

# An Exploratory Analysis of Quality Judgements and School Choices in the Montreal (Canada) School Market

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## **Abstract**

This exploratory analysis of seven semi-structured interviews is part of a doctoral thesis which aims to highlight whether mechanisms promoting social and school segregation are mobilized through the parents' school choice practices in Montreal's *quasi-market* (Felouzis, Maroy & van Zanten, 2013). It examines the parental point of view of school quality in four boroughs of Montreal and it explores how educational quality judgments (Felouzis & Perroton, 2007) are developed. It also focuses on judgment devices (personal networks, school marketing and promotion), that are the most commonly used by parents (Karpik, 2007; Draelants & Dumay, 2011). Very little is known on how parents ultimately determine their choices, however the results of this study show that 1) parental expectations in education, 2) the impact of instrumental and expressive dimensions related to schooling, as well as 3) their relation to "others" (van Zanten, 2009b) may have an effect on their quality judgments of a good.

**Keywords:** Quebec, School Choice, School Quality, Judgment Devices, Relation to others, Singularities, School Market

## **Résumé**

Cette étude exploratoire s'inscrit dans le cadre d'une thèse de doctorat visant à déterminer si des mécanismes favorisant la ségrégation sociale et scolaire à travers les pratiques de choix des parents peuvent être observés à Montréal. Elle a été menée auprès de sept parents dans quatre arrondissements de Montréal et souhaite comprendre l'élaboration des choix scolaires. D'une part, elle se penche sur les jugements de qualité éducative d'une « bonne école » (Felouzis et Perroton, 2007) dans le *quasi-marché* scolaire montréalais (Felouzis, Maroy & van Zanten, 2013). D'autre part, elle s'intéresse aux dispositifs de jugement des parents, comme les réseaux personnels, le marketing et la promotion scolaire (Karpik, 2007; Draelants et Dumay, 2011). Il ressort des entretiens semi-directifs que ce qui structure les attentes parentales en éducation, l'impact des dimensions instrumentales et expressives liées à la scolarisation ainsi que leur relation aux « autres » (van Zanten, 2009b) sont mobilisés de manière contextualisée.

**Mots clés:** Québec, Choix scolaires, Qualité éducative, Dispositifs de jugement, Rapport à l'autre, Singularités, Marchés scolaires

## Introduction

High school choice is a decision with long term effects on a child's personal and professional life (van Zanten, 2009a). For many parents, choosing a school is a way to influence their child's academic trajectory or to pursue their parental ambitions; for others it's a way to gain indirect control on their child's peer group (Felouzis, 2009). Since the 1960s, parents living in the province of Quebec have been able to choose high schools within the public or private system. However, access to private schools is most often restricted by the place of residence, entrance exams and relatively high tuition fees (Proulx & Charland, 2009). As early as 1998, the range of parental choice was broadened and made more flexible within public schools through "special programs" (e.g., international classes, sports programs, etc.), accessible only through a selective procedure. Although many parents opt for the regular program offered by the public school board, some of them follow active school choice strategies to increase their child's chances of being admitted to a "good" school. This is a growing phenomenon observed in the United States and in many European countries (Felouzis, Maroy & van Zanten, 2013). In the province of Quebec, the number of children attending private schools showed an increase: in 2012-2013, 20% of young students attended a private institution in secondary education (Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research, 2015, p. 11), whereas in 1970 the proportion was 5% (Tondreau & Robert, 2011). The offer of particular programs has grown sharply in public schools, particularly to face private competition (Lessard & Levasseur, 2007). School choice practices are thus increasing *quasi-market* logic, which is characterized by competition within a state-regulated service, or at least competitive interdependencies between schools in urban areas (Delvaux & van Zanten, 2006; van Zanten, 2009a). In *quasi-markets*, the state retains control over, for example, teacher training and schooling content, but lets schools determine how to reach governmental targets (educational success of students, children admitted into schools, promotion, etc.) (Felouzis et al., 2013).

