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# "It's about setting priorities" – why parents choose private schools in Hungary

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**Abstract**

This article examines the motivations and narratives of middle-class parents who opt for private primary schools in Hungary. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with parents from various localities, the aim is to shed light on how parents are driven towards fee-paying education in this formerly free education system. The findings reveal that the shift towards non-state, fee-paying schools is deeply embedded in the ideology of intensive parenting. The latter places the responsibility for securing a good education mainly on parents, who view the importance of choosing a school for their children as extremely high. The foundation for school choice is laid during the early years of child-rearing by organizing the child's schedule around various activities. As a result, although their accounts of their child-rearing clearly demonstrate the early use of cultural, social, and economic capital to secure their children's educational futures, parents tend to interpret their children's enrolment in private schools not as an outcome of their privilege, but rather as a deserved reward for parental care and sacrifice.

**Keywords**: educational privatization, intensive parenting, school choice, Hungary, parents

## 1 Introduction

A growing body of research highlights the global spread of educational privatization and marketization. Verger and colleagues (2016), while presenting evidence of various forms of educational privatization around the world, note that some regions remain under-researched in this regard, identifying Eastern Europe as one such region (Verger et al., 2016, p. 198). The aim of this article is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the processes of educational privatization and marketization in Eastern Europe. To this end, it presents findings from qualitative research on private school choice in different local contexts in Hungary. The research scrutinized how instances of intensive parenting and the projectification of child-rearing appear in the stories of parents who recently chose private schools in Hungary, and how different forms of cultural, social, and economic capital are used and thought of by the latter in the context of school choice.

The theoretical framework for this study draws on Bourdieu-inspired approaches to school choice and on scholarship that uses intensive parenting as a conceptual lens on childrearing and education. After outlining the framework, the article provides an overview of the Hungarian school landscape, followed by a description of the research design, including methods and sampling. The results section examines how intensive parenting is present in childrearing prior to the schoolchoice juncture and then scrutinizes how these early practices lay the groundwork for selecting a private school through the accumulation and mobilization of cultural, social, and economic capital.

## 2 Theoretical framework

The article explores educational privatization by looking at private school choice patterns and their role in reproducing social inequalities. Parental accounts of school choice and broader child-rearing practices will be interpreted in connection with practices of intensive parenthood. Integrating the perspectives of the Bourdieusian school choice research and that of intensive parenthood reveals how intensive parenting practices amplify efforts to accumulate cultural and social capital during childrearing and, in turn, reinforce and extend the advantages produced through processes of capital conversion. While the Bourdieusian lens on the reproduction of inequalities helps to reveal what parents do and how they do it, the concept of intensive parenting offers insight into how they make sense of their choices amid the growing trend of educational privatization and declining public welfare provision.

Privatization in education primarily refers to the diminishing role of the state and the increasing involvement of non-state actors in schooling. This process can involve changes in ownership; however, it also includes the growing influence of market actors in shaping educational goals and practices. The growing presence of educational providers other than the state is a global phenomenon (Verger et al., 2016); however, privatization also encompasses the broader trend of market logics increasingly guiding education policy and provision.

Verger et al. (2016) identify at least six different "pathways to educational privatization" – from state policy reforms to the extension of public-private partnerships and parental freedom of school choice. Education has traditionally been regarded as a public good – or at least as an institution with a public good component (Locatelli, 2018). However, regarding the connection between privatization and school choice, Lubienski argues that education is a special kind of good since it can simultaneously provide public benefits and serve private purposes (Lubienski, 2006), and he argues that the way education is delivered can influence whether it functions more as a public or a private good. Notably, school choice tends to position education more as a private commodity, pursued competitively by individuals (Lubienski, 2006). This article supports Lubienski's argument, considering school choice as a mechanism that can strengthen the privatized aspects of education.

The sociological literature on school choice provides evidence that the pursuit of individual educational goals through school choice may work against crucial public roles of education, such as ensuring equal access and social cohesion. First of all, school choice contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities (Burgess et al., 2019; Yoon & Lubienski,

2017). An undisputed and often recurring research finding is the extent to which the middle class is clearly in a privileged position in this process (Seghers et al., 2019). A substantial body of literature that relies on the Bourdieusian concepts of habitus delivers many illustrations of how this privilege is enacted and how middle-class parents act as "skilled choosers" (Gewirtz et al., 1995, p. 25), and how these "skilled choosers" navigate better in the quasi-market of schools. Beyond research on classed school choice in the British context, further studies have pointed out similar patterns in other European contexts (Butler & van Zanten, 2006; Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015).

Also, many pieces of research deliver evidence on how certain forms of cultural capital, especially language immersion programs, or programs for gifted children, are viewed as more valuable than others by middle class parents, and when it comes to choosing a school they tend to opt for "value added school options" – schools that provide curricular and/or extracurricular enrichment in language, music, arts, sports, and/or support for giftedness (Yoon, 2020, p. 5), thus further widening the social gap between mainstream schools and specialized schools.

