2 Theme 2: What are the school choice factors of middle-class parents when choosing a public-funded secondary school?

Education decision-making plays a role in how researchers can identify aspirations for mobility (Ball & Nikita, 2014). After examining the perceptions of educational quality, it is crucial to identify how the quality concepts are translated into specific factors and examine the vital considerations that drive middle-class school selection. Without recognising the factors contributing to parents' differential school choice behaviour, it is unlikely to foresee the impacts of policy implementation or formulate cost-effective policies that minimise social disparity and improve educational equity.

This study examined how middle-class parents selected public-funded secondary schools for their children. Most middle-class parents' quality perceptions were shaped by their school choice factors (83%, 15 in 18). Most parents considered five factors when selecting a secondary school for their children: "academic performance," "teaching quality," "child-focused learning," "school culture," and "socio-economic status." Thus, this study analysed the top five major factors influencing their school choice in detail.

5.1.2.1 Academic performance

This study indicated how academic credentials as socially accepted qualities might affect children's future occupations and life choices. Bourdieu argues that academic titles have developed into a

modern-day aristocracy, perpetuating the dominant class. Only people with such titles are entitled to enter the legitimate cultural world, as they can develop aesthetic dispositions and distinguish themselves from other members of society (Bourdieu, 2018). In an era of credential inflation, salary is directly connected to educational level. Consequently, parents believe their children have to improve their academic abilities to acquire cultural capital in schools and prepare them for university admission, as Alice indicated:

> Academic performance assesses pupils' utilisation of educational resources. Upward mobility requires education... High-quality schools should offer IB, HKDSE, and GCSE curriculum. A strong academic performance enhances university admission chances… (Alice).

Alice believed that education was vital for class advancement. Academic performance was substantially associated with economic success at schools that offered a diverse curriculum, such as the IB, HKDSE, or GCSE, which enhanced a child's likelihood of entering university. Parents assumed that educational credentials would aid their children in securing a lucrative career following graduation and that institutionalised cultural capital (academic credentials) would eventually be converted to economic capital (Bourdieu, 2011). Bourdieu contends that cultural capital strengthens an individual's power status, including academic qualifications and behaviour (Bourdieu, 2011), hence expanding opportunities for social advancement (Bourdieu, 1986).

Academic results

Middle-class parents in this study typically held a bachelor's degree or above and had high expectations for their children. They stressed "academic performance" (89%, 16 in 18) when selecting a secondary school. Public examination results and university admission rates are critical determinants of academic success for children. Employment has changed toward a credential society in a knowledge-based economy, prompting intense competition for university admissions. A high association between student grades and cultural capital indicates that children who have the desired cultural capital perform better academically (Brar, 2016). Academic achievement, as mentioned in Section 2.1.2, has a favourable effect on children's academic performance and educational attainment (Bourdieu, 1986; Evans, Kelly, & Sikora, 2010; Zhao & Hong, 2012). Parents in this study thought that a high-quality education would increase their children's likelihood of attending university and acquiring institutionalized cultural capital in the future. Academic credentials have monetary worth in the labour market (Bourdieu, 1986). Hence, all middle-class parents preferred EMI schools in this study. The capacity of a school to create "quality" pupils who earn high marks on public examinations reflects its symbolic capital and market position. As Daniel and Gil demonstrated, academic performance is considered a vital component of a high-quality education:

> Academic performance of a secondary school is vital, along with a high university entry rate, students with excellent academic and DSE results, and good teaching quality. Credentials matter to children's future (Daniel).

Students at elite schools generally get good grades. The HKDSE or IB scores determine student's university placement. Thus, academic performance is essential for a quality school (Gil).

Middle-class parents viewed academic performance as critical to their children's future success. This quest for academic excellence has driven them to seek elite schools with high academic standards to make their children stand out and boost their prospects of admission to top universities in the future. This reaffirms Kenway et al. (2013) that elite education is characterised by exceptional public examinations results and access to prestigious universities. The continued creation of influential alumni across professions, governments, industries, and social connections has resulted in high public esteem for elite education. Students with a higher level of education have a greater chance of accessing high-paying jobs (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). According to respondents, middle-class parents (like Daniel and Gil) believe that academic credentials facilitate capital acquisition, allowing social advancement. Parental preference has a strong correlation with academic achievement in school. School academic ranking is vital, assuming that higher-quality schools typically have higher university admission rates and better public examination outcomes, meaning that their children might have a brighter future, as Gemma's comment suggested:

Finding work without a degree is difficult. A bachelor's degree isn't enough. So I got a master's degree to boost my work prospects. A high education will help you gain future economic and

cultural capital. So I expect my son to graduate to keep his social mobility. Enrolling in a good secondary school is the first step toward developing English communication, presentation and leadership skills (Gemma).

Most parents considered credentials necessary for social and economic capital acquisition. Success in a high-quality secondary school or university can assist students in developing social, symbolic, and cultural capital, as well as the required habitus for upward mobility in their field. Gemma exemplified the critical nature of effective English communication, leadership, and presentation skills. As discussed in Section 2.1.2, individuals might acquire embodied cultural capital through their habitus or family inheritance (Bourdieu, 1986). It is interesting to see that Gemma understood sociological jargon, demonstrating her advanced education and institutionalised cultural capital. In this study, half of the parents held master's degrees, highlighting the critical role of academic credentials in achieving middle-class status in HK. Academic credentials helped students with job accomplishments, which were crucial for developing promising careers and retaining their social status. First, employers prioritise qualifications when evaluating job seekers and effectively recruit qualified employees. Most high-level jobs require a bachelor's degree or higher, and additional career options are available with higher education. Second, children's educational attainment increases future career opportunities and economic capital accumulation since academic credentials indicate knowledge and expertise.

Middle classes wrestle with their position, upholding bourgeois values while differentiating themselves from the working classes (Bourdieu, 2018). With the marketisation and privatisation of education, there is no guarantee of admission to a particular school, university, or of a secure career, especially during a recession. Recently, some middle-class parents have lived in fear of losing their jobs due to the COV-19 pandemic. Hence, they inevitably view their children's education with great importance. Academic qualifications are in high demand, assuming a significant association between employment prospects and educational attainment, which contributes to potential economic capital. Gabriel's remark revealed that some parents are concerned about the academic performance and university admission rates of schools, which influences school banding:

> Academic quality is essential as my son is a top student. I'll analyse the school's university acceptance rate and banding through parent groups or websites. If a Band 1 secondary school's university admission rate decreases, the school may be demoted to Band 2 (Gabriel).

In this study, most parents preferred secondary schools with a high academic standard. Gabriel asserted that academic performance of a school might impact parental school choice since it influences a child's chances of admission to a university, thus affecting their capacity to accumulate cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital. They assumed that a high-performing secondary school has higher university admission chances. Hence, they sought performance-based elite secondary schools to maintain upward mobility and social status. Gabriel commented that most middle-class parents desired

schools that met the needs and abilities of their children:

> I chose a school that met my children's needs, abilities, and banding. While school banding is not
>
> publicly known, I can learn about it through social contacts and websites. Academically successful
>
> students have more options and can easily enrol in a high-quality school (Gabriel).

While school banding information is not officially available in HK, it can be obtained informally

through social contacts and websites. As expected, high-achieving middle-class students have more

opportunities and are more likely to enrol in their desired schools.

Curricula

In this study, middle-class parents recognised the importance of fostering their children's interest and

enthusiasm for learning through a high-quality secondary education curriculum. Students can benefit

from various learning experiences, develop general skills, values, and attitudes, and prepare to be

independent learners. The inclusion of generic skills, including academic, communication, critical

thinking, problem-solving, personal, and social skills, is crucial for students' overall development and

accumulation of cultural capital. Ana emphasised the value of real-world learning opportunities for

students:

> I prefer a curriculum that incorporates more real-world learning experiences to assist students in
>
> developing generic competencies, including academic, critical thinking, communication,

problem-solving, and personal and social skills (Ana).

By capitalising on students' skills and experiences, schools can enrich their curricula to assist students in developing their capacity for whole-person development and lifelong learning, thereby increasing the quality of learning and teaching (Education-Bureau, 2019b). Besides the conventional HK Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) curriculum, some DSS schools offer internationally recognised curricula, such as the GCSE A-level or the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IB) program. These curricula are fast gaining traction in HK, providing additional educational opportunities and options for students. Due to its worldwide recognition, a growing number of middle-class parents select the IB curriculum in DSS schools, despite the additional cost. Della and David's quotations demonstrate the advantages of the IB program:

> While public school students take the HKDSE, DSS students may choose the IB curriculum as it has a higher university admission rate (Della).

> In an ever-changing world, IB is ideal for my daughter since it is dynamic and adaptable. My daughter switched from a government-aided school to a DSS school to avoid the high-pressure, exam-focused local curriculum. The HKDSE curriculum is particularly contentious. Lessons are rushed due to the large number of subjects covered. My daughter rapidly lost interest due to the lack of critical thinking. She prefers IB since there are fewer tests and less rote learning. The IB

program also allows her to choose electives like Psychology and English Literature (David).

Both Della and David suggested that the IB curriculum benefits students more than the HKDSE. Some students enrol in the IB program in DSS schools due to better resources, higher-quality teaching, and flexible curricula. It is more manageable and adaptive to societal changes. Like David, middle-class parents believe the IB curriculum is more flexible, has fewer examinations, and fosters critical thinking. Its distinguishing characteristics include educational and teaching activities and extra-curricular opportunities. Even though it is not as practice intensive as the HKDSE program, the IB curriculum is more adaptable, allowing additional topic choices such as Psychology and English Literature, and can help children develop their creativity and critical thinking skills. It is not as practice intensive as the HKDSE program. Parents choose DSS school for its breadth of electives, advanced learning facilities, and adaptive curricula. As Audrey's comment illustrates, an adaptable and flexible secondary school curriculum customised to students' learning styles is valuable:

> The Government should construct the curriculum based on globally recognised curricula, like the IB program. All stakeholders should be able to contribute to curriculum development. Experienced teachers are crucial in providing children with tailored school-based learning settings (Audrey).

Audrey proposed that the Government develop the curriculum by drawing on international recognised

curricula (like the IB) to better prepare students for the future. Experienced teachers are crucial in creating individualised school-based learning environments for students. Most parents seek the opportunity to contribute to curriculum development. Additionally, Gemma gave suggestions on curriculum design:

The curriculum design should build on school-based experiences to enable continuous enhancement and use experiential learning to aid in attaining specific learning goals like positive attitudes and problem-solving and social skills (Gemma).

Gemma recommended incorporating school-based experiences to facilitate continuous curriculum improvement and experiential learning to achieve specific learning goals that are difficult to achieve through traditional teaching alone. Problem-solving and social skills in daily life are essential for children to acquire social capital and embodied cultural capital in preparation for potential challenges. Moreover, David admired DSS schools for their middle-class cultural homogeneity and IB program, which encouraged resource sharing and collaborative learning:

This DSS school has a very supportive community comprised of like-minded students. We support one another, share resources, and collaborate to learn together. IB courses will encourage students to conduct additional research on a subject rather than focusing exclusively on writing papers and answering examination questions as the HKDSE does. Our curriculum is competitive, and our IB results are among the highest in HK… My kid will go abroad to study in the future, so I think the

IB program offered by DSS schools is valuable (David).

Additionally, Doris indicated that the education system had contributed to injustice:

Universities in HK that are competitive favour IB students, which generates inequality because

IB is only available to wealthy students... Enrolling your children in the IB curriculum at DSS

schools eliminates the need to send them overseas, so it is more cost-effective (Doris).

Parents value the reassurance generated by a school's symbol, curriculum, and assessment. For

example, the IB program is a globally recognised qualification that provides a passport to success

(Kenway et al., 2013). According to middle-class parents, the IB program is valuable for students

interested in studying abroad, serving as a middle-class indicator and helping students accumulate

symbolic capital. While DSS schools enjoy significant autonomy in developing curricula that meet

their educational objectives, public schools must adhere to a government-mandated curriculum.

Parents suggest that the IB program has the following advantages: Firstly, it promotes critical thinking.

The three IB core elements (creativity, action, and service) foster sports, performing arts, and

community service participation. The IB curriculum teaches students about the origins of knowledge,

assessing evidence, and making assertions, which better prepares them for university studies.

Community service aims at a more balanced education that improves learning outcomes. Secondly, the

IB curriculum equips students with an appreciation for global and national values through inquiry-

based and student-centred learning that emphasises research and self-exploration. Thirdly, the coursework requirements are adaptable, allowing students to pursue their interests and expand their knowledge horizons. Students can make more middle-class acquaintances and build social capital through community services. The cultural capital acquired through various subjects will likely benefit students when they attend university. This corroborates Bourdieu's assertion that an individual's possession of multiple forms of capital directly reflects one's position in social space (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989, 2018).

In HK, DSS policy permits the coexistence of IB and HKDSE. As described in Section 3.4.1, schools have relied on the IB program's reputation to attract academically talented students, which provides a diverse international curriculum and benefits students. Marketisation policies increased the emphasis on high-achieving students, resulting in competition among schools (Doherty, 2012; Resnik, 2018). The IB curriculum distinguishes itself from traditional schooling in its emphasis on cognitive and non-cognitive talents in addition to academic knowledge, including critical thinking, creativity, cultural sensitivity, time management, global awareness, communication, and leadership abilities (Wright & Lee, 2020). The IB program aspires to transcend the established curriculum by fostering inquisitive and knowledgeable students (Wright & Lee, 2020) which in turn can boost their academic performance. Hence, affluent children enrol in the IB Program, which prepares students for university (Resnik, 2018; Wright & Lee, 2020) and helps them to gain institutionalised cultural capital. IB schools

serve as a symbolic capital for higher social status. Hence, the IB program is popular among DSS, private and international schools and is well-received by middle-class parents in HK. Indeed, evidence suggests that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds choose the IB Program (Wright & Lee, 2020).

While both the IB and HKDSE curricula prepare students for university, no single course of study is suited for all students due to their diverse learning styles and aspirations. Moreover, the IB program is more expensive than the HKDSE, reflecting a higher SES and social capital. Therefore, some parents select curricula that meet their children's specific needs. Parents desire their children to attain bachelor's degrees or higher and accumulate symbolic and economic capital. Thus, they adopt various strategies to ensure their children attend university to gain institutionalised cultural capital.

5.1.2.2 Teaching quality

The school quality is determined by the environment, physical facilities, and the quality of teachers (Eble & Hu, 2016). In this study, most middle-class parents (83%, 15 in 18) have a firm position on the impact of teachers on their children's education. As mentioned in Section 3.4.2, Wall & Hall (2016) claimed that teachers serve as role models for pupils, influencing their personality and attitude development. Parents believe that teaching quality is a critical factor in school selection: it is a means of accomplishing a mission and providing positive student outcomes through successful instruction,

encouragement, evaluation, and learning opportunities. Teaching quality includes the qualifications of teachers, the medium of instruction, and class size, all of which are closely related to students' academic performance and learning outcomes.

Teachers' qualifications

Effective teachers are defined as those who can aid students in overcoming academic, physical, and social barriers (Woo, 2016). In general, most parents prefer teachers who are dedicated and qualified; teachers who can provide the ideal learning environment by mentoring and caring for their children, as David's reply demonstrates:

> I like teachers to be passionate and diligent enough to take care of children, even if children are troublemakers. I like this DSS school as it has reputable teachers and abundant teaching resources… It is essential that there are quality teachers who genuinely care about my children. The best measure of quality teachers is their understanding of the unique personality traits of every child. Teachers should adapt to these traits and develop positive aspects, thus improving children's learning experience (David).

David remarked that middle-class parents value teachers who personalise their lessons to each student's individuality and motivate them to learn. As students' habitus is affected by their parents and teachers, effective teachers and resources are essential. Most middle-class parents believe that DSS teachers are

superior to those in public schools. This high-quality teaching and caring environment contributes to students' satisfaction, which has become a significant factor influencing parental school choices. Furthermore, Daniel argued that DSS schools benefit more from additional funding sources and effective teachers than government schools, as they can hire teachers directly.

> Government schools cannot receive donations or external funding. Therefore, there are few expensive activities organised for students, such as travel tours. Moreover, they cannot employ teachers themselves; all teachers are assigned by the Government, and the curriculum is inflexible (Daniel).

In this study, most middle-class parents believe that DSS schools have greater autonomy and influence over teacher effectiveness, professional development, and the mutually respectful nature of teacher-student relationships. These are critical components of ensuring that children access high-quality educational environments.

Medium of instruction

In HK, the three common languages spoken are: Cantonese, English, and Putonghua (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2015). Cantonese and English are the two official languages in the public education system. English plays a prominent role compared to other languages (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2015). Under British colonial rule (before 1997), English was the primary language of education, Government,

and business in HK. It is one of the official languages, a popular second language, and a compulsory subject in most academic institutions (Chan, 2013). All subjects, except for the Chinese language, are taught in English in English-medium schools. The main challenges of using English as the MOI are teachers' English proficiency and Government support. The Government established the "mother-tongue" language policy in 1998. In response to considerable criticism, the Government began fine-tuning the language policy in 2005, focusing on teacher competency, student ability, and school-based support. EMI schools are usually ranked high in unofficial school bandings (Leung, 2013b). Besides the streaming effect of language of instruction, EMI schools have stimulated competition among parents. Adopting Chinese as a pedagogical medium entails an infringement on students' and schools' capital accumulation, assuming that parents' belief in English as an essential language remains intact. Adopting English as a MOI is a sign of high-quality schools; as Gandy and Doris's statements demonstrate, having lessons taught in English is essential for middle-class parents:

I will only choose EMI secondary schools in HK since it is vital to my kids' future (Gandy).

I will only consider an EMI school for my children to increase their global competitiveness, so I will look at its teaching medium (Doris).

As discussed in Section 3.4.2, globalisation has shaped students' future aspirations in HK. English

proficiency acts as cultural and symbolic capital that influences students' success (Tsao, 2018). The benefits of English language competence include improved communication with a stronger command of the English language and the ability to establish a future vision, which reflects a higher social class lifestyle (Gao et al., 2008). Thus, parents regard EMI schools as having a higher social position and prestige (Kenway et al., 2013). There is a rising social demand for English-medium or IB programs from parents dissatisfied with mainstream schools (Young, 2018). Although the HK Government permits schools to adjust the teaching medium based on students' academic results and teacher capability, there is intense competition for EMI schools. They believe that English-medium schools have a better academic reputation than Chinese-medium schools. Notably, all middle-class parents favour EMI schools, significantly determining school choice in this study. High English proficiency is essential in fostering their children's global competitiveness while increasing their cultural and symbolic capital. Middle-class parents begin providing English learning environments for their children in preschool or primary school. Although the existing MOI policy allows secondary schools to determine the teaching language based on teachers' and students' abilities, the MOI uncertainty in public schools creates a strong demand for DSS schools that primarily use English as the teaching medium.

Education provides language and material resources that contribute to capital accumulation (Bourdieu, 2018). In HK, parents consider English-medium schools superior due to better English learning

environments and resource accessibility. Since English is an international language, it is perceived to lead to better employment opportunities and an advantageous social position. Parents believe that high English proficiency is critical for their children's success and view English-medium schools as the most prestigious, signifying social prestige and wealth. English continues to be a gatekeeper to social positions, better professions, and higher education (Evans, 2010a, 2010b). Hence, parents desire increased exposure for their children to the English learning community and native English speaking teachers. Doris believes that higher English proficiency correlates with social reproduction and cultural capital, leading to a brighter future for her children.

> English proficiency is essential in HK. Individuals with low English proficiency typically have lower salary…I prefer DSS schools that provide a good English learning environment (Doris).

> Since my child cannot attend a prestigious EMI public school, I choose DSS schools that use English as the MOI to avoid CMI schools (Diana).

Doris and Diana favoured English-medium schools and avoided CMI schools. Most DSS schools adopt English as a pedagogical medium and hire more native English teachers since they have more funding and autonomy over teaching arrangements. This study indicates that middle-class parents in HK have a strong desire for their children to attend English-medium secondary schools, which echoes the findings of Woo (2016) and Zhou et al. (2015). Diana considered enrolling her daughter in a lower-

ranking English-medium DSS school if she could not attend an English-medium public school. Similarly, middle-class parents who value English teaching flock to DSS schools.

Class size

In HK, smaller class sizes of 21-25 students tend to break cultural barriers and reduce the sense of anxiety of students (Harfitt, 2012). The average class size in public-funded secondary schools was 32 students in 2019/2020 (Education-Bureau, 2020d). In this study, middle-class parents believe that the optimal class size is 25 students, as seen from Doris's quote:

Class size is critical as it enables teachers to address students' individual needs. I believe that a class size of fewer than 30 students, ideally 25, is preferable (Doris).

DSS schools allow flexibility in class sizes, and teachers can give additional attention to students, particularly those with special needs. They can use numerous instructional techniques to facilitate teaching and learning (Danny).

Doris and Danny argued that smaller class sizes enable teachers to provide more personalised attention to students, which aids their learning. Smaller class sizes enhance pedagogical quality and student learning, adding excitement and enjoyment to the teaching or learning. Teachers have additional time to become acquainted with their students; to learn about their abilities, interests, and any difficulties

they may face. They may employ various instructional methods to meet individual needs and improve

academic achievement, as shown in Blatchford et al. (2002). Smaller class sizes help students pay

attention and facilitate skills acquisition, contributing to embodied cultural capital. With improved

academic performance, students have better chances of getting into university and build their

institutionalised capital. Since DSS schools have adopted a flexible class size policy, as opposed to

public schools, middle-class parents believe that DSS teachers can help students accumulate more

embodied cultural capital, thereby assisting them in maintaining their social standing and facilitating

their future upward mobility.

5.1.2.3 Child-focused learning

Schools are expected to foster a learning environment for individual students, adapting to their unique

learning potential (Shernoff, 2013). Students have different backgrounds, personalities, abilities,

cultures, and learning needs. Despite the cultural focus on academic performance, middle-class

respondents support a child-focused learning approach that meets individual needs, as Diana's quote

illustrates:

> A quality school with a child-centred approach is critical as different children have different needs.
>
> A balance between children's well-being and their academic performance is essential (Diana).