## Research Problem and Main Question

Besides their life-long personal effects, school choice practices can also have collective consequences like social segregation, which depend upon educational aims (either expressive or instrumental dimensions) or a family's socio-economic background (van Zanten, 2009a; van Zanten, 2009b). In fact, not all parents can actually make a choice because this widely depends on their cultural and economic resources (Bourdieu, 1972). Being able to make a choice also contributes to strengthening school, social and ethnic segregation between schools (or social classes) (van Zanten, 2009a). The choice of schools in France, for example, appears to be strongly determined by the perception parents have of the type of students likely to be around their child in that school. This "relation to others", is significantly influenced by parents' social positions (the contribution of professional, social or political position in the elaboration of parents' judgments) and therefore increases social segregation (van Zanten, 2009a).

International research has already shown the negative consequences of segregation on school inequalities (e.g., Coleman, 1966; Felouzis et al., 2013; Maroy & Kamanzi, 2017) and has demonstrated that parents who make choices also rely on judgments about what they consider a "good school" or program for their child (Felouzis & Perroton, 2007). Indeed, in a market of what Karpik (2007) calls "singular goods" such as schooling, the quality of the good or service is very difficult to establish. It is so because of the unclear nature of the service provided by the

schools, but also because of the importance of intersubjective interactions, educational values and meanings of each student or family. School choices therefore proceed from "quality judgments" based on actors' perceptions and resources and how they reach for information (through devices or *dispositifs de jugements*, in French) within "quality markets" (Karpik, 2007).

Given the very low number of studies in Quebec in this area (Maroy & Kamanzi, 2017; Desjardins, Lessard & Blais, 2010), this paper aims to better understand the state of the situation from a sociological perspective. It examines the school choices of seven individuals who are parents in Montreal. It focuses on parents' social characteristics (e.g., socio-economic status, ethno-cultural background, etc.) and how they may or may not influence their judgments (Felouzis et al., 2013). The study aims to answer the following question: are school choice practices differentiated according the parents' cognitive and normative categories, relation to others, social position, social and cultural resources or spatial location (borough)?

### Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This section introduces the main theoretical and conceptual anchors of this research. Speaking from a sociological orientation, it will first clarify the notions of the school market (Felouzis et al., 2013) and market of singularities from Karpik's point of view (2007). It will then examine the concept of quality judgment and how it expresses itself in a market of singularities (such as a school market) and we will study how trust is engaged in its formation. It will see how different judging devices help provide parents with information on the quality of a good school. It aims to highlight how the perceived social and cultural characteristics of school audiences impacts their choices. Finally, it will examine how the "relation to others" can influence school choices in Montreal.

#### *School Markets and Markets of Singularities: Any Differences?*

The notion of "school market", is a hybrid concept between economics and sociology (Maroy, 2006). It helps to describe diverse empirical realities covering a set of public policies, the logic behind the actions and practices of actors in education (Felouzis et al., 2013). A school market includes competition between schools, freedom of choice and diverse school options (Felouzis et al., 2013). The multiple manifestations of school markets have been studied as various concepts such as *quasi-market* (Vandenbergh, 1996), *local competition space* (Ball & van Zanten, 1998, Broccolichi & van Zanten 1997) or *competitive spaces of interdependence* (Delvaux & van Zanten, 2006, Maroy, 2006). All these concepts derive from the traditional definition of markets for economists: "a mechanism of coordination between actors, based on a monetary exchange" (Maroy, 2006, p. 94), where the price regulates the balance between the offer and the demand for a good or service. Karpik's (2007) work uses the term "markets of singularities" (p. 42) to distinguish school markets from conventional markets where competition is through prices.

This type of market is characterized by a competition of qualities instead of a competition of prices (Karpik 2007). Thus a school market is a particular case of singularities or qualities market which is not regulated by prices (Felouzis & Perroton, 2007). In school markets, prices are not a measure of quality, which makes it difficult for parents to judge a school (Felouzis & Perroton, 2007) since the education service focuses on quality judgments based on different instruction and social criteria as well as educational intentions of families (Felouzis et al. 2013).

