Heterogeneous middle-class and diverse educational advantage: parental investment in children's schooling in Dehradun, India

The heterogeneity of the contemporary Indian middle-class has been discussed widely. However, the effect of its internal differences on the distribution of educational resources needs to be examined systematically. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with parents in 53 middle-class families in Dehradun, India, this paper explores three aspects of the home-school relationship: how socioeconomic transformations shape parents' aspirations for their children's future, educational decisions parents make to realise those aspirations, and mothers' engagement in their children's everyday schooling. The tripartite analysis reveals that despite sharing common educational goals and strategies with the population in general, middle-class families in India use their class privilege to gain valuable educational resources. The paper argues that the discrepancy in the mobilisation of accumulated resources in the heterogeneous middle-class results in diverse educational advantages across families. It critiques the binary construction of social classes when explaining the processes of social reproduction in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Heterogeneous middle-class, capital, parental aspirations, school-choice, parental engagement, educational advantage

Introduction

The family is a crucial site for social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1996). The formation of social class can be understood in terms of the position that individuals, or agents, occupy in the social field. Bourdieu (1985, p.724) conceptualises the relationship between social field, capital, and position as follows:

> The social field can be described as a multi-dimensional space of positions such that every actual position can be defined in terms of a multi-dimensional system of co-ordinates whose values correspond to the values of the different pertinent variables. Thus, agents are distributed within it, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of the capital they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the composition of their capital - i.e., according to the relative weight of the different kinds of assets within their total assets.

In a specific field, such as education, power is distributed among agents according to their possession of valuable resources. These resources, or capital in its multifaceted forms,

are not merely *economic*, they are also *social* consisting of social connections and networks, *cultural* including 'a broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences and orientations' (Reay, 1998, p.26), and *symbolic*—'the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived as recognised as legitimate' (Bourdieu, 1987, p.4). According to the *volume* and the *composition* of capital, agents are 'assigned a position, a location or a precise class of neighbouring positions, i.e., a particular area within that space' (Bourdieu, 1987, p.4). Strategies of social mobility and reproduction are used to occupy a privileged position in the social space. One of the crucial strategies that middle-class families use to retain their privileged position in the social space is to invest in their children's education and to cultivate the home-school relationship (Bourdieu, 1990).

Studies on the home-school relationship offer intricate accounts of how middle-class families solicit educational privilege. In her empirical study about families in the United States, Annette Lareau (2011), for example, shows the case of 'domestic transmission of cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.17). Lareau's work illustrates how parents in middle-class families 'concertedly cultivate' their children's skills and talents (pp.363–364). These investments benefit children scholastically and shape their wider social perspectives on matters such as the organisation of daily life, the use of language, familiarisation of forms of verbal interactions—all of which pave the way for attaining better life opportunities. Diane Reay (1998), in her seminal work, shows how middle-class mothers in the UK exert their class privilege by using language—a form of cultural capital—to strengthen the home-school relationship. However, working-class mothers find themselves placed 'outside on the margins' as they grapple with 'a matrix of intersected positionings and classifications that are embodied' (O'Donoghue, 2013, p.190; also see Reay, 1998).

These studies and others of the home-school relationship that binarily compare the

experiences of working-class with middle-class parents and children offer illuminating perspectives on educational practices. However, neatly defined categorical assessments fail to capture the dynamics that emerge as families across segments of social groups exercise their class advantage to fulfil common educational goals. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the positions of parents in the *education field* in the empirical case of an economically homogeneous fraction of the contemporary urban middle-class in Dehradun city in northern India.

Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of *field* and *capital* as 'thinking tools' (Wacquant, 1989, p.50), this paper focuses on three aspects of the home-school relationship. First, it explores the influence of socio-structural changes on parental aspirations for their children's future. Next, it examines the educational strategies parents adopt for meeting those aspirations. Finally, it investigates parents', especially mothers', engagement in their children's everyday schooling. By showing similarities and differences in parental investment in an apparently homogeneous fragment of the Indian middle-class, the paper problematises, and aims to disrupt, the binary reification of social groups in the broader scholarship on education and society. In what follows, I first outline the expansion and the nature of contemporary middle-classes and provide the background to the middle-classes in India. Then, I introduce the study before presenting and discussing the research findings.