Parents prefer a high-quality education that balances against children's abilities. Given the constraints

of learning time and resources, it is critical to balance the focus on children's well-being and the drive for academic achievement. Alex proposes that a high-quality education involves collaboration between school and home to ensure mutual support and alignment on child-focused learning's core values:

> Child-centred learning and secondary education missions should be mutually supported and aligned. A high-quality school can make my kids happy, ambitious, and creative. Teachers should manage a varied classroom that allows children to explore and learn while encouraging respect and friendship. Stakeholder collaboration is important to future social mobility (Alex).

According to Alex, middle-class parents preferred a high-quality secondary education that can help their children grow into happy, ambitious and creative persons. They appreciate teachers who provide appropriate assistance to ensure students' achievement with diverse characteristics and needs. Allowing students to explore freely, tailoring learning to their interests and growth, and fostering a respectful and friendly environment can establish a respectful and pleasant atmosphere. Rather than direct instruction, a co-construction approach to learning and teaching is critical. This approach emphasises the participation of students, teachers, and parents in the learning process, resulting in the accumulation of knowledge that meets the unique needs of students.

This research examines school choice concerning a middle-class family's values and how middle-class parents align their school choice with their perceptions of educational quality. The emphasis on child-

centredness and individuality is evident in the rationale of many middle-class parents. It is related to the perceptions of their children's academic achievements and education expectations, as shown in Gil and Alex's quotes:

Child-focused learning is the most important since the school needs to match my kid's capabilities and academic banding (Gil).

Child-focused learning is essential so that students can enjoy school life and learning (Alex).

Most middle-class parents (83%, 15 in 18) consider their children's needs and interests while selecting a public-funded secondary school. Gil and Alex stated that middle-class parents desire a school that matches their children's personality, abilities, needs, and interests. They regard school choice as the freedom to select what they consider best for their children; nevertheless, the choice varies according to family habitus, which is consistent with previous research (Olmedo, 2008; Reay & Ball, 1998a). In general, parents value schools that prioritise "child-centredness" and adhere to the vital principle of comprehending and honouring each child's unique developmental patterns, as well as valuing their individuality. Gil and Diana's quotations reflected the notion that most parents emphasised whole-person development, including discipline, courtesy and moral standards, to gain cultural capital:

I like schools that promote holistic development and focus on academics and extra-curricular activities (Gil).

I prefer schools that offer not only academic but also all-rounded training (Diana).

Most middle-class parents are interested not only in the academic performance of a school or their children getting credentials but also in a holistic education that encourages the development of embodied cultural capital. As children are unique, educational requirements vary. Therefore, a child-centred education is crucial in meeting their needs and maximising their learning potential. Middle-class parents select schools according to their children's academic level and abilities. Thus, children can develop essential cultural capital and habitus during their school years, which can substantially impact their future (Ball, 2003; Bourdieu, 1986, 2018).

5.1.2.4 School culture

School culture, which encompasses discipline and religious beliefs, plays a significant role in determining middle-class school choice. Discipline relates to developing self-discipline, which involves self-control and social and moral responsibility (Bear, 2010), and affects the educational achievement of students (Leung, 2013a). Scholars contend that middle-class parents emphasise providing their children with a high-quality education (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Olmedo, 2008). This study agrees with Ball et al. (1997) that middle-class parents favour schools that promote character development and provide individual care and attention, as this results in well-behaved students and

improves teaching quality.

Discipline

Peer groups potentially boost or hinder the achievement of students. For example, disciplinary issues may disrupt lessons. Middle-class parents are concerned about school discipline and fear that students with behavioural issues may jeopardise their children's education, as Gil demonstrates:

> Students with good discipline is one of my key considerations when choosing a secondary school. Middle-class students have distinct habitus. Peer group influence is essential as behavioural issues may jeopardise children's education. Thus, middle-class parents generally prefer a well-behaved, like-minded middle-class community (Gil).

Gil remarked that school discipline is a significant school choice factor and argued that middle-class students have a distinctive habitus. Childhood habitus and peer group influence are crucial. Parents value schools with well-behaved, middle-class, culturally homogeneous communities to avoid negative peer influence, such as bullying and harassment. Principals play leading roles in addressing school discipline issues and maintaining the school's reputation. The major goal of school discipline is to foster an environment that is conducive to learning and ensures school safety. Effective school discipline is critical in promoting a positive learning environment that is safe and enjoyable (Bear, 2010).

Religion

Religious organisations administer several government-aided or DSS schools (Wong, 2018). Most religious schools have a specific ethos that fosters a unique educational environment. Most parents in HK favour Christian and Catholic schools as these schools are committed to offering high-quality education and fostering a positive learning environment. Some schools accept students of all faiths to promote tolerance, acceptance and diversity. In contrast, some schools accept students who profess no religious views as long as they perform well academically and in extra-curricular activities. Students who share the same religious faith as the school gain bonus points in their school applications.

Some middle-class parents select religious schools based on their religious beliefs, academic performance, teaching quality, and discipline. Catholic respondents exemplify a religious group preference for faith-based education provision. According to some middle-class parents, religious schools are crucial in shaping successful students through an integrated package of culture, values, and academics, as indicated by the following quotations:

> As a Christian, I believe that attending a Christian school is paramount. We prefer overt spirituality in our interactions with students, parents, and teachers that hold similar values as we do. We are particularly keen on selecting a school affiliated with our denomination. We want our children to grow up in a Christian environment and understand religious beliefs (Aria).

I think aided schools with a religious background, like Catholic or Christian, are better since their

students' discipline is better (Diana).

Aria and Diana emphasised the critical role of religious education. Parents choose religious schools

for their Christian values and principles, and because they believe that this results in well-behaved

students, as David demonstrates:

Christian schools aim to equip students with a solid moral and spiritual compass, support their

development and prepare them for adulthood's challenges. Moreover, they instil Christian values

and principles. Therefore, student discipline is better in Christian schools (David).

Religious schools provide religious education to foster character development, moral and family values

(Bosetti, 2017). They emphasise personal growth and lifelong learning following sacred texts,

teachings of the faith, and adherence to spiritual practices. Middle-class parents with religious values

are more comfortable with their children attending a religious school with similar cultural traditions,

as Doris's quote reflects:

Our school is a Christian school that uses extra-curricular and academic programs to aid students

in their emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual development. A high-quality school

should integrate Christian beliefs, liberal arts and sciences and provide an educational perspective

that connects theory with practice, resulting in an increased understanding of God, self, and the world (Doris).

While faith is essential to many parents, the religious factor when selecting schools varies according to their personal preferences. Like Doris, most middle-class parents seek to integrate religious values with five critical aspects of learning for whole-person development: moral and civic education, intellectual, physical and aesthetic development, as well as community service and career-related skills. Government-aided or DSS schools incorporate 'religious education' subjects or worship services into their curricula. Some families prefer schools linked with a religion that shares their values and enrol their children in schools administered by their church. They believe that the distinctive traditions and school culture should fuse with the needs of multicultural students and the local community while adhering to their family values. It should be a collaborative community where students, parents and teachers work together to improve student learning and create opportunities to enrich their educational experiences and develop their talents. Middle-class parents favour religious schools because they believe that attending them allows students to accumulate symbolic and cultural capital (Verter, 2003). They are looking for religious schools with distinct ethos and characters. School ethos characteristics have a significant impact on parental school choice. Bourdieu's "spiritual capital" concept views religious knowledge as a competitive symbolic product (Verter, 2003). Material assets, according to Bourdieu, include transferable social, cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital

is critical in social power relations because it enables non-economic class hierarchy and habitus-based domination. The transformation from material to cultural and symbolic capital largely conceals the origins of inequality.

5.1.2.5 Socio-economic status

Apart from teaching quality, child-focused learning, academic performance and school culture, this study reveals that approximately 56% of middle-class parents (10 in 18) emphasise socio-economic status (SES) when choosing a school. Della stated that her SES had a positive influence on her children's educational experiences, academic achievement, and long-term well-being:

> As a middle-class parent, I can afford tutorial classes and extra-curricular activities for my child to train him to be all-rounded … His current DSS school is academically rigorous and provides numerous extra-curricular opportunities to develop his creativity, leadership, and communication abilities. Though DSS schools are expensive, I believe they will assist students in achieving their goals. Being a doctor, I hope that my son will follow in my footsteps if his academic results meet the university's requirements. I am qualified to assist him with his studies (Della).

Economic capital is critical for parents to provide additional support for their children, including tutorial and extra-curricular activities. As stated in Section 3.3, most middle-class students in this study joined various extra-curricular activities and sought after-class tutorials to get higher grades, which

corroborates the study of Chan and Bray (2014). Middle-class parents, particularly those with a higher level of education, stressed academic performance. They leveraged economic and cultural opportunities to promote learning, thus improving their children's life prospects and careers. They believe that attending DSS schools can help their children achieve their goals. As Doris's comment indicated, middle-class parents prefer DSS schools because they share common values and sociocultural peer groups that might aid upward mobility:

Middle-class habitus and peer influence are essential to my children's future. Most DSS students are middle class with plenty of resources. I prefer DSS schools because of their shared values, resources, and a like-minded environment for better mobility in the future (Doris).

DSS schools have more autonomy over student admissions, favouring students with a higher SES. This study agrees with other scholars that middle-class families tend to choose schools with cultural homogeneity (Ball, 2003; Reay & Lucey, 2004). The benefits of cultural homogeneity are shown below:

In HK, social mobility is determined by one's social status. So you will advance if your family has a higher SES. I transferred my child to DSS to take advantage of the improved teaching quality and resources and avoid being negatively affected by peers (David).

Managing students from similar backgrounds in DSS schools is easier (Doris).

I like DSS most since DSS schools can choose high-quality students who match their school background, and it is more manageable for teachers to teach like-minded students with similar SES and academic levels (Daniel).

David, Doris, and Daniel emphasised the crucial role of cultural homogeneity in preserving parents' social status and minimising the impact of student misbehaviour on their children, which corroborates previous research (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Leung, 2013b; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007; Woo, 2016). They argued that DSS schools' higher admission autonomy benefited similar socioeconomic classes by enhancing their social and cultural capital. This class-based habitus and peer influence are necessary to maintain social position and upward mobility. Hence, middle-class parents advocated for a culturally homogeneous environment where students could acquire the appropriate cultural capital and habitus to excel academically, boost their chances of attending universities, and pursue better careers.

To summarise, middle-class parents typically considered five factors when selecting a secondary school for their children: academic performance, teaching quality, child-focused learning, school culture, and SES. In this study, children might travel to school by private school buses or public transportation. As HK is a small city and the majority of middle-class parents own a car, school proximity appears to be of less importance to the middle-class parents in this study than the factors described previously.

Additionally, the higher parents' economic strata, the more economic resources they have and the more likely they are to choose DSS schools. Typically, the lower middle class is more concerned about tuition costs and prefers high-quality public schools. Some parents are pressured to maintain their social positions due to the recent economic downturn. As there is no guarantee of admittance to a quality secondary school or university, parents' anxiety is evident in this study. Most parents strive to support their children in achieving academic success and securing their social positions. Hence, school choice is a complicated combination of rationales derived from various principles and practical considerations. The next section will examine parents' rationales for enrolling their children in various types of public-funded secondary schools.

5.1.3 Theme 3: What are the rationales of middle-class parents for selecting different types of public-funded secondary schools?

This section examines the rationales behind middle-class parents' school decisions among various types of public-funded secondary schools in HK. According to this study, the majority of middle-class parents choose their children's school based on their children's needs, their own perceptions of educational quality, and school choice factors. Parental choice expands as education becomes more market-oriented, potentially resulting in increased competition among schools and improved educational quality. Thus, the Government and principals can no longer ignore the parents' voices

(Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Additionally, public-funded secondary schools comprise the lion's share of all secondary schools (89%) in HK. Therefore, when developing education policy, it is critical to evaluate the following rationales of middle-class parents for selecting various types of public-funded secondary schools:

5.1.3.1 Autonomy

Public schools are frequently overburdened with bureaucracy and lack the resources necessary for high achievement. DSS schools have been established in response to the global trend toward privatisation to enhance educational quality, increase school autonomy, and provide additional school options for parents (Education-Bureau, 2019d; Leung, 2013b; Mok & Welch, 2002). DSS schools have grown in popularity in recent years as parents have more choices while schools have more autonomy. DSS schools have greater flexibility in terms of curriculum design, school fees, student admissions, English language instruction, and class size than public schools. Gandy observed that parents in DSS schools had a greater influence on policy than parents in public schools:

> Principals, teachers, and parents in DSS schools collaborate more and have more opportunities to participate in policy decisions than in public schools (Gandy).

Gandy noticed that principals, teachers, and parents collaborate more closely and have more opportunities to influence policy in DSS schools than they do in public schools, which corroborated

the studies of Woo (2016) and Zhou (2015).

5.1.3.2 Finances and Tuition

DSS schools are education reform initiatives that mirror global attempts to encourage family choice and school marketisation (Zhou et al., 2015). These schools are classified as elite education based on the schools' wealth, tuition fees, parent affordability, resources and facilities, and income from donations. Apart from government grants, DSS schools usually receive additional funding through tuition fees, fundraising, and alumni contributions (Zhou et al., 2015). Consequently, DSS schools have additional resources to help students achieve the desired educational outcomes through various support programs, facilities, and other learning opportunities, such as exchange opportunities, as Della's quote illustrates:

> I think a $5000 monthly tuition fee is appropriate. My school offers a four-week summer exchange program to countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, which is beneficial for students (Della).

DSS schools have to compete for 'high-quality' students and maintain their reputation to secure funding since the subsidy is dependent on enrolment, as opposed to the class-based grant in government-aided schools (Leung, 2013b). Schools are assumed to improve their services, raising educational quality, which connotes exclusivity based on wealth or merit and superiority claims

(Kenway et al., 2013). On the other hand, parental school choice is influenced by family affordability, as some DSS schools charge relatively high tuition. In this study, depending on their financial resources and employment security, most middle-class parents were willing to pay for a higher-quality education if it was affordable. They asserted that monthly tuition expenses of around HK$5000 were appropriate for their family income. As Gemma stated, some DSS schools charged extra for IB or GCSE programs:

> My daughter transferred to a Government school two years ago due to the recent significant increase in tuition fees at DSS schools, particularly for IB and GCSE programs. I cannot finance six years of education (Gemma).

Considering Gemma's perspective, we recognise that not all middle-class parents are prepared to pay high school fees, particularly in light of the recent economic downturn. Therefore, public schools remain a viable market proposition. Some middle-class parents may have financial and practical concerns, including the affordability of school fees or the availability of scholarships. Public schools provide free education to local students. Some parents argue that public schools are more cost-effective as they have more resources for extracurricular activities that help develop their children's cultural and social capital (Stolle-McAllister, 2011). They opted for free public education to maximise their financial resources, believing that their children would be more competitive and perform better at public schools with extra extra-curricular activities or shadow education. Hence, middle-class students dominated elite public schools.

5.1.3.3 School culture

Public school enrolment is typically associated with a liberal political ideology and an appreciation for cultural heterogeneity, which means a diversity of mixed cultures and socio-economic backgrounds (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Posey, 2012; Stillman, 2012). In this study, some middle-class parents believed that reducing segregation was advantageous because it enabled equitable distribution of disadvantaged students across schools. They perceived their own educational experiences as academically and socially inadequate. They desired that their children be exposed to a more diverse student community and learn how to interact with students from diverse backgrounds, as Gman's quote illustrates:

> Random selection exposes students to a real-world experience of mixed ability and background. Peers from varied backgrounds may benefit students. Also, free public education allows me to manage my budget effectively and provide extra tutoring or extra-curricular activities for my child to improve his grades (Gman).

Gman asserted that cultural heterogeneity in public schools provided "real-world" experiences and cultural competencies that benefited his child's education and future employment opportunities, which corroborated previous studies (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Posey, 2012; Stillman, 2012). Nonetheless, contradictions frequently developed between parents' professed desire for a "social mix"

and their actual behaviour. Middle-class parents enrolled their children in elite public schools due to free tuition, academic success, an English-language learning environment, and proximity to home. However, only 17% (3 in 18) of middle-class parents agreed that they had no objection to their children attending socioeconomically diverse public schools if the working-class students were well-behaved and academically successful, as Anna and Giana's quotes demonstrate:

> Some working-class students have excellent learning abilities and academic performance. So, I don't mind my kids studying with them (Ana).

> My children attend a Band 1 government school with approximately 50% middle-class students … I favour academically qualified students, and their family backgrounds are not my concern (Giana).

According to some middle-class parents, teaching and learning at public secondary schools produce knowledge and skills necessary to cope with examinations. Therefore, they only seek DSS schools as another educational option for their children to secure a quality education. DSS schools have gained popularity in recent years due to the uncertainty and risks associated with secondary school allocation and MOI. The DSS policy leads to segregated elitism and is considered a symbolic policy (Leung, 2013b; Morris & Scott, 2003). DSS students are classified as privileged due to the school's symbolic reputation, and this classism also brings confidence that their children are superior. Students join DSS schools to acquire social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital and improve their

future social ranking or mobility. Parents who emphasise student discipline and middle-class cultural homogeneity tend to select DSS schools, which offer "through-train" options to ensure students have a consistent learning environment. More importantly, through-train schools allow students to bypass the school allocation process and transfer directly to a secondary school. An uninterrupted journey from kindergarten or primary school to secondary school ensures educational continuity. Significantly, students become acquainted, facilitating close relationships between peers and teachers. Students share the same culture and values, fostering a strong sense of belonging and self-confidence. Middle-class parents prefer the through-train education as it provides continuity and stability of experience, as stated in Daniel and Della's comments:

> DSS meets all of my requirements because it offers through-train education from primary school to secondary school graduation, avoiding the high pressure of the SSPA system…My son attends a DSS through-train secondary school… students can easily transit to their linked secondary school (Daniel).

> Through-train education offers parents assurance that their children are looked after and cared for. It enables students to form friendships across generations, campuses, and subjects, thereby reducing bullying (Della).

Daniel and Della believe that through-train schools provide a stable environment with familiar

classmates. Students can accumulate cultural capital and habitus more efficiently in a stable environment with like-minded peers.

However, HK has only 25 through-train schools (5.5%), resulting in intense competition among parents (Education-Bureau, 2020b). Around 15% of DSS schools offer a through-train program compared to 4% of public schools. Hence, some parents begin searching for a through-train school before their children enter kindergarten. Middle-class students gain advantages during the school choice process due to their capital and habitus in the field, resulting in social closure and the exclusion of working-class students. Middle-class parents have more options than working-class parents; they can choose DSS, private, or public schools, which contributes to social stratification and inequality. Thus, students do not compete on an equal playing field, which may result in educational disparity, as Gil and Danny's quotations illustrate:

> It's unfair to compare public and DSS schools. DSS schools benefit from increased financing from both the Government and parents (Gil).

> My son dissects mice, ox eyeballs, and pig lungs every month in biology class. Yet, my friend's son rarely has dissection practice at public school, which demonstrates that DSS schools have significantly more resources (Danny).

Middle-class parents benefit from exclusionary closure by securing a privileged position at the expense of working-class families. The DSS policy enables middle-class parents to benefit from school selection by leveraging their capital. The middle class is divided into three strata: upper, middle, and lower, and each stratum has distinct educational opportunities (Saunders, 2006). Upper-middle-class families often dominate top public-funded secondary schools, indicating that economic capital may substantially influence their school selection.

5.1.3.4 Curriculum and EMI

Public education ensures students have a consistent educational experience with a standard curriculum (Woo, 2016), while the diverse curricula (IB, GCSE, HKDSE) offered by DSS schools demonstrate the school's capacity to prime their students for university studies and assist them in paving their future career paths. Daniel highlighted the crucial role of the IB program in terms of enhancing the learning experience:

> DSS schools allow us to choose an IB curriculum, which is critical for my child's learning experience (Daniel).

As noted in Section 5.1.2.1 and 5.1.2.2, parents perceive EMI schools to have a higher social status. Parents disenchanted with mainstream schools are increasingly opting for English-medium or IB programs. They feel that schools with an English-language curriculum have a better academic

reputation than schools with a Chinese-language curriculum. Notably, all middle-class parents favour EMI schools, which influences school choice significantly in our study. A good command of the English language and a diversified curriculum are crucial for parents who wish to increase their children's global competitiveness while building their cultural and symbolic capital. However, EMI school places are limited, with around 114 EMI schools accounting for approximately 25% of the total local secondary schools in 2019 (Wong & Kwan, 2019), creating intense competition among students. Thus, it is critical to understand middle-class school choice strategies to investigate how parents win the school choice game and determine whether there is educational inequality.

5.2 Research question 2: What are their strategies when selecting a public-funded secondary school?

Middle-class parents are frequently portrayed as 'skilled' in the educational market, whereas working-class parents are more 'contingent' in their school choice (Ball et al., 2002; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Lam, 2013). For example, middle-class students have better English proficiency and more extra-curricular credentials. Most parents invest in tutorial classes and encourage their children to read and communicate in English since childhood. Moreover, they may acquire cultural capital through family inheritance. However, working-class students may lack the financial resources necessary to participate in various extra-curricular activities. This study examines how middle-class parents leverage multiple forms of capital to benefit from the school choice process. It demonstrates how parents' habitus perpetuates or intensifies social stratification, which confirms the findings of Ball (1993). Moreover, it explores how parents assess their information sources.

5.2.1 Theme 4: How capital and habitus help middle-class parents to maximise their advantages during the secondary school selection process?

As described in Chapter Two, Bourdieu's theory enables us to map parents' evolving power relationships within their social environments. Practice results from competing logics related to the field's unique social conditions, the distinctive dispositions that define its individual (habitus), and the capital mobilised in the process (Bourdieu, 1986). Parents have varying levels of access to resources,

and children's educational achievement in secondary school is often dependent on the structure and amount of capital available.

This research explores the strategies adopted by middle-class parents in HK to assist their children's learning, particularly parental support involving academic performance and extra-curricular activities. School selection processes contribute to the reproduction of the middle class, social closure, and the exclusion of working-class families from high-quality schools, resulting in inequality (DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016; Woo, 2016). This study aims to explore the middle-class advantage in possessing capitals and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) that contribute to their success in familial and educational practices and the capacity of these capitals and habitus to aspire.

