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Revisiting educational advantage and social class: a Bourdieusian analysis of middle-class parents' investment in private schooling and shadow education

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a Bourdieusian analysis of middle-class parents' investment in private schooling and shadow education (tutoring support) in India, thus contributes to the scholarship of class-based educational advantage. It unveils parents' aspirations for their children's education and investigates how these aspirations shape the demand for private education. Bringing into sharp focus the complexity of social privilege, this article discusses how middle-class parents' articulation of their lack of valued cultural capital informs their decision to invest in private schools. However, parents' views on their ineffective involvement in their children's education produce a perceived home disadvantage, which parents compensate for by investing in tutoring services. The article argues that investing in private education – both in formal educational institutions and tutoring centres – is a case of 'capital exchange' (transfer of economic capital to secure cultural capital) exercised by privileged social groups to 'purchase' valuable educational resources, thus reproducing their social class position.

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Introduction

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'the forms of capital' (Bourdieu 1986), sociological studies have shown that parents from privileged social groups use the resources they have at their disposal to provide their children with educational advantage, thus reproducing their social position in society (see, for example, the special issue by Golden et al. 2021).

Particularly, Diane Reay and Annette Lareau have made significant empirical and conceptual contributions to this field. In her seminal book, *Class Work*, published in 1998, Diane Reay shows how the home-school relationship varies across social classes in the United Kingdom (UK) – specifically, middle-class mothers are more likely than their working-class counterparts to be *heard* by schoolteachers; and, in contrast, working-class mothers are often dissatisfied with their interactions with schoolteachers, often articulating their experience as 'talking to a brick wall' (Reay 1998, 5). In their influential work on home advantage in the United States (US), Annette Lareau (2011) discusses how upper-middle-class parents draw

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on *their* experiences and resources to engage in the process of ‘concerted cultivation’ – a parenting style defined by the incorporation of organised activities, that aims to stimulate children’s development and foster their skills, both of which are valued by the schooling system and society more broadly.

These studies – and many others that Bourdieu’s work has shaped and inspired – offer nuanced accounts of the role of cultural capital (primarily discussed in the form of the language parents use when speaking to their children and schoolteachers), economic capital (in terms of school choice and the selection of paid-for enrichment activities to which middle-class parents subscribe their children), and social capital (which includes a useful network involving other parents and, at times, teachers) in dictating the differential distribution of valuable educational resources among children from middle-class and working-class families. They show how children from working-class families are disadvantaged because of the social positioning of their families in the wider education *field* that privileges middle-class values and belief systems.

This dichotomous understanding of social class privilege, however, has been critiqued on mainly two accounts: firstly, social class relations are mediated by other social characteristics such as race and ethnicity (see Vincent et al. 2012), and secondly, social class groups (middle-class and working-class) are heterogeneous, meaning that the experiences of people (families, parents and their children) in these groups are likely to vary (see, for example, Savage 2015; Bennett et al. 2020; and Gupta 2020 for cases from the UK, Australia, and India respectively). Both arguments are relevant in the Indian context, where this study is empirically grounded – the latter is especially noteworthy here as it provides the conceptual context for this article.

Inspired by these studies mentioned above, this article provides a Bourdieusian analysis of middle-class parents’ investment in private schooling and shadow education (tutoring support) in India, a relatively underexplored empirical context. It offers a nuanced understanding of how the complexity of class privilege, arising from increasingly diversified middle-class families, informs us about class-based educational advantage in contemporary India.

Specifically, the article unveils parents’ aspirations for their children’s education and explores how these aspirations shape the demand for private schooling and shadow education (outside-school educational support) in this social group. It demonstrates how parents in these families articulate their lack of valued middle-class cultural capital despite being economically recognised (*subjectively* by themselves and *objectively* by their household income levels) as middle-class. The article offers nuanced insights into how this narrative of middle-class deficit among families in this social group inspires the choices these parents make for their children’s education. It argues that investing in private education – both in formal educational institutions and tutoring centres – is a case of ‘capital exchange’ (transfer of economic capital to secure cultural capital), exercised primarily by privileged social groups to ‘purchase’ valuable educational resources and thus reproduce their class position in the social field.

In what follows, I will first discuss the emergence of the contemporary Indian middle-class, focussing particularly on its diversity, and then provide a brief overview of the study on which this article is based. Next, I will present the research findings on middle-class aspirations and educational choices parents in this social group make, which will be followed by a discussion on how private education serves as a source of cultural capital in the empirical context. Finally, I will synthesise the key implications of this work in the conclusion.

The contemporary Indian middle-class: its rise and heterogeneity

The rise of the contemporary Indian middle-class is typically linked to the Indian state's implementation of market-led liberal economic policies in the late 1980s. Recommended by the International Monetary Fund, this political-economic decision led to the expansion of labour demands, fuelled the growth of the Information Technology (IT) sector, and, overall, expanded the nature and extent of professional jobs and occupations. These changes transformed the class constitution and class relations in India, producing a diverse and complex group of the contemporary middle-class.

