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# Parental school satisfaction in the context of segregation of basic education in urban Finland

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the implications of the school choice policy, which has contributed to the segregation of basic education in urban Finland, by analysing the connection between the socio-economic status (SES) of schools' student populations and parents' satisfaction with their children's schools. The 318 participants were parents of lower secondary school students attending socio-economically affluent, average, and disadvantaged schools in three Finnish cities. Multiple indicators multiple causes modelling, with school SES and parental education as covariates, was used to test the hypothesis that a school's higher SES is connected to higher levels of parental school satisfaction with different aspects of the school's functioning. The hypothesis was partially verified as the results showed that a higher SES of a school implied more parental satisfaction with home-school cooperation and school culture. The findings suggest that the social segregation of basic education in urban Finland has implications beyond the differentiation of students' academic achievements and provide empirical evidence on the workings of one of the segregation mechanisms.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Parentocracy; segregation of basic education; parental school satisfaction; school SES; parental education

## Introduction

Nearly 30 years ago, Phillip Brown (1990) wrote about the 'third wave' of education, which, according to him, implied a shift away from the meritocratic ideology of everyone having equal chances of success depending on their intellect and achievement towards a new ideology of parentocracy that emphasizes the rights of parents as consumers of education and strongly favours the logic and principles of the free market in education. An often-cited quote from Brown states that, in an educational parentocracy, 'a child's education is increasingly dependent upon the wealth and wishes of parents, rather than the ability and efforts of pupils' (Brown, 1990, p. 66). While Brown was referring to the social history of British education, he argued that similar changes have also taken place in other countries. Indeed, research has repeatedly shown that the emergence of parentocracy is a phenomenon not only of British educational policy and ideology but also an international one relating to developments throughout the Western world (e.g. Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016; David, 1993, p. 275), with Finland and the other Nordic countries being no exception (Lundahl, 2016; Rinne, 2000). Central to this shift towards a parentocracy are the large-scale neoliberal educational reforms implemented during the last thirty years (see Baltodano, 2012; Imsen, Blossing, & Moos, 2017; McGregor, 2009). Even though there is

considerable variation in the ways and degrees to which reforms related to this wave have been implemented in different national education systems, several common features can be distinguished. These include dismantling centralized educational bureaucracies, emphasizing competition and demands for efficiency and accountability, and increasing the autonomic decision-making power of schools and parents, with school autonomy and free school choice<sup>1</sup> among the most important keywords (e.g. Gerwitz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Rinne, 2003).

The advocates of these neoliberal educational policies insist that education works best when it follows the market logic (see Baltodano, 2012; Bunar, 2008; McGregor, 2009; Rinne, 2000) because the free choice of services and competition between providers are expected to improve the quality and efficiency of the use of public funds (Dovemark et al., 2018). This is seen to increase educational democracy by enabling students and families to choose instead of being assigned, and to promote social and ethnic integration by shattering the social enclosures of the poorest students in the high-poverty, low-achieving schools claimed to have been caused by the attendance zone policy (Bunar, 2010). However, one of the main arguments against these policies (see Bunar, 2010; Yang Hansen & Gustafsson, 2016) challenges the notions of integration and democracy by stating that free school choice, which lies at the heart of the marketization

of education, is mainly being used by the socially strongest families, thus fuelling social segregation as it widens the social and ethnic differences between schools (e.g. Ball, 2003; Reay et al., 2008; Rinne, 2014; Söderström & Uusitalo, 2010; van Zanten, 2007). As Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton (2016) put it, parentocracy is parental choice, preference, empowerment, entitlement, or power. They argue that the ideology of parentocracy encourages parents to become more involved in their children's education through school choice or more direct engagement with the processes of education, but that the disposition and capacity to engage, as well as the effectiveness of this engagement, depends on their socio-economic position.

The marketization of education has put the focus on parents, who are often seen as consumers of education (e.g. Johnsson & Lindgren, 2010), and a significant amount of research has been dedicated to examining parents' views on and satisfaction with their children's schools (see Rätty & Kasanen, 2007). The viewpoint of these studies has frequently been derived from the sociology of education, and the main focus has been on parental school choice as well as its determinants and consequences both internationally (e.g. Ball & Vincent, 1998; Gibbons & Silva, 2011; Kim & Hwang, 2014; Pöder, Lauri, & Veski, 2017) and in Finland (e.g. Kosunen, 2014; Poikolainen, 2011; Seppänen, 2006). The other dominant strand of research on parental school satisfaction comes from the field of school administration and management, where studies have mainly been interested in the components of parental satisfaction and how to measure them. As the competition between schools increases and a school's functioning is constantly monitored and evaluated, the question is what the determinants and dimensions of parental satisfaction are and how schools can improve their reputation and desirability in local markets in order to survive the competition and garner good evaluations (Friedman, Bobrowski, & Geraci, 2006; Li & Hung, 2009; Meier & Lemmer, 2019; Skallerud, 2011). However, despite the abundance of studies on the different aspects and implications of parental school satisfaction, not much is known, especially in the Finnish context, about the relationship between the socio-economic composition of a school's student population (i.e. school mix or the school's socio-economic status, SES) and parental school satisfaction after the school choice has been made (or parents have opted not to choose) and the child has enrolled in the school in question. Hence, this study aimed to contribute to the understanding of the role that school SES has in relation to parents' views on their children's lower secondary schools and their functioning, as well as to take part in the discussion on the segregation of basic education in urban Finland

by providing further empirical evidence on one of the mechanisms of this segregational development.