5.2.1.1 Capital

Bourdieu's theory illustrates how class privilege is institutionalised in education: The unequal distribution of capital within the educational field, where only the dominant group can deploy their capital to aid educational success. This section delves deeper into how middle-class parents mobilise their economic, social and cultural capital(s) to secure the best education for their children.

Economic capital

Economic capital is associated with power, and middle-class families use their economic capital to

ensure their children attend their desired schools. For example, they relocate near target schools, stay at home to care for their children, and invest in after-school programs and extra-curricular activities. Private housing ownership is a common indicator of economic capital, which can be converted into other forms of capital, accumulated and transmitted to generations through family relations (Bourdieu, 1986). Parents strategically mobilise their economic capital to help their children.

Residential Relocation

Most middle-class parents in this study chose high-quality secondary schools. Public schools are free but offer limited school places. As Daniel argued, students who attended their designated government primary school had a better chance of admission:

> There are few government schools. It is difficult for students to enter their respective secondary schools if they have not studied in their linking government primary schools. Thus, my son has enrolled in an elite government primary school, hoping to get into the best secondary school in HK (Daniel).

Since children are assigned to public schools in their neighbourhoods, middle-class families have a greater chance of exercising choice in a public school lottery system through residential mobility. They can use strategic housing decisions to assist their children in meeting their enrollment goals, indicating that middle-class families are more mobile and can benefit from educational choices (Butler et al.,

2013; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Wu, 2012). Bourdieu's theory is crucial for analysing the behaviours of different classes. Bourdieu (1999) explains how relocating near prosperous neighbourhoods can assist individuals in maintaining or advancing their class status. Additionally, residing near a high-achieving school broadens one's prospects. By contrast, working-class families are geographically isolated. Consequently, educational inequality is perpetuated. As illustrated by Gandy's comment, relocation efforts may displace existing working-class pupils from high-quality schools:

> I moved closer to my son's government school to attend a through-train primary school and then
>
> transit to a renowned Government secondary school (Gandy).

Besides economic deprivation, a lack of high-ranking schools in neighbourhoods may limit the working class's school choice (Reay, 2003). The desire for high-quality education is reflected in high property values, which are greatly influenced by high-performing schools. Residential property values have risen sharply in neighbourhoods with high-quality schools and serve as determinants of the social status and stability of middle-class gentrification. However, financial constraints may prevent economically disadvantaged families from purchasing property adjacent to high-quality schools or paying for private education. Thus, economic capital is critical for school choice success, which ultimately results in social reproduction in affluent neighbourhoods.

Financial freedom

Notably, this study suggests that middle-class mothers play an active role in the school choice process. According to the background information of participants in Table 1, approximately 44% of middle-class mothers (8 in 18) resigned from their full-time employment and became housewives to devote themselves to teaching or caring for their children.

> I can assist school applications by attending school talks or seminars during office hours because I am a housewife. Additionally, I can teach my children and organise tutorials and extra-curricular activities (Diana).

As discussed in Section 3.3, mothers' employment status influences their involvement in education. Middle-class mothers can afford to stay at home to facilitate their educational involvement (Reay, 1998). Diana claims that being a housewife enables her to devote additional time to school applications; she can attend school talks or seminars during school hours. Additionally, middle-class parents are capable of tutoring and organising extra-curricular activities for their children.

Children investment

As indicated in Sections 1.4, 2.1.1 and 3.3, middle-class parents have been actively cultivating their children's abilities through their involvement in children's educational experiences. Parental involvement indicates class differences in concerted cultivation parenting styles (Vincent & Ball, 2007; Ying & Wright, 2021), which vary according to the capital and their parents' capacity to assist children

(Jonathan, 2021; Lareau, 2011). They invest their economic capital in private tuition and extra-curricular activities to ensure that their children develop abilities and skills in music, sports, and art, which aligns with earlier studies (Kenway et al., 2013; Lam, 2013; Yoon, 2020). They have the capital to invest in their children's concerted cultivation, academic learning, and future planning, whereas working-class parents cannot afford many extra-curricular activities (Lam, 2013). Due to resource constraints, working-class students may lack the financial resources necessary to enrol in tutorial sessions, interview preparation, and a range of extra-curricular activities. In this study, middle-class parents with sufficient capital could arrange more cultural activities and shadow education for their children to increase their chances of admission into their desired schools. They believed that having a proven track record in extra-curricular activities was crucial for increasing their children's academic competitiveness (Vincent & Ball, 2007). Concerted cultivation is positively associated with school admissions and outstanding performance from kindergarten to university (Ying & Wright, 2021). As Daniel's comment implied, some middle-class parents started training their children in kindergarten:

> I began training my children in kindergarten, as admission to an elite school is difficult. A through-train school can reduce the stress of school selection (Daniel).

In this study, middle-class parents believed that the sooner they began preparing, the easier their children could enter their desired school. Besides official education, parents generally aid their children in revising for examinations or seeking shadow education. Middle-class students usually attend various

tutorial classes, interview training and extra-curricular activities to develop into all-rounders and gain admission to their desired schools. This phenomenon is common at all stages of education. Middle-class parents contribute to schools through fundraising activities, volunteerism, and resource mobilisation. They leverage their economic and social capital to improve their chances of admission to high-quality schools. They assume that a well-paid career is connected to English language ability, which creates a distinction between classes. They can gain an advantage by converting their economic capital to their children's cultural capital. For example, Diana stated that parents could assist their children in acquiring cultural capital by providing shadow schooling and extra-curricular activities, so enhancing their chances of enrolling in a quality EMI school:

> I invest substantially in my children, including tutorials and extra-curricular activities, to improve their academic performance and gain awards in extra-curricular activities to increase their chances of attending an EMI school. They may meet peers of higher status, which may benefit them in future (Diana).

Social capital

Individuals acquire social capital by turning their social networks into necessary relationships for achieving advantages. Woo (2016) asserts that social capital in the middle class facilitates the school selection process. Their class identity influences their decisions due to capital discrepancies (Ball et al., 1995, 1997; Gordon & Nocon, 2008). Middle-class parents can use their cultural capital to monitor

their children's progress and communicate their requirements to school (Ball, 2003). Parental engagement can reinforce social reproduction by establishing solid relationships with other parents and teachers (Woo, 2016). By comparison, working-class parents typically lack awareness of the educational system and communication skills with school, and are unable to offer effective academic support for their children. They have fewer contacts with educators and school administrators.

In this study, middle-class parents typically used their capital and habitus to increase their children's chances of admission to their desired school. Parents' social capital appears to influence school selection by providing recommendations, facilitating or shaping their decision-making and assisting children with the school application process. Social connections with educational experts facilitate assistance and guidance (Reay & Ball, 1998a). Parents use their social capital to seek recommendations regarding school selection from friends or teachers. As Daniel's comment indicates, they could request recommendation letters for their children to boost their chances of admission:

> I asked friends and teachers for advice before applying to schools. I also asked a principal for a recommendation letter (Daniel).

Additionally, parents volunteer at their children's schools, collect interview questions and school information, and organise tutorials and extra-curricular events for their children, as Diana's comment indicates:

My elder child attends this DSS school, so I volunteer here. I gather parent feedback, past interview questions, and school information. I resigned from my job to teach and organise tutorials and extra-curricular activities for my kids (Diana).

Diana resigned from her job to focus entirely on her children. In this study, approximately 44% of middle-class mothers (8 in 18) stay at home to give their full attention to their children.

Cultural capital

Cultural capital refers to the credentials, abilities, and material possessions that indicate one's social status (Bourdieu, 2018, 2000). First, it is a long-lasting set of "dispositions of the mind and body in the form of cultural goods" portrayed as the form of embodied, objectified, and institutionalised states (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 84) that is transferable and transformable. Cultural capital is necessary for equipping oneself to maintain a higher social status, which is reproduced by economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Second, it comprises the knowledge that legitimises power status, including educational qualifications, values, attitudes, beliefs, tastes, and behaviours, and it differs among groups (Bourdieu, 2011). It is unevenly distributed among social groups, accounting for class disparities in educational attainment. Third, it comprises the entire socialisation process and can be acquired by practices that generate knowledge, skills and education.

School application and highbrow activities

Cultural capital is instilled in children by exposure to highbrow activities such as artistic practice, piano playing, and horse riding. Cultural capital expenditure varies according to class or family. As Diana's comment demonstrates, some middle-class students participated in various activities to ensure school admission:

> My child attends tutoring, religious activities, and extra-curricular events like science competitions to earn school credentials for school admission (Diana).

Middle-class parents work diligently to develop their children's cultural capital and enrol them in elite schools to prepare them for success (Lui, 2014). Parents invest in highbrow activities to assist their children in gaining advantages during the school admission process. The cultural capital, habitus and student ability are usually intertwined with academic merit, rewarding highbrow cultural consumption in the school system (Andersen & Hansen, 2012). Therefore, middle-class parents have more significant advantages over working-class parents during the school selection. Children's experiences and opportunities are shaped by their resources, influencing their future opportunities and choices. Bourdieu's practice theory argues that habitus and all forms of capital are equally valued in the education field. Students may be exploited if they lack the desired kind of capital required by schools, which translates to application failure, lower achievement, or discrimination (Brar, 2016). Schools also value specific types of cultural capital when they pick candidates during the school application process.

They implicitly solicit distinct styles, activities, interactions, social codes, and languages during admission interviews (Flere et al., 2010) or select students who behave or dress in ways compatible with middle-class values (Morris, 2008). As Danny's comment demonstrates, habitus or cultural capital may influence the performance of students during school interviews:

> My kids are involved in extra-curricular activities and have grown up reading English novels. Teachers will assess their spoken communication, academic, and logical thinking skills during an interview (Danny).

Danny urged that youngsters engage in extracurricular activities and begin reading English novels as early as possible. During an interview, teachers may evaluate students' oral communication, academic, and logical reasoning abilities. Middle-class students are more likely to enrol in high-quality schools because they appear to be more talented and thus gain advantages during the school choice process. Teachers often value communication skills and embodied cultural capital. Children may be denied admission based on their academic performance, interview results, or family background. Hence, the success of a school application is based on students' cultural or economic capital.

Home culture

Cultural capital acquisition predominates within the family, where children learn specific behaviours,

attitudes, norms, beliefs, and values (Bourdieu, 2011). Home is a place for social reproduction as it maintains social class and cultural capital. Thus, child-rearing and education are key components of cultural capital that meet societal standards. Middle-class parents devote time and capital in arranging shadow education, cultural activities or extra-curricular activities for their children to achieve cultural distinctions so as to increase their chances of admission to their desired schools. They use cultural capital to maximise their advantages and achieve a desired social status. Social reproduction occurs in the education system through cultural reproduction. Middle-class students succeed in school because the school culture resembles their home culture. Children that lack this cultural capital from their families will face significant difficulties adapting to school culture, which will result in marginalisation and inequity (Werfhorst & G., 2010).

Uneven capital possession

The education market is an arena for the middle class to employ various strategies to optimise their capital and inevitably excludes the less privileged (Wheeler, 2018; Woo, 2016). Middle-class parents tend to enrol their children in elite school circuits to differentiate themselves from the working class (Ball, 2003; Van Zanten, 2003). They can reduce the risk of downward mobility, whereas the working class typically lacks capital and is more concerned with practical constraints (Ball, 2003). Middle-class parents leverage their economic, cultural and social capital to gain benefits during the school choice process and participate actively by investing in shadow education, home relocation, or paying for DSS

or private schools. Their children have a greater chance of admittance to elite EMI schools while relegating others to less desirable schools (Wheeler, 2018). This research concurs with Slater (2013) that school quality has a direct impact on one's life chances, and there is a clear connection between educational attainment and employment opportunities, as Ana's quote demonstrates:

School quality can impact life chances. Lack of middle-class support may cause school closings. There is a clear correlation between education and job opportunities (Ana).

Ana noted that school closures could result from a lack of support from middle-class parents and low student participation. Social capital facilitates the school selection process by receiving additional school information and advice from social networks. Educational inequality is deepening as working-class families have limited resources and consequently school choices due to tuition fees or other costs (Allen, 2014). Financial constraints limit working-class participation, while cultural and social capital further diminish their interest in school choice or cultural activities. Ultimately, middle-class capital can bring valuable improvements to schools but at a social cost, as Doris and Aria illustrate:

Middle-class parents with wealth and education will make valuable contributions or school suggestions, leading to middle-class domination in elite schools (Doris).

Applying to schools is stressful. DSS students will take up most of the quota. Only wealthy families will get the remaining slots. How do poor kids get into DSS schools if their parents can't

afford it (Aria)?

Aria felt that if all high-quality government-aided schools turned into DSS schools, working-class students would lose the opportunity to advance socially. Moreover, DSS schools promote social segregation and establish a class division in the early education process. Tuition fees at certain DSS secondary schools have increased dramatically since 2001 (Leung, 2013b). While there are scholarships and financial schemes available to impoverished students, it is unclear how many students will apply or profit from them, as Alice's comment indicates:

> While working-class families are qualified for financial aid, passing the admission interview is difficult (Alice).

The school choice of working-class parents appears to be constrained by additional costs associated with DSS schools: tuition fees, fundraising or extra-curricular activities. Parents are compelled to enrol their children in public schools (Bernal, 2005). Hence, the increased social segregation and unequal educational opportunities and resources may exacerbate social inequality.

5.2.1.2 Habitus

Habitus embodies the social and material conditions in which people live, generating unique

preferences, interests, and lifestyles that can be translated into social behaviours (Paccoud et al., 2020).

Middle-class parents with more capital tend to have more school options (Bourdieu, 1984), enabling them to make long-term and strategic decisions regarding their children's education and establish distinctive practices that benefit their future. Parents invest their capital strategically, intending to put their children in an advantageous position relative to others (Veenstra & Abel, 2019). Habitus encompasses assumptions that influence the leisure activities various classes engage in. For example, middle-class children are interested in reading classical and non-fiction literature, learning classical instruments or viewing documentaries. Participating in these activities builds cultural capital and a sense of independence, making them more confident during interviews. Schools usually favour well-rounded students, as Gil's quote illustrates:

> My child participates in extra-curricular activities to win the school choice game. Besides academics, most elite schools expect students to be well-rounded and win prizes. Student performance and good jobs in the future depend on class norms and beliefs (Gil).

> Middle-class pupils dominate top academic ranks in public schools... while working-class kids may struggle (Gemma).

Like Gil and Gemma, middle-class parents assumed that embodied cultural capital and habitus allow students to succeed in school and eventually get well-paid employment. Contrarily, working-class

children may struggle in the education field, which agrees with the findings of Crozier et al. (2011). Bourdieu's habitus concept reflects the dynamic, relational nature of class processes. Habitus translates different class positions, specified by various forms of capital, into observable behaviours (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Parents' habitus can dictate how they use capital to improve their chances of success in the field. Given the financial advantages of affluent parents, middle-class culture may predominate in high-quality public-funded secondary schools, which places a high value on middle-class skills and knowledge. This confirms Brar's suggestion that those with a malleable and adaptable habitus are more likely to adopt the habitus of the dominant class to advance socially (Brar, 2016). Additionally, this study acknowledges the significance of social class habitus in school choice practices, corroborating Ball's results (Ball et al., 1996).

Parentocracy and Parenting style

Parentocracy, or parental engagement in school decision-making, is a byproduct of the marketisation of education, a system in which parents' capital and preferences, rather than their children's abilities and efforts, determine their children's success in school and society (Wheeler, 2018). By comparison, in meritocracy education and financial incentives are distributed based on skills and efforts. The education field favours students who can afford the best enrichment courses and private tutoring. The wealth, abilities and ambitions of parents significantly influence their children's educational success (Jonathan, 2021; Lareau, 2011); this is exacerbated by the school choice process, resulting in middle-

class reproduction, social closure, and the exclusion of working-class families from these schools (DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016; Woo, 2016). As described in Section 3.3, middle-class parents have engaged in concerted cultivation, developing their children's talents and abilities via active participation in their children's educational experiences, which leads to class disparities (Vincent & Ball, 2007). Private tutoring and extra-curricular activities are common ways of perpetuating advantages globally (Sun & Smith, 2017; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Zhang, 2020). Middle-class parents in HK generally boost their children's extra-curricular activities and academic studies to guarantee the best education possible (Choi, 2005; Lareau, 2003). Parentocracy acts as an invisible hand in children's education due to the marketisation of education; it results in academic support and resources for middle-class children (Wilkins, 2010). Gabriel demonstrates the importance of parental involvement in ensuring a high-quality education:

> A school that stresses parent engagement will improve with time. Curriculum, English learning medium, and class size are more rigid in public schools (Gabriel).

Parents expect a school to listen to their concerns and adapt to their children's individual needs. Gandy argued that including stakeholders in decision-making results in increased satisfaction and desirability:

> Principals should involve stakeholders in decision-making, consider their values, and solicit input on critical issues (Gandy).

Like Gandy and Gabriel, parents are concerned about a lack of parental involvement in public schools due to their rigid bureaucratic structure. DSS schools are more adaptable in curriculum variety, English medium of instruction, and class size. Academic success is associated with parental involvement in their children's educational endeavours (Farooq et al., 2011), including school selection, resources and financial support, as well as participation in learning processes and school-based Parent-Teacher groups (Kwok, 2015). Parental practices of capital provision, habitus and culture contribute to children's harmony at home and school (Crozier et al., 2011).

This study reveals that mothers are more involved in their children's school choices than fathers, despite having similar reasons for selecting a school. Some middle-class mothers are housewives who have additional time to assist with school selection and application. Most parents start planning for a quality school before the kindergarten stage, intending to enrol their children in through-train schools. Primary habitus is influenced by family during childhood, while life experiences shape secondary habitus. Parenting style, an indicator of habitus, is highly connected with academic achievement, psychological well-being, self-esteem, and adventurous spirit in children.

This study reinforces Bourdieu's argument that habitus and capital are important components of class reproduction. In terms of habitus, this study confirms Lareau's observation that working-class parents adopt an authoritarian or permissive parenting style following the natural growth paradigm (Lareau,

2011) by delegating child-rearing responsibilities to schools and refraining from managing children's

activities (Wheeler, 2018). Contrarily, middle-class parents employ a concerted cultivation model and

uphold an authoritative parenting style characterised by a child-focused approach with strong maturity

expectations (Nyarko, 2011). Parents transfer cultural capital and familial habitus to their children by

investing in their cultural experiences; in this way, they enable the operationalisation of the game rules

to aid their children's scholastic success (Crozier et al., 2011). The concerted cultivation model entails

parents attempting to instil their children with cultural resources acquired through broad exposure to

extra-curricular activities during their childhood, which benefits them in the education field (Wheeler,

2018), as Daniel's quote demonstrates:

> I encourage my kids to participate in extra-curricular activities and shadow education. When
>
> interviewing possibilities arise, I will consider my children's opinions and encourage them to
>
> select the one that best serves their interests (Daniel).

Parents emphasise maintaining positive relationships with their children. For instance, they clarify the

rationale behind rules and persuade their children to choose the path that maximises their self-interests,

as Giana's comment illustrates:

> Parents decide as teenagers lack maturity, but later seek their consent when interview possibilities
>
> occur (Giana).

Parents choose schools for their children, assuming that teenagers lack the maturity required to make independent choices at this age, but will eventually seek their consent when interview opportunities occur.

Middle-class distinction

Embodied cultural capital is critical during the school selection process as it refers to an individual's long-term physical and mental disposition, such as their habitus, behaviour, and general ingrained features such as accent, knowledge, communication skills, and language. Middle-class parents endow their children with embodied cultural capital through their habitus, behaviours, and nurturing (Bourdieu, 1986). Middle-class students with embodied cultural capital, such as good academic performance, communication skills and extra-curricular activities awards, are advantageous. Schools weigh several variables, including students' abilities, religion, residential address, or family backgrounds, as Diana's quote illustrates:

> Schools prioritise wealthy students over working-class students. For instance, my daughter's classmate in public housing exceeds her academically. The school admitted solely my daughter, indicating a preference towards wealthier students. During school interviews, teachers question students about their abilities, religion, and residency (Diana).

In this study, Diana illustrated that schools prioritise affluent students based on their residence, which

leads to inequality in school admissions. Schools also consider students' academic performance, extra-curricular activities, discipline, and interview performance. Middle-class children benefit from the school allocation process. They might be admitted via central allocation based on proximity if they were unsuccessful initially. They possess the economic capital for tutoring sessions to improve their academic performance or relocate to a neighbourhood near their desired school. Therefore, middle-class students are likely to have an advantage over working-class students during school admissions. Their ability to accumulate capital also determines their social position in the field (Bourdieu, 1984).

Furthermore, teachers and schools facilitate social reproduction by rewarding pupils with cultural capital and establishing elitist standards that help the middle-upper classes while excluding others (Tzanakis, 2011). Schools prefer middle-class children because their home environment supports the development of academic skills and habitus (Andersen & Hansen, 2012). The growing number of DSS schools in HK resulted in intense school competition. DSS schools actively influence parental choice and create student exclusion (Leung, 2013b) by selecting students through interviews or written tests and excluding potential students because of their financial backgrounds (Lubienski, 2006b). DSS schools release admission results earlier than public schools to maximise admissions and adjust enrollment rules to stake out competitive positions in the marketplace. Thus, parents can confirm their child's school enrolment earlier, avoiding the stress associated with the Government's school allocation system. Without proper school banding information, it may be challenging for parents to create a list

of over twenty school choices, as seen in Gandy's quote:

> Filling in thirty school options during central allocation takes time. We must study our chosen schools online or through social networks. It's stressful without school knowledge (Gandy).

School matching is determined by reciprocal agreement between parents and schools, and a school's symbolic capital is critical to its funding and survival (Leung, 2013b). As Ana's comment indicated, there is intense competition for DSS schools:

> If a DSS school takes my kids, I will accept it. Students compete fiercely because schools only accept the best students (Ana).

