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# **Fighting school segregation through information policies? Lessons from Barcelona, Milan and Oslo**

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## Abstract

*As previous research has widely shown, school choice has a very relevant role in shaping the intensity and the shape of school segregation dynamics at city level. During school choice process, families look for information, facts and evidence that help or support their choice. The type and the amount of information that families access can differ because of differences in what they look for but also because the availability and accessibility to this information are unequally distributed among families. This information asymmetry is mostly explained by the strategic relationship that passes between middle-class families and the school system. Thus, policymakers face a twofold challenge: first, to democratize access to information about different institutional arrangements and schools' characteristics, second, to provide balanced and adequate information to reduce school segregation. We focus on this second challenge. Local authorities have made significant progresses and attempts in the last years in using information as a driver to soften avoiding mechanisms or to hinder dynamics of social closure. This paper discusses and compares the information policies adopted in three urban local contexts (Milan, Barcelona, Oslo) which are characterized by different enrolment rules. Through the analysis of the information policies developed in these three cities, we identify the challenges, the strengths and the flaws of the instruments implemented and we critically compare them in relation to the three contexts. The final goal is to define some policy orientation in terms of information instruments that can apply to diverse contexts but having in common the goal of reducing segregation dynamics.*

## Key-words

School segregation; educational inequalities, school choice, cities, information policies

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## Introduction

Information plays a relevant role in shaping educational opportunities and choices, being significant also in softening or harshening dynamics of segregation. The present paper aims at disentangling how information can be used to contrast segregation dynamics through a comparative approach. Comparison is based on document and policies analysis of the information strategies of three European cities: Barcelona, Oslo and Milan. These three cities are characterized by different educational systems, especially in terms of enrolment process, nevertheless showing significant degrees of school segregation. The analysis focuses on the actors in charge of information policies, contents and means, and the potential consequences for school segregation. The method utilized is document analysis. The document analysis has considered both the contents and the channels of the information conveyed in order to grasp the whole information policy behind the instruments used. Following elements have been considered: language, visibility and accessibility of the contents, type of information, declared goals, not explicit objective or consequence, targeted groups, quality and accessibility of the channel used (i.e. user friendly website, documents to be downloaded). Documents taken into consideration include school and educational institutions webpages addressing the school choice and targeting parents, as well as any other documents such as letters, brochures, videos that are devoted to provide information on schools to parents before the enrolment procedure. Previous research and analysis have been utilized to provide a better understanding of the documents of each city. Complementary research includes focus group, k-informant interviews or secondary analysis of previous research. The article, after discussing previous evidence and research on the topic, introduces the three educational systems, focusing mostly on enrolment rules and their effect on school segregation processes. The third section presents the information tools and channels used by the three cities with reference to the school choice. In the following part, the authors analyze these information policies in relation to the school segregation phenomenon, meaning their current and potential effect on driving school choice to soften or harshen dynamics of marginalization for some schools. The final findings focus on comparing the three cases, in order to draw some conclusions and guidelines for information policies with the aim of counteracting school segregation.

## Literature review

In the last two decades research focused largely on the relationship between information and school segregation; so we have a rich literature on the many implications of this relation. Through different perspectives scholars tried to map the strengths and weaknesses of information assets in contrasting or reproducing socio-spatial inequalities. Looking at this field of studies we understand that the division between “choosing” and “not choosing” parents is an oversimplified explanation. For example, Ball and Vincent (1998) distinguish between skilled (or privileged) choosers, semi-skilled and disconnected ones, putting their attention on the different resources in the hands of families when searching for information.

Not all kinds of information are the same, neither are they equally considered by parents. Parents have different sets of values about choice and schooling (Ball and Vincent 1998) and this drives them to prioritize one piece of information over another. Literature has corroborated the fact that different social classes look at different criteria when selecting information about schools. For example, quality is not measured and conceived through the same indicators from all parents, but it varies according to the different profiles of households. Nevertheless, also within middle-class, researchers have found several differences in choice strategies and quality evaluation. Van Zanten (2003) classified, for instance, different types of middle-class families according to their strategy of school choice and the criteria they prioritize (academic achievement/children happiness, social

mix/homogeneity, school performance/proximity). Many scholars sustain that in the decision-making process, higher-income families tend to consider information related to academic factors more important than other non-educational parameters (Fossey 1994; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Hastings et al 2007). At the same time, low-income families seem to be much more set on non-educational criteria, such as demographic composition and home-school distance when choosing the school. Therefore, the middle and upper classes are more likely to search for objective data on quality, such as the test-score information that are considered as cultural distinction values (Olson Beal and Hendry 2012). Gomez et al. (2012) make a list of studies that demonstrate how the relevance given by parents to test-scores increases with family income and student skills. According to these studies, middle and high classes have more possibilities to select high-performing schools because they are culturally pushed to consider that dimension. Nevertheless, another subset of researches enlighten an opposite trend. For example, according to Kleitz et al. (2000), low-income families are much more sensitive to qualitative factors, while high-income families are attracted by cultural factors such as the social and racial mixture of the school because conceived as a social distinction value (Olson Beal and Hendry 2012).