Contemporary middle-class and the nature of its heterogeneity in India

The global middle-class population reached 3.2 billion in 2016; it is expected to grow by 140 million annually (Kharas, 2017). The global growth of the middle-class is centred on Asia, a region expected to contribute about 88% of the next billion added to the economic group (Kharas, 2017). The middle-class, as a group, has emerged from various historical contexts. As a result, it is defined variously and characterised differently across socio-cultural settings

(Heiman, Freeman, & Liechty, 2012). A vast pool of research in China and India—the two largest middle-class growth areas—reveals an extensively heterogeneous group (Brosius, 2014; Li, 2010).

In India, the contemporary middle-class arose primarily in the aftermath of economic liberalisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Fernandes, 2006). During this period, the social composition of 'the advantaged group' began a radical reconfiguration (Kharas, 2010; Fernandes, 2006). Most scholars agree that the Indian middle-class comprises of an old inter-generationally privileged, mostly upper-caste, self-sufficient group of families that played a crucial role in post-independence economic development (Deshpande, 2003), and a new, disparate but highly aspirational, upwardly mobile, and consumerist social group that benefitted greatly from the expanded market economy and its labour demand (Baviskar & Ray, 2011; Fernandes, 2006).

The second section of the 'new' middle-class, part of which is the focus of this paper, is further divided along the parameters of income levels, educational credentials of family members, main source of household income, and consumption patterns (Baviskar & Ray, 2011). Sometimes, it represents the IT professionals, who live in the metropolitan cities and contribute to the global economy (Fernandes, 2006; Fuller & Narasimhan, 2006; Mathur, 2010). At other times, it consists of the families who have a steady income but who struggle to secure their future financially (Donner, 2005; Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2009; Waldrop, 2004). Arguably, this group also represents the *Jats,* a primarily rural-based socially privileged group that invests generously to ensure their children's future in the urban regions (Jeffery, Jeffery, & Jeffrey, 2011).

Although there are internal differences, all socio-economic sections of the Indian middle-class invest heavily in their children's education (Dickey, 2012; Donner, 2005;

Fernandes, 2006; Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2009; Jeffery, Jeffery, & Jeffrey, 2011; Waldrop, 2004). The nature of this investment has been discussed primarily regarding school choice, obsession with engineering and medicine as future career fields, and readiness for the job market in urban contexts (Nambissan, 2009).

Few contemporary studies provide rich details on parental attempts to reproduce differences by comparing one fragment of the middle-class with another—for example, the upper and lower tiers of the economic middle class (Gilbertson, 2014), and upper caste and lower caste middle-class groups in rural India (Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery, 2005). This paper extends this body of literature by examining the social positionings of the families vis-à-vis educational privilege in a single fraction of the urban middle-class.

The study

This paper draws primarily on in-depth interviews with parents in 53 families between December 2014 and December 2015 in Dehradun—a capital city of Uttarakhand State in northern India. The household income of the participant families ranged between INR 300,000 and 500,000 (USD 4,490 and 7,484), which places them in the income category of contemporary Indian middle-class (Sridharan, 2011). These parents also identified themselves were 'in the middle' of the social hierarchy, whereby they had sufficient resources to survive and possibly build a secure future. However, they had to work hard to make ends meet (cf., Dickey, 2012). The initial opportunistic contacts with families (Patton, 2002) facilitated further connections through snow-balling (Creswell, 2012). Interviews were carried out in participants' homes, and each interview lasted for about 1.5 to 2 hours. While I proposed to interact with both parents, some interviews were with the father and mother together, and a small number were with only the father. Most interviews were conducted only with mothers.

As the purpose for carrying out the interviews was to learn about parents' practices vis-à-vis the education field (Bourdieu, 1990), the questions I asked were open-ended and, as expected, produced narratives of rural to urban migration, perception towards the education system, and everyday parental engagement in children's schooling. These narratives were triangulated with the material produced from informal conversations with parents and schoolteachers. The conversations happened in two schools, involved in the larger research project, where most participant families had enrolled their children. I also draw on observations made during parent-teacher meetings in these schools.