Ana's remark highlights the fact that not all children are able to attend their desired schools and that students faced intense competition. Some middle-class parents contended that random distribution was the fairest means for developing an equitable educational system. However, the recent influx of middle-class families has resulted in the gentrification of elite public schools and the middle-class dominance of public-funded secondary schools. Gman and Aria voiced this phenomenon:

> Middle-class students have dominated the elite Government schools … with roughly 45% of students coming from the middle class (Gman).

As more middle-class parents select government-funded schools, schools will ask pupils about

their families. Almost half of the students in my child's Band 1 school are middle class. Most have

good academic results (Aria).

Aria observed that nearly half of the students with good academic results at her government-aided

school were middle class. Middle-class parents prioritise educational quality. However, not every child

can succeed as schools oversee student selection. On the other hand, schools are under pressure to

perform well on high-stakes, standardised assessments that function as an indicator of academic

success (Townsend et al., 2016). Schools favour privileged families to maximise educational efficiency

(Ball, 2003; Gewirtz et al., 1995). Allen (2014) suggests that schools employ overt admission policies

relating to ability, residency, religious observance, and more subtle procedures to select more capable

students and maintain a competitive edge. Oversubscribed schools usually exclude disadvantaged

students, resulting in resource redistribution away from them. Moreover, Leung (2013b) argues that

school competition has not increased educational quality. Instead, it has channelled school energy and

resources into a race for student intake, which is believed to increase a school's symbolic capital,

assuming its students achieve high academic rankings. Student selection is an inherent part of a

meritocracy, in which resources are allocated based on individual merit. School choice exacerbates

inequality as student selection is based on their SES, ethnicity, and ability. Thus, privileged classes

have greater access to quality education and resources at the expense of the working class. School

choice diminishes the unique potential of schools to foster social cohesion as student characteristics

often segregate schools (Woo, 2016; Zhou et al., 2015).

5.2.2 Theme 5: What are their sources of information when selecting a secondary school?

Finding a suitable secondary school for children is critical to their potential success. Therefore, understanding the background information, admission requirements and application strategies is essential. Middle-class parents make decisions based on multiple criteria and utilise various information sources. This study agrees with Ball and Vincent (1998) that educational decision-making is not always rational; it can be intuitive, loaded with ambiguity and emotions. Parents understand their children's needs and interests in education (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008). Hence, accurate information about educational quality, as well as school qualities and characteristics is essential for school choice. Middle-class parents benefit from an informational edge in various ways, including better indicators of school quality and the availability of a broader range of options. Middle-class families typically benefit from a mix of "cold" and "hot" information.

Cold knowledge

In HK, parents obtain cold information from official sources, formal school knowledge from school seminars or information days, school websites, and academic achievement indicators such as assessment scores, public examination results, and standardised test results. Middle-class parents

typically verify the accuracy of school information by visiting schools or attending school events such as school talks, information sessions, or open days to interact with the principal, teachers and students to acquire school information, as Ana's comment illustrates:

I will attend school seminars and talks to learn more about the schools and students (Ana).

Middle-class parents generally examine the pertinent school information and students' overall performances, including academic results, university admission rates, curriculum, and school culture. They typically use their sophisticated internet skills to seek school information through school websites and online discussion groups, including university admission rates and public examination results, as Ana's quote reflected:

We can conduct an online search for essential information such as public examination results, university entrance rates, and extra-curricular activities. I usually consult my friends, parents, and relatives before choosing schools, as websites tend to be biased (Ana).

Parents will look for mission statements, annual reports, strategic plans, and school activities on school websites. School descriptions, in general, are available on government and school websites. Parents will consider the comments of other parents expressed in online forums. However, the information should be thoroughly verified to confirm its accuracy.

Hot knowledge

In this study, the middle-class respondents emphasised hot knowledge through social networks during school selection. They valued the advice of their social networks, including parents, teachers, relatives, and principals. The top three sources of information were websites, friends, and school open days or talks (Figure 12). Parents emphasised their social networks as a source of information and a tool for selecting schools. Additionally, they gathered informal school information from online forums regarding school banding and performance, academic results, school reputation and leadership style, discipline, school culture, and teaching quality. Parents can access basic school information through websites while accessing more comprehensive information from their social networks to ascertain the situation. As evidenced by Gman and Alex's quotations, the impact of word-of-mouth recommendations on school selection could be visualised:

I consulted friends whose children attended this school for first-hand knowledge. I also considered official websites and discussion forums (Gman).

My child attended this school after being referred by a friend who works there as a teacher (Alex).

Gman and Alex chose secondary schools based on recommendations from friends. Their social networks served as a conduit for high-quality public-funded secondary schools and a significant predictor of their desired schools, correlating with earlier research findings (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014;

Posey, 2012; Stillman, 2012).
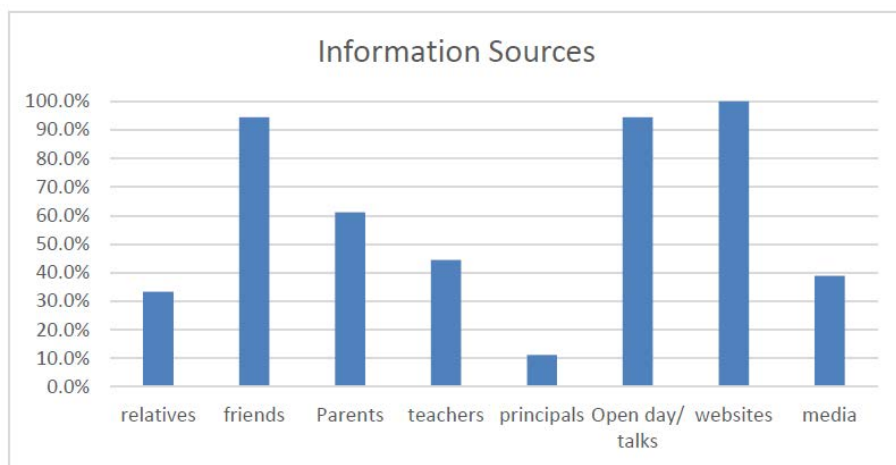
Figure 12 Sources of information for middle-class parental secondary school choice decision

This study concurs with Rowe and Windle (2012) that middle-class families employ established

procedures for identifying and enrolling in their preferred schools and do not rely entirely on website

information, despite reading it before decision-making, as mentioned in Section 3.1.2. In HK, there is

no official banding information provided for parents, to avoid labelling students' abilities and

encourage the development of varied talents. Most middle-class parents acquire school information

through their social networks: teachers, relatives and friends. Bourdieu's social capital can be

transferred from parents to their children through social relations to accumulate capital (Paccoud et al.,

2020). Social capital is closely related to an individual's social position (Moore et al., 2014) and can

influence the school selection.

5.3 Chapter Summary

This study sets out the context in which middle-class parents play a vital role in education decisions and produce social mobility in the field. The findings are summarised below, including school choice factors and strategies of middle-class parents.

5.3.1 School choice factors

This study delves into the logic of school selection and reveals how middle-class parents demonstrate their rationality through habitus, field, and capital accumulation. In this study, most middle-class parents translated their perceptions of educational quality into factors that influenced their school choice. The five common attributes for educational quality and school choice were academic performance, teaching quality, school culture, child-focused learning, and SES.

1. *Academic performance.* Academic performance includes public examination results and university enrolment percentage and curriculum, which is vital in increasing class mobility, employment and symbolic capital. A growing number of middle-class parents select DSS schools for their curriculum flexibility, English-medium instruction and through-train services.

2. *Teaching quality.* Teaching quality, including teachers' credentials, instructional medium, and class size, is associated with students' academic success or learning outcomes, resulting in embodied cultural

capital. Parents desire effective teachers who are dedicated, trained, and engaged with their children to provide the best learning environment, guidance and care. English-medium education is a signifier of high quality and is a critical school choice factor by most middle-class parents in HK. A smaller class size of 25 students is also believed to benefit children's learning and enable teachers to deliver individualised attention.

3. *School culture.* Most parents emphasise their children's credentials and overall development, including discipline, courtesy, and moral values. Parents desire that the school culture reflects their family values and meets their children's requirements. They anticipate a collaborative environment where educators and students work collaboratively to improve educational outcome.

4. *Child-focused learning.* Most parents favour schools that cater to their children's unique requirements and provide a balanced athletic and academic program.

5. *Socio-economic status.* A culturally homogeneous community is ideal for acquiring cultural capital and habitus in the field. It fosters an environment conducive to students expanding their educational experiences and developing their talents.

Middle-class parents' school choices vary significantly according to their perceptions of educational

quality, children's needs, personal experiences, and broader structures of beliefs and values. According to Olson Beal and Hendry (2012), school choice is influenced by SES and educational background. In this study, most middle-class parents ranked "school culture" (94%, 17 in 18) as the most crucial element influencing their school choice and prioritised five factors (83%, 15 in 18), namely academic performance, teaching quality, children-focused learning, school culture and SES, rather than all possible alternatives claimed by the RCT. Schools may offer various international curricula or programs to attract privileged social groups to enhance their symbolic capital (Forsberg, 2018). Individuals benefit from the symbolic capital principle as they achieve greater social recognition. This study also confirms the findings of Olmedo (2008) that middle-class parents leverage their capital to acquire a positioning advantage for their children and that their choice is influenced not only by rational instrumental calculation but also values, concerns, and intuitions.

5.3.2 School choice strategies

This study demonstrates how middle-class parents mobilise their economic, cultural and social capital to gain competitive advantages for their children, reinforcing class identification and contributing to social reproduction. Their children's educational achievements depend on their capital and habitus.

Capital

First, parents invest economic capital in additional tutorial sessions and extra-curricular activities throughout their children's childhood to build their children's embodied cultural capital. Some even relocate to take advantage of the relocation policy. Moreover, schools choose the best students through interviews or written tests, which benefits middle-class families.

Second, cultural capital relates to an individual's practices, artefacts and cultural resources (Yoon, 2020). It helps to explain why school choice has evolved into a struggle over the cultural space at school, where students acquire specific educational qualities that correlate to their families' aspirations and class positions. Schools are breeding grounds for classes, which explains why middle-class parents are actively involved in school selection (Roda, 2017; Wu, 2012). Parents believe that enrolling their children in a high-quality secondary school will assist children in acquiring institutionalised cultural capital. Thus, they invest in highbrow activities to supplement and accumulate cultural capital, which will assist their children during the school admissions process and facilitate social mobility. Middle-class students tend to inherit cultural capital from their families or invest in economic capital, while working-class students are far more constrained. This study reveals how school choice contributes to the accumulation of cultural capital through language acquisition. Middle-class parents in HK believe that English is superior to other languages and can help their children improve their social status and global competitiveness. Moreover, they think that English-medium schools empower students with valuable capital, including prestigious student alumni and social networks. Thus, parents prefer

English-medium schools, which leads to social exclusion and stratification. Middle-class parents turn their economic and social capital into cultural capital to adhere to the field's institutional norms for proactive educational involvement (concerted cultivation) (Lareau 2003) and school decision-making (Ball 2003). Their habitus and capital facilitate their children's access to elite schools (Ball et al., 1995). In comparison, the working class lacks cultural capital and habitus, which contributes to educational inequality.

Third, Ball (2003) recognises the contribution of social capital to the development of practices, while Bourdieu (1986) underscores the importance of social capital in establishing boundaries, group memberships, and a sense of belonging (Ball, 2003). Bourdieu's social capital is described as the outcome of investment strategies to reproduce social relationships and gain benefits (Bourdieu, 1986). It stresses how privileged families benefit from social networks that enable them to obtain timely information (Ball, 2003). This study shows that middle-class parents leverage their social connections to gain "hot knowledge" and acquire information and advice on school choices (Ball, 2003). Parents with greater access to information and social networks appear to benefit from the school choice process. Social capital amassed through social networks is transformed into cultural capital regarding knowledge about school reputations and ethos (Ball & Vincent, 1998). Parents access school information by consulting relatives, friends, teachers and principals and conducting online searches. They engage in school visits or talks to understand schools' missions, reputation, university admission

rates, and public examination results. Moreover, they can speak with key staff and observe student behaviours during school visits.

Habitus

This study demonstrates that the habitus of students and parents may directly impact the success of school applications, which corroborates the findings of Woo (2011). Most middle-class students participate in cultural activities, such as reading or learning classical instruments, which helps them acquire cultural capital and build confidence during interviews. Schools tend to choose well-rounded students with middle-class habitus and are concerned about the influence of parents on the behaviour and manners of children, which marginalises working-class students (Woo, 2011). Middle-class parents mobilise their capital and habitus, which results in social closure. This phenomenon is most prevalent in high-performing English-medium schools, a social space endowed with substantial cultural and social capital. This study resonates with Bourdieu (1986) that economic capital takes time to transform into other forms of capital and that capital requires a longer period to shape habitus.

Middle-class parents adopt a concerted cultivation model and authoritative parenting style when choosing schools for their children (Nyarko, 2011). They may consider their children's perspectives during the final decision-making stage; also, they assist them in choosing the path that maximises their self-interests (see Section 5.3.5). They are more adept at strategising and securing advantages for

themselves and their children, which excludes working-class families and leads to inequality. For

instance, Gandy and Diana sacrificed their careers to become full-time housewives, which allowed

them to devote their time to nurturing their children and participating in their children's school

activities. Gabriel stressed the importance of school engagement in building social capital and ensuring

a high-quality education through exchanging information and benefiting from PTA or fundraising

initiatives. This study reinforces the suggestions of Stacer and Perrucci (2013) that middle-class

parents are more involved in their children's education so to foster a positive relationship and assist

their children in getting the most out of their school years.

CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the practical and policy implications of the study and concludes with recommendations on education policy. Practical implications relate to how middle-class parents' perceptions of the educational quality are shaped into school choice factors and strategies. Policy implications involve the impacts of the DSS policy on education. Lastly, this chapter includes recommendations for improving educational quality and inequality.

6.1 Practical implications

Middle-class parents believe that a high-quality education can help their children pursue overall development; strengthen their personality traits and cultivate their diverse talents. They appreciate a disciplined educational environment with effective teachers who genuinely care about their children and teach them effective learning strategies. They value the symbolic capital of school, assuming it may be turned into other forms of capital, such as economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Parents are attracted to the potential future investment return on their children's education, especially their future employability. Parents assume that accumulated capital will improve their children's chances of attending university, thereby expanding their institutionalised cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). They believe that students' academic performance is related to educational quality and that educational attainment is inextricably linked to employment opportunities and social advancement.

6.1.1 School choice factors

In this study, middle-class parents play a vital role in school decision-making. They translate their perceptions of educational quality into their school choice factors: teaching quality, academic performance, children-focused learning, school culture and SES. Parents demand the best possible educational environment and curriculum possible for their children. First, they seek effective teaching that incorporates English as a pedagogical instruction to provide the best learning environment and caring for their children. Second, they believe that a class size of 25 is optimal for learning and teaching. Third, most middle-class parents prefer schools that suit their children's unique requirements and incorporate a balanced athletic and academic curriculum rather than focusing solely on academics. Fourth, parents appreciate a disciplined learning environment and prefer religiously affiliated schools. They value schools that are culturally homogeneous among the middle class, as this can promote social mobility. Fifth, school proximity may be a less significant selection criterion than academic performance or child-centred learning because HK is a small city and most middle-class parents own a private car. Above all, the school choice process is part of broader social closure dynamics destined to situate their children in a more privileged position.

This study reveals that parents do not always choose the highest performing schools. Instead, they consider their children's educational prospects and unique characteristics that can help them maintain

their social position or advance through capital accumulation. Hence, they invest substantial resources in educating their children and employ various strategies to help them get admitted to high-quality schools. Some middle-class parents invest in their children's cultural capital to ensure they attend a prestigious secondary school and advance socially. At all educational levels, students compete for educational opportunities, which can cause anxiety. Their success depends on the amount of capital they possess and accumulate. The earlier segregation occurs, the greater the inequality that results.

6.1.2 School type selection rationales

In this study, some parents prefer public schools, while others DSS. As shown in Section 5.1.3 and prior research, a mixed culture informs students about the "real world" and strengthens their cultural competencies (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Posey, 2012; Stillman, 2012). Those who favour public schools claim that the central allocation system reduces inequality by accepting students of all levels. Some parents prefer public schools with high academic standards or convenient locations. They also assume that free public education saves money, allowing additional extra-curricular activities or shadow education.

Contrarily, some parents prefer DSS schools as they offer higher educational quality and better educational opportunities. First, DSS schools signify educational pluralism by providing middle-class parents with more options that suit their children's educational requirements and reflect their values.

Second, parents believe that DSS schools have greater autonomy and freedom than public schools regarding school management, curriculum, tuition, and admission standards, which results in higher teaching quality, resources, and facilities. For example, Gandy argues public schools are more bureaucratic than DSS schools (see Section 5.1.3). Parents believe that DSS schools have superior teaching quality with English-teaching medium, flexible curriculum, smaller class sizes and cultural homogeneity, which echoes other studies (Van Pelt et al., 2007; Woo, 2016). Third, they value the symbolic capital of DSS schools to retain their social capital and facilitate upward mobility. They believe public school students have a mixed SES and that parents should have the opportunity to choose. Fourth, some are religious adherents or support middle-class cultural homogeneity for their children's school experience. Most middle-class parents favour "through-train" education, which connects primary and secondary education. Parents who are dissatisfied with public education or who want to educate their children according to their principles tend to prefer DSS schools.

6.1.3 School choice strategies

Middle-class capital and habitus facilitate social reproduction in education. Bourdieu claims that parents' capital and habitus interact with the field, influencing their practices (Bourdieu, 2018). Most working-class children rely on school resources to succeed academically, whereas middle-class students use capital to gain an advantage in the education market (Fong, 2019; Larsson & Hultqvist, 2018; Reay, 2012). This study illuminates the school choice dynamics by using Bourdieu's theory,

evaluating various kinds of capital that maintain class hierarchy. Middle-class parents influence school choice through school strategies and engagement. They manipulate the education market for their children, which results in socio-economic and class stratification. Tradition has favoured parents with economic, political, social and cultural capital over others, which corroborates the study of Dong & Li (2019). Parents' school-choice strategies are linked to their capital, habitus, and parenting style.

Economic capital

Middle-class parents have more flexibility in school choice as they can use economic capital to relocate near quality schools and participate in fundraising and volunteer activities. They provide academic support and talent development activities that boost academic performance and build cultural capital for their children: private tutoring, extra-curricular activities, and cultural activities. The popularity of private tutoring underscores that parents have embraced it as a supplement to formal education. The findings confirm previous research suggesting that middle-class parents leverage the education markets as a reproduction strategy to acquire advantages, social mobility and advancement (Ball, 1993; Ball et al., 1996; Ball & Vincent, 2001; Bourdieu, 2000).

Cultural capital and habitus

Cultural capital is acquired through education and parental investment in culture. Family is the primary source and transmitter of capital (Bourdieu, 1996, 1998). Individuals might gain social class

recognition by accumulating cultural capital through family inheritance or academic achievement (Bourdieu, 2018). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argues that habitus and field are the driving forces propelling individual practices. Capital entails engagement with cultural practices and resources, while habitus refers to subjective attitudes and dispositions. Capital is valuable to a specific field because it enables parents to generate profits, gain rewards, or reproduce benefits. Bourdieu (2006) argues that middle-upper class families leverage their beliefs, dispositions, education, and language ability to help their children succeed. They mobilise their capital to ensure that their children access high-quality education. For instance, they assist their children with schoolwork or examinations by imparting cultural knowledge to ensure academic success. They believe that habitus nurtured during childhood is more durable. They get their children involved in cultural and religious activities early on to build the embodied cultural capital required to get them into high-performing schools.

Social capital

Social capital is a useful resource for parents, as well as a reliable reference point when deciding on a school. Middle-class parents gather data for school selection, weighing both hot and cold knowledge before deciding. They leverage their social capital to pave the path for high-quality education by requesting referrals. Generally, school application success depends on the quality and quantity of social relationships (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cycle of capital

Economic and cultural capitals are transferrable through generations (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital eventually transforms into academic qualifications that enable individuals to maintain their positions in the field (Andersen & Jæger, 2015). Life success, according to Bourdieu, is determined by capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 2018). He contends that students' academic performance differs due to their social status and educational privileges (Bourdieu, 1986).
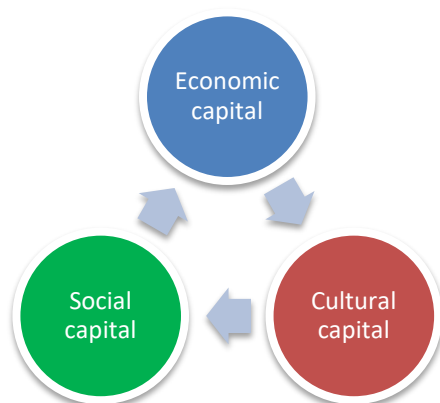
Figure 13 Cycle of capital

Middle-class parents assist their children in acquiring advantages through capital conversion. Individual power is tied to the structure and quantity of capital one owns. The capital cycle (Figure 13) begins with middle-class parents investing economic capital in their children to increase their embodied cultural capital, which in turn increases their children's success at elite secondary schools, where they can acquire social and cultural capital. Consequently, their chances of attending university grow, which may translate into power and salary later in life (economic capital). Second, by exhibiting cultural capital, students are more likely to gain recognition in society and accumulate social capital.

Third, their social network will provide children with additional tools and opportunities for economic

capital accumulation and cultural capital reinvestment. This is how Bourdieu's capital operates.

In this study, most middle-class parents are willing to pay for better education. Capital is essential to

ensure the dominant class's social reproduction. It enables parents to get an advantage in the school

selection process and encourages upward mobility. Middle-classes frequently use numerous strategies

to maintain their dominance or power in a given field. Moreover, DSS schools' exorbitant tuition fees

or activities like study tours are frequently out of reach for working-class families. Working-class

parents may struggle due to a lack of economic, cultural, or educational resources. This is problematic

because social class differences affect resource access. Given that parents may not have access to all

relevant information, the Government's help disseminating further school information is vital.