The heterogeneity of the middle-class is evident in contrasting narratives of the lives of people who belong to this social category, producing multiple imaginaries of what it means to be middle-class in India today. Some scholars articulate the contemporary middle-class as a hegemonic bloc that dominates the economically governed social structure (see Fernandes 2006). Discussing the middle-class workers in software services and export industries, Carol Upadhyia (2011) argues that the broader political-economic restructuring has played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural identity of the middle-classes, and in doing so, it has created new hegemonic power relations in Indian society. Presenting a similar case of IT professionals, Fuller and Narasimhan (2007) characterise the Indian middle-class as a group representing highly educated people, and ambitious knowledge workers, who earn high salaries and are defined by their consumeristic and materialistic lifestyle. In their study, the middle-class is also seen as a group characterised by family members with high-skilled professional and managerial jobs in the private and public sectors.

Contrary to this 'more self-confident', socio-economically and politically powerful portrayal of the contemporary Indian middle-class, scholars have also discussed people in this group as anxious and constantly stressed about their precarious lives (see Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009). Elaborating on the complexity of the everyday lives of middle-class people, Sara Dickey (2012, 559–560) notes:

Whilst being 'in the middle' is a source of pride and pleasure, connoting both achievement and enhanced self-control, it is simultaneously a source of great tension, bringing anxiety over the critical and damaging scrutiny of onlookers. For each positive aspect of a middle-class identity that emphasises security and stability, there is a negative ramification or consequence that highlights the precariousness and potential instability of middle-class life.

Based on Dickey's research conducted between 1999 and 2009, the above narrative unveils the perceptions and experiences of people who identify themselves as *performing* middle-class identity, illustrating the profound vulnerability and deep-seated anxiety that emanates from aspiring high but being fearful of falling behind. These deliberations signal a symbolic and dynamic understanding of what it means to be middle-class in India. The middle-class assumes new identities and locations in the broader social stratification. Indeed, as Donner and De Neve (2011) posit, the middle-class is 'lived and experienced through embodied practices, and it is precisely in everyday discourse that the relational nature of the class is revealed' (p. 12).

This article focuses on families within one fraction of this heterogeneous social group that, albeit economically middle-class and socially privileged, find themselves somewhat disadvantaged educationally when compared to other middle-class families. By discussing

middle-class educational aspirations and how these are realised through a capital exchange, this article offers novel insights into the notion of *choice* within the increasingly privatising Indian education market. Moreover, by offering a nuanced account of the *messiness* of the middle-classes, it bolsters my earlier argument on the heterogeneity of middle-class educational advantage in the empirical context (Gupta 2020).

The study

This article draws on a larger project that aimed to explore schooling practices from the vantage point of non-state education provisions, offering insights into both formal (schools) and informal (at home and private tuition) educational spaces. Data for this project were produced ethnographically in Dehradun city in northern India between December 2014 and December 2015. I spoke with multiple stakeholders in various settings, including schoolteachers in schools, parents at their homes, tutors in tutorial centres as well as students in schools, homes, and tuition centres. This article draws primarily on interviews with parents in 53 middle-class families. This is supported by the material produced from my fieldwork at two private schools (including interactions with 38 schoolteachers) and 12 tutorial centres (including conversations with 22 tutors).

The annual household income of the families that participated in this study ranged between ₹300,000 and ₹500,000 (£2,974 and £4,958), placing them in the middle-income category – an *objective* measure of social class categorisation (see Sridharan, 2011). Being aware that middle-class can also be a *subjective* class identity, as discussed above, I also *asked* the parents about their own understanding of their social position. All of them identified themselves as middle-class, with many articulating this with phrases such as they are ‘in the middle’ and ‘neither rich nor poor’. Moreover, these middle-class parents had shared experiences of internal migration from neighbourhood regions, mainly rural hilly or small city areas, to Dehradun city. To facilitate this decision, most fathers in these families had to change their occupations from farming to either business or professional occupations. All mothers I spoke with considered raising children their primary responsibility. Mothers’ educational levels also varied significantly – while many had at least one college degree, some had only completed schooling, and others had dropped out of school at different educational levels. This variation was reflected in the diversity of educational privilege parents realised they had, demonstrating the *relative* and *dynamic* nature of social advantage across these families (see Gupta 2020).

I approached these parents through my network in their children’s schools. These schools were a key part of the larger project, where I observed various teaching practices and interacted with the staff – in this period, I met several parents during their regular school visits, many of whom I later interviewed. This approach helped to gain parents’ trust and secure their informed consent to participate in this study. I interviewed parents in their own homes and at a time of their convenience. The majority of the interviews were conducted with both parents, with greater participation from mothers. Some of the interviews were carried out only with mothers and others with only fathers. On average, these interviews lasted for about 1.5–2 hours.