## Segregation of basic education in Finland

Equal access to education, a common core of subjects, and no segregation based on ability, gender, or social class<sup>2</sup> have traditionally been among the essential aspects of what is, or at least what was, known as the Nordic model of education (Imsen et al., 2017; Lundahl, 2016). However, neoliberal ideas have had a significant impact on education in the Nordic countries, and the introduced interpretations of the school choice policy have resulted in growing educational divisions as schools are becoming more socio-economically and ethnically homogenous<sup>3</sup> (e.g. Bernelius, 2013; Kupari et al., 2013; Lundahl, 2016). While not as pronounced as in, for example, Denmark and Sweden, the increase in the use of market mechanisms in the field of education is also very much evident in Finland (Berisha, Rinne, Järvinen, & Kinnari, 2017; Dovemark et al., 2018).

The basis of the Finnish education system is a nine-year comprehensive school that provides basic education at primary and lower secondary levels, is run with public funds, and is free of charge for the families. In Finland, the state and municipalities administer all basic education, and schools are not allowed to financially profit from their operation. There are no national testing systems, no public league tables, and almost no private schools in the basic education system (Berisha et al., 2017). In regard to the Finnish comprehensive school, many view the introduction of the school choice policy in the mid-1990s as the most important education policy change of the last decades. While comprehensive schools are required to maintain a national core curriculum, they are also allowed to specialize in certain areas to meet the different demands of parents and the different aptitudes of students by offering special subject profiles (e.g. in mathematics, science, languages) in so-called classes with special emphasis, where students are selected on the basis of applications and aptitude tests. At the same time, while children are obliged to attend a designated neighbourhood school defined by local educational authorities, parents are also able to choose between schools based on its particular character and curriculum. (Varjo & Kalalahti, 2015; see also Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015a; Varjo, Kalalahti, & Lundahl, 2015a.) Thus, while the Finnish basic education system is non-selective, given that it does not – officially – involve any ability-based grouping of students, there are, nevertheless, practices related to the school choice policy in basic education that lead to grouping students based on their school performance (Berisha & Seppänen, 2017, p. 241). These distinctive practices of school choice appear particularly in large

cities, making this an urban phenomenon in Finland (Räty, 2013; Seppänen, Rinne, & Sairanen, 2012).<sup>4</sup> Recent studies show a clear difference in the socio-economic backgrounds of those students who attend these special emphasis classes and those who attend regular classes. Students in special emphasis classes typically have very good school performance records and are from socially advantaged backgrounds (Kalalahti, Silvennoinen, & Varjo, 2015a; Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015a). On the other hand, children from working-class backgrounds do not attend these classes as often, even when their academic achievement is excellent (Silvennoinen, Rinne, Kosunen, Kalalahti, & Seppänen, 2015).

Because the implementation of the school choice policy encourages and promotes early selection of children from different socio-economic backgrounds to different educational paths within school levels, in Finland, urban schools and school classes are divided into those with high status and popularity, and those with low status and popularity (From et al., 2014; Kosunen, 2014; Seppänen, 2006). There is growing evidence of systematic growth in differences between and within schools in learning results and socio-economic composition of the student populations (e.g. Berisha & Seppänen, 2017; Bernelius & Kauppinen, 2011; Bernelius & Vattovaara, 2016; Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015b; Kuusela, 2012). The gap between the best and the weakest comprehensive schools in terms of student performance is growing (Kupari et al., 2013, p. 44; Vettenranta et al., 2016), and in the capital city Helsinki, a group of 'failing' schools has emerged (Bernelius, 2011). Also, recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessments indicate that the positive characteristics of the Finnish school system are deteriorating. For instance, the effect of socio-economic background on learning outcomes has gotten stronger, and the proportion of students with low levels of skills has grown significantly (OECD, 2013, 2016).

### Parental school satisfaction

Research on parental school satisfaction focuses typically either on school choice and its determinants or on the components of satisfaction and how to measure them. With regard to these topics, school reputation is often a central element discussed in the literature. However, it should be noted that the concepts of parental school satisfaction, school reputation, and school choice motives are intertwined and overlapping, as are the studies on these topics. Factors such as students' academic achievement, school SES, school culture and climate, teaching and teacher quality, safety, and discipline are among the components that form or contribute to, depending on the viewpoint of the study, parental satisfaction,

school reputation, or school choice motives (parental satisfaction: Friedman, Bobrowski, & Markow, 2007; Gibbons & Silva, 2011; school reputation: Oplatka & Nupar, 2012; Skallerud, 2011; school choice: Schneider & Buckley, 2002; van Zanten, 2013). Also, school leadership and administration, curriculum, class sizes, transportation, facilities and equipment, and a school's marketing activities are mentioned in the literature in this regard (Friedman et al., 2006; Johnsson & Lindgren, 2010; Li & Hung, 2009; Meier & Lemmer, 2019).

While many studies consider only a few contributing factors at a time, there are also some that approach parental school satisfaction from a wider perspective, taking several different dimensions into account. Meier and Lemmer (2019) have found four major themes related to parents' satisfaction: school culture (including beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and rules), communication between home and school, quality of instruction, and classroom organization and discipline. Friedman et al. (2006, 2007) have suggested a conceptual model in which overall parental school satisfaction comprises three factors: communication and involvement, school resources, and leadership quality and budget adequacy. In an Icelandic study, influential factors of parental school satisfaction included children's well-being and development at school, ability to influence school decisions and future vision, and adequacy of special support when required (Jónsdóttir, Björnsdóttir, & Bæck, 2017).