6.2 Policy implications

This research emulates Stephen Ball's work by applying Bourdieu's theory to interpret middle-class

school choice practices and education policy (Ball, 2003). A notable difference between Ball (2003)

and this study on the relationship between education policy and parental practices is that Ball (2003)

asserts that school choice policies increase parental accountability and pressure, particularly among

middle-class parents. By contrast, some DSS parents (like Daniel and Danny) in Section 5.1.3 implied

that the DSS policy modified the field structure of parental school choice in HK, thereby supporting

the middle-upper classes in managing risk and uncertainty. The DSS schools' through-train services enable primary school students to transfer directly to a secondary school without passing through the school allocation process. The middle-class respondents attempted to alter existing exclusion regulations to preserve their privileges and power under the DSS privatisation policy. This reinforces Ball's claim that education markets are critical vehicles for privatising education systems through increased parental funding (Ball, 2007). Some parents suggested that DSS schools were superior in English teaching quality, curriculum flexibility, smaller class sizes, cultural homogeneity, and their capacity to bypass the government allocation system, which corroborates prior findings (Van Pelt et al., 2007; Woo, 2016). They expressed satisfaction with the cultural homogeneity that existed between parents who share comparable parenting abilities, beliefs, activities, and educational perspectives. In Section 5.1.2.5, middle-class parents (like David, Doris and Daniel) stressed the importance of cultural homogeneity as it allowed parents to maintain their social status and minimised child misbehaviour, which mirrors previous research (Leung, 2013b; Woo, 2016).

DSS schools are gaining popularity as parents believe social class reproduction benefits students. DSS schools typically offer a higher-quality education than public schools by incorporating inquiry-based learning, a globally recognised curriculum, English-medium instruction, high-quality teaching, a supportive school setting, smaller class sizes, and cultural homogeneity. This research echoes the findings of Woo (2016) that middle-class parents favour DSS schools due to the uncertainty and risks

associated with the school allocation system and the MOI language policy. The benefits of being middle-class students are amplified when they attend DSS schools due to their privileged status. In contrast, enrolling their children in free public schools was more cost-effective for some middle-class parents, since it allowed for additional shadow education and extracurricular activities that may improve their children's academic performance and build symbolic, social, and cultural capital. Moreover, parents chose schools based on their quality perceptions and school choice factors, which varied according to their financial capabilities. This research provides a more realistic picture of middle-class school choice in HK, indicating that school choice may result in social exclusion and stratification.

This study concludes that parents strongly desire their children to attend EMI secondary schools, corroborating other studies (Woo, 2016; Zhou et al., 2015). In section 5.1.2.2, Doris and Gandy mentioned that they preferred EMI schools as they feared the negative notions associated with CMI schools. DSS schools are perceived to have more autonomy over teaching instruction and offer a better English-medium learning environment. Thus, middle-class parents who prioritise English instruction flock towards DSS schools. When middle-class children are denied admission to a selected school due to the government's allocation system, parents may strategically deploy their capital to assist their children in accessing an English-medium DSS school. DSS schools attract parents that appreciate similar values, perspectives, and aspirations for their children. School administrators, teachers and PTA

presidents typically value cultural homogeneity since political confrontations over school matters are less likely to occur among like-minded individuals (Woo, 2016). Students' SES influences their school admissions. Thus, "meritocracy" is no longer the only way to access high-performing schools. However, such exclusivity within school communities questions the purpose of education, which is supposed to be a public good, not a private commodity. Ideally, education should foster social cohesion and alleviate socio-economic inequities by ensuring equal access to high-quality education.

6.3 Policy recommendations

Market-driven accountability and competition potentially eliminate bureaucracy and result in a more efficient education system (Bulkley et al., 2010; Wong & Kwan, 2019). Thus, school choice is considered an education reform strategy that can raise the efficiency and effectiveness of an education system by compelling underperforming schools to transform or close (Wong & Kwan, 2019). At the same time, all parents are supposed to have access to relevant information in order to select appropriate schools for their children (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). However, middle-class parents typically have more educational options and better access to higher-performing schools, which contributes to inequality (Ball, 2007). If school choice results in greater sorting by capital and habitus, educational benefits may be unevenly distributed.

This research indicates that parental capital accumulation and school-based student selection processes

significantly contribute to the dominance of the middle class in public-funded EMI secondary schools. Possessing diverse "Doxa-related" habitus and capital affects middle-class performance in the field since it enables them to better position themselves and maximise their children's successful admission in quality schools. However, students should be evaluated by their abilities rather than their SES. Under a meritocracy, the Government is expected to offer equitable academic opportunities and eliminate economic, social, and cultural capital disparities across different families. According to Leung (2013b), status attainment and upward mobility in HK are meritocratic processes as students can overcome familial obstacles through education. However, education as an equaliser remains unrealised, especially for working-class students. Their lack of capital or habitus in the education field creates an "achievement paradox," limiting their school options and their ability to use education as means of upward mobility. This study reveals how the colonial legacy of a language symbolic order and socioeconomic stratification affect social differentiation in school choice and lead to segregatory tendencies in a marketised education system, coinciding with Lam's (2019) findings in Section 3.4.2.

This research also supports the suggestion of Zhou (2015) that school choice exacerbates inequality because children are selected or excluded depending on their SES or ethnicity. This exacerbates the quality gap across schools, benefits affluent families, and diminishes schools' unique capacity to foster social cohesiveness, leading to social segregation. As demonstrated in Section 5.2.1.1, middle-class families gain advantages during the Government school allocation system since they can expand their

school options through home relocation; in conclusion, social reproduction and stratification in education contribute to inequality. Parental school choice practices offer insights into school choice policies; understanding the rationale behind such practices can help improve educational quality and equity. Regardless of the debate over school choice, the effectiveness of any school choice scheme rests on its implementation (Wong & Kwan, 2019). The following sections are some recommendations for improving the quality and equity of education in HK based on the findings of this study.

6.3.1 Review MOI Policy

Globalisation has shaped and inspired students' future visions. Scholars explain how parental choice (Ball, 2003) and educational participation in the educational field reward middle-class cultural capital (Lareau, 1989, 2003). The HK education system is unique in various aspects, including the symbolic significance of English (Bourdieu, 1991), its symbolic banding, and the complexity of its choice mechanisms. As mentioned in Section 3.4.2, the present MOI policy is an elitist language selection policy that prioritises English proficiency acquisition. The importance of English to HK's economic survival, which was contrived on the eve of the 1997 switchover by business interests, led to the perpetuation of a form of linguistic imperialism (Choi, 2003). Additionally, Tsao (2018) believes that English proficiency serves as cultural and symbolic capital, impacting students' potential for achievement, helping them accumulate capital, assisting them in competing in the global labour market, and sustaining HK's competitive edge. English is a critical component of individual self-capitalisation,

symbolising the cosmopolitanism that differentiates one social class from another (Tsao, 2018). Academic success at the university level requires English proficiency, which is viewed as a privileged cultural capital. The symbolic value of English is connected with an individual's relative position in educational and broader social fields (Tsao, 2018). Moreover, parents associated English proficiency with employment opportunities and regarded EMI schools as having a higher social position and prestige. Thus, EMI schools are linked to student achievement and have a reputation for providing a superior education with a stronger academic foundation than CMI schools (Tsao, 2018). EMI schools are highly regarded in the educational market, providing parents with symbolic capital. Middle-class students have an advantage in reaching the requisite English proficiency. In contrast, working-class students may be excluded from EMI schools and marginalised due to resource constraints as the middle class invests in maintaining their position, resulting in educational inequality.

As described in section 1.2.2, the increasing civil unrest in HK that mainly demanded democracy and universal suffrage, has been widely linked to growing inequality. Parents face these difficulties differently due to successive recessions, job restructuring, and greater job insecurity (Tsao, 2018). Recently increased immigration to other nations shows parents' desire for an equitable society and a better future based on democracy and education, which is a response to the growing concern over economic inequities within the broader population and requests for improved equity and redistribution (Ortmann, 2015; Tsao et al., 2018). Policymakers must acknowledge the reality: there are not enough

EMI schools to match parental needs. The latest "fine-tuning" of the MOI policy in 2010 did not appear to relieve public dissatisfaction. Contrary to its claim to promote learning, the language policy has become a sorting mechanism that favours those with economic and cultural capital. The MOI policy has exacerbated inequities among HK students due to a shortage of EMI schools (Lui, 2003), as described in Section 1.4.1. Without capital and middle-class habitus, it is unlikely for working-class parents to compete with the middle class for entry to elite EMI schools. Thus, policymakers should consider abolishing the MOI policy and delegate authority to schools to determine the most appropriate language policy. In this way, more pupils from diverse socio-economic backgrounds can benefit from their desired MOI.

6.3.2 Review DSS Policy

Middle-class parents stress the importance of 'whole-person' development, which relates to the expanding privatisation of public schools under the DSS, limiting disadvantaged students' access to privileged circuits of schooling (Ball et al., 1995). Privatization of education worsens school segregation and the unequal distribution of school resources and performance, hence aggravating inequities (Ball, 2003; Tse, 2008; Van Zanten, 2003). In HK, schools are classified based on their banding, reflecting their students' academic level and language ability (Lam, 2013). However, school banding information is not publicly available. Additionally, the secondary school market is governed by a complex admissions system, implying the field's capital requirements and explaining how middle-

class gains advantages through educational processes. Simultaneously, a rising number of elite EMI schools are converting to fee-charging DSS schools to meet market demand and provide parents with additional school options (Tsao, 2018). However, this study shows that high tuition fees may not be affordable to all parents. Middle-class parents' engagement in schools, such as volunteerism and fundraising activities, might shape the school culture, as Ana's quote suggests:

> Affluent families have more school options... high tuition fees may not be affordable to all parents.
>
> Volunteerism and fundraising by middle-class parents may influence school culture (Ana).

As a knowledge-based economy, HK experiences increasing demand for highly educated and skilled labour to satisfy future social development requirements. Moreover, education is vital to the overall development of individuals, communities, and nations. Its ultimate goal is to promote human capital and social mobility for all individuals, regardless of their background (Szeto, 2017). Equal access to education enables individuals to increase productivity, ability, and social mobility. The existence of educational inequality indicates a severe discrepancy between education's ideal goal and reality: education does not promote social mobility or equality; on the contrary, it exacerbates the problem of social inequality. This study contributes to a growing body of evidence suggesting that school choice policies have failed to deliver on their promises. Some middle-class parents in this study express displeasure with educational inequity and disempowerment, which corroborates Bhattacharya's study (2021) mentioned in Section 3.1.2. Given the vital role of capital in education, policymakers and

schools should ensure equal opportunity for all students to safeguard long-term human development (Szeto, 2017). As discussed in Section 3.1.2, the Chinese Government promotes educational quality through regulating choice fees and comprehensive governance toward equity and quality. In HK, the Government can consider the policy in China, including revising enrollment procedures, sharing high-quality educational resources, speeding up school transformation, reducing class size, standardising school management techniques, and increasing overall school performance (Dong & Li, 2019).

In this study, middle-class parents asserted that their decision to enrol their children in public-funded schools was affected by school choice factors other than school types. DSS schools, which charge tuition fees and receive government funding, account for around 12% of all secondary schools in HK (Census-and-Statistics, 2020),. DSS policy aims to provide better alternatives to public schools and provide parents with other educational options (Woo, 2016). As described in Section 3.1.1, the DSS policy seeks to minimise segregation in schools, enhance educational equality by allowing parents to select, and eliminate underperforming schools (Lam, Byun, & Lee, 2019). However, emerging evidence indicates that many DSS schools have become increasingly exclusive to wealthy families. There is concern that the DSS does not provide more educational opportunities for working-class parents, who can only rely on the government school allocation system to secure school placements for their children. Hence, the DSS policy has contributed to the stratification of schools in HK, which leads to elitism and limits working-class parents' school selection options.

While the DSS is supposed to expand parental choice, many working-class families believe that their

school options have decreased due to government-aided schools leaving the public sector to join the

DSS and begin charging tuition (Woo, 2016). Woo (2016) argues that the DSS policy may weaken the

public education system by rewarding families with additional capital. Schools are expected to

minimise the potential impacts of middle-class participation on working-class families during

decision-making processes, distribute resources evenly, and fight restrictive social practices. Thus,

policymakers should assess the socio-economic inequities created indirectly by the DSS policy and

consider modifying or eliminating DSS.

6.3.3 Equitable resource access

This research demonstrates how education may forge links between social and educational inequality,

confirming Bourdieu's research on social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The attainment

gap between working-class and middle-class students has aroused attention (O'Sullivan & Tsang,

2015). There are concerns about the fairness of education as resourceful middle-class parents tend to

put their children in more privileged positions. The Government and schools are expected to promote

educational equity and ensure equitable resource distribution. They should weigh the benefits of choice

policies for middle-class families with more options against the adverse impact on working-class

families who lack the capital to choose. Equal access to resources is vital to ensuring that education

reaches its full potential, bridges social gaps, and promotes social mobility. This involves enabling

equal access and eliminating unnecessary learning barriers, as Gandy demonstrated:

> The Government should ensure educational equality. Inequality in resource availability hinders
>
> education's capability to achieve social equality and mobility (Gandy).

As Gil's remark demonstrates, middle-class families with more resources appear to have a competitive

edge over working-class families in the school choice process, which may result in inequality:

> Resources are scarce for working-class kids. Ensuring equal access to educational opportunities
>
> and financial aids for all students may help close the achievement gap (Gil).

Gil stated that providing equitable access to resources and financial aid to working-class parents could

help enhance underprivileged students' educational possibilities. Educational outcomes can be more

favourable if educational equity is secured. Equitable access to educational opportunities and

experiences is necessary to accomplish this goal. Students can then accumulate the requisite capital

and habitus for the future.

Financial support

School choice policies that allow student sorting by social class may increase segregation (Posey-

Maddox et al., 2014), leading to uneven distribution of educational resources. This research confirms

the findings of Posey-Maddox (2014) that middle-class families can contribute critical resources to schools through fundraising and donations (see Section 3.3). However, their involvement in public schools can marginalise and exclude working-class students (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014), which results in educational inequity. While variations in parental school choices are unaddressable by one policy, the Government can provide financial assistance or tools to help families overcome socio-economic gaps. Educational equity can be strengthened by redistributing resources to disadvantaged students (Lamont, 2000). Although it is impossible to raise the SES of working-class students, there are alternative ways to compensate them (Stull, 2013). Financial considerations are crucial in school choice; the Government can provide vouchers, financial assistance, or scholarships (as the UK does, as shown in Section 3.1.2) to assist working-class pupils in expanding their educational options (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; Hsieh, 2000). Gabriel's quotation clearly illustrates this point:

> The school choice policy benefits middle-class parents. The Government can help working-class families by providing vouchers or other financial assistance (Gabriel).

With sufficient economic capital, working-class students can increase their chances of attending their preferred schools. They may attend shadow education or acquire resources to boost their academic performance, thereby increasing their chances of admission to a university, as Gman's quote demonstrates:

> Working-class parents with sufficient funds are more likely to help their children enrol in their

preferred schools. Students may seek assistance (like shadow education) to enhance their academic performance to achieve university admission (Gman).

School information

The Government should assess individual needs and adjust policies accordingly to balance freedom of choice and equality. As Andrew's comment shows, efforts to reduce the knowledge gap are critical. This could be achieved by providing parents with more information, such as school specifics and admission procedures:

To close the knowledge gap, the Government should assess individual requirements and adjust policies accordingly by providing additional information to parents, such as school information and admission procedures (Andrew).

Woo (2011) suggests that "school information should be transparent and easily accessible by all parents regardless of their educational background" (Woo, 2016, p. 324). Most middle-class respondents expressed concern about the inadequacy of school specifics such as school banding, teacher qualifications, and university admission rates. There is currently no well-recognised website for comparing school information. As Gandy's comment indicates, online information or additional seminars could provide information to assist parents in making decisions:

Comparing school information such as religious affiliation, curriculum, public examination scores,

university entrance rates, teacher credentials, class size, extra-curricular activities, application deadlines, and classroom videos can be done through websites, application systems, and seminars (Gandy).

Gandy recommended developing a comprehensive information system that would enable parents to compare numerous school options in order to streamline the school selection process. As indicated in Section 3.1.2, most parents in the UK use league tables to compare school achievement (Allen, 2014). The tables contain vital school data that allows parents to compare schools and evaluate their performance (Burgess, 2013). The HK government should provide a robust information system for parents to streamline the application process. With a search feature on the web, parents can effectively access the school information, such as religious affiliation, curriculum, public examination results, university admission rate, teacher credentials, class size, extra-curricular activities, application information, and classroom recordings.

Moreover, all middle-class parents get cold knowledge from school websites, as shown in Section 5.2.2 (Figure 12). Therefore, parents need internet knowledge to become "informed consumers" of education (Woo, 2016). This digital divide issue of working-class parents can be addressed by providing additional ways to acquire school information, such as seminars or talks apart from online information, to ensure school choice is equitable across social classes. While some may fear that publishing

individual school performance data may result in school labelling, sharing such data with parents aids in school selection. Della highlighted the importance of school performance information as parents had to compile a list of over 20 school preferences during the CA stage:

> Although there may be a school labelling effect, school performance data is crucial in evaluating and selecting schools. We are expected to complete CA with over 20 schools, which is challenging without school banding information (Della).

While parents understand the government's desire to avoid labelling schools, they still believe it should provide information to facilitate parental choice.

6.4 Chapter Summary

This research demonstrates how school choice catalyses social and educational inequality by examining middle-class parental school choice and strategies during the secondary school choice process. This chapter discusses the practical and policy implications of the study and concludes with recommendations on education policy. Firstly, practical implications relate to how the middle-class parents' perceptions of educational quality are shaped into school choice factors. Secondly, policy implications involve the impacts of the MOI and DSS policies on education. The current MOI policy is an elite language selection process that focuses heavily on acquiring English competence. Privatisation of public education under the DSS exacerbates school segregation and polarises school

resources and performance, hence exacerbating inequalities. Finally, this chapter makes policy

recommendations for improving educational quality and inequality by reviewing the MOI and DSS

policies. The Government should provide equitable resource access for all students through financial

aid and additional information.

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Secondary education is a significant developmental stage for students; school selection is critical since it impacts students' future academic and professional lives. This study portrays middle-class parents as economic actors responsible for selecting the best educational option for their children. In line with the global trend toward marketisation and privatisation of education, the HK Government seeks to increase educational quality by increasing parental access to high-quality schools and incentivising schools to compete for students. This chapter summarises the entire thesis by presenting a coherent study overview that includes the context, research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, and findings. Then, I address the contributions and limitations of the study, make recommendations for future studies, and end with concluding words.

7.1 Summary of thesis

Following the global neoliberal trend, the privatisation of the public sector in HK intends to promote competition among schools, driving them to reform, innovate, and improve educational achievements in order to maintain their global competitiveness. Thus, education has become an essential stepping stone in achieving social status and constitutes a vital component of an individual's cultural capital. This study explores the school choice factors and strategies of HK middle-class parents in a context of considerable social unrest. It sheds light on how 'class' manifests itself in daily life and parents' capacity for self-differentiation. For the middle classes, it is "a time of affluence and risk, opportunity and

congestion, celebration and anxiety" (Ball, 2003, p. 4).

7.1.1 Context

As discussed in Section 1.2.2, the middle-class parents evaluate different educational options to maintain their positions. They doubt the feasibility of a liberal, self-governing HK due to current political instability. The civic unrest is growing, supporting democratic and universal suffrage ambitions linked to rising inequality (Tsao, 2018). Work insecurity, job restructuring, and recessions are widespread. Following the introduction of the national security law in HK (Lilian & Denise, 2021; Peters, 2021), many middle-class parents prefer emigrating to other countries to seek more stability and academic freedom (Leung, 2019; Yuen, 2021). Those who stay in HK will strategically choose an educational option that can help them improve their social status.

In HK, the education system is primarily based on the ability of the middle classes to reproduce advantage and fight for credentials. Bourdieu argues the meritocratic principles of the education field are flawed. It is a field with people occupying different positions according to their capital accumulation to retain their advantage through "a veneer of meritocracy" (Davey, 2009, p. 34). The field has become a battlefield for domination and symbolic aggression. Parents attempt to decide the stakes worth making and demonstrate how capital is valued and transferred differently. Each field has a class-based code called "Doxa," a sorting mechanism that rewards parents with the economic and

cultural capital required to engage in and dominate the school choice process (Leung, 2013b). English-medium secondary schools contribute to the "new elitism" in education by enrolling more middle-class students due to students' habitus and parental capital. Parents feel that having a solid command of the English language demonstrates status and improves their children's future career prospects.

7.1.2 Research questions

This study examines how middle-class parents choose a public-funded secondary school. Firstly, it establishes a historical context for choice, marketisation, and privatisation to situate the emergence of the school choice concept as a product of a predetermined image of the educational system. Secondly, it encompasses the characteristics of globalised neoliberalism by examining middle-class parents' views and behaviours during the secondary school admission process. Thirdly, it extends beyond identifying factors affecting educational quality and school choice to explore the rationales for parental choice, information sources, and how their capital, habitus, social and cultural distinctions influence their choices and strategies. Fourthly, it applies Bourdieu's theory to investigate if class crystallisation exists by analysing differences in the middle-class school choice strategies; how parents behave, make decisions and leverage capital and habitus to win the school choice game. Finally, it understands school choice as a sociocultural practice that contributes to perpetuating individual social dynamics. The research questions are as follows:

(1) What factors influence the decision of middle-class parents to enrol their child in a public-funded

secondary school in Hong Kong?

(2) What are the strategies of middle-class parents when selecting a public-funded secondary school?