All of these interviews were carried out in Hindi, which I later translated and transcribed into English for the purpose of data analysis. The data were analysed using the processes of segmentation (breaking the material into different codes and fragments) and reassembling (bringing the data under the same code together to make sense of the emerging themes)

(Boeije 2010). This article weaves together three key codes: ‘parents’ aspirations’, ‘school choice’, and the ‘demand for private tutoring’. This analysis is supported in this article by my interactions with schoolteachers and tutors throughout the fieldwork. All these datasets have been instrumental in generating a nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between home and school environments in middle-class families, as well as in capturing how and where private tutoring features in this dynamic.

Private schooling: parental choice for gaining a middle-class educational advantage

School choice in India is recognised by scholars as a primary way in which parents across social classes hope to gain an educational advantage (see Srivastava 2008). In *this* study, the ways in which parents made school choices were heavily influenced by: parents’ own experiences of being middle-class, their understanding of what it means to be middle-class and what they aspired for their children to accomplish in order to stay in the same or higher social position. This section explores each of these factors and explains how they interact with one another, illustrating how for many parents, school choice carried a much deeper and profoundly personal meaning, beyond being merely an instrumental strategy for securing social advantage.

All the parents I spoke with viewed the purpose and meaning of their children’s schooling considerably differently from *their own* education. The vast majority of parents viewed their own schooling experience as ‘narrow’, ‘locally relevant’ and ‘limited’—many of whom characterised it as a ‘timepass’ (a way of passing their time). These parents did not see their education as particularly transformative in nature. They saw attending the local school as a ‘typical thing they did’ whilst also helping out in a family business from a young age (farming, local store, and so on). Parents talked about how growing up, they felt their future employment was ‘secure’ and ‘predictable’ and how this was not really shaped by their educational trajectory; rather, it was influenced by the family they were born into. This intergenerational transfer of resources was disrupted when parents and their family members migrated to Dehradun, leaving behind their jobs and social networks for a new life in the city. This migration experience was instrumental in shaping parents’ aspirations for the education and life trajectory of their children – all the parents I spoke with felt that they needed to prepare their children for advanced professional jobs from a very young age.

We were just told what to do – by parents, by teachers, by neighbours, and by relatives. None of them had big dreams and goals for us. We [referring to his brothers] were destined to take on the family business. But nothing can be left to destiny now [for the next generation]. They have to make their own fate. They need to find what they like and what they are good at, and schools should facilitate that thinking. We need to start from the beginning [young age].

When asked specifically about what they hoped for their children’s professional futures, all the parents shared that they aspired for their children to pursue professional jobs in the Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and enter the globalised labour market. These aspirations were often framed by parents as ‘typical’ in middle-class families; to realise them, parents felt it was important for them to choose a school for their children that supported their science education throughout their studies. Hence, choosing such a school meant that their children would have access to resources that were

instrumental in realising what parents deemed to be the ideal educational and professional career goals for their children.

Indeed, as parents realised that education was a pathway to secure middle-class jobs, school choice was not just a mundane family decision but became a *significant* topic of deliberation. Parents spoke about feeling ‘morally responsible’ for making the ‘right decision.’ This phrasing was frequently used by parents during interviews, signifying the pressure parents felt regarding educating their children in what they deemed to be ‘a better and enriching environment’ than what they were exposed to, and that supported their future plans (a similar observation has been made by Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009; Donner and De Neve 2011; Dickey 2012). All parents in this study felt that only high-fee private schools that used English as a medium of instruction offered what they were looking for, making ‘English medium private schools’ a non-negotiable criterion for school choice in these middle-class families.

Private schools were preferred by parents also because of their gravely negative experiences at and perceptions of public schools. Interestingly, all of these parents had completed *their* education in government schools. Although some of them reported that ‘state schools in their time were better than they are today’, all suggested that attending private schools was never an option for them as they used to cater to the elite social groups exclusively. This view that private schooling was only for the elites has changed in the past few decades with significant growth of a variety of private schools that have wider fee ranges. In their study on private education in India, Kingdon (2017, 12) found:

[O]ver the four-year period 2010–11 to 2014–15, the total stock of government schools in India (20 major states of India) rose by a mere 16,376 government schools. By contrast, the number of private schools rose by 71,360 schools. Despite the modest increase in the number of government schools, the total enrolment in government schools over this period actually fell by 11.1 million students, whereas total enrolment in private schools rose by 16 million students over the same four-year period.