From the literature emerges that evaluating quality is a challenging issue. Surveys made by researchers identified two ideas. First, even when parents are supposed to select on the basis of school performance, they ignore many of the results on standardised tests (Gomez et al. 2012). Thus, even the most educated parents are not fully aware when conducting a choice. Moreover, many parents declare to make choices on the basis of beliefs and perceptions because much information, such as the quality of teachers (Schneider et al. 1998) is not in their hands. Second, it is important to consider that educational systems differ in the kind of information they make available to parents. Test-score is widely used in some countries but avoided in others. Information on composition, such as students' nationality, is not accessible everywhere. This difference in which kind of information is released to parents is embedded in different enrolment systems that affect the degree of choice households have and the mechanisms triggered in the process of choice.

Existing studies also concentrate on the channels used by families to get informed. These works explored the "information research patterns" of different families (Ball and Vincent 1998, Holme 2002, Schneider et al. 1998) in order to understand the resources that families utilize to forge a preference. The literature distinguishes two kinds of information: the "cold" information, that is the formal one produced by schools themselves or other educational institutions; and the "hot" information, the one conveyed by friends, neighbours and relatives on the basis of their personal experience or knowledge. While families usually combine the two sources, the second one is often considered more reliable. Moreover, parents' behaviour with regard to the two typologies can vary largely, so they deserve two distinguished analyses.

Regarding the provision of "cold" information, school systems and countries differ in which kind of content they prioritize in their communication with families. According to Lubieski (2007), we can at least find two main typologies of information provided by and about schools: one is related to evidence of organizational inputs such as facilities (labs, gyms, swimming pools, etc); human resources such as teachers (special training, class-students ratio); curricula/pedagogy; students characteristics (mother tongue, ethnicity, special needs, etc). The second one concerns organizational outputs such as test results, drop-out rates, honours, added value, etc.

The use of different information tools is strongly linked with the governance of the system. First of all, the actors in charge of providing information about the schools can be different according to different regulations. In the USA, due to the relevance of the local educational markets, schools are the most prominent actors (Lubieski, 2007). Public schools are keener in providing standardised information required by local regulations: information on organizational inputs such as instruction and academics, student characteristics, academic facilities, and human resources are used quite frequently in the annual reports required by the state, as are raw outputs

such as test scores. However, they are less active in promoting themselves through other types of information that are also of interest to prospective parents (academic programs, extracurricular activities, and other themes such as community and patriotism). Private schools, instead place more emphasis on instructional innovations, the value-added effects, sports facilities, or admissions issues. Charter schools, finally, offer more commercialized materials in which they choose not to employ the information required of public schools in their annual reports. They are more likely to stress academic programs and themes, often in differentiating themselves from (perceptions of) public schools or equating themselves with private schools: character education and morality, safety, uniforms, patriotism, and their tuition-free nature. Cold information differs in the type and amount, but also in the means by which it is conveyed. This difference can be found between countries, but also within the same educational system when school autonomy is considerable. There are systems in which schools are systematically ranked according to test-scores or other performance measurements and these rankings are published and easily accessible. In other systems, all sorts of information are published but not all of them are easily accessible for all households. In other systems, a small piece of information is offered by the system. Publishing test-scores and rankings of schools in relation to national evaluations is a controversial issue. Also in this case, the literature about the implications of this information strategy is quite poor, and mostly developed outside the EU. According to Hastings and Weinstein (2008), receiving this information significantly increases the fraction of parents choosing higher-performing schools, also among lower-income families in a public-school choice plan. According to the same scholars, attending a higher-scoring school increases student test scores, and consequently school choice will most effectively increase academic achievement for disadvantaged students when parents have easy access to test score information and have good options to choose from. However, other scholars highlight that it is very uncertain if high-score levels are correlated with true value added (McEwan, et al. 2008). For example, one might imagine an exceptionally productive school that enrolls predominantly low-income children or, likewise, a rich school with unexceptional administrators and teachers. In such cases, access to information on test score levels may not improve parents' ability to choose the most productive schools. Indeed, it may simply reinforce stratification or reward inefficiency if it encourages parents to choose low value-added schools serving wealthy children (McEwan, et al. 2008)