7.1.3 Theoretical framework

This study demonstrates how Bourdieu's theory can be applied to micro-level educational processes in order to understand macro-level stratification patterns. I used Bourdieu's capital, habitus, and field concepts to help clarify and direct my inquiry into middle-class school choice. Bourdieu's theory greatly influenced research that illuminates how school choice reproduces inequitable social structures (Yoon, 2020), a frequently employed concept in social class and mobility studies (Maggio, 2017). It potentially expands chances for equitable politics, particularly for marginalised youngsters, which verifies the findings of Yoon (2020). Bourdieu (1984) focuses on practices that reveal underlying habitus and observes that most cultural consumption activities are linked to economic costs. Parental choice, social reproduction, childhood, and parenting orientation are all effective indicators of habitus. This study complements Bell's notion that middle-class parents with similar school choice processes and rationales consider different types of public-funded secondary schools. This variation can exist because school choice is socio-historical in nature, and parental choice sets are linked to the available educational opportunities (Bell, 2009b). This research demonstrates the connection between parental school choice and educational inequality. It views schooling as a social reproduction tool and parental strategies as contributors to inequality. It investigates how middle-class parents secure a high-quality

education by employing strategies that result in social reproduction or segregation. While middle-class

parents' education practices vary, they appear to share a common goal: to secure advantages for their

children.

Bourdieu's theory is valuable when examining school choice strategies and observing inequality. First,

Bourdieu effectively theorises the choice behaviours of middle-class parents as social reproduction

strategies rather than rational actions, which affects the rationality and meritocracy of school choice.

He suggests that parental school choice strategies may vary according to SES, educational attainment,

and capital access. Second, Bourdieu's theory offers ways to understand social classes through daily

life practices. Bourdieu suggests that an individual's success is linked to the amount of capital they

access and accumulate (Bourdieu, 2018). Parental capital accumulation confers an advantage on the

middle classes in the secondary school admissions process. Capital ownership is associated with

specific dispositions or practices, and it can be accumulated and transmitted across generations

(Bourdieu, 1998). Third, education is socially constructed through domination in society, which

strengthens one class's influence over another through "symbolic violence" and exerts control through

cultural supremacy (Bourdieu, 2011). Bourdieu refers to the consequences of dominance as "symbolic

violence," or the power dynamics that result in the internalisation of humiliations and the legitimisation

of hierarchy, resulting in self-blame for misfortunes and the naturalisation of the status quo (Colaguori,

2010). Acceptance of social order, dubbed the "Doxa paradox" by Bourdieu, is a source of conflict in

people's social lives. Middle-class children are more likely to achieve symbolic mastery given their habitus and capital, which marginalises working-class students with fewer educational opportunities.

7.1.4 Methodology

This study evaluated the factors and strategies influencing parents' school choices using an interpretivist qualitative approach. This chapter established the coherence of the research reflexivity, paradigm, conceptual framework, interpretivist qualitative methodology, research questions, data collection methods, analysis and coding strategies, and data storage and protection.

Research reflectivity was envisaged as an 'attitude' that permeates the entire investigation. Reflective processes help us understand how and why capital is mobilised (Lareau, 2011). I studied middle-class parents' school choice factors and strategies and constructed a conceptual framework to lead the study through a Bourdieusian lens. The study demonstrated how parental involvement exacerbates class influence and the detrimental effects on working-class educational success. Moreover, I adopted an interpretivist qualitative paradigm to investigate parents' secondary school choices and recruited individuals using purposeful and snowball sampling methods. I conducted semi-structured online Skype interviews with 18 middle-class parents of children attending various public-funded secondary schools. This study examined middle-class parents' school choice practices in greater depth and provided insight into their preferences. The safety, anonymity, and confidentiality of the participants

were crucial, and informed consent was obtained early on to ensure voluntary participation. It helped

me understand micro-level interactions and the educational field and acquire a holistic picture of

parental school choice in HK. Furthermore, I facilitated coding and theme analysis by utilising Braun

and Clarke's six-phase thematic model, Saldaña's codes-to-theory approach, and Nvivo 12 software. I

constructed the themes in response to the research questions and interview data. The validity and

reliability of the study were emphasised. Participants received an acknowledgement note and

transcribed data to assure data accuracy. The data was regularly backed up to ensure participants'

confidentiality and prevent data loss.

7.1.5 Findings

This study examined three types of public-funded secondary schools, filling previously identified gaps,

as most previous research in HK has concentrated primarily on DSS schools. Bourdieu's theory helps

analyse the school choice practices of middle-class parents, suggesting that the school choice policy

has exacerbated social stratification and inequality. Specifically, middle-class students are at an

advantage when applying for their desired schools, and the volume and types of capital frequently

determine their trajectories. I applied Bourdieu's theory to understand the underlying rationales behind

parental choices and examined how parents mobilise their capital and habitus to gain advantages in

the school choice process. The potential for inequality grows as school options, and socio-economic

backgrounds vary in HK. Thus, policymakers should be conscious of the parental school choice factors

and the structural inequality that arises from the selection process to establish more inclusive and equitable education policies. Middle-class school choices vary according to children's needs, individual families' experiences, and broader systems of beliefs and values.

School choice factors

Middle-class parents usually consider five common school choice factors, all of which relate to their perceptions of educational quality: academic performance, teaching quality, children-focused learning, school culture and SES. Parents believe that high-quality schools enable their children to excel academically, increase their chances of attending university, and facilitate the acquisition of cultural and economic capital. They prefer schools that provide a balanced education delivered by qualified teachers that are academically compatible with their children's abilities. Moreover, they prioritise cultural homogeneity as it assists their children in developing the cultural and social capital necessary for maintaining their social status.

Some middle-class parents cherish DSS schools for their autonomy, especially in terms of having English as the medium of instruction, adopting curriculum flexibility and offering smaller class sizes. Middle-class parents are more likely to gain advantages during the school choice process because of their financial resources and habitus. They tend to support their children through various strategies to maintain their social status, resulting in social stratification and reproduction. They often have more

resources to fund additional courses or activities, contributing to inequality. Contrarily, some middle-class parents enrol their children in free public schools, believing that this allows them to allocate their resources to their children better.

School choice strategies

This study reveals how middle-class parents pass on class-based benefits to their children via the education system by analysing their school choice strategies. Parents in HK generally prefer EMI schools, which are perceived as of superior quality. Middle-class parents are proactive in ensuring their children's success during the school selection process by mobilising their economic, cultural, and social capital. Economic capital can finance shadow education or residential relocation, while cultural capital can aid their children in learning and raise their examination scores. Moreover, parents may exploit social capital by seeking assistance from relatives and peers. School-based social networks can attract parents with similar financial resources. Middle-class families benefit from an informational advantage based on both "cold" and "hot" knowledge when selecting a school. They trust information through their social networks, including teachers, relatives, and friends.

This study reflects parents' anxiety about the existing school choice legislation and educational system. For instance, David's child transferred from a government-aided school to a DSS school to participate in the IB program and ease academic pressure. Moreover, parents and students are stressed out by

unconfirmed school banding, uncertainty about the school allocation scheme, budget constraints, and

widespread scepticism about the quality of public school teaching. They have trouble compiling school

options without knowing the school banding. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that students will be

assigned to their preferred schools. Parents use various strategies, including their capital and habitus,

to choose suitable secondary schools to preserve their social class status and enhance their children's

upward mobility. They mobilise their economic capital to ensure their children's educational outcomes.

At the same time, parental choice can exacerbate competition for admission to desirable schools,

limiting enrolment opportunities for working-class students. The efforts of middle-class parents to

secure viable alternatives for their children catalyse school reform initiatives that exacerbate class

tensions and contribute to inequities. For example, fundraising, donations, and the influx of middle-

class students into EMI schools may marginalise working-class parents.

7.2 Study contributions

Parental school selection is a complex process. This research examines the middle-class secondary

school decision process through the Bourdieusian lens. It offers several contributions: Firstly, it

provides a comprehensive picture of middle-class parental choice in HK because it encompasses both

public and DSS secondary schools, which account for 89% of all secondary schools in HK (Census-

and-Statistics, 2020). Most previous studies have concentrated primarily on DSS or private schools,

which do not accurately reflect the secondary school choice in HK (Chan & Tan, 2008; Ng, 2012; Tse,

2008; Woo, 2016; Yung, 2006; Zhou et al., 2015). Secondly, this study considers how middle-class educational practices contribute to a more comprehensive understanding and development of social class practices. Parents actively define their field positions and prioritise activities that benefit their children. This study dives thoroughly into how middle-class parents choose schools and how they deviate from their anticipated preference for fee-paying schools. Most parents seek the best secondary school for their children based on their school choice factors. This research enhances the analysis of capital mobilisation and contributes to our knowledge of middle-class students' educational achievement. Furthermore, by examining the class advantage mechanisms in the HK context, this research contributes to the literature by illustrating how capital and habitus foster inter-class variety and class reproduction. Thirdly, the school choice factors examined in this study may serve as a reference for parents to select suitable schools for their children in the future. Parents spend a lot of time looking for and pursuing good educational opportunities for their children. Knowing how parents choose schools can help other parents understand issues and factors related to school choice. In this study, middle-class parents describe high-quality schools as those that have a middle-class cultural homogeneity culture, superior teaching quality and academic performance, and adaptive curricula that match their children's needs. Fourthly, this study reinforces Bourdieu's suggestions that educational inequality is rooted in the different volumes and structures of capital related to parents' SES, which influences school choice and the extent to which middle-class children are supported and prepared for the future. It contributes to Bourdieu's conceptions by examining how middle-class parents use their

capital and habitus to ensure their children's success in high-quality schools and retain their status in the field. Finally, it provides a more nuanced exploration of middle-class practices and listens to their perspectives on educational quality and school choice options. It also challenges the notion that middle-class parents only favour DSS schools in HK. In reality, they select schools based on their preferences and the needs of their children. By incorporating parental preferences into reform procedures, the Government can establish a more parent-centred policy while increasing school competitiveness.

7.3 Study limitations

This research has numerous limitations despite the richness of data generated. Firstly, this research is only confined to Chinese middle-class parents in Hong Kong whose children attend a public-funded secondary school. There is a lack of diversity in social groups, race or ethnicity of study subjects. In HK, parents of varying social status coexist alongside a multicultural population of South Asian, European, and Chinese migrants (O'Connor, 2018). Secondly, some participants may forget their school choice factors, prompting the interviewer to ask further questions to refresh their memory. It is unclear how middle-class parents build their choice set during the central allocation stage. Thirdly, there may be concerns regarding sample representativeness and findings generalisation of qualitative research to a larger population, even though this is not the objective of a qualitative study. Fourthly, this study is subjective due to the researcher's subjective data collection following the interview. Thus,

it is critical to verify transcripts and data analysis with participants to confirm the accuracy of findings. I should double-check all transcriptions and translations and frequently reflect them throughout the study to avoid personal biases. Fifthly, snowball sampling was inefficient in identifying research participants as the researcher had no control over when parents would refer potential study participants. Finally, Nvivo is helpful in data management, like indexing text segments to themes, linking research notes to coding, and exploring possible links between themes. However, mastering the Nvivo application involves some effort. It is expensive for individual use and cannot automatically interpret data, which concurs with Dollah et al. (2017). It lacks a mechanism to express my analytic thoughts. For instance, while implementing Bourdieu's theory, I had to explain the phenomenon of parental school choice myself.

7.4 Future research

This research acts as a basis for more thorough research on parental school choice. The recommendations for further research are:

Wider social class or ethnicity

This research is only confined to middle-class parents whose children study in a public-funded secondary school of a Chinese social community. There are parents of different ethnicity and social classes in HK. Future research may include various social class levels (working, middle and higher

class) or ethnicities (South Asian, European or Chinese migrants) to better understand their experiences and opportunities of accessing various educational options. It is fascinating to observe how different parents react to school choice issues.

School perspectives and impacts

By focusing on parents as the active agent in the market-turned restructuring, the choice exercised by schools has nevertheless been overlooked. Student admission under market-driven reforms includes balancing the bidirectional interaction between parents and schools. However, most literature analyses the influences of parents and schools independently. Hence, the perspectives of schools could be considered.

First, we can examine the strategies schools adopt to increase their chances of attracting high-quality students: how they select students, their criteria, or the factors considered by quality schools during the school admission process. Moreover, the impacts of educational policy on schools may be worthwhile to investigate. Second, research can assess whether the influx of middle-class families into public schools constitutes school gentrification and establish the percentage increase in middle-class families. For example, it is worthwhile to determine whether curricular changes, new programs, educational resources, or infrastructural improvements proposed by middle-class parents represent or support particular social groups or broadly address the needs of students from all socio-economic

backgrounds. Third, it is vital to investigate further the role of middle-class parents in shaping school cultures in public-funded schools. For example, we can understand which forms of school engagement of middle-class parents promote inclusive relationships within school communities. Middle-class school engagement strategies may be analysed to see if there are impacts on resource allocation and school culture and whether resources are dispersed equitably within schools. Research can investigate how decision-making processes regarding resource prioritisation vary with social classes. It can determine if school culture and climates have changed, including expectations, traditions, and social dynamics.

7.5 Concluding words

Education operates within a highly political context that involves a diverse spectrum of stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, principals, and the Government (Abdulrasheed & Bello, 2015; Song & Meier, 2018). Each stakeholder seeks to influence educational outcomes to meet their agendas. The rise of neoliberalism has culminated in a reorientation of education policies and practices by shifting resources from the public to the private sector. This research portrays middle-class parental school choice in the current HK context as an apparent tension with equality. It has aroused attention to the imbalance between social justice and school choice. Two primary considerations influencing policy and school choice are school choice freedom and its potential impact on educational equality. Policymakers are increasingly concerned about the achievement discrepancy between disadvantaged

and advantaged pupils, as well as the extent to which middle-class parents can enrol their children in DSS schools or choose schools based on the ability to relocate to nearer high-quality schools. Recent initiatives have attempted to regulate parental choice through the Government's school allocation system, prompting criticism. While middle-class parents admire DSS schools, comprehensive privatisation of public education is unlikely, as public schools have their demands and markets. Thus, market concepts are introduced into the public sector during education reforms, creating a "quasi-market." This quasi-market seeks free-market efficiencies without compromising traditional public administration structures and financing. The public sector is restructured to encourage competition among schools, hence improving educational achievements.

Given that one of Government policy objectives is to keep middle-class students in public-funded schools (Ho, 2020; Tai, 2016), the rationales and strategies for middle-class school choice are worth exploring. Habitus and field interact with various forms of capital affected by the economic environment to determine parental school choice. School choice is a complex process that may not be rational. Bourdieu's theory helps understand how middle-class school choice practices contribute to class reproduction and individual differentiation. It implies that education remains firmly entwined in the social structure. Middle-class families excel in leveraging economic, cultural, and social capital to assure their children's success; they secure the best educational opportunities and invest early in their children. Their school choice is typically governed by academic performance, teaching quality, school

culture, child-focused learning and SES. They believe that offering English-medium education led by effective teachers is vital to their children's success. Parental school selections are influenced by class identification and capital availability, which is consistent with Ball's findings (Ball et al., 1995, 1997). Therefore, this research may help us understand middle-class school choice factors and how middle-class participation in public-funded education contributes to the reproduction of educational inequity.

This research shows that education contributes to class stratification and causes inequality. It represents a foray into middle-class social reproduction. Middle-class parents can access educational opportunities and perhaps dominate high-quality public-funded secondary schools due to capital and habitus differences. They have greater power and benefits in exercising their preferences because of the unequal cultural and economic capital distribution among families. This leads to unequal educational opportunities and resources, marginalising working-class parents. Bourdieu argues that eliminating symbolic violence ingrained in individuals' habitus is essential to construct an equitable environment (Bourdieu, 2000). In the contemporary neoliberal paradigm, symbolic violence typically leads to self-blame, whereas society's function remains hidden (Bourdieu, 2000; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Smith, 2007). Hence, acceptance of the "Doxa paradox" is a source of conflict in social life. Privatisation of education and school choice may overlook social equity and justice issues, leading to social segregation and disparity because most EMI and DSS schools are essentially restricted to affluent families. Middle-class parents mobilise their economic, cultural and social resources during

the school choice process, contributing to social reproduction and inequity. The rise of neoliberalism has resulted in great changes in education. Education is no longer considered a public good and is now commonly regarded as a business that competes in a market, focusing on high-stakes tests that measure student outcomes. The neoliberal discourse and agenda of education reform may lack social justice imperatives. Hence, the issue of equity is still on the education agenda. If education continues on its current trajectory, neoliberalism will lead to an inequitable society, marginalising disadvantaged groups in HK. Education aims to encourage lifelong learning, equality, and cultural and social integration of students from diverse backgrounds. Educational inequity will erode public acceptance of the system. Thus, the Government should review the DSS and MOI policies to implement appropriate policies to ensure educational equity for all students. When developing policy, the Government needs to consider all stakeholders holistically and the impact that specific regulations may have on individuals and the educational system.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Parents' consent form/ recruitment email

10th June, 2020

Re: A study of the determinants of the education quality and the factors affecting the selection of public-funded secondary schools by middle-class parents in Hong Kong

Dear Parents,

I am currently doing doctoral research at the University of Bristol, studying the determinants of the quality of education and the factors affecting the selection of public-funded secondary schools by middle-class parents in Hong Kong. I am writing to invite you to join an individual interview through Skype, which will last for around 1 hour. This study aims to understand how middle-class parents in HK construct quality education as a concept and the sources of information about quality education. Moreover, it identifies how all those quality concepts translate into the specific factors and strategies of parents during the school selection process. The sources of information when choosing a public-funded secondary school for your children will also be investigated.

Before the anonymisation process, the researcher will send the transcribed data back to the participant to verify the accuracy of the transcription of an interview and the validity of the content analysis. All the personal information for this research will be kept strictly confidential and accessed only by the researcher or authorised staff from the University. Your name will not be shown in the research findings, and your identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study, and the whole interview process is audio-taped with your consent. All names are removed to preserve anonymity. Recorded data are encrypted and stored securely in University's onedrive. The researcher will look carefully for the meaning when translating the interviews. There may be online follow-up sessions to re-contact parents for clarification of the interview questions. We aim to publish the findings of this research in various formats, including books, book chapters, academic journal articles, or disseminate to schools. However, we will guarantee the anonymity of the participants. Participants may be keen to know the study's outcomes or results of the research. If you are eager to see the study's findings or conclusions, the researcher will send you a summary of the results after completing this research upon request through email.

Please reply to the email or sign the consent form electronically to show that you understand the purpose of the study. A copy of the consent form will be given to you. I would be grateful if you can

join our research and reply before 30th Aug 2020. If you wish to participate in this study, please respond by email and fill in the necessary information. For those parents interested in joining the research, I will select suitable candidates for conducting an online semi-structured Skype interview. A confirmation email will be sent to you. Parents can contact me through email for any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time. I can be contacted through email for any questions regarding this study. Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. Thank you for your precious time.

The following information is provided for you to decide if you wish to participate in the study. Research participation is voluntary, and parents may decline to answer any questions they prefer not to answer or opt-out of the research at any time if they feel uncomfortable. Parents can contact the researcher (alicestudent@gmail.com) or project supervisor (jennifer.rowsell@bristol.ac.uk) for any questions regarding the study through email. Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study.

Please fill in the following information to facilitate the selection of participants.
Parent's surname: Miss/ Mrs _____
  ☐ I will not participate in the interview
  ☐ I can participate in the semi-structured interview
  Please fill in the following details if you decide to participate in the research. All the information will be kept strictly confidential, encrypted, and store on a computer and onedrive of Bristol University.

Family Background

Participant's Details:	(1) Occupation : _____		
	(2) Children's academic level (F1-F6) : _____		
Children's type of school:	☐ Direct-Subsidy Scheme school (DSS)	☐ government school	☐ government-aided school
Average monthly family income	☐ < $40,000	☐ $40,000 - $70,000	☐ > $70,000
Types of housing:	☐ Private housing estate	☐ Home ownership scheme housing estate	☐ Public housing estate
Education level:	☐ Secondary level or below	☐ Post-Secondary Degree or Non-degree	☐ Master or above

Skype Interview Schedule

My available interview dates are : _____

	My available time slots are (please put a tick) :					
	11:00am-12:00pm	2:00-3:00pm	3:00-4:00pm	4:00-5:00pm	5:00-6:00pm	7:00-8:00pm
☐ Monday						
☐ Tuesday						
☐ Wednesday						
☐ Thursday						
☐ Friday						
☐ Saturday						
☐ Sunday						

Yours faithfully,

Alice Chui

Appendix 2: Interview grid

1. Research Background	1.1 Background
	- Researcher's background and career history
	- Background of Bristol university
	- Objectives of research
	- Research questions
	- Significance of research
	1.2 Ethics procedure
	(1) Anonymity/ confidentiality and online follow-up section
	- Protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, consent for audio-recording and online follow-up section
	(2) Right of participants
	- Opt-out and Complain procedures
	1.3 Research Process
	- Research methods, procedures and stakeholders involved, reasons for using online Skype as an interview tool, interview duration
2. Student Information	2.1 Number of kids and level of study
	2.2 Secondary school banding details
	2.3 Types of secondary school
	2.4 Types of primary school
	2.5 Overall academic ranking in primary school
3. Determinants of a quality secondary school by middle-class parents in Hong Kong	3.1 Determinants of a quality secondary school in HK
	- What is a good school?
	- What are the determinants of a quality secondary school in Hong Kong?
	- What are the most important elements among all the factors?
	- Can your school arouse your kids' interest in studying?
	- What do you think about your school's teachers?
	- Any differences between different public-funded secondary schools?
	3.2 Sources of information
	- What are the sources of information for the education quality?

4.	Factors for choosing public-funded secondary schools during F1 school application process	**4.1 Parental School Choice Factors** - What are the factors considered when choosing a secondary school for your child? **4.2 Other parental factors from typology** - Besides the above factors, any other factors are important? **4.3 Importance of factors** - How many factors you consider when choosing a secondary school for your kids? - Can you arrange all these factors in the order of importance? - Can you explain the order of importance? **4.4 Sources of information** - What are the sources of information for the parental school choice factors?
5.	Rationales for choosing the public-funded secondary schools during F1 school application process	**5.1 Secondary schools applied** - What types of schools have you applied to during the F1 secondary application? **5.2 Public schools (government schools, government-aided schools)** - What are the advantages of studying in government schools? - What are the disadvantages of studying in government schools? - How many government schools have you applied? - Will you consider this type of schools? Why? **5.3 Direct-subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools** - What are the advantages of studying in DSS schools? - What are the disadvantages of studying in DSS schools? - How many DSS schools have you applied? - Will you consider DSS schools? Why? - What is the accepted monthly school fee for DSS school?