With a strong perception that private schools offer a better quality of education than public schools, parents across social groups, including the economically weaker populations, began choosing the former over the latter. In their paper, Kingdon notes that in 2014–15, nearly half of all students enrolled at the primary educational level (6–10 years old) in urban India attended private schools (that receive no financial support from the government); the corresponding proportion for rural regions was 21 per cent. Despite notable regional variations, the proportional change reported over time in the enrolment in private schools and government schools provides significant evidence for the ‘emptying of public schools’ amidst the rapid privatisation of the Indian schooling sector (see Kingdon 2017 for a detailed analysis).

Many of the parents I interacted with viewed government-run schools as ‘crowded’, ‘old’, ‘traditional’, ‘ineffective’ educational spaces, and they perceived schoolteachers in state schools to be ‘lazy’ and ‘authoritarian’ in their conduct (also noted in De et al. 2011). Furthermore, for parents in this study, choosing a private school was not just about choosing a perceivably good quality of education, but it was also felt necessary with a general assumption being ‘you must enrol your children to private school if you can afford it’ – as such, selecting private schooling for their children was indeed perceived by parents as an essential part of exerting their social identity as middle-class.

They [a private school where their children are enrolled] have many classrooms, sports facilities, and various kinds of teams. Their teachers work hard, and they are not like our teachers who would just give punishments and not really teach...also, no one in our circle [social network] sends their children to government schools. People will talk if you do so. They will say, 'what are you saving for?'. So, there are many things we need to consider.

As suggested in the excerpt above, parents valued not only the modern setups, with a variety of resources in the educational setting, but they also appreciated that private schools tended to hold teachers accountable. These aspects, parents mentioned, were crucial to ensure that their children gained the educational advantage over other students enrolled in either government or lower-fee private schools, which they felt would be valuable when competing for admission to higher educational institutions. Moreover, attending private school – as the excerpt suggests – was also deemed as a symbol of being a privileged class. This symbolism was articulated most explicitly by some of the mothers I spoke with in terms of what their children's school uniforms conveyed.

They [students] look so smart with their tie and blazer – I mean, if you just look at them, you can see that they are doing something worthwhile. It [school uniform] really affects how children see themselves and their future.

When discussing this perceived superiority of 'tie and blazer' as uniform – instead of 'simple pants and shirt' that pupils from typically government-run schools wear – some mothers expressed a sense of pride. This objectified cultural capital was indeed a performance of parents' middle-class identity, and they gave themselves credit for making this a reality for their children.

Choosing a school that supported English as a medium of instruction and assessment (rather than vernacular language, which, in this case, was Hindi) was yet another example of how school choice was linked to the social class performativity in middle-class families. Similarly to how school dress signified the notion of a bright present and a promising future, parents considered their children's ability to speak fluently in English – embodied cultural capital – to be a sign of their future educational and occupational success, something that many of them could not do themselves but felt it was crucial for their children. All the parents I spoke with had been enrolled in schools that used vernacular language (Hindi) as a medium of instruction, and yet they considered 'Hindi medium schools' as 'lacking resources' and of 'low standard' and viewed 'English medium' schools as more resourceful and ideal spaces for preparing their children for future work in the globalised labour market (discussed in relation to social reproduction in Gupta 2020).

Hence, parents in this study made specific school choices that not just ensured a good quality of education for their children but also legitimised parents' social positioning and responded to their aspiration for a middle-class future for the next generation. School choice for these parents was not just a typical decision in the increasingly marketising and privatising education market; rather, it was a strategic choice to realise the home advantage. All the parents perceived the school they had chosen for their children as a site for accumulating cultural capital (in its varying forms), which they felt they themselves lacked but needed to source for their children's future. It is clear from the discussion here that the choices parents in this study made for their children contrasted with the decisions *their parents* had made for them. This intergenerational difference in parents' educational decision-making process signifies a transformation in the middle-class strategies that aim to facilitate social reproduction. This transformation occurs primarily due to the changing positions of middle-class

groups within an everdynamic *field*. The next section will illustrate how the extent to which the parental strategies were perceived as successful varied across families.

Private tutoring: parental response to the perceived educational disadvantage




As shown above, parents in middle-class families used their economic capital to gain an educational advantage through making strategic school choices. Parents maintained that while they had enrolled their children in the best school they could, parents also realised they themselves lacked resources to meaningfully support their children's educational needs at home. To compensate for these perceived disadvantages, parents invested in *additional* educational support offered by the private tuition industry. Notably, the purpose for which tutoring was solicited varied among participant families depending on the nature and the extent to which parents were involved in their children's education. This section demonstrates this variation by mapping this onto three categories of parental involvement: suppliers of essential material resources (*providers*), collaborators with schoolteachers (*partners*), and hands-on orchestrators of children's overall schooling experience (*proactive agents*) (see Gupta 2020 for a detailed discussion) (See Table 1).

Tutoring for comprehensive learning support: a case of provider parents

The *providers* in this study were the parents with basic or no educational qualification, and they activated their economic capital to supply materials for supporting their children's education – providing resources as per the demands of their children and schoolteachers was the primary way in which *provider parents* contributed to their children's education. Parents in this group suggested that they felt they did not have strong interpersonal relationships with either their children or their schoolteachers.