### *How are Parental Judgments Elaborated?*

van Zanten (2009b) and Felouzis & Perroton (2007) show that for French parents, a "quality school" is associated with the perceived characteristics of instruction and socialization. The criteria used to assess the quality of a school can also be based on the institution's reputation or statistical performance data published by an educational authority (Draelants & Dumay, 2011). Judgments made by groups of individuals are also based on trust in the information within their reach to help them know and qualify these goods, but also on trust in the interlocutors who convey them (van Zanten, 2009b). In order to control the uncertainties surrounding the service or the product, the users of a market of singularities rely in fact on various judgment (or confidence) devices (Karpik, 2007; Quéré, 2005). A judgment device can be personal (networks, social relations) or impersonal (ranking, books) on which an actor or a consumer relies to elaborate a decision.

To illustrate, parents may rely on a school with a "good name" whose proper appellation is well known (e.g., Harvard or Oxford Universities) (Draelants & Dumay, 2011) as an implicit trust in the school's "brand". This is often put forward by school principals in their logic of actions towards parents in a space of competition between schools (Maroy & van Zanten, 2007). The reputation of a school might lead some parents to moving to a new neighborhood so that the child is admitted to a school with a good reputation (Merle, 2011; van Zanten, 2009a). Parents' trust is therefore associated with a strong belief that a type of institution is better or contributes to the hierarchy of reputations of products or services (Karpik, 2013).

### *Social and Cultural Resources and the Choice of a "Good School"*

Some parents with high social capital are able to discriminate more skillfully the characteristics of the educational quality of a good school (Felouzis et al., 2013, van Zanten, 2009a; van Zanten, 2009b). This facilitates the school choice process for privileged families, while less "prepared" parents won't be able to do so. This asymmetry sometimes increases reproduction of school and social hierarchies. Schools also participate in the construction of this asymmetry through action logic filtering students through marketing or advertising, or via selection criteria (Maroy & van Zanten, 2007). This accentuates the school's effect on the larger public during visits (or welcome days) in particular, providing a first filtering of the student population (Maroy & van Zanten, 2007). Some parents exercise indirect control over their child's peer group (Felouzis, 2009) with emphasis on avoidance strategies that are mediated by school choices (van Zanten, 2009a). For example, these parents may want to avoid enrollment in certain schools they consider unsuitable for their children. In order to do so, they can put forward other strategies of choice such as residential strategies (changing neighborhood).

Asymmetry also favours a hierarchy among schools, where the social or ethnic characteristics of students constitute (or not) the "social quality" of the school. This hierarchy derives in particular from the school quality judgments developed by parents who want their children to grow up among peers (Felouzis, 2009) and stay away from others who hold opposing educational values. This could be called a negative "relation to others".

The elaboration of judgments on the qualities of a (good) school is also based on family history, and on unequal economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1972). These resources and social positions can determine expressive (well-being or happiness of the child) or instrumental

(serving a means) educational aims as well as be associated with different representations of society (open, enriched by social mixing or not) (van Zanten, 2009a; van Zanten, 2009b).

## **Methodology**

This qualitative exploratory study took place in four different socio-spatial contexts in Montreal. It aims to understand school quality judgments related to the residential situations of parents and offers highlights on cultural and economic status of families. More specifically, this study aims, through seven exploratory semi-structured interviews, to validate our analysis tools (part 4.3) and our coding grid which will be operationalized on a larger scale.

### *Socio-Spatial Considerations*

The boroughs of the city of Montreal were chosen by targeting the districts where there was a more than one school option and where the possibilities for parents' to make choices existed. Additionally, we looked for districts where competition among schools (to attract the best students) could be observed. We also chose districts that we considered more or less equal on the socio-economic level. The districts chosen were: Ahuntsic-Cartierville (AC), Rosemont-La Petite Patrie (RLPP), Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grace (CdNNDG) and Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (MHM).