My two-step approach to data analysis—segmentation and reassembling (Boeije, 2010)—was informed by an interpretivist theoretical position, the aim of which was to understand how the participants made sense of, and operated in, the social space (Bourdieu, 1987). First, I segmented and inductively coded the interview transcripts and field notes (based on informal conversations and observations). This process resulted in breaking up, and decontextualising fragments. It was followed by re-contextualising the material (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and by bringing together the data that were assigned the same codes.

I used the coded material to identify dominant themes across the datasets. These themes are sequenced in order here—*from* parents' understanding of their social class positioning and the educational strategies they adopted to provide their children with valuable educational resources *to* engaging in their children's education—to offer a more meaningful, coherent, and comprehensive understanding of commonalities and differences in ways in which parents invest their capital to gain educational advantages.

Migration, middle-class, and the construction of social mobility

The participant families belonged to a section of the contemporary Indian middle-class that is characterised by internal migration from rural to urban regions and an occupational shift from

agriculture to the service sector. Most of the families came from the Garhwal Hills, and only a few had come from non-hilly regions. About 70% of participating families had been living in Dehradun for about 8–10 years; nearly 10% had moved to the city more recently, and about 20% were second or third generation migrants. Furthermore, most male adults in these families had switched their primary source of income from farming to professional careers. Most fathers were army officials, bankers, or teachers. Some were skilled labourers and worked as chefs in restaurants in metropolitan cities within India and overseas, and a few were in the tourism or retail industries. The following excerpt from my interview with Sanjay typifies the migration experience of most participants.

> I grew up in an extended family with my parents, grandparents, and uncles—all living under one roof. Farming was the primary source of income generation for all of us—young and old, son and father. We all did our bit to support it. As I was finishing up my college education, things started to change in the village. Many of those I knew started to move out to settle in Dehradun. It seemed logical; no one in the village who was even slightly capable of moving out stayed back.

In 2000, Sanjay's graduation coincided with the declaration of Dehradun as an interim capital of the state of Uttarakhand. As both public and private sector industries began expanding, Dehradun became a career hub. Many people from neighbouring hilly and rural areas moved to the city to seek employment opportunities. Many rural families wished to migrate to Dehradun but only a few of them were socially positioned to do so. For Sanjay, the movement was facilitated by the social connections he already had in Dehradun. In his words:

> I could not have done it without help from my family. I had some relatives who were already working in Dehradun before I moved here. They encouraged me to invest in a retail business. They put me in touch with people they already knew, and I was able to make some profitable deals. My business expanded. Now I have a shop in the city market, and my family—mother, wife, and two children—live with me.

Like Sanjay, parents in other participant families mobilised their economic resources and social capital to diversify out of the agrarian system and to switch to mostly wage-based employment. This shift offered these families a position in the urban middle-class social fabric (cf., Sridharan, 2011). This positioning, which was both experiential and performative, is illustrated in the following excerpt from my interview with Arun, who worked in a leading insurance firm.

> Here [in Dehradun] we have roads, water, electricity, good schools, cars, phones, designer clothing, and almost everything. The whole lifestyle is different [from the village]. Some villages, especially those in remote areas, still lack basic facilities even today. Say, for example, education. A child of their [his children] age growing up in a village would not have the same benefits as they do [in Dehradun]. My kids are studying in one of the best schools in the city. I am not spending money for them to become farmers. They will be doctors, engineers, or will work in a multinational company when they grow up. As parents, we use all we have to invest in their education.

The availability of infrastructural facilities and the experience of a specific lifestyle not only meant an improved quality of life for the families, but they also achieved crucial 'material conditions of existence' that positioned them 'intrinsically' alongside other 'occupants of the same position in a space' (Bourdieu, 1987, p.6), the urban middle-class.

This positioning in the social space, as illustrated above, was intertwined with parents' attempts to draw on their capital to achieve it. As parents moved away from the traditional occupation of farming to professional employment, intergenerational transfer of professions was neither possible, some families had sold their land and assets in the village to buy property in the city, nor was it desirable because parents wanted their children to enter the global labour market.

The criticality of city-space as a place to position themselves surfaced more strongly when parents associated formal education with the future they wished for their children. For example, Hema, who moved to Dehradun from a small town in Uttarkashi, made the

following response to my query about the relevance of her children's education to her migration story.