I am worried about them [referring to her children] and their education, but it is difficult to chat with them about their experiences. I don't know why they get low grades – if I inquire about this, then they just get angry and say, 'ija [mother], you know nothing', and maybe they are right. So I have to leave them to their own devices.

Table 1. Parental engagement in their children's schooling in middle-class families: a continuum.

	Nature of parental engagement		
	Provider	Partner	Proactive agent
Parents' educational level	Basic or no education	Senior secondary/college education	Post-graduate degree holder
Activated capital	Economic	Economic and Social	Economic, social, and cultural
Perceived contributions to children's education	Material supply	Material supply and monitoring	Material supply, monitoring, and teaching
Parents-teacher-student relationship			
The nature of the perceived need for extra-school educational support	Comprehensive	Supplementary	Enrichment

P: Parent; S: Student; T: Teacher.
(Adapted from Gupta 2020).

Moreover, *providers* often vocalised their dissatisfaction with the school management, and they usually blamed schoolteachers for their children's academic failure. These parents spoke about feeling 'not listened to' by the schoolteachers, especially when they discussed their children's poor academic performance. Schoolteachers I interacted with believed that these parents would 'nag' them, were 'uncultured', and try to place the blame onto them rather than supporting their children at home. Overall, parents in this group felt that neither school nor they themselves were able to offer a foundational learning framework for their children's benefit. In response, as shown below in the excerpt from an interview, *provider parents* solicited private tutoring for *comprehensive learning*.

Both my children have not been doing very well in school, and I don't get any answers from teachers about this. They (schoolteachers) think it is all my fault – and it may well be [pause], but at least tutors can help them. My children have been going to tuition since they have been going to school. The tuition master makes sure that they are up to speed. I feel more comfortable talking to tutors [than teachers], and they assure me that they are doing the right thing.

Tutors' role, in these parents' perspective, was to teach their children 'properly' – this comprised identifying and addressing learning difficulties and challenges and letting the parents know what they would do to help. Parents in this way felt that they had completely 'passed on' their responsibility regarding their children's educational progression to their tutors. Put differently, parents in this group outsourced a part of their perceived parenting role, i.e. being an effective educator.

This observation resonates with the case of parents hiring tutors to uphold 'a coherent image of intensive mothering' in Taiwanese middle-class families – drawing on interviews with 12 Taiwanese mothers and 20 tutors for 14–18 years old children, Kao (2021) argues that tutoring serves as a way for middle-class families to outsource mothering, especially mothers' 'cultural capacity to educate their children both academically and behaviourally'. Similarly, *provider parents* in this study activated their economic capital to *buy* valued cultural capital (in the form of educational resources), although parents themselves did not have this due to their own experience being drastically different to their children's, that tutors claimed to offer their children.

Tutoring for supplementary educational support: a case of partner parents

The overall parental engagement in their children's schooling was somewhat different in *partner* families. These households represented families where mothers had completed their schooling or tertiary education and worked *with* schoolteachers as partners. Alongside providing educational materials (supplying economically purchasable educational resources) for their children, *partner parents* developed their edu-networks (including other parents in the same category, schoolteachers and friends who were teachers) and used these connections to gather useful additional resources for their children.

Thus, in addition to using economic capital, *partner parents* activated their social capital to maximise educational returns for their children – here, we see the exchange of both economic and social capitals to gain valued cultural resources. These parents interacted with their children and their schoolteachers frequently about their academic performance at school. Based on these interactions, parents felt that they had a functional relationship with both their children and schoolteachers regarding their children's overall schooling experience. Still, as shown below, parents felt that tutoring was needed.

I send him [referring to her son] to tuition [centres] just so that he is able to inquire about things and concepts that he would not in classrooms [at school]. There are many children in the classroom, and sometimes he hesitates to ask questions if he does not understand things, so the tuition helps with those aspects.

Despite feeling that they had a functional relationship with teachers and their children, partner parents felt that teachers could only help so much, and they needed to step in to complement the school-based learning at home. At the same time, though, parents realised that this extra educational support they themselves 'should offer their children' was just 'not available at home' and needed to be 'outsourced'. Hence, these parents felt that tutoring could offer their children *supplementary support* alongside the resources available to their children at both school and at home.

Tutoring for enrichment purposes: a case of proactive parents

The nature and the extent of parents' involvement among providers and partners were substantially different to that of highly educated parents who assumed the position of proactively orchestrating their children's schooling experience. These *proactive parents* had at least one college degree, many of them had one post-graduate educational qualification, and some had more than one master's degree. In other words, most parents in this category were educationally equally, if not more, qualified than the majority of schoolteachers, and some even with teaching qualifications. *Proactive parents* were ideally positioned to activate all three forms of *capital* – *economic* for supplying materials, *social* for collating information and asking for favours that were usually favourably responded to by teachers, and *cultural* (a degree of which pre-existed for these families) for actually teaching their children at home and discussing their school experiences and performance.