### Parental school satisfaction in Finland

In Finland, Hannu Räty and his colleagues, in particular, have conducted research on parents' perceptions and experiences with their children's schools and schooling at primary and lower secondary levels (e.g. Räty, 2010; Räty & Kasanen, 2007; Räty, Ruokolainen, & Kasanen, 2012; Räty, Snellman, Mäntysaari-Hetekorpi, & Vornanen, 1996). The overall level of school satisfaction among comprehensive school students' parents has been found to be rather high and the share of dissatisfied parents low (Räty, 2010; Räty & Kasanen, 2007), although there is a gradual decrease in the satisfaction as children progress through basic education (Räty, 2010). Finnish parents are especially satisfied with the standard of teaching, their ability to influence school functioning, and the fairness of assessments (Rinne & Tuittu, 2011), but their views vary based on, for example, their gender (Räty & Kasanen, 2007) and social class (Rinne & Tuittu, 2011). Middle-class parents and mothers are more satisfied with their children's schools than working-class parents and fathers. Parental education has also been found to be significant in this regard, but the observed direction of this connection differs between studies; while some studies suggest that high

levels of education indicates more school satisfaction (Räty, 2010; Räty & Kasanen, 2007; Räty, Kasanen, & Laine, 2009), there are also results showing that parents with only compulsory education are more satisfied than parents with higher levels of education (Rinne & Tuittu, 2011; for similar results from Iceland and Poland, see; Jónsdóttir et al., 2017; Kaczan, Rycielski, & Wasilewska, 2014). Academically educated parents also feel more entitled and competent to criticize the school (Räty, 2010; Räty et al., 2012).

Studies examining school reputation in urban Finland have found that a school's social composition and a child's expected school contentment are important factors for school reputation and desirability, as well as for parental preferences in school choice. However, reputational and social differences can also be found between school classes in a school (Kosunen, 2016), a phenomenon related to schools being able to offer special subject profiles in selective classes with a special emphasis. Many Finnish parents prefer moderately socially mixed classes with slight aptitude-based student selection because they want to choose the kind of social environment their children experience at school, and a very high percentage of students from immigrant and lower socio-economic backgrounds are seen to potentially lead to lower school contentment as well as to unwillingness to study and follow school rules. However, at the same time, parents tend to want to avoid so-called elite classes since they are often considered to be too competitive and stressful environments, endangering a child's school contentment. (Kosunen, 2014; Kosunen & Carrasco, 2016)

Against the backdrop of parentocracy and educational segregation, this article sets out to examine the extent and mechanisms of the segregation of basic education in urban Finland by asking whether school SES is connected to how satisfied parents are with different aspects of their child's school and its functioning. Parental education is also taken into consideration. Three factors of parental school satisfaction that have been shown to be important in previous studies were derived from the data, namely, *school culture* (Friedman et al., 2006; Meier & Lemmer, 2019), *child's school satisfaction and learning* (Kosunen & Carrasco, 2016; van Zanten, 2013), and *home-school cooperation* (Friedman et al., 2007; Jónsdóttir & Björnsdóttir, 2012; Meier & Lemmer, 2019). School culture includes shared attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values, as well as school safety and social interactions among students and between students and teachers, which all manifest themselves in students' behaviours at school and in teachers' attitudes towards students (cf. Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013). Here, the school culture factor comprises components such as school safety, having high expectations of students, effective management,

treating students with respect, and meeting students' individual needs. A child's satisfaction and learning at school refers to the child's enjoyment, positive experiences, and progression at school, while home-school cooperation includes a school's communication with parents and endorsement of parental involvement.

### Aim of the study

In this article, the focus is on the school satisfaction of parents of lower secondary school students in urban Finland, where the number of comprehensive schools in local school markets is relatively high (i.e. there are more than one or two schools to choose from), where municipal policies favouring parental school choice are applied, and where schools differ based on the socio-economic profile of their student populations. In addition to examining the overall level of parental school satisfaction, the aim of the study was to analyse whether parents' education and school SES are connected to this satisfaction. While the relationship between parental education and school satisfaction is interesting in itself, the importance of including parental education in the analysis is highlighted by the fact that the educational level of students' parents at a given school is, quite naturally, not independent from the school SES (c.f. Lekholm, 2011).

The hypothesis is that parental education and school SES are predictors of parental school satisfaction, meaning that higher levels of parental education and school SES indicate higher levels of satisfaction. This hypothesis is based on results attained in previous studies. School SES has been associated with factors such as students' academic achievements (e.g. OECD, 2010; Sirin, 2005), academic self-concept (Huguet et al., 2009; Marsh & Hau, 2003), emotional and behavioural school engagement (Järvinen & Tikkanen, 2019), and well-being (Rimpelä & Karvonen, 2010), all of which have been shown to be related to parental school satisfaction. Research has also shown that there is a connection between parents' education and their school satisfaction. In this study, it is assumed that higher education indicates higher satisfaction, especially with regard to home-school cooperation because highly educated middle-class parents have better abilities and readiness to communicate and cooperate with schools than do working-class parents, which makes interacting with schools easier for them and also makes them more confident in this regard (Ball, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Miller, 2015). Hence, parents' orientation to and participation in communication and cooperation with schools differs based on their social class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Reay, 1998), which is also the case in Finland (Kalalahti, Silvennoinen, & Varjo, 2015b). Here, the

concepts of habitus<sup>5</sup> (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993) and social-psychological distance (Räty & Snellman, 1998) are useful. Following Bourdieu's theory on class-based educational inequalities (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), the closer parents' cultural origins are to the culture of a school, the more compatible is their habitus with the rules and demands of the field of education. As another way to conceptualize this, it has been postulated that parents' social position, education in particular, locates them in an educational hierarchy and defines their social-psychological distance from school; the higher the parents are in this hierarchy, the closer they are to the notions and values of the school (Räty et al., 2009; Räty & Snellman, 1998). With regard to the other parental school satisfaction factors, the hypothesized 'direction' of the connections gains additional support from research showing that middle-class parents tend to have more positive recollections of their own school days than working-class parents, and that parents with positive school recollections display more school satisfaction than those with negative memories (Räty, 2007).