### *Participant Recruitment and Interviews*

For the purposes of this study, we looked for seven parents residing in the boroughs mentioned, who demonstrated an interest in the object of study by responding to the announcement. Like Poupart et al., (1997) and Fenneteau (2007) suggest, we chose to conduct interviews because we believe they are a promising avenue for capturing oral narrations about judgments regarding actors' school choice practices. We conducted one hour-long semi-open interview per participant during the summer and fall of 2016. Following an interview protocol, we asked parents questions on different themes, such as: their personal, professional and academic trajectories, their appreciation of their borough of residence, their representation of their child's school and socio-educational characteristics, their perception of the current and expected school environments, their perception of a good school for their children or their relation with others that they considered different from them. All of the participating parents were born in Canada, French-speaking and eager to send their child to a francophone public or private high school in Montreal. Finally, parents had to live in the borough for at least one year, be considering, or be tempted to choose a secondary school for their child, whether or not it was located in their neighborhood. At the time, all had an intended target school in mind, although they had not confirmed enrollment at said school.

We initially aimed to talk to parents whose children were at the Grade 6 (age 11 or 12) level in the 2016-2017 school year, but we also met one parent whose child was already in high school, but had to choose another school because the current one did not meet their expectations. Table 1 highlights the characteristics of our sample. It also shows an unexpected overrepresentation of parents with a child with "special needs": 6 out of 7 are categorized as students with disabilities. All the parents we met were mothers; who, according to de Singly (2017), are the ones to, most of the time, ensure the monitoring of their children's schooling.

Table 1: Sample

Parents (P)	Gender	Boroughs	SFR Index	Highest Education Level	Professional Occupation	Age and gender of the child	Learning or physical disability	High School targeted
P1	F	RLPP	18,4	University (Bacc + Master's Degree)	University laboratory manager	Girl, 13 y/o	Yes	Public
P2	F	RLPP	30,7	University (doctorate)	Coordinator of a research team	Boy, 11 y/o	Yes	Public
P3	F	CdNNDG	55,8	University (bacc)	Osteopath	Boy, 13 y/o	Yes	Private
P4	F	MHM	8,6	University (bacc)	Teacher	Girl, 12 y/o	Yes	Private
P5	F	MHM	68,7	Secondary + Pastry Degree	Beneficiary Attendant	Girl, 12 y/o	Yes	Public
P6	F	CdNNDG	17,9	University (bacc + Master's Degree)	Freelance Designer	Girl, 12 y/o	No	Private
P7	F	AC	20,0	Technical College Degree + University Certificate (HEC)	Director of a Early Childhood Education Center	Boy, 12 y/o	Yes	Public

### Tools and Data Analysis Process

The interviews were recorded on audio file and then transcribed. The transcripts were coded with the *NVivo* (version 10) qualitative analysis software using a pre-determined coding grid. Our grid included the following categories and sub-categories: *judgements (relation to others, educational aims, personal experience)*, *educational quality (instruction, socialization)*, *judgement devices (personal, impersonal)* and *cognitive and normative (beliefs, expectations, projections, trust on schools)*. A verbatim content analysis was performed along with a return to the theoretical framework to adjust the preliminary coding categories, as suggested by Miles & Huberman (2003). In the second phase of analysis, our codes were stabilized for a more detailed examination of the themes this study focuses on. The instrumental and expressive dimensions attached to schooling as well as their educational expectations were subject to careful consideration. An instrumental education aim could be linked to a "fear of the other", a condition discouraging social diversity (van Zanten, 2009b). The analytical concept of "relation to others" (van Zanten, 2009b), helped understanding how this affects parents' quality choices and

judgments. Attention was put on their (positive or negative) perceptions of the social, academic, cultural and ethnic characteristics of the audience of students in the targeted secondary schools (van Zanten, 2009b) for which a judgment was made (Broccolichi, 1998). This could indicate if conditions favouring social segregation are possibly observable (van Zanten, 2009a; van Zanten, 2009b).