Parents in this category spoke about how they made sure that any deviation from their expectations regarding their children's schooling, whether it was about classwork or teachers' reports, was quickly resolved either at home or school. Out of all three groups of parental engagement, *proactive parents* were most positive about the home-school dynamic and their relationship with their children and schoolteachers. In such families, the extra-school educational services were perceived to offer primarily *enrichment support*.

I think it is not sufficient to do well on school-level tests. There are so many kids who work hard at the school level, but all of them cannot qualify for entrance tests [for college admission] – I can help with school prep, but I do not know sufficiently about these competitive exams. Having tuition [support] maybe in Grade 9 or 10 not only helps with getting high grades in school but also with preparing for these tests.

Hence, parents in this group perceived the role of tutoring in terms of *further enriching* their children's academic capabilities and potential. These parents were acutely aware of the competitiveness not just within the schooling system but also during the transitional stage from schooling to higher education, and it was this area of education that they felt they could not support their children with. Indeed, many of these parents articulated the need for private tutoring to provide the resources that one requires for preparing for college entrance tests. They felt that additional academic support, beyond school and home, can enrich their children's schooling experiences and will enhance their potential to fulfil their own high-end educational and occupational aspirations (as discussed in the previous section).

Tutoring as an essential investment: a common perception across middle-class families

The findings in this section so far have shown how the perceived need for private tutoring varied across middle-class families and the different ways in which middle-class parents articulated the role of private tutoring in their children's education. There were, however, similarities across families in how irrespective of the nature and extent of its demand, tutoring was perceived by parents as a source of valuable educational resources. Parents across families felt disconnected with their children's schooling – a gap they wanted to fill through outsourcing educational resources they thought they themselves should have provided to their children. Regardless of their level of involvement, this disengagement was felt much more strongly by parents when their children reached the higher grades as compared to when they were at elementary levels.

It is not easy to keep up. I have an MSc degree, and although I studied in a Hindi-medium school, I could still help my daughter until she was in Grade 5. But now that she is in Grade 7, I find it extremely difficult to support her.

Even the parents who were engaged in their children's education proactively felt that it becomes increasingly difficult to play the role of a teacher at home as their children move up in their educational levels. Hence, the lack of valued cultural capital – in the form of parents' lack of confidence and their inability to academically engage with their children – was prevalent across families, and it intensified at higher educational levels and at the stage when students were preparing to transition to higher education.

Furthermore, many parents I spoke with would share their education-related concerns with schoolteachers but schoolteachers' responses to these concerns, nonetheless, were not uniform – the highly educated parents were more likely to get additional help than their counterparts who were less educated (as also discussed in Gupta 2020). Even the parents who could seek help from school felt that their children needed more individualised support, especially for excelling at high-stakes examinations. In this context, the tuition centres were deemed as perfect solutions – they claimed to offer a varying degree of academic support, corresponding to the diverse roles and purposes parents assigned them, depending on their perceived home disadvantage (also see Gupta 2022).

Generally, all the parents I spoke with felt that they could converse more easily with tutors than schoolteachers – this may have been because both groups of educators approached their relationship with parents slightly differently. As I noted elsewhere, teachers were highly reluctant to take responsibility for students' poor academic performance (this is linked to teachers' work and identity in India – see Gupta 2021a for discussion). A typical response from teachers to address parents' queries was as follows:

I teach everyone [referring to students] in the same way. The home environment is very important for students' performance. We [referring to schoolteachers] are doing what we can, and if the child is not performing [well], then you [the parents] should do something about it.

While schoolteachers maintained that parents should be doing more, the parents themselves were unable to do more, so they spent money on tutoring to do the 'more'. During interviews, all the tutors spoke about being aware of this dynamic and understanding where parents were coming from, and they would typically promise parents that they would address their concerns effectively. Through these promises, tutoring services gain social legitimacy (see Gupta 2021b; Gupta 2021c) as well as provide reassurance that parents' exchange of capital (economic for desired cultural resources) will have the anticipated result.

Private education as a source of cultural capital: a discussion

As the previous section suggests, contrary to the middle-class families in the US or UK (see Lareau 2011; Reay 1998), the Indian middle-classes make educational decisions with the profound realisation that they *lack* the valued middle-class cultural capital, despite 'being in the middle' of the socioeconomic hierarchy. The research findings show how not all middle-class parents feel fully equipped with valued cultural capital and how some may feel incapable of helping their children gain the desired educational advantage. This section synthesises these findings to illustrate the specific ways in which private education – both through formal schooling and private tutoring – is considered a source of valued cultural capital in middle-class families. The discussion here will highlight the practices involving middle-class educational advantage and the process of capital exchange that privileged social groups use to compensate for their relative home disadvantage.