> The future lies in cities, and more so for kids. We had everything there [in the village] but not the future I want for my kids. I want my children to go to top universities and study hard to secure a good position in this competitive job market. If they had continued their education in that school [a private primary school in the village], they would not have stood a chance in competition with these city kids. They would have been left behind with that kind of education. I could not kill the dreams I had for my children. I had to leave.

Hema's words resonate with other parents who explained that their decision to leave behind the comfort of a closely-knit village or small-town community for a life in a city where they had relatively loose connections was simultaneously challenging and necessary. This perceived necessity was in alignment with the parental desire for upward social mobility in the imagined socio-occupational hierarchy. The investment in children's education was a critical way for parents to realise the intergenerational transfer of social privilege. In educational matters, middle-class parents made a series of decisions, discussed in the next section, that they believed would have a significant impact on children's future outcomes.

Education choice as a strategy for social reproduction

All parents invariably preferred private schools that use English for educational purposes over highly incentivised public institutions most of which use the vernacular language for instructional and assessment purposes—this is a typical school-choice across social classes (LaDousa, 2014; Srivastava, 2008). This choice is premised on the perceived quality of 'English-medium' and 'private schools' (James & Woodhead, 2014). Notably, private schools in India are elite, but they are also low-cost (Srivastava, 2008) and they cater for middle-class families (Gilbertson, 2014). The participating families had similarities but also differed from others in the social group when commenting on their preference for English

education, learning science subjects, and academic excellence. For example, Kartik, a father, who served as a captain in the Indian Navy, said the following about English education:

> All good jobs need someone who knows the operation of the firm, and someone who can communicate efficiently with colleagues and a wide range of customers or clients. Now, some people with whom you work, even within India, might not even speak Hindi. I know that those who live in the South [of India] may not. English is the language of work. It is vital to master it to be successful.

While his experience of the challenges he faced while interacting with his colleagues who did not, or could not, communicate in Hindi, had shaped Kartik's view, for other participants, the need for English proficiency was imagined or perceived. English carries the mark of elitism in postcolonial India, and some participants associated choosing an English-medium school with its socio-historically informed symbolic value (LaDousa, 2014). However, the majority valued English for its perceived use in leveraging their children in competition for jobs in the labour market (Bénéï, 2005; Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2009). Parents envisioned that their children would be physically mobile within India and outside, and their proficiency in English would equip them to navigate their career path with ease.

Apart from the use of English, parents also valued knowledge of other disciplines in the school curriculum. In this regard, most participants' construction of an ideal school—as emerges in the following excerpt from my interview with Ajay, a parent—was based on the school's infrastructural capacity to provide strong curricular support and the use of a creative teaching pedagogy.

> The ideal school would have an impressive infrastructure. I looked not only for aesthetics—separate blocks for primary, secondary, and higher educational levels, well-furnished classrooms, and working laboratories but also the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers here are accountable. The school offers a variety of disciplines, including new ones such as information technology, communication, entrepreneurship, and business. Not all schools have the capacity to deliver these subjects.

While there were many English medium private schools, very few had the capacity to offer well-trained teachers and the necessary resources to integrate vocational training and lab-intensive science subjects in their standard curricula effectively. However, at the secondary education level, the availability of a science stream was the most critical aspect of both school-selection and school-switching. The following excerpt from the interview with Himani, a mother of a Class X student, explains this aspect of parental choice.

> I want my son to pursue engineering. He needs to have science subjects at secondary level. Right now, he is preparing hard to make it to the science stream. It would be great if he is offered the science stream in the school in which he is currently enrolled. Otherwise, we will have to switch to another school…because science is essential.

The obsession with science subjects in the participant families was associated with the aspirational occupational choice of the fields of engineering and medicine for the next generation (cf., Wilson, 2011, presenting the case of the Indian middle-class in Kerala). Almost all parents believed that entry into these fields would provide their children with a privileged position in the occupational hierarchy. As a result, like Himani, parents were determined to make sure that their children had access to a science stream at secondary level.

The final critical factor of school-choice was schools' performance in producing high-achieving students. This point arises in the excerpt from my interview with Harish, a father of two children.