In addition, this study focused on whether a positional effect could be involved in the formation of choices and what are the conditions of occurrence (van Zanten, 2009b). Finally, judging devices and their use were examined according parents' social and professional characteristics.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations to this study have been identified. The main limitation is related to the composition of our exploratory sample (Table 1). We noticed that it is unbalanced from the point of view of the status of the child since only one parent with a child without special needs was questioned. A second selection bias of our sample (relative to the actual diversity of parents and our research objectives) lies in the lack of variety in the socio-professional profiles of parents. Finally, a social desirability bias may have influenced participants' responses.

## **Analysis of parents' judgments**

This section will provide a comprehensive interpretation of key findings such as contrasts, contradictions, common or shared beliefs between the parents, as well as the construction of their judgments, and how they elaborated the competition of qualities and the hierarchy of local schools.

### *Parents' Educational Expectations*

Our interviews show a strong concern about the well-being or happiness of the child. This expressive dimension is therefore a major finding and contrasts with what French studies show (van Zanten, 2009a). However, the instrumental dimension is not completely absent from the families' expectations. P7 suggests that a certain level of academic achievement is important, but the parent first wants the school to allow her child to flourish:

« (...) je ne veux pas nécessairement que mon enfant performe, je veux que mon enfant soit heureux » (P7, AC).

("I don't necessarily want my child to perform [at school], I want my child to be happy" (P7, AC))

None of the parents questioned had any particular ambitions regarding their child and none of them insisted on sending the child to a school that would be contrary to his or her wishes. The importance of these expressive educational goals communicated by parents may be related to their child's special needs status which may lower parent expectations from an instrumental point of view.

*Strong beliefs in the reputation of institutions... or the teaching system?*

In general, the belief in the reputation of the school or school network (public or private) is shared by all the parents interviewed. However, when the parents had attended the private sector as a teenager, they were more likely to choose a private school (P3):

« [C]’est sûr que, moi je me suis toujours dit, même avant d’avoir des enfants, que probablement que mes enfants, si je pouvais me le permettre, suivraient le même cheminement que moi, c’est-à-dire école publique pour le primaire, école privée pour le secondaire. Donc, je pense que je ne me suis pas posé énormément de questions par rapport au public-privé, au secondaire » (P3, CdNNDG).

("I always said to myself, even before having children, that probably (...), if I could afford it, they would follow the same path as me (...) public primary school and private secondary school. So, I didn’t question myself very much regarding the public-private high school debate" (P3, CdNNDG)).

Their judgment is grounded in their own academic trajectory and personal experience which allows them to reduce any uncertainty of choice. Judgment is therefore based on trust in family tradition and personal experience; it is not delegated to a third party, as Karpik (2007) envisages with judgment devices. P4 is more clearly positioned in terms of the reputation of the institution. She develops her judgment on the “perceived” bad reputation of public schools in general and maintains the belief that the private network is better for her child:

« Mais c’est peut-être moi aussi qui a une opinion erronée de ce qui se passe au public là, on en entend tellement parler » (P4, MHM).

("But, maybe I’m wrong about what's going on in the public [network] there. We hear so much about it" (P4, MHM)).

This parent teaches in a primary public school and also went to a private school as a teenager. She had a very clear image of the ability of the private school to support her child:

« On pense que [pour] ma fille qui a des forces dans d’autres choses que l’académique, (...) l’école privée (...) comme par exemple l’école Collège d’Anjou, bien je me dis ça peut être positif » (P4, MHM).

("We think that the private school (...) as for example the College of Anjou (...) [for] my daughter who has strengths in other areas than academic, well I say, it can be positive [for her]" (P4, MHM)).

She also has a negative perception of "others" surrounding her child, which, in our opinion, has a strong effect on school choice. Her perception was reinforced by her own professional experience as a teacher and by the visits she made. Her strong beliefs that the private sector would better meet her expectations and her daughter’s needs is therefore indicative of a loss of trust in the public-school system.

