

## **Paper presentation:**

### ***School choices, school segregation and social cohesion***

This study is about upper secondary school choice, school segregation and the basic belief that education should overcome social fractions in society and increase social cohesion. In this paper we will address this policy issue by analyzing 925 students answering survey questions about their choice of upper secondary school.

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### **General description**

Educational choices and their interactions with context as well as class, ethnicity and gender are by all means centrally important for and in the process of school choice (Forsey et al. 2008). But, as will be pointed out in this paper school choice is also filled with cultural and social values that help establish symbolic boundaries that define the borders of belonging and influence identification of and with different upper secondary school cultures.

In analyses of how school choice may produce school segregation, two major and interrelated causal paths have been identified through which this may occur. *Structural boundaries* refer to the organizational structure of an educational system in a specific time and place. In the present Swedish system, students can choose freely between all the schools in this region (what we refer to as a “local school market”). The primary structural boundary restricting these students’ educational choices is their final grades from primary school. The grades required to be accepted to a program at a specific school depend on how many students apply for the same program, and the grades of those students. Thus, the varying competition between students to get into specific programs at specific schools results in the “thresholds” for being accepted varying between schools and programs. Since school achievement is partly dependent on various social factors, primarily the educational level of the parents, this is one way the choices of less privileged students are restricted vis-à-vis those of the privileged. This first pathway is related to Boudon’s (1974) understanding of “primary effects”, i.e., segregation that is the consequence of “objective” restrictions on the choices of individuals; restrictions that in turn are related to social and ethnic background.

*Symbolic boundaries* refer to meanings associated with belonging in a specific context, for example a school (Voyer 2013). Symbolic values are assigned to the different actors in the local school market and, depending partly on their social position, students respond differently to these values. In our definition, symbolic boundaries create or restrict social belonging or “we-ness” as a structuring force in school choice processes (Lund 2015). Who am I? Who are the other students at my school? Equally important is difference: Who are the students at other schools and why are they there (Alexander 2013)? Lamont and Molnár (2002) differentiate between symbolic and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions that may or may not, depending on other factors at play, manifest themselves into social boundaries. The latter are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to an unequal distribution of resources” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168). The concept of symbolic boundaries is closely related to Boudon’s (1974) “secondary effects”, i.e., segregation that is the result of educational choices students make “voluntarily” (self-selection), but that nonetheless are dependent on social background (Eriksson and Rudolfs 2010, Jonsson and Rudolfs 2011). When symbolic boundaries are agreed on to an extent that they produce social boundaries, the social boundaries will in turn confirm and reinforce the symbolic boundaries.

This paper builds on an assumption generated from previous research. Barmark and Lund (2016) shows that approximately 50 % of the students at the natural science program choose school because of symbolic boundaries. The research question to be answered is: To what extent are students’ choices restricted by previous school performance, and to what extent are they the result of their feelings of belonging?

### **Methods/methodology**

The analysis is performed using both register and survey data. The forthcoming analysis is thus based on register data from all upper secondary schools in Malmö, and survey data from eleven upper secondary schools. The survey was filled out in the classroom during school hours, either on paper or online. A total of 925 students participated in the study, corresponding to 79 percent of all students enrolled in these eleven schools at the time of the study. Most of the register data are official data retrieved from the Swedish National Agency for Education. The material includes information on the composition of students at all schools and programs in the Malmö municipality with regard to gender, immigrant background and parents’ educational level. We also use students’ grades from primary school, on an individual level, retrieved from the Educational Administration Office in Malmö.

The register data include the parents' educational level as well as immigrant/native background. According to the formal definition used in Swedish official statistics since 2004, individuals born outside Sweden are categorized as first-generation immigrants while individuals born in Sweden with both parents born outside Sweden are categorized as second-generation immigrants. The educational background of the students is also defined in accordance with the formal definition; i.e., students who have at least one parent with a post-secondary education are defined as having highly educated parents. The same definitions are used in the analysis of survey data.

From the survey data, parents' "work situation" is used as a complementary indicator of socioeconomic background. The original variable consisted of several alternatives, but for the purpose of this analysis a binary variable was constructed to distinguish between students with at least one parent working full time and those with no parent working full time. Finally, information on parents' income would have been relevant, but it was assumed that students' knowledge of their parents' income is generally limited and that this information, if obtained from the questionnaire, would be unreliable. Instead, we included form of residence (owning or renting) and whether or not the family owns a car as crude indicators of economic resources (Nilsson 1998, Larsson 2008).

Included in the survey were also a number of items on the motives for choosing this particular school. The students were asked to agree or disagree on a four-point scale with six different statements. In the analysis the variables are dichotomized, and the proportion of students agreeing fully or partly with the statement is compared with those who fully or partly disagree.

### **Expected outcomes/results**

In a previous study we showed that there is substantial ethnic and social segregation within the natural science program in the local quasi market of Malmö (Barmark & Lund, 2016). In sum, students with an immigrant background are overrepresented in the natural science program as a whole, but underrepresented at the schools with the highest thresholds<sup>1</sup>. This is partly due to structural boundaries – immigrant students generally have lower grades from primary school, thus making their school choices more restricted.

However, roughly half of the segregation found with regard to immigrant status cannot be attributed to differences in grades; it is rather the result of high-performing immigrant students to a higher extent than high-performing native students "voluntarily" choosing a low-threshold

school, and the other way around. In addition to structural boundaries, it thus seems that symbolic boundaries play an important role in reinforcing segregation in this context. The motive of “social belonging” turns out to be an important factor behind students’ school choice.

Based upon these results our assumption is that symbolic boundaries have most impact on school choice when the students are skilled school performers, have high grades and are well informed about the different school cultures in the local school market. If this assumption is true, present educational policy debate will come into a new light. The discussed policy solution, to give children and their parents more information about their educational options and to demand an obligatory choice, will hardly reduce the increasing school segregation in Sweden.

### **Intent of publication**

Yes.

### **References**

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<sup>i</sup> The more students who apply to a specific school and program, the higher the required grades become for getting a seat. Thus, higher grades are required to get into the more attractive schools. In the following, we refer to the schools at the top and bottom of this hierarchy as high- and low-threshold schools.