> Schools are money-making machines. If I pay high fees, I want good results. We all know that the schools that have to their credit students who have scored high in their Board exams [centrally conducted high-stakes assessments at Class X and XII] are obviously doing something that other schools are just not able to do. I don't care if the British established it [in the colonial period], the important thing for me is that the school I send my child to shows a potential to discipline students and prepare them to excel in exams.

Parents view schools as providers of a service. This view was reinforced by a number of advertisements for educational institutions in streets, markets, and residential blocks in the city. The *distinctive* value of a school as post-colonial elite institution influences school-choice in the upper-tier of middle-class families (Donner, 2005; Waldrop, 2004). Participants in this research viewed academic excellence as a means to attain *distinction* in a 'schooled society' (Baker, 2014). In all participating families, children were receiving tutoring support, and some of those in Classes IX to XII also attended parallel coaching sessions to improve their chances of success in the national entrance examinations for engineering and medicine. This investment in extra-curricular support was the parents' strategy aimed at providing the *additional* educational resources that are perceived as critical to enabling students to excel in high-stakes exams (locally known as Board exams) and to succeed in college entrance assessment tests.

Since the educational choices in middle-class families are directed at meeting similar long-term career goals, the nature of parental investment of economic and social capital appears to be similar. However, differences emerge in how parents engage with their children's everyday schooling.

Mothers' educational engagement and distribution of cultural capital

Educational decisions aim to solicit valuable educational resources by parental use of social and economic forms of capital in participating families. This section explores the ways in which parents in these families engaged in their children's everyday schooling to illustrate the differential in the mobilisation of institutionally available resources to ensure academic achievements. The fathers' role in most participant families was almost always limited to providing economic support, whereas mothers assumed a range of household responsibilities including tracking their children's educational progress. This gendered division of domestic

labour in maintaining the home-school relationship was 'naturally' accepted by women as their task (also discussed in Reay, 1998, pp.145–157).

The involvement of mothers in increasing educational support in participant families ranged on a continuum from being *providers* of monetarily purchasable resources, *partners* with teachers and children, to *proactively* orchestrating the overall schooling experience. Each of these somewhat fluid categories is explained below.

The providers

The providers represent those mothers whose primary contribution to their children's education was to supply the materials that were either suggested by teachers or demanded by their children. Most provider-mothers had never attended a school or had been forced to drop out prematurely due to factors such as family hardship or the prevailing gender norms against female education in their families. Anjana's involvement in her children's schooling exemplifies this category of parental involvement.

Anjana was living with her two children in a 3BHK (three bedrooms, hall and kitchen) apartment. Her husband served in the Indian Army and was posted in a different Indian state at the time of the interview. In response to my query as to what she thought the value of formal education was, Anjana said:

> My parents wanted me to focus less on studying and more on learning household skills because they felt that those skills would be more useful when I take on the role of a wife and a mother. I would never do that to my daughter. See [pointing to a photo of her daughter] how smart she looks in the school uniform—blue blazer and a tie. I do everything—pay for school, transportation, private tuition classes, books, and stationery —to make sure that she gets the education she deserves.

For Anjana, meeting a range of logistical demands efficiently signified her

commitment to educating her daughter. As our conversation continues, I inquired about how she spent time with her children and learned that she was mostly occupied in performing family duties. In her words:

> I am usually very busy with household chores, gardening, preparing meals. And, there are some social obligations too. I have to invite over neighbours and relatives to my house or meet up with them in their place to maintain social connections and relationships.

At this point in the interview, Anjana had to leave the room to answer a phone call. I turned to her daughter, a Grade VIII student, who was sitting beside me, and asked her about her studies at home and what she does when her mother invites relatives and family friends over. She said:

> I enjoy it when my cousins and friends come over to our house, but it can be challenging to study simultaneously. I usually adjust my study schedule according to the things happening in the house. Sometimes I help my mother with food preparation and cleaning up, which is usually fine but can be disruptive at times.

Anjana said that the whole house, the front garden, and the roof were there for her children to use for play and study. However, she was not fully aware of their subjects and study materials as she would not interact with her children about matters to do with their education for the following reason:

> It is embarrassing, and I fear that I might not understand their [referring to her children] issues and concerns because now they are more educated than I am [laughs]. I make sure that money is never the issue in what they want to accomplish, but they pretty much manage things by themselves.