### *A contextualized "relation to others"*

Parents did not seem to put emphasis on the characteristics of students likely to be around their child in the targeted high school. However, the parents' relation to others of all parents varied according to the context of social relations. For instance, it is often "positive" in friendly and cordial relationships outside the school, but becomes "negative" when these relations directly affect their child's current school. P7, for example, generally appreciated the fact that her son has friends "from other origins" in their neighborhood of residence, but considers problematic the fact that he is part of the [ethnic] minority (Native Quebecker) in his class (of mostly immigrants):

« Je ne veux pas que ce soient tous des 'Québécois de souche' qui sont à l'école, je trouve qu'il y a une richesse à apprendre des autres, mais quand c'est ton enfant qui est l'exception, c'est comme si tu vis un problème de... d'immigration dans ton pays » (P7, AC).

("I do not want all of them [the students] to be native Quebeckers at school, I think it's great to learn from others, but when your child is the exception [in the class], it is as if you are experiencing a problem of ... immigration in your own country" (P7, AC)).

This mother considers that the social, ethno-cultural and identity characteristics of "others" are too different from her child's. She believes this may have negative effects on her son's academic success. This parent may want her child to avoid the experience of being a minority when, in fact, her child is in a majority position throughout the rest of the province. Referring to an "immigration problem" validates this parent's choice of a school where her child associates with other children from similar ethnic and social groups.

P1 and P4 are more concerned about populations with different deviances and social problems rather than ethno-cultural differences. For example, they report noticing "violence" and "blood" at school, and how harmful their child's exposure to a negative climate might be. They do not explicitly associate those social problems to ethno-cultural characteristics.

« Donc pour notre fille, juste pour donner un exemple (...) dans les trois premières semaines [de la rentrée] il y a des batailles entre filles, puis aux [coups de] poings, puis il y a du sang. Donc ça a beaucoup traumatisé notre fille (...) » (P1, RLPP).

("So for our daughter, just to give an example (...) in the first three weeks [back to school] there are battles between girls, then [with punches], then there was blood. Our daughter was traumatized (...)") (P1, RLPP).

« C'est leur éducation (...) il y a beaucoup... de ce qu'elle me rapporte, il y a beaucoup de violence. Violence verbale [en classe] » (P4, MHM).

("It's their [the other children's] education (...) according to my daughter, there is a lot of violence. Verbal violence [in class]" (P4, MHM)).

We hypothesize that the concerns of these parents may also be related to the fact that they each have a female child combined with learning disabilities for whom they express a greater interest in safety in the school context.

Another parent believes that the educational values of "others" are too different from her family values (P3). The living environment as well as the school context have an effect on this parent's relationships with others. She wants her child to be in a school where the student population has what she considers to be positive educational values and a positive climate for learning. The openness to "differences" appears to be conditional on the sharing of educational values which, according to this parent, translates into "educational practices" close to their own, such as attendance at school or setting up a routine of school-related tasks. The social, cultural or ethnic characteristics of the "others" perceived as negative do not appear in the oral narratives of P2, P5 and P6. P5 and P6 are rather neutral on this subject whereas the P2 is enthusiastic about the idea that her son meet people of different origins. We believe, in these cases, the relations to other has no major effect on school choice.

### *A "Good" High School*

To identify how parents define the quality of a good school, we considered Felouzis & Perroton (2007)'s two dimensions: the effectiveness of the school and the socialization factor. In the latter dimension, several elements can contribute to a school's perceived effectivity, particularly the social or cultural characteristics of the other pupils, as well as the social climate of the school or the social relations (between pupils). Our data also invited us to consider schools' "effectiveness" as a major dimension of choice, according to parents. This category, particularly in terms of school administration, teachers' relations and safe school environment, was frequently reflected in parents' narration and in their way of qualifying a "good school", as demonstrated by P1 and P5:

« [Une bonne école], c'est une stabilité au niveau du corps enseignant, c'est une diversité de l'offre, autant pour l'enseignement que des activités parascolaires » (P1, RLPP).