## Methods

### Sample and procedure

The data were collected within a Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE) research project. The GOETE project involved eight EU countries, including Finland, and it was concerned with understanding how education systems deal with the changing relationship between education and social integration (see Parreira do Amaral et al., 2011). The participants of this study were parents of lower secondary school students attending their final year of compulsory education (ninth grade) in three Finnish cities: Helsinki (capital city, 604,000 inhabitants, Uusimaa region), Turku (180,000 inhabitants, southwest Finland), and Tampere (217,000 inhabitants, Pirkanmaa region). In all three cities, municipal policies favouring parental school choice have increased the segregation of comprehensive schools (Varjo, Kalalahti, & Seppänen, 2015b). Lower secondary schools were the main sampling unit selected at random from a sampling frame, and the survey was carried out in late 2010 and early 2011. The 635 students who responded to a GOETE student survey at school were also given a questionnaire to take home to their parents. Out of the parents' questionnaires, 50.1% ( $n = 318$ ; response rate per city: Turku 58%, Tampere 52%, and Helsinki 41%) completed and returned the questionnaire, which assessed, among other things, their satisfaction with several aspects of their child's school.

The sample was stratified into three categories according to school SES, and it included responses from parents whose children attended socio-economically affluent ( $n = 120$ ; 37.7%), average ( $n = 105$ ; 33.0%), or disadvantaged ( $n = 93$ ; 29.3%) schools. Six schools from each city were selected so that each category was represented by two schools per city. The main criteria for classifying the schools were the socio-economic structure and unemployment level of the schools' catchment areas, as assessed by official statistics. In addition, the share of students with immigrant backgrounds was considered, and the results of a previous study (Seppänen, 2006) examining school choice policy and student flows in Finland were also utilized when applicable. A majority of the respondents were mothers (83.4%) and had a higher education degree (70.9%). As highly educated parents were over-represented in the data, Table 1, presenting the differences in socio-economic structure between the three school groups, is based on the related student data to provide a more accurate picture of the dissimilarities in the structure of schools' student populations and to further validate the categorization.

### Measures and analysis methods

The GOETE project developed the questionnaire that was used to survey the parents (see McDowell et al., 2012). It included 19 questions related to parental satisfaction with their child's school. As this measurement instrument had not been previously validated, the first step of the analysis process was to examine the factor structure with principal components analysis (PCA). Then, the structure was further refined and validated by using confirmatory factor analysis

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics (percentages) and significance of differences between disadvantaged, average, and affluent lower secondary schools (chi-square test).

	School SES			p
	Disadvantaged	Average	Affluent	
<b>Mother's educational level</b>				
High	14.7	44.9	49.3	< .001
Low	85.3	55.1	50.7	
<b>Father's educational level</b>				
High	20.9	44.7	46.8	< .001
Low	79.1	55.3	53.2	
<b>Mother's occupational status</b>				
High	32.5	54.7	59.2	< .001
Medium	46.5	34.5	30.4	
Low	18.4	4.7	5.2	
Entrepreneur	2.6	6.1	5.2	
<b>Father's occupational status</b>				
High	24.1	43.0	53.5	< .001
Medium	19.2	13.4	8.0	
Low	50.0	30.9	24.7	
Entrepreneur	6.7	12.7	13.8	

Educational levels are post-secondary education or lower (low) and first stage of tertiary education or higher (high); occupational status categories (c.f. Statistics Finland) are manual worker (low); clerical support, service, or sales worker (medium); technician, associate professional, professional, or manager (high); and self-employed (entrepreneur).

(CFA). The third step was to test the potential connections that parental education and school SES have with parental school satisfaction using multiple indicators multiple causes (MIMIC) modelling. Both covariates used in this study are ordinal variables: school SES has three levels (disadvantaged, average, and affluent), and parental education has five (lower secondary education, upper secondary education, post-secondary non-tertiary education, first stage of tertiary education, and second stage of tertiary education).

The analyses were carried out using Mplus 6.0 software with the maximum likelihood estimator (Muthén & Muthén, 2006) and IBM SPSS 20. A small amount of missing data (.3–4.4% per item) was handled by the expectation–maximization procedure because identical data sets were needed for working with the two analysis software packages. With regard to normality, the research variables' univariate distributions were within a reasonable range (skewness  $\pm 2$ , kurtosis  $\pm 7$ ; see Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). The suitability of PCA was assessed prior to analysis, and four items needed to be excluded due to strong cross-loadings. When PCA was run on the 15 remaining items (overall Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test [KMO] value .89, with individual KMO values between .77 and .94, Bartlett's test statistically significant at level .001), it revealed three components with eigenvalues greater than one, which explained 38.9%, 11.4%, and 7.7% (altogether 58%) of the total variance. A Varimax orthogonal rotation was used to aid interpretability, and while the rotated solution did not fully exhibit a simple structure (see Table 2), the three-component solution met the interpretability criterion, and the components were retained as a starting point for further validation of the factor structure with CFA.

In the CFA model, residuals were initially assumed to be uncorrelated, and the factors were allowed to

correlate. The fit of the CFA model was evaluated by the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (Byrne, 1989) and fit indices, including root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and comparative fit index (CFI). To indicate a well-fitting model, the following cut-off values are advised by Hu and Bentler (1999): RMSEA value under .08, SRMR value close to .06, and TLI and CFI values close to .95. In addition, the ratio of the chi-square statistic and degrees of freedom was carefully considered, but the statistical significance of the chi-square value alone was not interpreted to indicate a poor fit (see Byrne, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1995). Some slight modifications had to be made to the CFA model in order to achieve a good fit between the data and the model as indicated by the ratio of the chi-square statistic and the degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2(87) = 214.02, p < .001$ ). By allowing three residual correlations, namely PS\_13 and PS\_14 (.27), PS\_12 and PS\_13 (.26), and PS\_1 and PS\_2 (.29),<sup>6</sup> respectively, a good fit to the data was achieved as indicated by both the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio and the model fit indices ( $\chi^2(84) = 162.14, p < .001$ , RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04, CFI = .96, TLI = .95). Hence, the CFA validated the three-factor structure: school culture (standardized factor loadings .59–.76), home–school cooperation (.59–.73), and child's school satisfaction and learning (.52–.81).