Private schooling as performing middle-class identity and gaining home-advantage

Many studies frame school choice in India as parental preference – i.e. parents across social groups prefer to enrol their children into private schools rather than government institutions of education, with the primary reason being the perceived quality of private schools (Srivastava 2008). This study shows a deeper meaning behind school choice by linking it to parents' aspirations amidst the shifting nature of social reproduction in middle-class families in contemporary India.

Specifically, these research findings show that many middle-class parents rationalise their school selection criteria as not merely a choice that they feel may potentially allow their children to gain access to valuable educational resources but a tactic that aligns strongly with parents' long-term aspirations for their children to enter the highly skilled labour market, thus maintaining the perceived social privilege. These aspirations, which were common across middle-class families in this study, guided parents' school choice – and their economic capacity helped them realise their preferences (often found across middle-class families globally – see Lareau 2011).

Furthermore, many parents deemed their approach to school choice as *expected* of them by the people in their social network and society more broadly – something, as one of the parents said, 'everyone [middle-class] did for their children.' Hence, choosing a private school is not just an attempt for parents to provide their children with a good quality of education; it is also guided by middle-class identity, making it a crucial way in which these families substantiate their social positioning as middle-class in the empirical context.

This link between performing social class identity and school choice, and its changing nature, emerges strongly in the ways in which parents spoke about providing their children with a different kind of education than what they themselves had received – private and not state, English medium and not vernacular, 'blazer-tie' schools and not a 'simple shirt and pants' school. This inter-generational difference in the school experience is crucial to understanding private schooling in middle-class families as an example of capital exchange in privileged social groups. Indeed, as demonstrated in this article, children in middle-class families are benefitted in multiple forms through the exchange of economic capital for securing valued cultural capital in varied forms —embodied (experience of a relatively

better quality of teaching and learning), institutionalised (urban and English education, science education), and objectified ('smart' school uniform and advanced learning materials such as textbooks, tools, and electronic items)—that should offer them an edge in a competitive educational and career landscape. Hence, school selection becomes a pathway to achieving middle-class aspirations for social reproduction.

Although the middle-class parents in this study realised their *social class advantage* by being able to enrol their children into the school they preferred, this *school advantage* did not necessarily translate into the *educational benefits* these parents had envisioned. This perceived failure to meet the desired outcome was substantiated in parents' narratives of home disadvantage in middle-class families. This was framed variously by parents as their own failure because of their internalised responsibility towards their children's education. Hence, parents' search for gaining the desired educational advantage was extended from school to the private tuition industry.

Private tutoring as a means to compensate for varied home-disadvantages

The research findings illustrate how the demand for private tutoring is both dynamic and multifaceted. These findings unravel the mystery in the scholarship of shadow education, i.e. why parents who are already investing heavily in the presumably superior quality of private schools feel the need to invest in tutoring provisions. Previously, scholars have suggested that 'teacher-corruption' (when teachers compel their students to attend private tutoring with them after schooling hours) and poor educational quality at schools are instrumental for students to solicit outside-school tutoring support (Sujatha 2014). These explanations, while contributing to understanding the demand for the tuition industry to some extent, are not sufficient to make sense of why students from high-fee private schools (that claim to offer better quality of education and where teachers are highly accountable) solicit tutoring support.

As shown in the previous section, while parents *bought* privileged schooling experiences for their children, choosing a private school does not necessarily deliver the degree of academic support parents felt their children needed to fully realise the middle-class educational advantage. Private schooling is non-negotiable in middle-class families for the reasons mentioned above; parents in this social group still felt that their children lacked adequate educational guidance, advice, support and direction from schoolteachers – the extent to which this was felt, however, varied across families. Some parents, especially those who were highly educated, could compensate for this lack at home to some extent by proactively engaging in their children's schooling. However, all parents felt that they needed to outsource this support from the wider education market – notably, the extent to which these additional extra-school resources were thought to be needed across families was tied to the level at which parents felt that they were able to invest and be involved in their children's education.

The analysis in the article demonstrates that not all middle-class families have the same resources and capacities, and relatedly the extent to which they felt they contributed to their children's education varies – for example, the cultural capital across families in this study varied according to the level of educational qualification of parents in each household. Highly educated parents had greater resources – with which they could activate all three forms of capital – for their children's benefits, and as such, they were more likely to feel that they contributed to their children's education more adequately than their less-educated

counterparts. Hence, the extent to which parents experienced the home disadvantage and overall education deficit, although they existed in all, differed across families.