Anjana's son joined in the conversation and said, 'she does not know what happens in school, what we study, and how many things we have to balance all at once'. Her lack of educational qualifications, and her deficit of cultural capital in an institutionalised form,

inhibit Anjana from engaging with the teaching and learning aspects of her children's education. Her son's dismissive attitude towards his mothers' contribution to his education seems to create even more distance between Anjana and her children's everyday schooling.

Anjana's ignorance of the assessments her children were preparing for, the challenges they were facing, and their feelings about academic success and failure made her confused during parent-teacher meetings. During one such meeting, which was organised soon after the results of a critical assessment, I observed Anjana's interaction with her daughter's class teacher. From the report card, handed to her by the teacher, Anjana learned that her daughter had failed mathematics. Anjana reacted by speaking in a highly animated manner:

> I am doing everything I can. She [her daughter] opens her book, sits with it for hours and hours, but does not understand a single thing, it seems. I mean [she pauses, and tension builds up, then Anjana raises her voice and says] I am spending so much [money] on education. I do not know what else I can do. Why do they not learn anything in school?

Anjana was disappointed with her daughter's performance because she believed that since she provided everything for her daughter, she had no reason to fail. Interestingly, the question that Anjana asked the class teacher appeared to challenge the teachers' accountability. Upset by Anjana's attitude, the teacher responded assertively:

> I am a teacher to all my students in school, and I pay attention to all of them equally. It's not my fault or the lack of efficiency of other teachers in school if some students do not perform well in exams. We try our best. You should also know that the environment that they are exposed to when they leave the school premises also influences children's performance. Maybe you should pay more attention to her at home.

Placing the blame on the families was a typical response from teachers to those parents who seemed to criticise their work or threaten their social position. Conversations between teachers and Anjana—and other Providers—would usually end prematurely with

vague defensive comments from the teachers. Hence, in spite of their enormous efforts to make sure that their children had access to quality education, the Provider mothers were effectively distanced from their children's everyday schooling experiences.

The partners

Mothers who viewed themselves as partners took on the role of creating a home environment for their children that was conducive to learning and that complemented school activities. They would not only meet the logistical demands made by teachers, their children, and school administration, but also purchase additional teaching and learning aids, and cater to their children's nutritional needs in an organised way. These mothers had completed their schooling, and some of them were college graduates. Rajni's engagement with her sons' education typifies the involvement approach of Partner parents. The following is an excerpt from the observation notes I prepared after my interview with Rajni.

> Rajni showed me her house, particularly proudly pointing to one room in her 3BHK apartment that she referred to as a 'study room'. This room was a dedicated space for studying, and it was left for its users—her children—to maintain and utilise. The room had two tables fully occupied with files, papers, and stationery. One of the tables was covered with multi-coloured pencils and drawings of human bones. Pointing at the drawings, Rajni said that her older son was preparing for practical assessment of Class XII Biology.

The organisation of space to foster learning practices was common among Partner families. Rajni was also active in sourcing other resources that might help her children with their studies. For example, during my informal conversation with her, Rajni shared:

> All parents purchase teaching and learning materials that the schoolteachers ask for, but it is not just about studying you know, nutrition and play are equally important. I take care of what and when they eat and make sure that they go out and play. Everything is important to facilitate greater focus during studying.

Rajni subscribed to an 'education and health' magazine that would usually have different recipes and diet plans suggested by educational experts. Along with supporting their children's needs in different ways, the Partner parents also sacrificed their social life for their perceived need to maintain their physical presence around their children. Rajni, for example, would often cancel her own travel plans to visit extended family members or attend cultural events. Despite being heavily involved in their children's education, Partner parents shared a strong sense of guilt for their inability to assist their children academically. Rajni shared her views on the matter as follows:

> I studied in a Hindi-medium government school. And even though I have a BA in Hindi literature, I do not have the right skills to know everything that my children are studying in their English-medium school. Every subject, except for Hindi, is taught in English. I may understand a few terms and concepts in the Hindi language, but maybe not in English. I teach them Hindi at home, and they often ask me if they need help, but other subjects are just beyond me.