## Results

The general level of school satisfaction among parents of lower secondary school students was relatively high. Parents were the most satisfied with the child's school satisfaction and learning ( $M = 3.05, SD = .58$ ), then with school culture ( $M = 2.95, SD = .46$ ), and they were least satisfied with home–school cooperation ( $M = 2.68, SD = .53$ ), but as the mean values<sup>7</sup> show, the differences in satisfaction levels were not substantial.

**Table 2.** Parental satisfaction with child's school; rotated structure matrix for PCA with Varimax rotation (rotated component coefficients and communalities).

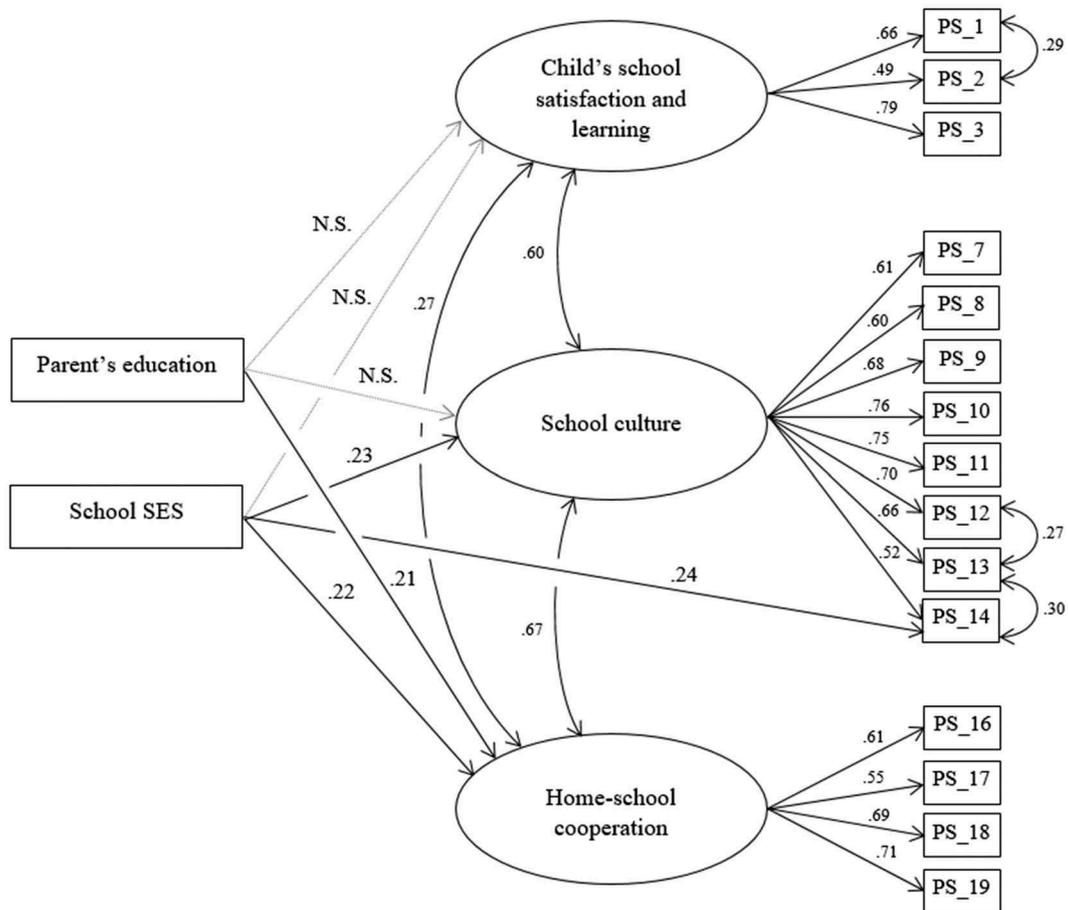
Questionnaire items	C1	C2	C3	Comm.
PS_1 Child enjoys school.	.19	.05	<b>.83</b>	.73
PS_2 Child is making progress at school.	.03	.11	<b>.82</b>	.69
PS_3 I am overall happy about child's experiences at school.	.42	–.04	<b>.66</b>	.62
PS_7 School keeps child safe.	<b>.72</b>	.07	.14	.54
PS_8 School expects child to work hard.	<b>.53</b>	.22	.29	.41
PS_9 School makes sure child is prepared for future.	<b>.55</b>	.34	.29	.50
PS_10 School encourages child to develop their personal qualities.	<b>.58</b>	.41	.29	.59
PS_11 School treats child with respect.	<b>.64</b>	.29	.27	.57
PS_12 School meets child's particular needs.	<b>.65</b>	.29	.29	.59
PS_13 School is led and managed effectively.	<b>.75</b>	.25	.04	.63
PS_14 School has a good reputation in the community.	<b>.78</b>	.12	–.03	.62
PS_16 School informs me of child's progress.	.17	<b>.70</b>	.13	.53
PS_17 School has explained to me how I can help child with work.	.15	<b>.72</b>	–.03	.54
PS_18 I am encouraged to participate in decision making at school.	.16	<b>.74</b>	.04	.58
PS_19 School takes account of my suggestions and concerns.	.33	<b>.68</b>	.06	.57

Figures in bold indicate the component in which the individual items were included (Component 1: school culture, Cronbach's alpha .87; Component 2: home–school cooperation, alpha .74; Component 3: child's school satisfaction and learning, alpha .75).