Ball and Vincent's (1998) groundbreaking study highlights the crucial role of social networks in accessing "hot" and "cold" knowledge about schools. Most of the above-cited Bourdieusian research on school choice focuses on contexts where education is fee-free. While the role of economic capital in enabling access to private education – and in creating barriers to equal access – is arguably self-evident, this research scrutinizes how cultural and social capital are also mobilized by families who opt for fee-paying schools.

All these different kinds of privileges enter into play and produce stratified school systems, but, at the same time, research also emphasizes that the school choice process places a considerable emotional burden on families, and middle-class families experience anxiety, emotional distress, and sometimes moral dilemmas throughout the school choice process (Roda & Wells, 2013).

Anxiety is a key feature, according to Vincent (2017), who says that neoliberal ideology shapes how parenting is thought of, and how "parenting becomes a source of risk and anxiety as what happens is viewed as the product of individual, autonomous choices" (Vincent, 2017, p. 545). Individual responsibility is a key aspect of the norm of intensive parenting (Hays, 1998). According to this norm, being a good mother requires devoting extensive time and energy to child rearing, especially when choosing a school (Brown, 2021). This can lead to specific child-rearing styles that may be of strategic importance regarding schooling, like "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011). This term was developed by Annette Lareau in her research in the American context to refer to a middle-class child-rearing style in which parents actively foster their children's talents and skills through organized activities; also, family life in such families is organized, to a great extent, around the extracurricular activities of the child. This approach can equip children with advantages in institutional settings that can contribute to their educational success.

Although Lareau herself does not refer to the notion of "intensive parenting," research exploring this latter phenomenon also talks about how family life – especially that of mothers – revolves around child-rearing, and emphasizes stress, anxiety, and feelings of uncertainty as dominant components of twenty-first-century parenthood. The concept of intensive mothering originates from Anglocentric societies, where studies have shown, for example, that navigating between work and motherhood is made more difficult by the lack of social policies that help with work-family balance and overcome parental anxiety

(Collins, 2019). Such research shows that the emergence of intensive parentification is tightly connected to the neoliberal policy context and the outsourcing and privatization of formerly state-provided welfare services.

Moreover, public policies embedded in the neoliberal discourse also reinforce the norm of intensive parenting by putting growing pressure on parents who feel that child-rearing is a private matter and their own individual responsibility; this can lead to parents' feelings of isolation in their roles and adverse feelings toward service providers (Fargion, 2021).

An emerging literature explores how intensive parenting plays out in the Hungarian setting (Szőke, 2022). Among the few studies that scrutinize intensive parenting in connection to education, Szőke and colleagues (2024) found that even among lower-middle-class parents, schooling emerges as by far the most important dimension of parenting in the context of an authoritarian political regime (Szőke et al., 2024).

Using insights from the Bourdieusian school choice literature and the intensive parenting framework, this paper aims to scrutinize how instances of intensive parenting and the "projectification of childrearing" appear in the stories of parents who recently chose private schools for their children in Hungary, and how the different forms of cultural, social, and economic capitals are used by them in the context of choosing a fee-paying school.

## 3 Policy context

Several elements of the patterns identified by Verger et al. (2016), such as privatization through state reform and the dismantling of the welfare state, or "scaling up" existing privatization patterns, can be observed in the Hungarian context. However, the political and policy context of educational privatization in Hungary differs from that of other European Union countries.

Free school choice was introduced as early as 1985, when the private sector was not yet present. According to regulations, state schools were strictly zoned, but families had the right to apply to any school they wished to, and schools could accept applications depending on the places they had left after district applications.

Besides the liberty of school choice, right after the fall of communism in 1989, the funding of schools by providers other than the state became possible. However, the majority of pupils (95%) still attended municipality-operated primary schools, but, thanks to free school choice, many opted for non-district ones.

This opportunity for free choice within the state sector has created inequalities, not only between settlements but also within them. In fact, according to many studies, inequalities generated by school choice are among the largest in Europe (Zolnay, 2006; Kertesi & Kézdi, 2014; Berényi, 2018).

The government that came to power in 2010 introduced a series of legal and budgetary measures that led to an increase in the privatization of the sector in terms of educational providers. So, like in many other European societies, certain forms of educational privatization have been initiated by governmental decisions. However, in contrast to Western European patterns, throughout the last 15 years, governmental privatization has been accompanied by the centralization of the state school system with a decrease in the

role of local governments, a radical decrease in school autonomy, and a return to centrally issued curricula and single, centrally published textbooks (Radó, 2019).

As a consequence, the share of state-maintained schools at the primary level decreased from 95% to 77% in a short period of time. Religious organizations emerged as the second-largest providers of primary education, primarily because governmental measures prioritized church schools in various ways, both over state schools and other types of non-state schools (Neumann, 2023). In the meantime, and as a result, among urban middle-class families, there has been a growing distrust of the state (Kopasz & Boda, 2018), leading to a new demand for private schools, which resulted in an almost threefold increase in the number of students attending this school type between 2010 and 2023. Before 2010, the small primary private school sector was dominated by schools maintained by foundations using so-called "alternative" or "reform" (e.g., Steinerian) pedagogies. Unlike many Western European and Anglocentric education systems, only a small proportion of privately maintained schools offered elite options, like international schools, which are attended only by a few Hungarian students.