Having studied in a government school where the medium of instruction was Hindi, Rajni felt nervous and academically inept at teaching her children who were enrolled in an 'English medium private school'. She felt proud to be able to use her cultural capital to help her children to study Hindi, but this was not helpful in her engagement with other subjects. She had skills but not the *right ones* in relation to her children's educational field. Her way of compensating for this hiatus was to send her children to after-school tutoring classes for all their subjects and to enhance this with information gathered from her personal contacts. Rajni had befriended some of her sons' teachers who came from the same region where Rajni had spent her childhood. She would often visit them in their homes and discuss her children's performance informally. These exchanges were of crucial importance to Rajni in learning more about her children:

I have learned much more about my son's everyday schooling experience that I possibly could have by merely attending PTMs (Parent-Teacher meetings). Teachers often tell me about extra study materials that are best for preparing for Board Assessments. So, I buy them at the market and I discuss with tutors how to incorporate these materials into their lessons.

Rajni's children listened to her and discussed with her the problems they were facing both academically and otherwise. Rajni believed that her interactions with her children were critical in maintaining a productive relationship with their teachers and tutors in terms of meeting her children's educational needs more appropriately. Hence, in addition to paying fees, the Partner mothers mobilise their economic capital to provide extra educational resources for their children and activate their social connections to source valuable teaching and learning material.

The Proactive agents

On the other side of the continuum of parental engagement were the highly educated mothers who orchestrated their children's schooling experience by helping them with their homework, participating actively in everyday curricular activities, and, at times, monitoring their learning progress in self-scheduled home-tests. Aditi's way of engaging with her children's education illustrates the parental involvement of Proactive agent parents. It is embodied in the following excerpt from the notes I made based on my informal conversation with her.

Aditi gets up at 5a.m. and calls her children by 5:30 a.m. While the children freshen up, she places a tray with some tea, toast, and a bowl of nuts on the study table. Between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m., Aditi sits with her children as they finish their homework and meet the daily study target that she sets out for her children. At 7:30 a.m., the children eat a more substantial breakfast of *Paratha* with a glass of milk before they leave for school at 7:45 a.m. After returning from school at around 2:30 p.m., the children are served a nutritious meal before they leave again for 2 hours of tuition classes from 3 to 5 p.m. During these hours, Aditi reviews her children's classwork, their school diary, and checks whether

there is any note to parents. Between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m., she sits with her children and usually asks them about their day. She helps her children to revise their classwork and to complete their homework. Dinner is served at around 8 p.m. This period is quite informal and conversation topics may or may not concern studies. After dinner, the children finish their remaining work for the day, and everyone goes to bed, usually between 10 p.m. and 10:30 p.m.

Her children's education was central to Aditi's recent life trajectory as well as her daily routine. Aditi's husband, who was in the Indian Navy, was posted in one of the southern states of India. Even though the family had a house and property in a smaller town in the Garhwal region, Aditi chose to live in a two-bedroom rented apartment in Dehradun, primarily to provide her children with access to a better quality of education. In addition to providing teaching support for some subjects, Aditi had enrolled her children in tuition classes for Mathematics and Physics. She would usually take note of specific problems her children were experiencing in school and share them with teachers during parent-teacher meetings. In one of the PTMs, I observed her interaction with Rajeev's (Aditi's son) Biology teacher.

> [Aditi to the teacher] Rajeev really enjoys his biology lessons. However, recently I noticed that he is not able to follow the diagrammatic representation of bones. He gets confused. Although I know that you have taught this before, it would be very helpful if you could perhaps tell him which aspects he should pay attention to when differentiating structures [of bones] so that he does not make this mistake in the Board [assessment].

Aditi was articulate when speaking to the teachers. As shown above, she first compliments the teacher for her effort and then presents the problem in the form of a request. The next day in school, I noticed the biology teacher sitting with Rajeev during lunch time and advising him. During the fieldwork, I learned that teachers respected Aditi, and usually, educators were forthcoming in offering her the support she asked for. As an active agent, Aditi, and other mothers in this category, productively mobilised their economic, social, and

cultural capital to provide their children with educational advantages.