MIMIC modelling was used to assess the connections of school SES and parents' education with parental school satisfaction. The fit of the model (Figure 1) to the data was good, as indicated by the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio and the model fit indices ( $n = 295$ ,<sup>8</sup>  $\chi^2 (107) = 202.38$ ,  $p < .001$ , RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .04, CFI = .94, and TLI = .93). The model showed that parental education was positively connected to their satisfaction with home-school cooperation. However, parents' education did not contribute to their satisfaction with school culture or child's school satisfaction and learning, which indicates that parents were equally satisfied with their children's school in these regards despite their own educational background. School SES was a statistically significant predictor of parental satisfaction with both home-school cooperation and school culture. The higher the school SES, the more satisfied the parents were. As with parental education, school SES was not associated with parental satisfaction with child's school satisfaction and learning. In addition to its connection with two of the latent factors, there was a statistically significant direct path from school SES to item PS\_14 'School has

a good reputation in the community'; a higher school SES indicated more positive perceptions of the school's reputation.

One of the questionnaire items that did not fit the parental school satisfaction factor solution, namely 'There is a lot of competition between students at my child's school', is very interesting, especially against the backdrop of the current Finnish and, more broadly, European educational policies. Hence, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if there were differences in parents' perceptions of the amount of competition between students based on school SES.<sup>9</sup> The ANOVA result was statistically significant with  $F(2, 315) = 3.52$ ,  $p = .031$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .022$ . Parents' level of agreement with the statement that there is a lot of competition between students at their child's school grew stronger from the disadvantaged group ( $M = 1.77$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) to the average group ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = .72$ ) and then to the affluent group ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = .73$ ). Bonferroni post hoc analysis showed that the statistically significant difference was between the groups of disadvantaged and affluent ( $p = .027$ ). This means that parents whose children attended affluent schools felt that there was more competition between students than did the parents whose children's schools were disadvantaged.



**Figure 1.** The MIMIC model examining the connections of parents' education levels and school SES to the latent factors of parental school satisfaction (standardized coefficients; statistically significant paths and correlations all significant at the .001 level).

## Discussion

This study set out to examine the way parental education, and especially the socio-economic composition of a lower secondary school's student population, are connected to parental school satisfaction in urban Finland and to thus provide further empirical evidence regarding one of the mechanisms of segregation in basic education. The rationale for this stems from recent research results concerning the segregation of comprehensive schools with regard to the social and ethnic compositions of student populations (Berisha & Seppänen, 2017; From et al., 2014), reputation and popularity of schools and classes (Kosunen, 2014; Rinne, Carrasco, & Flores, 2015; Seppänen, 2006), and students' academic achievements (Bernelius, 2011; Kupari et al., 2013) in the Finnish school system, which has been internationally acknowledged for its ability to promote educational equality. Three factors of parental satisfaction were derived from the survey data: school culture, home-school cooperation, and child's school satisfaction and learning. It was assumed, based on results obtained in previous studies, that parental education and school SES would be positively connected with these three dimensions of satisfaction. This hypothesis was partially verified.

### Parental education

According to the results of this study, parental education was positively connected to their satisfaction with home-school cooperation, where higher levels of education indicated more satisfaction. This expected observation is in line with studies showing that parents' orientation to and participation in communication and cooperation with schools depends on their social class and education (e.g. Friedman et al., 2006, 2007; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Kalalahti et al., 2015b). Because the expectations that schools have regarding parental involvement are likely to better match the values, capacities, and involvement styles of middle-class parents than those of working-class parents (Bæck, 2005), highly educated middle-class parents are more confident and have better abilities to interact with schools, and they feel more competent and entitled to criticize the school when they see a need to do so (Lareau, 2003; Miller, 2015; Rätty et al., 2012). This is likely to contribute to their satisfaction; the smaller the social-psychological distance from the school and its values (Rätty et al., 2009; Rätty & Snellman, 1998), and the more compatible the habitus with the culture of a school (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), the more satisfied parents are with home-school cooperation.

However, counter to the hypothesis, there was no association between parents' education levels and

their views on school culture or child's satisfaction and learning at school. The lack of this association could be partially explained by the somewhat different dimensions of schools' functioning and characteristics included here and in those studies that have found a positive association between parental education and school satisfaction (Friedman et al., 2006; Rätty, 2010; Rätty et al., 2009). Rätty and colleagues have found differences based on parents' education in mainly their views of their children's school success and the fairness of a student's treatment at school, but not in, for example, their views on the quality of the instruction or the educational assessment (Rätty & Kasanen, 2007). Moreover, it has also been argued that vocationally educated parents and parents with higher education (who together formed the vast majority of the respondents to this study) are equally satisfied with different aspects of their children's schools (Jónsdóttir et al., 2017; Kaczan et al., 2014; Rinne & Tuittu, 2011, p. 116). Nevertheless, due to these somewhat contradictory results, more research on this topic is needed before reliable conclusions can be drawn in the Finnish context or beyond.