According to the latest statistics, the distribution of private maintainers and pupils attending private schools is very unequal across the country: whereas it is almost 10 percent in the capital, Budapest, the national average is 4%, and the private sector is almost absent in smaller towns.[1] Due to a reduction in state subsidies for schools maintained by private entities, the proportion of private schools' budgets covered by state subsidies has declined. This has typically led to an increase in the fees charged by these schools. While the profile of private schools continues to be dominated by institutions offering "alternative" pedagogies, this is becoming less prominent. Some newly established schools place less emphasis on progressive pedagogies and instead promote themselves using explicitly elitist language and with reference to "value-added" programs, such as bilingual education. At the same time, demand is also growing for alternative schools that explicitly welcome children with special educational needs.[2]

Whereas most state-maintained primary schools officially cannot select their pupils, both church and private schools can. Besides the growing demand, this contributes to the social composition gap between the different types of maintainers. The most reliable quantitative data regarding the social intake of schools is provided by the yearly National Assessment of Basic Competences, which entails a survey filled out by school principals. According to these data, the average proportion of university-degree-holding parents of children in private schools is 50%, while in state-maintained schools it is 17%. Given the concentration of private schools in big cities and the capital, it is worth noting that the disparities remain similar in the capital city, Budapest: here, the proportion of university degree holders is 65% for private schools, and 34% for state-maintained schools.[3]

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[1] Data provided by the Educational Authority, source: https://dari.oktatas.hu/download/kozerdeku/kir_stat2023_a04t18_gyermekek_tanulok.xlsx

[2] The number of Hungarian students attending international schools remains low, but is growing. However, since most international schools demand fees only affordable to a narrow segment of Hungarians, and these schools do not offer the Hungarian general school-leaving certificate, parents from these schools were not included in our sample.

[3] The data for the assessment were provided by the Educational Authority, and the calculations were carried out by the author.

## 4 Methods and sample

To help scrutinize the main narratives on private school choice, we planned to conduct interviews with parents whose children attend privately maintained primary schools. We decided to include interviews from different localities in the analysis to capture the effect of contextual differences – most importantly, variations in the size and diversity of the local education market (which is far greater in the capital than elsewhere), as well as the differing social composition of families across regions. Interviews were carried out in one district of the capital, Budapest, where the educational market is the biggest and the social composition of the residents is also much more favorable than in the rest of the country; in a relatively big county capital ("Countycapital") and its suburban area, a town ("Middletown") in the Central-Northern area of Hungary, and in a smaller town ("Smalltown") in the Eastern part of the country.

The exact locations in towns were chosen based on having good access to schools and parents due to our earlier research or social connections. Once the fields were chosen, interviewees were recruited by purposive sampling from local social media sites for parents, combined with snowball sampling. In the cases of "Countycapital" and "Smalltown," some interviewees were recruited through the school. Although special care was taken to ensure neutrality in these cases, this approach may have produced bias in the interviews, especially when parents discussed their experiences with their school.

The recruitment criteria were that parents should have at least one child attending a private school in the third to sixth grade at the time of the interview. This criterion was specified with the intention that the period during which school choices were made should not have been too long ago, but that the interviewees should already have substantive experience of the school. However, the timeframe between the school choice and the interview may limit certain aspects of the analysis, as interviewees were more likely to justify or support their decision retrospectively.

Of the 30 interviews, twenty were conducted in Budapest, and ten in other smaller towns; at least two interviews were conducted in each of these smaller localities. Except for two fathers, all other interviewees were mothers. The Budapest interviewees, with one exception, all had higher education degrees. Among the other interviewees in the County Capital and Middletown, the majority also held higher education degrees, but some did not. Of the two interviewees in Smalltown, one had completed a degree.

The interviewees were engaged in a wide range of occupations, but economists or other financial professionals and engineers were clearly overrepresented, and the majority were working in the private sector, either in "big companies" or in family firms as entrepreneurs.

The interview guide focused on how and why parents ended up choosing a fee-paying school instead of a free, state-maintained, or usually also free church-maintained primary school. In line with the conceptual foundations of the research, the guideline also contained blocks about earlier child-rearing experiences and practices. The interviews also contained questions about how parents viewed schools as social institutions and what they thought about the role of the state in education.

The length of the interviews varied between 55 and 115 minutes, with an average of 80 minutes. All were typed verbatim. Thematic analysis was then conducted, following the logic of the interview guide and the research questions.