("[A good school has] stability at the level of within the teaching staff, it is has a diversity of the offer, the level teaching and extracurricular activities" (P1, RLPP)).

« [Dans une bonne école] les profs sont à l'écoute des enfants avec des difficultés, qu'il y ait de l'aide pour ces enfants-là, qu'elle soit sécuritaire » (P5, MHM).

"[A good school is where] teachers are listening to pupils with disabilities, there is help for them, [it's a school] that is safe for them (...)" (P5, MHM)."

For P6, whose child is skilled and talented at school, the instrumental dimension seems to be as important as the expressive dimension. In this case, school could be one of the ways to bring the child up on social and academic levels. The "knowledge content" category was also implicitly associated with the type of school or program targeted:

« [Une bonne école] c'est un lieu d'épanouissement dans l'apprentissage (...). Elle fréquentera... c'est une école qui vise l'excellence (...), il faut qu'elle soit beaucoup, beaucoup stimulée (...). C'est vraiment ça, c'est une école qui

nourrit les enfants d'un point de vue académique, connaissances... » (P6, CdNNDG).

("[A good school is where] my daughter feels fulfilled in her learning (...). She will attend a school that aims for excellence (...) she needs to be very, very stimulated (...). So, a good school feeds the children from an academic point of view, the knowledge..." (P6, CdNNDG)).

For parents of children with special needs, the school's ability to supervise their child and to keep her or him away from school failure was a primary concern. In contrast, P6 essentially hopes that a "good school" can bring up her daughter's ambitions and offer her a context for academic and professional development:

« Elle se projette... elle se voit avocate, puis elle se voit faire ses études à Harvard ou à Oxford. (...) elle connaît la réputation de l'école, elle sait que des premiers ministres y sont allés et pour elle c'est important » (P6, CdNNDG).

("She projects herself... she sees herself as a lawyer, then she sees herself studying at Harvard or Oxford (...) she knows the reputation of the [targeted high] school, she knows that prime ministers went there and, for her, it's important" (P6, CdNNDG)).

Supervision here holds less importance than the level of requirements (i.e., to be able to go to Harvard). For this parent, the "knowledge content" should bring her child's educational aspirations up. A certain prestige is, in this case, pursued and valued. Moreover, quality is associated with the professional and social status of former students in the targeted secondary school.

The "socialization" category, related to the perception of the social, ethnic and cultural characteristics of other students, has little impact on choice making except for P1, P4 and P7. For P4, the learning climate is very strongly related to student characteristics:

« Je le souhaite, en tout cas, que le climat de classe (...) moi, c'est ce qui a pesé dans la balance de dire, bien, dans les écoles publiques avec tout le *melting pot* d'enfants qui peut y avoir, parce qu'on est obligé de les intégrer, parce qu'on est obligé de côtoyer toutes sortes d'élèves (...) est-ce que je veux que mon enfant soit dans une classe comme ça? (...) ou je préférerais (...) qu'elle côtoie des gens qui sont pareils comme elle » (P4, MHM).

("(...) I wish that the climate of the class (...) it is what weighed the most (...), in public schools, because we have to integrate all sorts of pupils, we have to interact with all kinds of children (...) Do I want my child to be in a class like that (...) or would I prefer (...) that she associates with children like her?" (P4, MHM)).

The importance of this climate seems to be part of the "socialization" dimension but with strong implications for school effectiveness. The "relationship with others" is in this case negative and contextualized. Its effects on learning in the classroom are reinforcing "avoidance"

strategies (i.e., choosing a private school instead of the neighborhood public school) from this parent.

*A positional effect hardly perceptible, but...*

Given the low social variance of our exploratory sample, no major trend can be identified between parents' sector of activity, professional position or socio-spatial context and their relation to others. The only two parents (P4 & P7) who have shown a negative relationship with others come from modest backgrounds (family background and school career), but, paradoxically, occupy jobs in the field of human relations (child care and teaching). The vision of "relation to others" seems to be related to the social and ethno-cultural characteristics of the population of students likely to attend the targeted schools. We hypothesize that, on a larger scale, this can have a stronger impact on school choices at this could be observed according the socio-spatial context.