### School SES

School SES was a predictor of parental satisfaction with both home-school cooperation and school culture; the higher the SES, the more satisfied the parents. There is a concordance between this finding and the findings of previous studies in which school SES had been linked with factors related to parental school satisfaction, such as students' academic achievement (e.g. OECD, 2010; Sirin, 2005), academic self-concept (Huguet et al., 2009; Marsh & Hau, 2003), and emotional and behavioural school engagement (Järvinen & Tikkanen, 2019). While this study shows only that school SES and these two aspects of parental school satisfaction are statistically associated and does not provide proof of a causal relationship, it can still be fruitful to speculate on some possible causal processes that could shed light on the empirical correlation observed here. As more highly educated middle-class parents are more inclined and able to engage in cooperation with schools, their position in an educational hierarchy is higher, and their social-psychological distance from the school is smaller (Rätty et al., 2009), it can be assumed that when the overall SES of a school's student population is high, involving parents and carrying out home-school operations are easier for the school and can be done more efficiently, thus increasing parents' satisfaction. Moreover, it has been found that Finnish schools situated in middle-class neighbourhoods can be more prone to taking parents into consideration in their activities and more actively making room for

cooperation and parents' own initiatives as compared to schools located in working-class neighbourhoods, which can be more passive in relation to parents and leave less room for cooperation and parents' initiatives (Metso, 2004). When parents are not adequately included in making important decisions, it can indicate that they are not respected as equal partners by the school (Bæck, 2009). Hence, it is not only the general disposition of parents towards cooperation with schools and the ensuing ease of this collaboration but also the disposition of the school towards parents that can explain the association between school SES and parental satisfaction in this regard.

Also the observation that school SES is a predictor of parental satisfaction with school culture, which includes shared attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values at school, as well as social interactions among students and between students and teachers (Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckenooghe, & Aelterman, 2008; Lynch et al., 2013) is in consonance with the view that the values, meanings, and principles of action that middle-class parents and students have internalized in their home environment to their habitus are more compatible with the norms and values of the school (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Previous studies have shown that Finnish parents typically prefer moderately socially mixed classes and that they perceive a high percentage of students from immigrant and lower socio-economic backgrounds as a potential threat to their children's school engagement and well-being (Kosunen & Carrasco, 2016; Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015a). Hence, higher school SES indicates a more middle-class compatible school culture, which parents see as beneficial for their children's schooling and which, therefore, increases their satisfaction. This parental perception is supported by findings suggesting that there is a school-wide peer culture within schools that contributes to students' academic behaviours and the quality of their peer relationships (Lynch et al., 2013). In addition to being linked to parents' views on school culture, school SES had a direct connection with school reputation. The higher the school SES, the better the perceived reputation of the school. The social and ethnic composition of schools' student populations have been found to be a crucial factor in school attractiveness and reputation in other studies as well (e.g. Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015a; Oplatka & Nupar, 2012; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). On the other hand, parental school satisfaction influences school reputation (Skallerud, 2011) because the so-called grapevine is a central source of information for parents making school choices (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Kosunen, Carrasco, & Tironi, 2015).

School SES was not connected to parents' contentment with their child's school satisfaction and learning at school. While the lack of this association

appears to be a very positive result – according to the parents who participated in this study, there are no differences between students enjoying school and progressing in their studies, based on the SES of the school – some caution is required when interpreting this result. The survey items that comprise this factor were worded in a different way than the items for the other two factors, which could have caused the parents to respond to these items differently (see the Limitations section). This seems conceivable as the socio-cultural features of schools, such as the composition of the student population and school norms and values, have been associated with students' well-being (Rimpelä & Karvonen, 2010).

Those parents whose children attended socio-economically affluent schools felt that there was more competition between students at school than parents whose children attended socio-economically disadvantaged schools. While higher school SES is associated with a more favourable school reputation, perceptions of a high degree of competition among students can have a negative influence on the desirability of the school because parents tend to view excessive competition as a risk to their children's school well-being (Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015a, p. 257). Indeed, studies have shown that competition can discourage students from learning (Wang & Yang, 2003), and it is associated with bullying and victimization (Di Stasio, Savage, & Burgos, 2016) as well as with stress and anxiety (Gilbert, McEwan, Bellew, Mills, & Gale, 2009), which supports parents' perceptions in this regard.

### Limitations

There are limitations to be considered, some of which are related to the data used in this study and some of which are of a more general nature. On a general level, parents' school satisfaction is difficult to measure because it is always relative to their previous experiences, such as their historical experiences in school and their impressions from the media and public debate (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rasmussen, 2012; Rätty, 2007). Also, when parental satisfaction is used as a proxy for the actual conditions and functioning of schools, it should be noted that parents' rather restricted presence at the school means that they do not have first-hand evidence but need to rely on their children's reports about school experiences along with other anecdotal evidence obtained through their social networks (e.g. Bosetti, 2004; Meier & Lemmer, 2019).

The first data-related limitation concerns the sample. The response rate was only 50.1%, resulting in a potential nonresponse bias (see Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011), which is likely related to the fact that highly educated mothers were clearly over-

represented in the sample. This poses challenges to the generalizability of the findings, especially because parents who are highly educated and mothers have been found to be more satisfied with their children's school than parents with lower education levels and fathers (e.g. Friedman et al., 2006; Rätty & Kasanen, 2007). The clear over-representation of highly educated parents is likely to be a result of multiple factors. While in the whole country, the share of the population aged 15 or over with a higher education degree is around 30%, the share is clearly higher in large cities (Statistics Finland, 2019). Hence, the data reflects, to a certain extent, the regions from which the sample was drawn. However, the question is clearly also about different response rates, which implies that parents with lower education level were less willing to complete the survey. It is possible, for example, that these parents have a relatively low trust in their children's schools. Furthermore, the way the survey was implemented might have elicited lower response rates from less educated parents.

The second limitation of the data is that while the nested structure of the data would have, in principle, called for multilevel analysis, the low number of clusters (18 schools) in the data did not allow for this type of complex analysis<sup>10</sup> (Maas & Hox, 2005). Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) can be used to evaluate the necessity of multilevel analysis; ICC values below 10% indicate that multilevel analysis is not necessarily required for the data (see Byrne, 2012, p. 354). Here, in relation to school SES, two factors had ICC values under 10% (child's school satisfaction and learning, 3.0%, and home-school cooperation, 5.3%), but the school culture factor's ICC value (14.2%) was higher. This suggests that single-level analysis might not have been sufficient and that the nesting might have caused the subjects' scores to not be independent.