# 5 Results

## 5.1 The intensive project of child-rearing

Our first research question concerned how intensive parenting is present in the early child-rearing process of parents who later chose a private school for their child. Preparation for child-rearing began for many of our interviewees either before the child was conceived or at the moment of conception. This included, for instance, reading specialized literature on child-rearing or developmental psychology, usually from the moment they decided to become parents. Some parents consulted with child psychologists – without requiring solutions to any specific problems, and prior to giving birth –, because, as one of our interviewees stated:

> "For me, it has always been very important not only to think about it personally, but to hear the opinion of a professional." (Middletown, A School, Parent 2)

When asked about their child-rearing practices during early childhood, such parents had clear visions about the kinds of activities they considered useful. A large share of the interviewed parents used references to psychological, or even neuroscientific, professional vocabulary, such as a father who talked about extracurricular activities during kindergarten:

> "I considered motion to be primary, so let's not approach things from the cognitive side and overload the child with things they might not necessarily need at a given stage. However, I know that motion affects everything: the basic wiring, the oxygen supply, everything, so it plays a central role." (Countycapital, B school, Parent 1)

Such parents, drawing somewhat on the model of "skilled chooser" parents (Gewirtz et al., 1995), can be referred to as "professional" parents in the sense that they regard parenting as something that requires professionalization and specific expertise. For them, the organization of activities is embedded in the "development" project of their children. Parents receive impulses related to becoming professionalized and good parents even in kindergarten:

> "There were always activities like this in the kindergarten, so we didn't need to go somewhere else for them. These are the big hits [popular activities] for children of my generation, you know, these skills- and abilities develop[ing techniques]; these are magic words – as if, if we don't do these, they'll [the children will] lag behind in learning and development, and their specific skills won't develop properly." (Budapest, T school, Parent 2)

The lives of these parents revolve entirely around the "child-project": attending various activities for small children or even babies is a practice that most parents engage in during early childhood. A good example of how these can have a direct effect on the later school choice process is the "English-speaking nursery afternoons" for toddlers, which were a decisive experience for a mother who later took her kids to a regular English-language afternoon class during kindergarten, and then to a private school with an English immersion program. As she narrated, she "happened to meet an English mother," which shows how privileged social networks facilitate the privatized school trajectory, even during very early childhood:

> "When my child was one year old, we happened to meet a mother in [the name of the town] who was English. She started an English group right there, locally. It was set up so that there was one morning a week where we would go, and it was like being in kindergarten together with our children. I already considered this to be very important, even before the children were born, that it should be this way." (Middletown, A School, Parent 1)

Such interviews suggest that elements of "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011) significantly influence how interviewees raise their children, even before the latter enter school. These practices, especially the early structuring of the child's schedule and participation in various organized activities, are undertaken because parents believe that "good parenting" necessarily involves such activities. There are, however, differences among the parents regarding the content of these extracurricular activities: they are oriented toward activities that are seen as more productive in relation to the later school career, and have more "value-added" (like English programs for toddlers) for many parents who later sent their children to more elite-oriented schools.

For others, it is rather the organization of the child's schedule through various activities and the subordination of the parents' life to these activities that is seen as a natural part of parenting and family life. Such a phenomenon is illustrated by our interviewee without a higher education degree from a small town in the eastern part of the country. Their life also revolves around their child, but the actual content of the scheduled activities is less "elite-oriented" and does not seem to be of central importance to the parents:

> "– And what do you do in your free time?"
>
> "Well, mostly things with the kid. I take her everywhere. … So now we're [we were] just starting to feel like we might have a little more free time, but then that's [that was] taken up by her activities. She's been riding horses since she was three years old, and now with school, there's so much going on – majorette classes, folk dancing – she wants to do everything. So, our time is spent picking her up and taking her to these activities every day. That's how our free time goes." (Smalltown, Parent 1)

## 5.2 Choosing the school

One of the goals of our research was to understand the connection between early intensive parenting and concerted cultivation in the decision to choose a private school. The careful choice of a school for children is, without exception, considered one of the most important parental responsibilities for the parents we interviewed. For most, the process, in fact, had already started, as described above, by taking early childhood activities very seriously, and by carefully choosing and competing for a good kindergarten. In localities with larger educational markets, the latter usually means, in our sample, a private maintainer or at least a kindergarten that, despite being state-maintained, has the best reputation according to the "hot knowledge" (Ball, S. J., & Vincent, C., 1998) of fellow parents. Private kindergartens appeared on the horizon for parents, not necessarily because they wanted to distance themselves from state-maintained educational institutions; this choice was often considered rather a necessity. For example, parents expected some kind of flexibility, such as not attending every day, that public kindergartens could not offer.

Some private school maintainers – both alternative and elite-oriented – also operate kindergartens or organize preparatory classes for six-year-olds. The interviewees who attended such institutions quite naturally continued on to the related school, thus their child's place was already secured at the time of choosing the kindergarten. Moreover, parents in other private kindergartens were often guided toward private schools by their network of fellow kindergarten parents.

Early engagement with extracurricular activities can also pave the way to private schooling, as illustrated by the case of the mother who sent her child to the 'English for Toddlers' club.

For other parents who could not directly convert their early child-rearing activities into school choices, the school choice process was one of the most crucial aspects of their child-rearing practices. For some, not having paid enough attention to kindergarten choice is, retrospectively, considered a mistake, which made them more attentive when it came to school choice.