### **Discussion**

In this study, parents were very sensitive to school visits (impersonal device), where they could, on their own, check on what people say about the school (for instance, about programs, activities, supervision, etc.). Parents' visits to schools are part of a marketing strategy called "confluence device" and are more effective when the parent is undecided or hesitant about the choice of high school, as was the case for P5. The fact that most parents have a child with significant learning disabilities may partly explain the excitement around visits. Indeed, these parents are more in a position to determine whether the efficiency and socialization dimensions can promote their child's academic success and the expressive dimension they wanted for them. The other impersonal networks distinguished by Karpik (i.e., cicerones, appellations, classifications) such as the "palmarès" (school ranking results) or schools' marketing communications (Draelants & Dumay, 2011) is not involved in parents' judgments. For P6, however, the target school and its associated reputation are considered a "brand" (naming device).

### **Conclusion**

As previously mentioned, we wanted to understand what underlies parental judgments on schools and how they are mobilized in school choices. The main purpose of this article was to explore how the quality judgments of a "good high school" could be developed for some parents in the Montreal school market. We have examined that through action logic, such as visits during the welcome days, some schools contribute to shaping their image and their reputation. We also wanted to know what judgment devices the parents relied on and how they manipulated the information they derived from them to judge the educational quality of a school. In the first results obtained, a competition of qualities is palpable: the prices did not in any way influence the parents' school choice practices. At this stage of our investigation, socio-spatial characteristics, as well as the social or professional position of parents, play little role in the development of parental quality judgments, except for parents from human relations professional background. The way in which the "relation with others" influences the representation of a good school is perceptible in several interviews, but it is not clearly linked to a social position. On the other hand, parents' choices appear to be more related to the child's gender and the fact that their

child has (or not) a special needs status. We therefore assume that this leads to specific choice strategies.

It will be interesting to further explore the impact of the current categories on choices and to focus on the hypothesis of a possible presence of a particular "parental anxiety" surrounding the choice of high school for these children with special needs. From a more diverse sample, we would be able to know if the "relation to others" helps to differentiate the practices of choice among some Montreal parents, as has been demonstrated in France, and if a position effect has an influence (van Zanten, 2009a; van Zanten, 2009b). This could demonstrate that some conditions favouring segregation are in place.

The results of this study were used to highlight the key elements on which parents focus when choosing a school and helped us understand which topics need to be deepened in the forthcoming thesis. The stabilized coding grid and first findings will contribute to the pursuit of this research and hopefully, will allow the validation of hypotheses or questions derived from foreign studies. If any negative effects can be identified, it may be possible to address public policies or to question schools and actors in the education community on their actions.

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## Tables

Table 1. Open non-probability Sample (as suggested by Savoie-Zajc, 2006)

Parents (P)	Gender	Borough	SFR Index	Highest Education Level	Professional Occupation	Age and gender of the child	Learning or physical disability	High School targeted
P1	F	RLPP	18,4	University (Bacc + Master's Degree)	University laboratory manager	Girl, 13 y/o	Yes	Public
P2	F	RLPP	30,7	University (doctorate)	Coordinator of a research team	Boy, 11 y/o	Yes	Public
P3	F	CdNNDG	55,8	University (bacc)	Osteopath	Boy, 13 y/o	Yes	Private
P4	F	MHM	8,6	University (bacc)	Teacher	Girl, 12 y/o	Yes	Private
P5	F	MHM	68,7	Secondary + Pastry Degree	Beneficiary Attendant	Girl, 12 y/o	Yes	Public
P6	F	CdNNDG	17,9	University (bacc + Master's Degree)	Freelance Designer	Girl, 12 y/o	No	Private
P7	F	AC	20,0	Technical College Degree + University Certificate (HEC)	Director of an Early Childhood Education Center	Boy, 12 y/o	Yes	Public

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