The measurement instrument used here to measure parental school satisfaction includes factors from two different perspectives. While two factors are constructed from items where the statements were formulated from the perspective of the school (e.g. 'School keeps child safe' and 'School takes account of my suggestions and concerns'), the items for the third factor, the child's school satisfaction and learning, consisted of items formulated from the perspectives of the child and parent (e.g. 'Child enjoys school'). This could have caused the parents to respond somewhat differently to the items measuring their child's school satisfaction and learning when compared to the ones measuring school culture and home-school cooperation. Lastly, future studies around this topic should carefully consider the ethnic aspect of school and neighbourhood segregation as it could reveal some important connections not brought forward by this study and also explain some of the mechanisms behind the associations observed here.

## Concluding remarks

The differences between schools in the socio-economic composition of student populations and in learning results are growing in Finland (e.g. Berisha & Seppänen, 2017; Bernelius & Kauppinen, 2011; Kuusela, 2012; Vettenranta et al., 2016), and the effect of students' socio-economic backgrounds on their learning outcomes has gotten stronger (OECD, 2016). Even though there are complex social processes behind parents' views of their children's school that cannot be explained with only school-level factors, the results obtained in this study suggest that school SES is connected to – in addition to the immediate prerequisites of producing learning results (e.g. Kauppinen & Bernelius, 2013) – the extent to which schools can invest in those aspects of their functioning that are more indirectly related to learning, such as home-school cooperation and a safe and encouraging school culture. The connection between school SES and parental school satisfaction found in this study provides empirical evidence of the self-perpetuating cycle that is argued to be in motion in the school markets of Finnish cities (Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015a, p. 232–233) and the way this cycle works. The segregation of schools has further intensified because a higher school SES is connected to higher levels of parental satisfaction, which in turn have been shown to improve the reputation and attractiveness of the school (Oplatka & Nupar, 2012; Skallerud, 2011) and, hence, to strengthen its position in the local school market, making it more desirable for parents choosing a school for their children (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Kosunen et al., 2015; Li & Hung, 2009; van Zanten, 2013). This is because families with more educational and cultural resources are typically the ones exercising the right to choose a school other than the neighbourhood one for their children, and students from more advantaged social backgrounds excel in the competition for the most sought-after study places (e.g. Bosetti, 2004; Kim & Hwang, 2014; Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015b; Reay et al., 2008; van Zanten, 2007). School choice is not, of course, the only mechanism affecting the increasing social and ethnic segregation between schools. In this regard, housing segregation and so-called white flight or white avoidance, i.e. native middle-class residents moving away from or avoiding areas with immigrant concentrations that are associated with lower socio-economic neighbourhoods (Komulainen, 2012), in particular, have been widely discussed and shown to also contribute to educational segregation in Finland and beyond (e.g. Bernelius & Vilkkama, 2019; Lindbom, 2010; Vilkkama, Vattovaara, & Dhalman, 2013).

According to Rinne (2000), the neoliberal changes that had taken place in Finnish educational policy by

the beginning of the new millennium resembled, to an astonishing degree, the supranational message of Brown's (1990) third wave away from meritocracy towards the ideology of parentocracy. There has not been any significant changes in the direction of these policy developments or their consequences since. The welfare state's aims of inclusion and universalism have been toned down to an absolute minimum in Finnish government programmes in the last two decades, signalling a time of increasing estrangement from universal notions (Hellman, Monni, & Alanko, 2017), possibly leading to the inequalities between social classes growing (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2019) and the effect of socio-economic background on students learning outcomes getting stronger (OECD, 2016). In this regard, the role of parents is becoming increasingly important in the context of basic education not only for the students but for the schools as well. As a result, Finnish basic education, historically intertwined with the Nordic notion of a welfare state and still renowned for its equality, is starting to resemble its more stratified European counterparts.

## Notes

1. Generally, school choice can be defined as a policy whereby schools may select some or all of their students, and families may, to an extent, choose a school or an educational track for their children (Dovemark et al., 2018).
2. Whereas one's SES is typically defined by a combination of their financial income and level of education and occupation, social class, while related to it, goes beyond SES in marking one's position in a society because social class typically refers to the culture that carries with it group membership, norms, and socialization patterns (Deutsch, 2017).
3. This process of school segregation – the uneven distribution of specific student groups related, for example, to their ethnic or social background across schools – is one central dimension of differentiation in compulsory education (see Ojalehto, Kalalahti, Varjo, & Kosunen, 2017, p. 125–127).
4. There are differences between municipalities in this regard. The different local contexts have produced different interpretations of school choice and competition, and municipal educational authorities do not offer choice to the same extent in all Finnish cities (Varjo & Kalalahti, 2015).
5. Among the different definitions Bourdieu has provided for the concept of habitus, one of the most comprehensive and systematic is that 'The external definitions which are connected to a particular class of conditions of existence produce hexis (habitus), systems of continuous and transferable predispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, in other words as generative and organizing principles of the practices and reconstructions, which can be adapted objectively to their purpose without aiming consciously at it, and

to control explicitly the actions necessary for its achievement' (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 88).

6. The three residual correlations were very likely caused by the statements being more closely related to each other than the other statements included in the factor.
7. To aid interpretability of the means and standard deviations, sum scales with a range from one to four (higher values indicating higher levels of satisfaction) are used here instead of the latent factor scores.
8. Twenty-three parents did not respond to the question about their highest levels of education.
9. There were no outliers; data were normally distributed for each group as assessed by skewness and kurtosis values, and there was homogeneity of variances (Levene's test  $p = .66$ ).
10. Despite several attempts, it was not possible to apply the analysis type complex in Mplus for computing standard errors and a chi-square test of model fit while taking into account data stratification due to the small number of clusters. Also, the ratio of the sample size and the number of parameters in the model was problematic in this regard.

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