One of the primary objectives of parents during the school choice process is to get to know the schools as well as possible. Beyond various information-gathering practices (such as collecting information and attending open days), they describe their school-searching process as intensive and meticulous. They referred to the school finding process as an "exhausting" one; they described the task as one of "research work," a "struggle" full of fears and anxiety, involving severe risks – especially the risk that their children would be "lost in the crowd."

> "Finding a school was a very, very long and exhausting process. I really struggled because, of course, I wanted the best for my child, the best we could offer. I also knew that everything needed to be done… So I wanted the best that could be found in the vicinity. I visited all the foundation schools in the neighborhood, went to public schools as well, and even checked out schools outside the district, including private institutions." (Budapest, T school, Parent 2)

> "And when we saw that we had really made a mistake with this kindergarten, even though we had put a lot of thought into it, then came the question of what school they should attend, and we were very afraid." (Budapest, R school, Parent 2)

Since the parents made such significant efforts, it is not surprising that they tried to make sense of this meticulous research process and formulated quite clearly what they seek in a school.

Many parents among those whose children attend schools that offer "alternative/progressive" pedagogies or reform pedagogies described what they like or dislike about schools in reference to the pedagogical practices and methodological terminology. It is, of course, not possible to clearly assert whether these were the original concepts they used when they started to look for a school, or if their present narratives are influenced by their school experience, or even by the self-promotion activities of the schools. However, in the interviews, they tended to criticize the "traditional" subject-specific approach to knowledge; furthermore, they fundamentally disapproved of education based solely on factual knowledge. This pedagogical vocabulary is embedded in a broader understanding of how modern/today's schools should operate: providing factual knowledge is seen as the educational practice of the past; parents emphasized that schools should prepare pupils for the

insecurities and risks of the future. Many criticisms were articulated regarding the abrupt kindergarten-school transition and the overly rapid traditional teaching of basic skills in mainstream state-maintained schools.

> What I disliked the most [about a regular public elementary school] is that when a preschooler starts school, they are immediately treated as a schoolchild and are given a demerit if they can't stay quiet for 45 minutes. But before that [in kindergarten], they weren't required to do anything like that… And, for example, this horrified me: that they would restrain the child, shove them [behind] a desk, and expect them to stay silent there. (Budapest, R school, Parent 1, speaking about state-maintained schools)

Formulating clear opinions about what kind of pedagogy they like or disapprove of is very illustrative of the professionalization process of parenthood – parents use a vocabulary full of pedagogical notions.

This vocabulary may be shaped not only by the narrative promoted by the chosen school but also by the ongoing public debate about education. Within these debates, liberal and left-leaning educational experts often highlight – among other issues – the overly theoretical and conservative character of current general education. In their accounts of pedagogy and schooling, many parents of children attending alternative schools explicitly criticized the government's neoconservative educational policies.

Classroom communication is also closely linked to pedagogical principles and methods, as evident in the interview excerpt that follows, where discipline, order, and silence are presented as traditional school values that the parent experienced during a visit to the district school. These could be contrasted with the values of a friendly atmosphere and group work in the private school that was eventually chosen:

> Well, it wasn't that exciting [the open day at the local district school]; the children were sitting there very nicely, raising their hands properly, and we felt like it was just like it was 30 years ago in our time – silent, orderly, disciplined. Meanwhile, at the other school, for example, everyone was shouting out during the open day, and the teacher listened to everyone. Yes, they addressed each other informally, and there was a very friendly atmosphere. Here [at the state school], it felt very traditional, very Prussian – the teacher stood at the front, explained, wrote things down, delivered the material, and the children either absorbed it or didn't. There, it was more of a collaborative effort. (Budapest, R school, Parent 2)

Expectations regarding child-centeredness are often mentioned in our interviews. Generally, parents mean by this that the school should adapt to the children, rather than the other way around. As one mother in Smalltown expressed several times, what she appreciated about their foundational school was the possibility of "getting attuned" – both in terms of the school adapting to the children's pace of learning, and by providing time and space for the children to adjust to the school environment.

As previously discussed, the small Hungarian private school landscape has traditionally been dominated by foundational schools offering alternative or reform pedagogies, which are seen as child-centered. In contrast, high-quality education has typically been associated with the elite segment of state-maintained schools. Consequently, in Hungary, parents tend to perceive child-centeredness and high-quality education as two mutually exclusive categories (Szőke et al., 2024).

Some parents seem to agree this dichotomy when they describe reputable state schools as "too much" for their child – citing this as a reason for choosing a private school instead.

However, due to growing distrust and dissatisfaction with recent changes in educational policy (Kopasz & Boda, 2018), in our interviews, child-centeredness was not only contrasted with "high-quality education," but the state, as a school maintainer, was also frequently portrayed as incapable of providing a child-centered environment.

Experiences during visits to district schools or references to specific school conditions – such as underpaid teachers, large class sizes (both directly linked to budget constraints), or the rigidity of the national curriculum – were cited by some parents as reasons why they perceive the public sector as inherently unfriendly to children. Their turn toward the private sector, therefore, is not necessarily driven by a desire to avoid "overly high expectations," nor by the search for alternative pedagogy, but by a perceived lack of child-centeredness in state schools.