Indeed, the taxonomy of parental involvement that I have laid out in this article shows that as the level of parental engagement increases, connections among stakeholders (parents, students and teachers) also grow stronger (see Gupta 2020 for more discussion on this). Notably, students in *provider* families were more likely to be exposed to two very different environments at home and at school than in *partner* and *proactive* families (often suggested to be the case in many working-class families in western contexts, such as in the UK – see Reay 1998), resulting in the greatest level of perceived home-disadvantage in these groups across all families that were part of this study.

This home disadvantage was articulated by all parents in this study as feeling ‘disconnected’ or ‘disengaged’ with their children’s everyday schooling practices – this feeling, as the findings demonstrate, varied across families within the sample, depending on the extent to which parents could be involved in their children’s education. This variation corresponded with the nature and the extent of demand for private tutoring across families. For example, typically, *provider parents* seek tutoring to provide their children with a fundamental framework for learning; *partners* view it as a way to offer their children complementary support, and for *proactive agents*, private tutoring meant to offer enrichment training to their children. In all these instances, parents perceived private tutoring as a source of valued cultural capital, in addition to the resources their children had access to at school and at home.

Hence, the demand for outside-school educational support in middle-class families emerges from the recognition of the gap between the educational aspirations of parents in this group and the perceived educational deficits at school and home. Parents’ economic capacity to buy these extra-school resources – or the possibility of this exchange of economic capital for desired cultural capital – and tutoring centres’ ability to map their services onto these diverse needs sustain the need for and growth of the private tuition industry (Gupta 2022). As many parents see this capital exchange as a possibility to gain individualised educational support, participation in private tutoring itself becomes the norm – or ‘a trend’ or ‘fashion’, as framed by many participants of this study – in many middle-class families.

Conclusion

This article has produced a Bourdieusian analysis of Indian middle-class parents’ investment in private schooling and shadow education for their children. While parental involvement in their children’s schooling is a well-researched area of enquiry, much of the extant literature focuses on research contexts within the UK, US and other countries within the Anglosphere. This article presents a case of India – a relatively underexplored empirical context – and as such, the discussion presented here offers novel empirical implications for education systems and practices in India. Nonetheless, the conceptual insights this article has generated contribute to the extensively discussed, debated and deliberated relationship between educational advantage and social class within the larger field of sociology of education. Research findings and discussions presented here have the following implications.

First, the article has offered a nuanced account of the middle-class *choice politics* in the education *field*. The discussion presented here speaks to the scholarship of neo-liberalisation, where neoliberalism is viewed as a *process* that shapes the actions and behaviours of

individuals, groups and societies (Gupta 2021a). A common objective of neoliberal projects is to produce neoliberal mechanisms and subjects, thus sustaining the market logic in both delivery and demand of educational resources. Specifically, neoliberal mechanisms emerge in this study in the form of the rapid privatisation of the Indian education sector, occurring through the rise of private schools and tutoring businesses. Rampant privatisation not only demonstrates the impact of market-driven policies in favour of shifting forms of education governance, but it also involves 'a process in which the state shifts the blame for the very evident inequalities in access and the outcome it has promised to reduce, from itself onto individual schools, parents, and children' (Apple 2001, p.416). Thus, as the article has illustrated, as neoliberal subjects, parents themselves feel responsible for making the right choices and accurate decisions at the most appropriate time throughout their children's lives, thus ensuring excellent academic performance and progression. Parents understand that the choices they make will have a significant impact on the educational resources their children will have access to, which, in turn, will determine their future life trajectories – thus, these practices involving educational decision-making have implications for the larger processes of social reproduction and mobility.

Secondly, this article has shown the heterogeneity of the middle-class advantage and disadvantages, reinforcing Bourdieu's (1986) notion of the relational nature of social class and privilege in the education field. It has shown how middle-class parents are able to make seemingly homogeneous school choices, which provides their children with a home advantage. However, the perceived lack of valued cultural capital within families, depending on parents' own educational qualifications and academic competency, adversely affects the home-school relationship and parents' overall involvement in their children's schooling. This relative home disadvantage was reflected in parents' views on the educational deficit in their children's schooling experience and informed their understanding of the perceived need for extra-school educational support. Thus, this article has established not just the variety of forms of parental involvement in their children's education but also the impact of this internal differentiation on educational investments parents in this group make for their children.

Finally, this article has surfaced deep-seated vulnerability, fears and anxieties that fuel and inform various educational decisions middle-class parents make. It has articulated how educational decision-making is closely tied to the exertion of parents' middle-class identity amidst the neo-liberalising Indian education market. In addition, the intergenerational difference in educational choice – noted here in the form of how parents' own experience of schooling was diametrically opposite to that of their children's – alludes to the transforming nature of class relations corresponding to the globalising market-based knowledge economy. This article argues that private education is solicited not only for ensuring children's educational success but that, for many parents, it is a way to outsource the middle-class cultural capital, which parents deem as necessary for realising the intergenerational transfer of social privilege more broadly – of which educational success is a critical part.

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Ethics statement

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