6.	Strategies of Middle-class parents during the secondary school selection process	6.1 Secondary school allocation process - Have you joined the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) System? - How many schools did you consider and apply to during the F1 application process? 6.2 Sources of information - What information did you look for before choosing schools? - Have you visited the schools before choosing them? If yes, how many schools have you visited? - Do you think the information is accessible and enough for you to make a decision? 6.3 Same school for children - Do you have any other children that attend school? If yes, which school are they studying at currently? Do you think children studying at the same school are essential? 6.4 Class size - Do you think class size is critical? If yes, what class size is the best for facilitating learning? 6.5 School choice strategies - What strategies have you used to aid successful school application? - Does your child attend any extracurricular activities after school? If yes, what are they? - How much you spend on extracurricular activities every month? What is the frequency of lessons weekly? - Have your child participated in any tutorial or interview classes to assist them in raising their academic results?
7	Parenting Style	7.1 Who decide which secondary schools to apply to at the initial stage? 7.2 Who make the final decisions of selecting a secondary school (Parents/ children/ both)?
8	Distribution of middle class	8.1 What is the proportion of middle class in your form? 8.2 Do you think it is important to choose a school with students of similar socio-economic status?
9	Suggestions for improvement	9.1 Have you faced any difficulties during the secondary school application process? If yes, do you have any improvement suggestions? 9.2 During the Discretionary Places (DP) stage and the Central Allocation (CA) stage, have you faced any difficulties? 9.3 What can be improved to assist you in passing through this school selection process? 9.4 What suggestions do you have regarding school choice and education quality?
10	Referral through Snowball sampling	Can you refer your middle-class friends to me if their children are studying in DSS, government-aided, and government schools?

Appendix 3: Summary of participants and their key preferences

Table 4 Summary of participants

School Types	Middle-class Parent	Education Level	Parents	Jobs Mother (M) / Father (F)	School Choice Factors (Top 5)	Captial Investment	School Type
G1	Gil	Degree	Father	M: Teacher; F: Physiotherapist	(1)Child-focused learning (2)Teaching quality (3)Academic performance (4)School culture (5)School facilities and extra-curricular activities	Tutorial classes, Interview classes	Government
G2	Gandy	Degree	Mother	M: Housewife	(1)Child-focused learning (2)Teaching quality (3)Academic performance (4)School culture (5)SES	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, Table-tennis and flute	Government
G3	Gman	Degree	Father	M: Occupational Therapist F: Physiotherapist	(1)School culture (2)Academic performance (3)Teaching quality (4)School facilities and extra-curricular activities (5)Through-train school	Piano, fencing and taekwondo	Government
G4	Giana	Degree	Mother	M: Manager	(1)School culture (2)Academic performance (3)School facilities and extra-curricular activities, Proximity (4)School reputation	Tutorial classes, ballet and drum	Government
G5	Gemma	Master	Mother	M: Senior Administrator	(1)Child-focused learning (2)Teaching quality (3)Academic performance (4)School culture (5)SES	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, Table-tennis and flute	Government
G6	Gabriel	Master	Father	F: Pharmacy	(1)School reputation (2)School culture (3)Academic performance (4)Proximity	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, Violin, chess	Government
A1	Ana	Master	Mother	M: Civil Servant	(1)Child-focused learning (2)Teaching quality (3)Academic performance (4)School culture (5)School facilities and extra-curricular activities	Tutorial classes, interview classes, and football classes	Aided
A2	Alex	Master	Father	M: Housewife; F: Social Work	(1)Child-focused learning (2)School culture (3)Teaching quality (4)Academic performance (5)SES	Drama	Aided
A3	Andrew	Master	Father	M: Housewife; F: Administration Manager	(1)Teaching quality (2)School culture (3)Child-focused learning (4)Proximity (5)SES	Homework class, Tutorial class, Violin, STEM	Aided
A4	Aria	Degree	Mother	M: Teacher	(1)Child-focused learning (2)School culture (3)Academic performance (4)Tuition fees (5)SES	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, Football classes	Aided
A5	Alice	Master	Mother	M: Teacher	(1)Academic performance (2)Teaching quality (3)SES (4)Child-focused learning (5)School culture	Tutorial classes, STEM, basketball, speech training	Aided
A6	Audrey	Degree	Father	F: Administration Manager	(1)Child-focused learning (2)Teaching quality (3)Academic performance (4)School culture (5)School facilities and extra-curricular activities	Tutorial classes, STEM, Football	Aided
D1	Doris	Degree	Mother	M: Housewife; F: IT Manager	(1)Child-focused learning (2)School culture (3)Teaching quality (4)Academic performance (5)SES	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, Ballet and piano	DSS
D2	Daniel	Master	Father	M: housewife; F: Director	(1)Academic performance (2)Teaching quality (3)Child-focused learning (4) School culture (5) SES	Tutorial classes	DSS
D3	David	Master	Father	M: housewife F: Lecturer	(1)Child-focused learning (2)School culture (3)Teaching quality (4)Proximity	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, Ballet and drawing	DSS
D4	Danny	Master	Father	M: Housewife; F: Social Work	(1)Child-focused learning (2)School culture (3)Teaching quality (4)Academic performance (5)School facilities and extra-curricular activities	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, English reading courses	DSS
D5	Diana	Degree	Mother	M: housewife; F: Manager	(1) Child-focused learning (2) Teaching quality (3) Academic performance (4) School reputation (5) School culture	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, swimming, badminton, musical instrument	DSS
D6	Della	Degree	Mother	M: Doctor	(1) Through-train school (2) Child-focused learning (3) Teaching quality (4) Academic performance (5)SES	Tutorial classes, Interview classes, football classes	DSS

Table 5 Key preferences of middle-class participants

Government school	School choice preferences of middle-class parents
G1 – Gill	Gill emphasised child-focused learning, teaching quality, academic performance, school culture and SES. He assessed his child's abilities and banding and chose schools that emphasised both academics and extracurricular activities to support personal growth and friendship.
G2 – Gandy	She solely considered EMI secondary schools. Students needed child-centered education and qualified, supportive teachers. Students value freedom of speech. Principals should work collaboratively with stakeholders and communicate shared values to raise educational quality.
G3 – Gman	Gman chose government school as he desired real-world experience with mixed ability and free public education allowed him to manage his resources wisely and provide additional tutorials or extracurricular activities for his child to boost academic performance.
G4 – Giana	Giana stressed discipline as peer influence was critical. Academic achievement ensured children's competitiveness. The teaching quality influenced students' enjoyment of the subject. Proximity to home may help reduce travel time.
G5 – Gemma	Gemma considered only EMI secondary schools because they were crucial for the future of her children. Child-centered learning was critical to ensuring that children loved their schools and fit their needs. Teachers should be knowledgeable and supportive. Students valued expressive freedom and active engagement. Her daughter transferred from a DSS school to a government school due to the significant increase in tuition fees at DSS schools.
G6 – Gabriel	The school choice program created an inequitable playing field that benefited middle-class parents. The Government may provide vouchers or other financial aid to working-class families to expand educational possibilities and subsidise school transportation.

Government-aided school	School choice preferences of middle-class parents
A1 - Ana	Ana is a civil servant with a Master's degree. She adored DSS because it guaranteed a school place sooner than the allocation system, which put both parents and pupils under immense pressure. However, due to his poor academic performance, her son was denied admittance. Child-centered learning was her leading school choice factor. She matched her kids' grades to the school's banding and chose schools with similar level. The school should foster a learning environment, and students should be self-assured. Academic performance and teaching quality were essential. She advocated for incorporating more real-world learning experiences into the curriculum to assist students improve academic, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, personal, and social skills. She was concerned about the absence of official banding information, she sought opinion from her social network. Affordability was cited as a factor in her argument. Volunteerism and fundraising by middle-class parents may influence school culture, resulting in educational inequity. She saw a correlation between educational attainment and employment prospects. So she enrolled her son in tutorial, interview, and football sessions to help him with his school applications.
A2 - Alex	Alex is a social worker with a Master's degree. He prefers DSS secondary school due to its autonomy, higher teaching quality with interactive activity teaching, and smaller class size, with more resources and support to children. They have more teachers allocated and more facilities. Additionally, public schools operate under rigid rules and are inflexible. However, his son's academic results cannot reach the DSS standards and DSS is costly; he selects a government-aided school for his son. Alex believes that a high-quality school can help his son develop into happy, ambitious, and creative individuals. Teachers should manage students effectively and allow them to explore freely, adapt their activities to their interests and growth while also fostering respect and friendship.
A3 - Andrew	Andrew is an Administration Manager with a Master's degree. He prefers top ranking elite public-funded secondary schools with teachers who are qualified and experienced. EMI school is vital since English is a global language that will likely increase competitiveness in the future. He believes that public schools are more cost-effective than DSS schools. He suggests the Government to assess individual requirements to bridge the school choice knowledge gap by providing more information to parents, like school summary and admission procedures.
A4 – Aria	Aria believes that DSS schools have more resources, particularly their environment, facilities, and extra-curricular activities, are better than aided schools. It is difficult to know the leadership styles and teacher quality before entering. She selects a school based on academic performance. She wants to strike a balance between his extra-curricular activities and academics. Schools should encourage students to enjoy learning and a positive school culture that promotes student discipline is critical. A university degree is required for the future, so academic success is vital. Tuition should be affordable. Moreover, cultural homogeneity is vital.
A5 - Alice	Alice is a teacher with a Master's degree. Her daughter is studying in a government-aided school. Alice believes that high-quality school should be one with high academic performance since education is essential for upward mobility. Good academic level increases the chances of entering university. Teachers should incorporate interactive elements into English-medium instruction to ensure that students enjoy learning.
A6 – Audrey	Audrey argued that the most critical school choice factors are teaching quality, child-focused learning and academic performance. She favoured EMI and happy schools that satisfied her child's academic and social demands. She desired a Christian school with proper discipline.

DSS school	School choice preferences of middle-class parents
D1 – Doris	Doris enrolled in DSS schools to avoid working-class students and believed discipline was crucial because others readily influence them. Academic success was not her primary goal. She chose an academically suitable school for her child and believed that happy learning was critical. Additionally, cultural homogeneity was preferable, as middle-class habitus and peer influence were essential for children's future development. She selected DSS schools due to shared values, resources, and a supportive environment conducive to future mobility.
D2 – Daniel	Daniel believed that a quality school should have high academic quality, such as good DSE results, high university admission rates, good reputation, abundant resources, and a diverse range of extra-curricular activities. Credentials were critical to their future success.
D3 – David	David based on his children's capabilities and academic achievements to match the school's admission requirements. He preferred DSS school as it has qualified and passionate teachers and an abundance of instructional materials. He emphasised the vital role of school culture, religious beliefs, and discipline in education. Christian schools attempt to develop Christian principles and ideals in their students by providing them with a solid moral and spiritual compass. Proximity to home is essential.
D4 – Danny	Danny's daughter transferred from a government-aided school to a DSS school as he believes that the DSS school is a more relaxed environment with less pressure. She adores the IB curriculum and annual performance with the Arts exhibition. Danny favours DSS schools as they allow greater class size flexibility and allow teachers to use various approaches to promote teaching and learning and dedicate more time to students with special needs.
D5 – Diana	Diana favours DSS secondary school owing to its autonomy, higher teaching quality with participatory activity teaching, and smaller class size, with more resources and support to children. She believes that DSS schools have more quality teachers and facilities. Her younger son cannot join the DSS school at primary school, so she has invested a lot of extra-curricular activities in order to join her desired DSS secondary school. She quits her job to help her son and has submitted six letters to the elite DSS secondary school to boost the likelihood of admittance.
D6 – Della	Della supports DSS because it can guarantee a school place earlier to reduce the pressure of the school allocation. Moreover, it has greater autonomy in administration and management, better resources and higher teaching quality, various extracurricular activities, and a flexible curriculum. It has additional resources to assist students because it is subsidised by the Government and receives tuition fees. DSS students may choose to study the IB curriculum, which has a greater university admission rate.

Appendix 4: Summary of findings

Table 6 Perceptions of educational quality by middle-class parents in HK

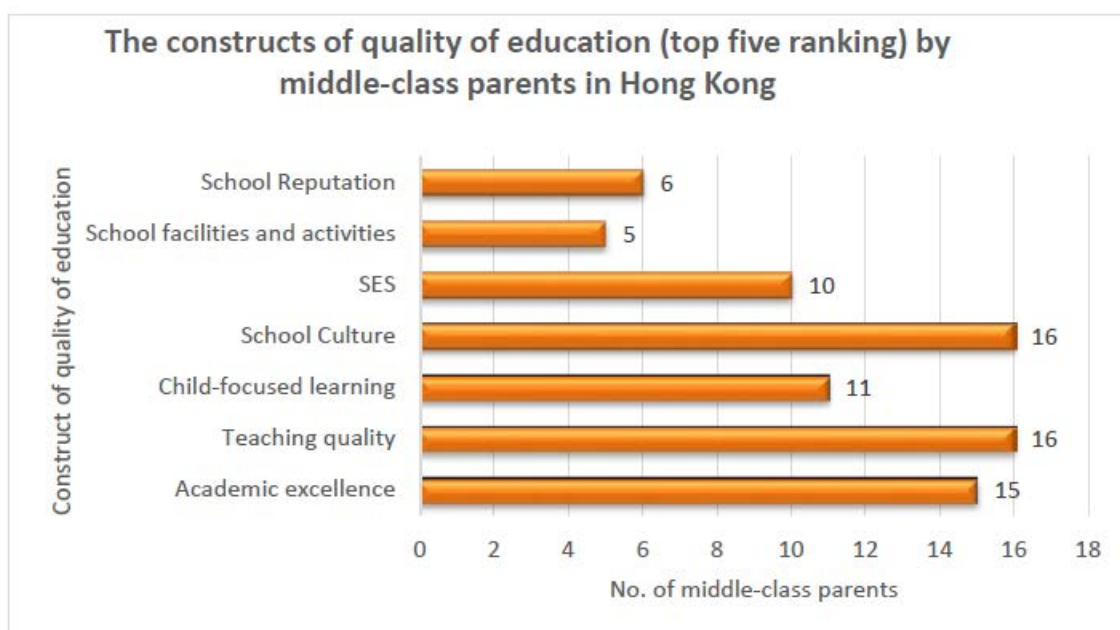| School Types	Middle-class Parent	QUALITY SCHOOL CONSTRUCTS						
		Priority: 1 (High) to 5 (Low)						
		Academic excellence	Teaching quality	Child-focused learning	School Culture	SES	School facilities and activities	School Reputation
G1	Gil	2	1		4			3
G2	Gandy	4	3	1	5			2
G3	Gman	3	2		1	5	4	
G4	Giana	2	3		1			4
G5	Gemma	3	2	1	4	5		
G6	Gabriel	3			2			1
A1	Ana	2	1	4			3	
A2	Alex	3		1	2	4		
A3	Andrew		1	5	3	4	2	6
A4	Aria	3	3	1	2	5	4	6
A5	Alice	1	2	4	5	3	6	
A6	Audrey	3	1	2	5	4		
D1	Doris		2		1	3		
D2	Daniel	1	2			4		3
D3	David		2	1	3			
D4	Danny	4	3	1	2		5	
D5	Diana	3	1	4	5			2
D6	Della	1	2		3	4		

Figure 14 The top five constructs of educational quality by middle-class parents in Hong Kong

Table 7 The secondary school choice factors by middle-class parents in HK

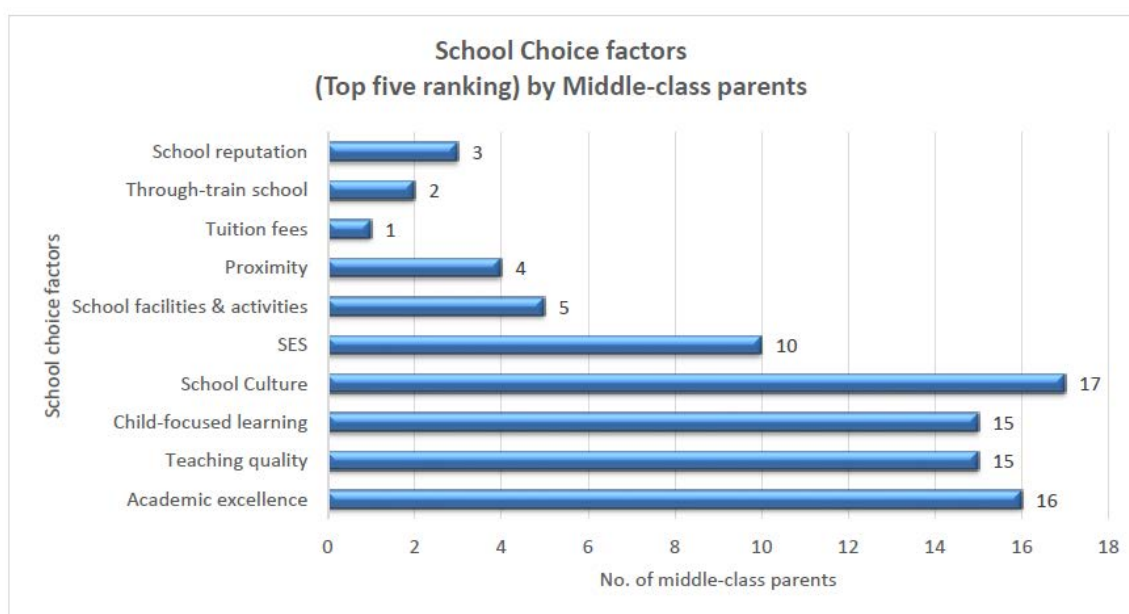| School Types	Middle-class Parent	Academic excellence	Teaching quality	Child-focused learning	School Culture	SES	School facilities & activities	Proximity	Tuition fees	Through-train school	School reputation
SCHOOL CHOICE FACTORS (1 High priority to 6 Low priority)											
G1	Gil	3	2	1	4		5				
G2	Gandy	3	2	1	4	5					
G3	Gman	2	3		1		4			5	
G4	Giana	2			1		3	3			4
G5	Gemma	3	2	1	4	5					
G6	Gabriel	3			2			4			1
A1	Ana	3	2	1	4		5				
A2	Alex	4	3	1	2	5					
A3	Andrew		1	3	2	5		4			
A4	Aria	3		1	2	5		6	4		
A5	Alice	1	2	4	5	3	7		6		
A6	Audrey	3	1	2	5	4					
D1	Doris	4	3	1	2	5					
D2	Daniel	1	2	3	4	5					
D3	David		3	1	2			4			
D4	Danny	4	3	1	2		5				
D5	Diana	3	2	1	5						4
D6	Della	4	3	2		5				1	

Figure 15 The secondary school choice factors according to the top five rankings of middle-class parents in Hong Kong

# Appendix 5: Parental school choice factors from literature review

Table 8 Parental school choice factors from literature review

SCHOOL CHOICE CATEGORIES	FACTORS	REFERENCES
Child-focused learning	1. Children's Academic performance	(Reay & Lucey, 2000)
	2. Characters and interest	
	3. Learning needs	
Socio-economic status	4. Parents' income	(Alsuiadi, 2015; Beavis, 2004; Chevalier, 2013; Rehman, Khan, & Tariq, 2010)
	5. Parents' education level	(Beavis, 2004; Burgess, 2010; Van Pelt et al., 2007)
	6. Occupation	(Beavis, 2004)
Academic performance	7. Academic/ Public examination results/ Standardised test scores/ University entry percentage	(Bell, 2009b; Bosetti, 2004; Coldron & Boulton, 1991; Jackson & Bisset, 2005; Taylor, 1996; Thieme & Treviño, 2013; Woo, 2011; Yaacob, 2014)
Teaching quality	8. Teacher qualification	(Alsuiadi, 2015; Wilkinson, Macintosh, & Denniss, 2004)
	9. Medium of instruction	(Charles, 2011; Woo, 2011; Zhou et al., 2015)
	10. Class size	(Alsuiadi, 2015; Bosetti, 2004; Charles, 2011; Denessena et al., 2005; Vassallo, 2000).
School culture	11. Student discipline	(Woo, 2011)
	12. Student background	
	13. Physical environment	(Charles, 2011; Dronkers, 2003; Hsu & Yuan-fang, 2013; Rehman et al., 2010; Smith, 2000)
	14. Religion	(Taylor, 1996; Van Pelt et al., 2007; Wilkinson et al., 2004)
School facilities and Proximity	15. School facilities	(Alsuiadi, 2015; Berry, 2002; House & Taylor, 2003; Hsu & Yuan-fang, 2013)
	16. Extracurricular activities	(Alsuiadi, 2015; Hsu & Yuan-fang, 2013)
	17. Proximity to school	(Alsuiadi, 2015; Malmberg, Andersson, & Bergsten, 2014; Olmedo, 2008; Taylor, 1996)
	18. Sibling(s)	(Coldron & Boulton, 1991)