This is probably the reason why our interviewees repeatedly tried to reconcile the potential tension between "child-centeredness," which they feel they have found in their private school, and quality education. Sometimes, this is communicated through the way they refer to "stress," usually mentioned as something that parents experienced during their own education (obviously, in a state-maintained school), and to which they do not want their children to be exposed. These parents sometimes refer to highly esteemed state schools as institutions that might provide good factual knowledge, but are full of stress and rigidity.

Eventually, several parents attempted to reconcile the tension between "child-centeredness" and high-quality education by considering education as a "package" that ideally offers practice-oriented pedagogy, flexibility, open communication, and a relaxed environment. Thus, child-centeredness and a relaxed school atmosphere are not viewed as indicators of low quality, nor are they valued solely because they can prolong childhood and make the kindergarten-school transition smoother and more comfortable. On the contrary, a lack of stress is considered to provide a solid ground for skill building, too, as illustrated in the following parental narrative:

> I always heard that the foundations need to be solid, that development should happen properly, so that they can handle the pressure, that their nervous system should be strong, and we shouldn't stress them out too early. And if their foundational system is stable, then we're basically preparing them for greater pressure – for high school. At that point, it's like being a coach: I'm preparing them, making sure the child is in good shape for the future, so they'll be able to withstand the challenges that await them. (County Capital, B school, Parent 1)

The above quote is also a good illustration of how intensive parenting leads to thinking "professionally" and using scientific references about education; these approaches, in turn, help parents reassure themselves that their present child-centered approach represents a good investment that will lead to future high achievements.

Although the preference for child-centeredness was the common denominator among the parents we interviewed, the meanings attributed to "child-centeredness" were not necessarily identical.

Some parents openly expressed disagreement with what they perceived as the "excessive" child-centeredness and liberalism of alternative schools – such as the mother who compared both school "R" and, more generally, Steiner (Waldorf) schools to the one they eventually chose.

> [R school] was too liberal for me, in the sense that I had never seen such dirt [and] mess as there. [Like], I don't know, the kid comes downstairs, takes his jacket and his shoes, and kicks them off and leaves them in the middle of the auditorium. I understand that you can do anything, but to just feel that there was no regulation at that level was a little bit of the other extreme of acceptance for me. For me, it was important that it was very child-centered, but that it [involved] a framework, in the sense that there were rules to be followed. [.....] I wanted a school that fit in with the Hungarian curriculum to some extent, but at the same time, that [it should be] child-centered. The Waldorf [Steiner approach], it was very far from our approach." (Budapest, T School, Parent 1)

This mother represents the type of parent who turned to the private sector in search of individual care and child-centeredness – qualities she felt were lacking in state schools – while also trying not to move too far away from mainstream schooling.

In fact, the notion of child-centeredness is no longer exclusive to private schools; it has also become a prominent part of how many primary state schools present themselves in their promotional narratives. However, most of the parents in our interviews appeared to have overlooked this type of information. In fact, what stands out is the contrast in how parents interpreted the information they receive from state-maintained versus private schools. Parents typically value the quality of teacher–parent communication in private schools and recalled being able to gather a significant amount of useful information before making their decision. In contrast, they tended to distrust the reliability of information provided by state schools.

> The [state school] didn't really come up as a serious option. I felt it was too much of a gamble – like, okay, I go to one parent-teacher meeting, and I spend an hour or however long talking with the teacher… or actually, not even talking with the teacher, because they're the only one talking the whole time. They just go on about what the school is like, what they're going to do, who they are, what they've done, how long they've been teaching, and so on – the usual dry statistical stuff. But I wouldn't really have gotten much real information about the school itself, about what daily life, everyday routines are like there. (Budapest, B School, Parent3)

The contrast between the distrust and discontent with state schools and the appreciation of the open communication of the private schools is best illustrated by the following quote from a parent that describes the experience in a state school (excerpt a) and then the interactions with the prestigious private school (excerpt b):

> a. "They [the children] don't get meaningful tasks there [the state school], and the material they're given to learn is terrible. The textbooks are full of mistakes. And then I always had to add: 'Darling, this is not how it is, this is nonsense. Learn it this way because this is what they'll ask on the test, but know that what's written here is wrong,' and I had to explain why. So I constantly had to be there alongside the school. For me, this was an enormous burden." (Budapest, A school, parent)

> b. "This A school [the private school] is different, because there they actually asked me what expectations I had of the school, and whether they could respond to them. That kind of question… I seriously felt a lump in my throat, I almost cried, that my needs were acknowledged at all. And I told them that what I expect is to be able to be a mother at home. I don't want to be the teacher. I'm perfectly fine with my own work and my own life. I don't want to teach at home." (Budapest, A school, parent)

This comparison also illustrates how entry into the private sector reassures the parent that she will not have to be as involved, which she feels is unavoidable with a child in a state school. This might mean that for some, private schooling provides not only a more relaxed atmosphere for the children but also reduces the pressure on the parents as well.