Conclusion

The paper captures the complexity underlying the relationship between class privilege and educational advantage. By focussing on a fraction of the contemporary Indian middle class, it shows that social class is a construction of relative *positions* that *agents* occupy in a *field*. When allocating class status, Bourdieu (1987) maintains that the agents in one group ought to be 'as similar as possible in the greatest possible number of respects', and there should be 'the largest possible separation between classes of the greatest possible homogeneity' (Bourdieu, 1987 p.5). However, in actual society, Bourdieu acknowledges that 'clear-cut boundaries' and 'absolute breaks' do not exist. This often results in the fragmented positioning of agents from different social groups (Bourdieu, 1987 p.13). Notably, individuals' positioning in a social space, and their power in the field, are shaped by the *volume* and the *composition* of the agents' multi-dimensional capital (Bourdieu, 1985).

The evident heterogeneity in class performance in India, shown here and in the literature, seems to produce an image of the middle-class as a multi-positional category in a dynamic and evolving social space. This image helps in the investigation of parental investment in education. The participant families had a few similar experiences that placed them closely with one another in the social space. They used their economic and social capital to move spatially and to adapt their occupation to suit the fabric of the urban middle-class (Jeffery, Jeffery, & Jeffrey, 2011). This socio-spatial transformation also guides parents' aspirations for their children's education and career trajectories.

This paper shows that parents' desire for children to enter the fields of engineering, medicine, and other professions are premised on their belief that pursuing careers in these lines of work will position their children 'in the middle' of the newly formulated occupational

hierarchy structure. These views on the possibility of social reproduction via education within a constantly restructured social space explain the educational decisions that parents in participant families make. These decisions—the selection of a private school that uses English for educational purposes, having well-equipped classrooms, plenty of subject choices, and stress on academic achievements—are not merely choices, they are strategies for achieving academic distinction and acquiring valued educational resources. More specifically, most of these decisions are aimed at mobilising economic resources to gain cultural capital—in both embodied and institutionalised forms—to provide children with competitive advantages later in their educational and career trajectories.

Therefore, social and economic forms of capital are necessary for middle-class families to *accumulate* valuable educational resources. However, whether they are deployed to realise the desired educational advantage depends on the distribution of parents' cultural capital. This paper shows how the management and the utilisation of available resources are influenced by the nature of mothers' involvement in their children's education. Different educational experiences place mothers in diverse positions in the *field* of parental involvement in education. While the mothers with higher academic qualification usually proactively engage in, or partner with, teachers in shaping their children's schooling experience, and consequently strengthen the home-school relationship, those who lack this embodied and institutionalised form of cultural capital fail to translate the assembled educational resources into capital despite having common goals and adopting similar educational strategies.

The intra-class difference in the mobilisation of capital within and across sections of social groups invariably intersects with other forms of social classifications such as gender, religion, region, and caste. These factors did not surface in this paper and during interviews

due to the homogeneous sampling. The paper presents cases of mostly upper-caste Garhwali Hindu families in an urban area. It would be interesting to examine educational privileges in one or more dimensions of social classification with social classes intersectionally in future studies within India and beyond.

Despite the limitations arising from drawing on the empirical case of only one group of the Indian middle-class, this study offers a sharp critique of 'choice' in the education sector. Indeed, the marketisation and privatisation of education have provided middle-class parents with choices, and the lack of these choices places the economically weaker sections of the social class in a relatively disadvantaged position. However, the paper unveils the façade behind the optimistic views associated with school choice by showing that the availability of choice does not guarantee educational privilege even within middle-class families. Socio-economic capability may bring together valuable resources, but differential distribution and composition of other forms of capital—which are accumulated variously throughout the lives of the members of social groups—result in the disparate utilisation of accrued resources.

Earlier studies have provided sufficient evidence for middle-class diversity. This paper illustrates that the advantages that members of just one fraction of this group seem to have at their disposal can be quite diverse. This diversity occurs due to the variety of ways in which the agents reach the middle position in the class hierarchy. Since the heterogeneity, produced through differential life trajectories, exists relationally across and within different sections of social groups, educational privilege cannot be categorised neatly between middle and working classes. Hence, instead of producing binary narratives of social class to illustrate educational advantage, perhaps analysing relative privilege and disadvantage in increasingly heterogeneous social groups would allow for capturing more comprehensively the complexity

underlying the processes of social reproduction in the evolving social fields.

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