Appendix 6: Nvivo 12 Coding, thematic analysis and word tree

Figure 16 Nvivo 12 Coding and thematic analysis (Parental school choice factors)
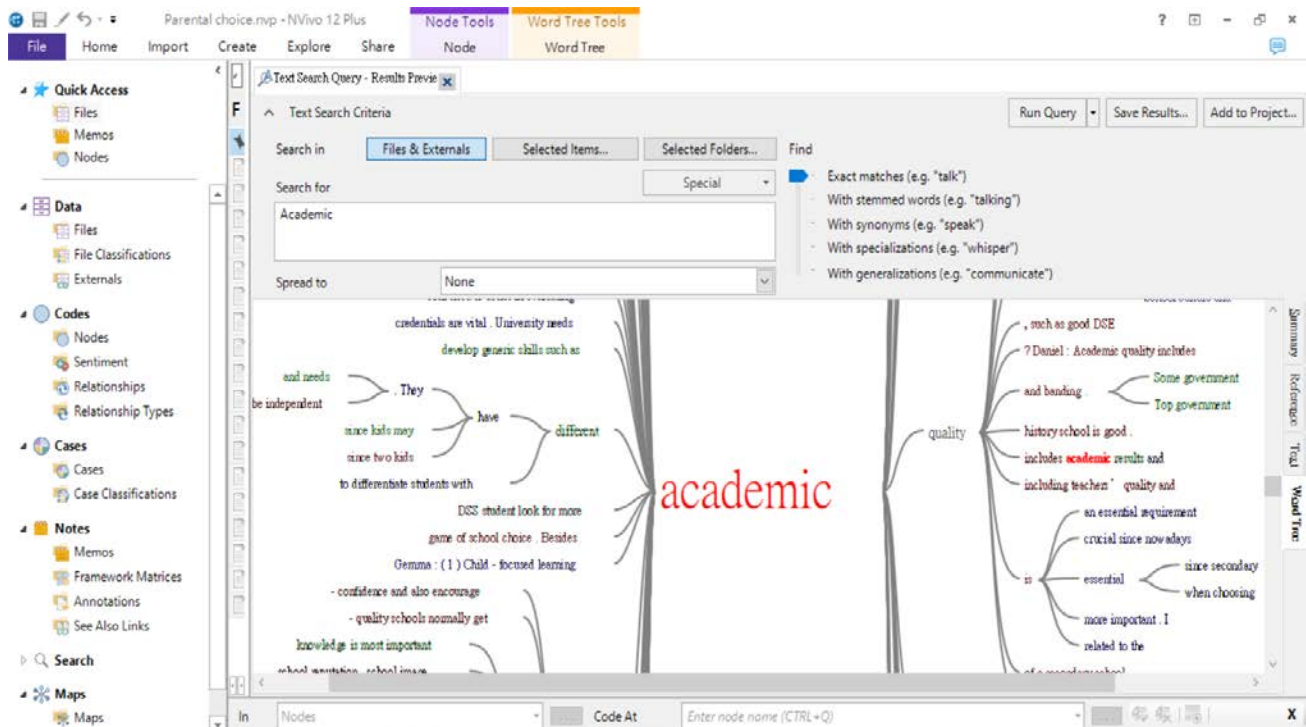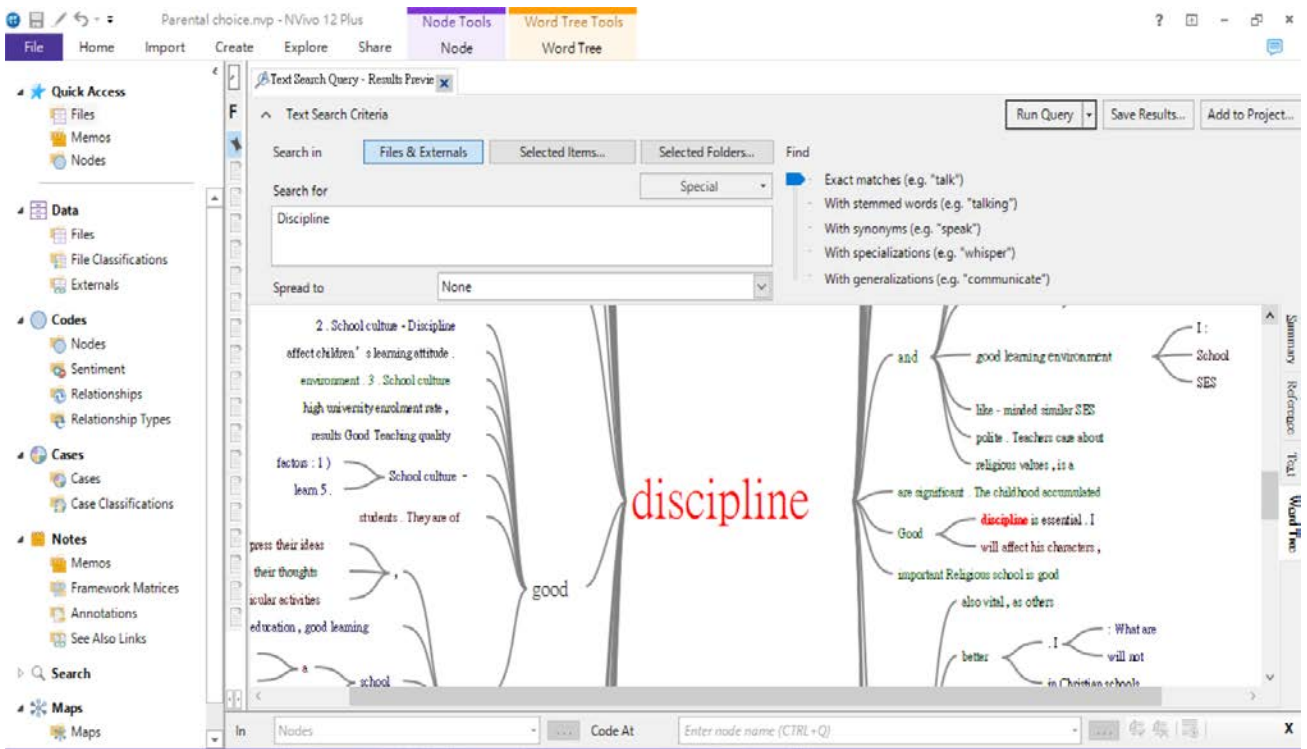
Figure 17 Nvivo 12 A node treemap

Appendix 7: Sub-theme "Academic Performance" by Nvivo 12

<u>SUB-THEME: ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE</u>

<u><Files\\A1- Ana></u> - § 4 references coded [2.80% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.55% Coverage

  Academic performance - University entry rate, good academic results, and the school can train students to be all-rounded

Reference 2 - 0.99% Coverage

  Academic results
  Curriculum with the flexibility for us to choose IB or DSE. Both are ok. My younger kid loves sports. So, if the school has this subject, it will be perfect. University entry rate is vital also.

Reference 3 - 0.97% Coverage

  I prefer curriculum to incorporate more real-world learning experiences to help students develop generic skills such as academic, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, personal, and social skills.

Reference 4 - 0.29% Coverage

  Curriculum should match with my children's needs such as sports.

<u><Files\\A2 – Alex></u> - § 3 references coded [2.32% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.43% Coverage

  3. Academic results – but not too high pressure is better, enjoy learning is more important

Reference 2 - 1.06% Coverage

  3. Academic results – acquire knowledge is most important, good academic, basic requirements, if school's academic is good, it will increase the chances of entering university. This is the aim of study in secondary school.

Reference 3 - 0.82% Coverage

  (4) Academic results
  Match his academic banding to choose a good academic quality history school is good. Academic quality is related to the teaching quality and resources.

<u><Files\\A3 - Andrew></u> - § 1 reference coded [1.92% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.92% Coverage

. Academic
      I prefer professional and experienced teachers. Teachers need to teach concept clearly. They need to be patience and explain until students understand, use interactive way to create a happy learning environment.
      EMI school is vital since English is an international language and can increase competition in future.

<u><Files\\ A4 - Aria></u> - § 3 references coded   [1.52% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.43% Coverage

(3) Academic performance: Curriculum with the flexibility for us to choose IB or DSE.

Reference 2 - 0.52% Coverage

I need to balance his academic with the school. Schools should encourage students to enjoy learning.

Reference 3 - 0.57% Coverage

students' academic performance is significant to aid mobility since a university degree is vital in the future.

<Files\\ A5 - Alice> - § 2 references coded   [2.58% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.96% Coverage

Academic performance refers to the extent to which the educational resources provided to students assist them in achieving their educational goals. Education is essential for upward mobility.

Reference 2 - 1.62% Coverage

I prefer high academic but not too high pressure and students can enjoy learning. Acquire knowledge at school is most important. Good academic level increases the chances of entering university. This is the primary aim of secondary education. EMI is vital. Academic quality is related to the teaching quality and resources.

<Files\\ A6 - Audrey> - § 1 reference coded [1.79% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.79% Coverage

3. Academic
Academic is the basic needs for a secondary school. I prefer professional and experienced teachers. They need to be patient and use an engaging approach to build a happy learning atmosphere. EMI school is important because proficiency in English will increase competition in the future.

<Files\\ D1 - Doris> - § 1 reference coded [1.87% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.87% Coverage

(4) Academic results - I think students' academic results, especially the University entry rate, are of utmost importance. Universities in Hong Kong that are competitive favor IB students, which generates inequality because IB is only available to wealthy students... Enrolling your children in the IB curriculum at DSS schools eliminates the need to send them overseas, which is more cost effective.

<Files\\ D2 - Daniel >   - § 3 references coded   [1.87% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.05% Coverage

Academic quality of a secondary school is vital, including the high university entry rate, students with excellent academic results and DSE results, and good teaching quality. Especially, my sons, I think credentials are critical to their future.

Reference 2 - 0.30% Coverage

(1) Academic results (high university entry rates, flexible curriculum)

Reference 3 - 0.51% Coverage

(1) Academic results – I think students' academic results, especially the University entry rate, are of utmost important

<Files\\ D3 – David > - § 1 reference coded [1.30% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.30% Coverage

(3) Academic quality - emphasizing teachers' quality, resources, support and student care. I like teachers to be passionate and diligent enough to take care of children, even if they are troublemakers. I like this DSS school due to the reputable teachers and abundant teaching resources.

<Files\\ D4 - Danny > - § 1 reference coded [1.10% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.10% Coverage

4. Academic results –acquire knowledge is most important, good academic, basic requirements, if school academic good, enter university easier. Schools should match children's banding

<Files\\ D5 - Diana > - § 1 reference coded [1.47% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.47% Coverage

2. Academic results & Teacher quality - Teaching quality is essential. Teachers need to care for students, be patient, and give students enough support especially if they face academic problems. It is high pressure to student if lack of care. I believe that if teachers good, students will be good.

<Files\\ D6 - Della > - § 1 reference coded [0.55% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.55% Coverage

(4) Academic results – High university entry rate is vital. She chooses IGCSE since I think it is better than DSE.

<Files\\ G1 - Gil > - § 2 references coded [3.70% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.20% Coverage

(3) Academic performance
Academic performance, in my perspective, is the demonstrated ability to perform and excel in educational activities. It is related with excellent grades and superior performance on standardized tests, university admissions exams, and curricula. DSE curriculum is good as I familiar with the syllabus and curriculum, I can advise and give help when necessary. University entry rate is essential as I think entering university is a must before starting a career life.

Reference 2 - 1.51% Coverage

First, my child academic performance is the most determinant of factor. It determines which school banding we can consider. The reputation and comment of the schools add to my consideration. University entry rate is also important. The balance of academic study and extracurricular activity allow my child lead to a happy school life.

<Files\\ G2 - Gandy > - § 1 reference coded [0.24% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.24% Coverage

1. Academic performance - University entry is vital

<Files\\ G3 - Gman > - § 1 reference coded   [0.70% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.70% Coverage

2) Academic results
- good academic results reflect in high university entry rate which give confidence to the parents,

<Files\\ G4 - Giana > - § 1 reference coded   [0.50% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.50% Coverage

2. Academic results:
- HK is competitive and critical thinking training is essential

<Files\\ G5 - Gemma > - § 2 references coded   [2.62% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.10% Coverage

(3) Academic results

Reference 2 - 2.52% Coverage

It's difficult to find work without a strong educational background. Nowadays, a bachelor's degree is insufficient. Therefore, I have a master's degree to increase my job competitiveness. A high education level will assist you in acquiring symbolic, economic and cultural capital in the future. So I expect my son to get a higher degree to maintain his social mobility in society. A high-quality secondary school is the first step to successfully learning English communication, presentation and leadership skills.

<Files\\ G6 - Gabriel > - § 1 reference coded   [5.20% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 5.20% Coverage

2. Academic quality – Graduate students career, university entry rate, lot of famous students from the media.
   Academic quality is essential when choosing a school since my son is a top student. I'll analyse the school's university admissions rate and gather details about its banding via parent groups or websites. If the university admission rate of a Band 1 secondary school decreases, elite students may leave the school, and it may revert to Band 2 classification.

   I will choose a school that is a good match for my children's needs, banding and skills. While knowledge about school banding is not publicly available, I can gather information informally via social contacts and websites. Students with good academic results, like my son, have more options and should have little difficulty enrolling in a high-quality school.

Appendix 8 Coding of the sub-theme "Academic Performance" from the Parental School Choice Factors interview extract

Table 9 Coding of the sub-theme "Academic Performance" from the interview extract of parental school choice factors

(DSS schools)

Parents	Code	Interview extract
D1 - Doris	Academic results	I think students' academic results, especially the University entry rate, are of utmost importance.
	IB	Universities in Hong Kong that are competitive favor IB students, which generates inequality because IB is only available to wealthy students... Enrolling your children in the IB curriculum at DSS schools eliminates the need to send them overseas, which is more cost effective.
D2 - Daniel	Academic performance	Academic quality of a secondary school is vital, including the high university entry rate, students with excellent academic results and DSE results, and good teaching quality. Especially, my sons, I think credentials are critical to their future.
	Academic results	I think students' academic results, especially the University entry rate, are of utmost important.
D3 – David	Teaching quality	Emphasizing teachers' quality, resources, support and student care. I like teachers to be passionate and diligent enough to take care of children, even if they are troublemakers. I like this DSS school due to the reputable teachers and abundant teaching resources.
D4 - Danny	Academic results	Acquire knowledge is most important, good academic, basic requirements, if school academic good, enter university easier. Schools should match children's banding.
D5 - Diana	Teaching quality	Teaching quality is essential. Teachers need to care for students, be patient, and give students enough support especially if they face academic problems. It is high pressure to student if lack of care. I believe that if teachers good, students will be good.
D6 - Della	Academic results	High university entry rate is vital.
	Curricula	She chooses IGCSE since I think it is better than DSE.

Table 10 Coding of the sub-theme "Academic Performance" from the interview extract of parental school choice factors

(Government schools)

Parents	Code	Interview extract
G1 - Gil	Academic performance Definition	Academic performance, in my perspective, is the demonstrated ability to perform and excel in educational activities. It is related with excellent grades and superior performance on standardized tests, university admissions exams, and curricula. DSE curriculum is good as I familiar with the syllabus and curriculum, I can advise and give help when necessary. University entry rate is essential as I think entering university is a must before starting a career life.
	Academic performance	First, my child academic performance is the most determinant of factor. It determines which school banding we can consider. The reputation and comment of the schools add to my consideration. University entry rate is also important. The balance of academic study and extracurricular activity allow my child lead to a happy school life.
G2 - Gandy	Academic results	University entry is vital
G3 - Gman	Academic results	Good academic results reflect in high university entry rate which give confidence to the parents,
G5 - Gemma	Academic results	It's difficult to find work without a strong educational background. Nowadays, a bachelor's degree is insufficient. Therefore, I have a master's degree to increase my job competitiveness. A high education level will assist you in acquiring symbolic, economic and cultural capital in the future. So I expect my son to get a higher degree to maintain his social mobility in society.
	MOI	A high-quality secondary school is the first step to successfully learning English communication, presentation and leadership skills.
G6 - Gabriel	Academic performance	Graduate students career, university entry rate, lot of famous students from the media. Academic quality is essential when choosing a school since my son is a top student. I'll analyse the school's university admissions rate and gather details about its banding via parent groups or websites. If the university admission rate of a Band 1 secondary school decreases, elite students may leave the school, and it may revert to Band 2 classification.
	Child-focused	I will choose a school that is a good match for my children's needs, banding and skills. While knowledge about school banding is not publicly available, I can gather information informally via social contacts and websites. Students with good academic results, like my son, have more options and should have little difficulty enrolling in a high-quality school.

Appendix 9: Definition of terms

Table 11 Definition of terms

Terms	Definition
Bourdieu's theory of practice	Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002) is a French sociologist who focused on the power dynamics of society and interested in the relationship between culture and social stratification and the reproduction and exercise of power. His theories of social stratification that deal with status and power is highly influential. One of his contributions is the relationship between various forms of capital, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. His theory of practice involves three main conceptual categories— habitus, field, and capital — and concepts of struggle and strategy, which imply individuals, families, and social groups seeking to exploit their positions in various social fields.
Concerted cultivation model	The concerted cultivation model entails parents attempting to instil their children with cultural resources acquired through broad exposure to extracurricular activities during childhoods, which benefits them in the educational system (Wheeler, 2018)
Cultural capital	Cultural capital is defined as individuals' ownership of cultural resources, such as knowledge, skills, intellect, and education that benefit them in social life and contribute to their social mobility and reproduction (J.P.E Harper-Scott, 2009). It may be operationalized as cultural knowledge since it encompasses the value placed on university attainment (Ra, 2011). Cultural capital appears in embodied, objectified and institutionalized forms, and can be used to explain the educational inequalities between social groups (Bourdieu, 1986b). Embodied cultural capital: Embodied cultural capital denotes the long-lasting dispositions of body and mind cultivated over time by individuals, including their habitus, behaviours, and general embedded characters like learning, accents, knowledge, skills and language (Bourdieu, 1986b). Objectified cultural capital: The objectified cultural capital appears in objects like dictionaries, books, libraries, pictures, instruments (Bourdieu, 1986b) or through participation in highbrow cultural events, such as visiting museums, galleries, or concerts (Byun, 2012). Other indicators include reading habits and academic environment, family educational resources, and extracurricular activities (Jæger, 2011). Institutionalized cultural capital: Institutionalized cultural capital refers to academic qualifications that acquired by a person to attain the education level valued by others (Bourdieu, 2011), which has a positive effect on children's academic performance and educational attainment (Evans, 2010a; Zhao, 2012). It can be the symbolic resources transmitted from the middle-upper classes through generations to maintain class status (Bourdieu, 1977).
Cultural homogeneity	Cultural homogeneity refers to a group of individuals who share a common background and similar behaviours, values or beliefs (Calabuig, 2017).
Economic capital	Economic capital refers to individuals' wealth or income, the dominant type of capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that manifest in a family's overall financial position (Bourdieu, 1986b; Ra, 2011). It shows how financial resources are critical in school choice practices.
Effective teachers	Effective teachers are defined as teachers capable of assisting students in overcoming academic, physical, and social obstacles (Woo, 2011).
Human capital theory	Human capital theory is based on a set of economic theories applied to human behaviour, and it asserts that people make decisions based on their maximum benefits (Poppy, 2006).
Interpretivism	Interpretivism, a qualitative approach, entrusts researchers with the responsibility of observing study phenomena and incorporating human interest into a study (Myers, 2008).
Meritocracy	Meritocracy is a political system in which economic resources or political power are vested in individual people on the basis of talent, effort, and achievement, rather than wealth or social class. (Wikipedia)

Terms	Definitions
Middle class	The middle classes are people sandwiched between the upper and working classes. They are committed to education and possess distinctive qualities such as individualism, ambition, a sense of entitlement, educational achievement, self-confidence, and competitiveness (Reay, 2011). Methodologically in this research, the participants are families who owned private housing, engaging in professional or managerial occupations (John, 2016) and with university education (Lam, 2015).
Neoliberalism	Neoliberalism refers to concepts associated with economic liberalism and free-market capitalism. It is often correlated with economic liberalization policies, including privatization, globalization, deregulation, free trade and decreases in government spending to increase the role of the private sector in society (Haymes, 2015).
Parental school choice factors	Academic performance: includes the academic ranking, HKDSE results, university entry rate and curricula. Teaching quality: includes the qualifications of teachers, the teaching medium, and class size. Child-focused learning: means schools that meet children's unique academic, learning, and development needs, and offer a range of extracurricular opportunities to help their children boost their cultural capital. School culture: encompasses discipline and religious values Socio-economic status (SES): includes not only income but also educational achievement, professional recognition, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class (Baker, 2014).
Parentocracy	Parentocracy, or parental participation in school decision-making, is a product of the marketization of education, which refers to a system in which the capital and desires of parents determine their children's success in school and society instead of the children's abilities and efforts (Wheeler, 2018).
Pluralism	Pluralism is a political philosophy holding that people of different beliefs, backgrounds, and lifestyles can coexist in the same society and participate equally in the political process.
Quality	Quality is defined as the customer satisfaction level with the service offered in a marketized school context (Jidamva, 2012; Manyanga, 2007). It is considered perfection, excellence, consistency, empowerment, transformation, enhancement, and fitness for purpose from different perspectives (Jidamva, 2012; Lomas, 2002; Weir, 2009). Robey defines a quality school as: "A school based on warm, caring relationships, focuses on the useful and relevant application of knowledge with a goal of competence, and uses a lead-management approach to promote self-evaluation and continual improvement" (Robey, 2018: 16)
Rational Choice Theory	Rational choice theory refers to a set of principles that help in the understanding of economic and social behaviours, in which individuals use logical calculations to make rational decisions that maximize their personal benefit (Ogu, 2013).
Reflexivity	Bourdieu argues that researchers should situate themselves within cultural production and recognise the influence of researchers' position on the research data, where research reflexivity is the route to objectivity (Bourdieu, 1989).
Social capital	Bourdieu defines social capital as investment strategies to help or support social relationships so that individuals can benefit from the resources generated within social networks (Bourdieu, 1986b), including family relationships, professional groups and associations (Tierney, 2006).

Terms	Definitions
Social class	Social class includes the upper, middle, and working classes (Bourdieu, 2010). The position of classes and class factions in the social space is assessed by their quantity and composition of capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu suggests that classes are characterized as: "who occupy similar positions in social space ... are subject to similar conditions of existence and conditioning factors and, as a result, are endowed with similar dispositions which prompt them to develop similar practices." (Bourdieu, 1987: 6) Social class is determined by occupation, income, education, power, cultural interests and lifestyle (John, 2016; Ou, 2018; Savage, 2013; Yan, 2014. Among all factors, the most widely used indicators are income, educational level, and occupation (Forrest, 2004; Karsten, 2015; Kraus, 2012, Ou, 2018), representing an individual or group's relative position in an economic-social-cultural hierarchy.
Spillover effect	"Spillover effect" refers to peer influence, which can be either positive or negative. Middle-class students have a positive impact on their peers' academic success, whereas working-class students have a negative spillover effect (Gottfried, 2013).
Symbolic violence	Symbolic violence refers to power dynamics that result in the internalization of humiliations and the legitimization of hierarchy, resulting in self-blame for misfortunes and naturalization of the status quo (Colaguori, 2010).