### 5.2 Parental capital and the acceptance of social selection

Our interviews illustrate various ways in which concerted cultivation involves the strategic use of parental capital in order to secure what is perceived as a child-centered and, at the same time, future-oriented childhood. The capitals accumulated through these early childhood experiences are seen as valuable assets later to be converted into schooling. Early forms of concerted cultivation evidently require the use of economic capital, as these activities often come at a financial cost.

Paying for a private kindergarten is an especially noteworthy phenomenon, since in the Hungarian context – unlike in several other European countries – kindergarten attendance is mandatory from the age of three. Nevertheless, some parents are willing to pay for what they perceive as value-added options or institutional flexibility even at the kindergarten level. Economic and social capitals are especially intertwined in these cases: by participating in early childhood activities or enrolling their children in private kindergartens, parents become embedded in social networks where more information circulates about the private education sector.

A particularly noteworthy form of parental capital is the strong confidence middle-class parents express in their own cultural capital – capital they believe they can, if necessary, mobilize as a substitute for high-quality subject-based schooling in the future. As one parent explained, while advocating for a child-centered school and expressing little concern about whether the school would provide a strong subject-based education in the early years:

> "I was thinking that with x number of degrees behind us, I'd just step in if something [some subject knowledge] was missing. So, regarding what they teach – if it's not enough, I'll make up for it." (Budapest, A school, Parent 1)

As for economic capital, although there are differences in the tuition fees parents have to pay, as well as in how burdensome they find these payments, there is a general consensus among them that it is worth it. Some of them directly link this to what they see as the state's declining willingness to pay its teachers enough:

> "On one hand, it's more expensive for me, that's for sure – I have to pay more. But because of this, I would say that the teaching staff is also more balanced. And I think this is the biggest advantage of private schools." (Countycapital, B School, Parent 2)

Many parents tend to rationalize the role tuition fees play in creating social selection in education by talking about the money their fellow parents (in state schools) also spend on educational needs and shadow education. Some parents even deny that financial capital creates gaps between families; instead, they argue that they simply allocate their money differently than others in order to afford the tuition fees:

> I don't know if there is any alternative pedagogy where you don't have to pay – maybe not. But people assume that just because I pay tuition for my child, I must be living well. Which isn't true. For example, I don't spend money the way my colleague, who earns the same, does. I don't order food deliveries every day, [but] that's fine if someone does. It's just that we manage our money differently. So it's not that I have more money because I send my child to a fee-paying school – the emphasis is simply on something else. (Budapest, W School, Parent 2)

> Otherwise, we are not in a very, very [advantageous] financial position; we live well, but we don't go on, I don't know, exotic vacations every break. We spend a lot of money on the children's education, and we consider it important that they study in a place that is good for them. (Middletown, A school, Parent 1)

> My approach to it is that it is an investment. I want the same thing as someone who buys kitchen furniture to make their home nicer, I invest in something to make things better, it is just not as tangible as kitchen furniture. By the way, we've lived here for 13 years now, and I wanted to replace the kitchen furniture, and I haven't done it. It's about setting priorities. (Countycapital, B School, Parent 1)

These arguments demonstrate how financial capital is converted into cultural capital through selective schooling. They also show how parents attempt to justify their privileges and regard the choices made possible by their habitus as generally expected by implying that others could also afford tuition if they prioritized education as much as fee-paying parents do.

Other parents acknowledge that having the necessary financial capital creates educational advantages for them, but accept this situation by assuming that there is nothing that can be done about financial inequalities, like the following mother who reflects on the absence of Roma pupils in their child's school:

> "Here everyone has to pay tuition. There aren't any Roma kids either. I think it's for financial reasons. And also, I don't think it even reaches them, it just doesn't spread that way." (Budapest, R school, Parent1).

Although some parents express that, in an ideal world, they would be happy to send their children to a school where they could meet peers from diverse social backgrounds, even the mother who initially enrolled her child in state education – believing that this would allow him to experience how society works – later referred to this as her "delusion," which she felt she had to give up for the sake of the individual interests of her child.

Most parents did not mention social cohesion or diversity as important social functions of schooling; this may be linked to the long-recognized social selectiveness of the Hungarian education system, which persisted even during the period when the overwhelming majority of children attended state schools.

Moreover, the acknowledgment of the role played by financial capital in schooling is overshadowed by narratives about how parents appreciate their fellow parents' attitude to

childrearing: they are described as caring, future-oriented and conscious: for instance, they continue the childrearing project after school in the afternoon, because they are aware that this has to be done in order to secure a good future for their children:

> Let's say upper-middle or upper-class [families send their kids here] from a financial point of view. We're more in the poorer half of the school, but what I like about the other families is that they're really conscious about raising kids. At least to the extent that they've chosen a good school. So, it's not like, okay, school day is over, let's head to McDonald's, then go home to watch TV. Instead, it's, I don't know, recreational programs, hiking, sports, or whatever – cooking at home, or going to healthy restaurants, things like that. (Budapest, B School, Parent 3)

> For everyone, the child and education, invest[ing] in the future, is the absolute priority. That is, it's important for everyone to make the whole thing work, to view teachers as partners – or at least [that] most do. Even if there's a problem, it's not about blaming each other, but about solving it. (Budapest, T School, Parent 1)

When parents talk about their fellow parents as "caring parents," this usually encompasses things that are inherent to a middle-class habitus (e.g., spending active recreational time together) and/or necessitate at least some financial capital (like going to healthy restaurants, etc.). Again, just like the belief that affording the tuition fee can be seen as a matter of "prioritizing," this conceals the connection between social status and "good schooling".

## 6 Conclusion

Our interviews in Hungary led to results that align with earlier Western European and American findings (Vincent, 2017; Brown, 2021), which emphasize that the school choice process is inextricably tied to the intensive project of child-rearing, and that early child-rearing experiences and practices play a role in how school choice is enacted later. A major finding of our research is that elements of concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011) are, in the Hungarian case, already present before the start of formal schooling in the case of many of our interviewees; hence, this kind of child-rearing not only helps children through their school years, but it can play an important role even preceding the school choice process. Many parents we interviewed, especially those who later sent their children to elite-oriented private schools, are specifically seeking value-added activities that they believe will enhance their child's future opportunities. An underlying reason for this kind of early concerted cultivation may be heightened parental anxiety that it is never too early to start securing one's child's future. This also shows that the stakes, even related to the choice of primary school, are perceived to be very high in Hungary. This can be attributed to the fact that, in the past 40 years, and as a consequence of free school choice, the Hungarian primary school landscape has become even more stratified than existing socio-geographical differences would suggest, and the shared understanding that even primary schools are not equal further raises the stakes involved in choosing a good education. Seeking and providing various structured activities during the early years involves investments of cultural, social, and financial capital, which are deeply intertwined and help pave the way to privileged schooling.

Intensive parenting can be identified in how parents talk about the period of school choice: it is described by many parents as a time of "heavy research," and as a very tiresome period; however, their early practice of concerted cultivation facilitates this process for them.

Also, parents feel that looking for a good school requires not only investing time and energy, but that they need to become schooling experts: identifying a good place of education involves meticulous research into the pedagogical practices of schools or formulating opinions on the pedagogical methodologies used in schools.

Intensive parenting culminates in this period in gathering all kinds of "hot" and "cold" knowledge about schools. In this research, parents are much more suspicious about the information that comes from schools maintained by the state, whereas they trust privately maintained schools much more, seeing them as more transparent and more willing to openly communicate with parents.

Mistrust of the state is further strengthened by references to recent policy changes, especially budgetary cuts, which parents interpret as inevitably leading to a decrease in the provision of suitable infrastructural and professional assistance in state schools. In the Hungarian case, distrust is also frequently intertwined with a direct political stance: some parents turn away from state schools and seek alternative private schools because they are opposed to the ruling government's educational policy. Intensive parentification, hence, stems not only from the belief of having been left alone (by the state) but also from thinking about schooling along pedagogical-professional lines and trying to make sense of whether it is worth turning to alternative pedagogies.

Self-confidence in their own cultural and economic capital can help parents reconcile their choice of "alternative" private education and the possible gaps in quality education that are usually thought to go together with alternative education.

However, whereas many "alternative schoolers" think about child-centeredness as an all-encompassing pedagogical philosophy, others who refer to this term rather think of it as a guarantee of flexibility and the consideration of the individual needs of the child.

Strategies intended to avoid state schools that deploy mainstream teacher-centered pedagogies and the emphasis on the individuality of the child are two sides of the same coin, and they both motivate parents to dig deep through their school research in order not to fail in their parental responsibility. Our findings align with Lubienski's argument that school choice is a mechanism that strengthens the privatized aspect of education: parents do not trust mainstream education on the one hand, and they feel that finding a good school is their most important parental project and responsibility, and not fulfilling this responsibility can ruin the future of their children. Probably due to the stratified feature of the Hungarian educational landscape even before 2010, social inequalities among institutions are widely accepted as an inherent feature of the system. In agreement, in our interviews, while some interviewees expressed their regret that only those from privileged social backgrounds can attend the school their child attends, concerns about the consequences of exclusionary education rarely arose. On the other hand, growing social inequalities within the educational system are legitimized by downplaying or justifying the exclusionary effects of tuition fees. This is reflected in the vocabulary of the parents when they speak in terms of investment, prioritization, or responsible parenting, by which they imply that it is not financial capital that creates social differences in schooling. More-

over, they underestimate the role played by their financial capital in the reproduction of their educational privileges when they speak of themselves as among the least wealthy families in the school, or see being wealthy as the least important of their characteristics. They also normalize their privileges by perceiving their fellow parents not primarily as people who can afford private education, but as committed, caring, and responsible parents who have made the right choice and necessary sacrifice of paying for education for the sake of their children. Moreover, although their accounts of their child-rearing clearly demonstrate the early use of cultural, social, and economic capital to secure their children's educational futures, parents tend to interpret their children's enrolment in private schools not as an outcome of their privilege, but instead as a deserved reward for their parental care and sacrifice.

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