The way how information is provided can create further information asymmetry due to the features of the household (Teske et al. 2006; Howell 2006; Schneider and Buckley 2002). In fact, existing studies demonstrated that the more educated parents are also more active in school choice and the ablest to deal with school websites. Anyway, as discussed by Teske et al (2006), even if many schools and states made the information easy to be found through report cards, websites and school fairs, this type of material is still handled mainly by the high and middle-class. Moreover, according to other research (i.e. Howell 2006), many schools are not very able in diversifying information contents and channels to reach all the parents. These obstacles may lead many parents to not understand their range of choice options (Alegre et al 2010). Thus, inequalities are reproduced also in the access to information. Information seeking and selection imply time and knowledge costs that not all families can bear. Therefore, social research suggests that school policy should develop strategies to reduce the costs of understanding this information (Howell 2006). According to them, the main challenge in market arrangement schooling is how to empower low-skilled parents in selecting the needed information (Olson Beal and Hendry 2012). Inequalities occur also in the process of gathering "hot" information, meaning the word of mouth, because the amount and the quality of this information strongly depend on the type of social networks households can rely on, that is their social capital. As Van Zanten notices, "parents' rationality is bounded by the fact that their reflections are based on limited information, immediate concerns and local comparisons" (2013, p.83). In addition, parents are not frequently familiar with the information research itself but rather with its "popularized version".

Finally, from the side of the offer, schools have increased their dedication to the promotion and dissemination of their projects and activities. School autonomy has been incorporated into the educational policies of many countries. As an extension of this autonomy, schools have incorporated marketing and quasi-market dynamics into their way of working, willing to inform families about the school product they offer (González et al, 2021). González et al. (ibidem) conclude that autonomy inevitably leads to quasi-market school behaviours by stimulating competitive dynamics (to attract more resources or more and more desirable demand from middle class families). Alegre (2010) points out that the diversification of the public offer (or publicly financed) and the school autonomy constitute one of the four basic mechanisms through which the quasi-market is deployed. From this approach, some information strategies from schools can be understood as examples of endogenous privatization (Ball and Youdell, 2007) since, by publicly displaying the educational project and the singularities of the school, they stimulate comparative selection (Bartlett, 1993) and competition between schools, reverting in higher degrees of segregation.

Studying information policies will force us to focus on these different aspects at the same time: the proactive actions taken by public administration, the tools and channels developed by families to get information and the activities and practices promoted by schools to engage potential pupils and their parents.

### **The three cities' educational context**

Barcelona, Milan and Oslo respond to three different educational local systems regarding school supply and the design of the school choice process.

Milan is characterized by a quasi-market educational system: parents are free to choose whatever school they want among the state, subsidized, and private supplies. The residential criterion applies only in case of overbooking in state schools and only state schools have some kind of territorial reference, i.e. catchment area (CA from here). CAs are a legacy from the past when the residential criterion was used to regulate enrollment. Each school belongs to a CA and only one state school is found in each CAs: then Milan has 137 CAs and their relative school for the primary cycle (6-10) and 78 for the lower secondary cycle (10-13). Now we can consider the system as based on the households' free choice: more than half of the student population, in fact, do not attend the local school. Subsidized and private schools do not belong to any territorial unit and they play a considerable role in the city educational system. In fact, a quarter of children attend private schools and 22% of them are enrolled in private subsidized schools. These are privately managed, but partly publicly funded. Subsidized schools must follow the state curriculum and they are mostly located close to the city center. As the school segregation is concerned, in 2018/2019 Milan showed a dissimilarity index of 0.44. This value is not very high in absolute terms, especially if compared to other EU cities, but it is when compared to the city residential segregation dissimilarity index, which is 0.38. Milan in fact shows the typical Mediterranean city patterns of residential segregation: residential segregation is in fact relatively low and the foreign population is heterogeneously distributed especially over the peripheral neighborhoods, not generating ghettos or really enclosed communities (Arbaci 2008). Nevertheless, the city is characterized by high degrees of inequality and polarization, which lead to social exclusion and educational poverty in some brackets of the population. Schools seem to not mirror exactly the distribution of the population in the territory, but on the contrary, they show dynamics of segregation. Home-to-school mobility is in fact relevant in the city of Milan, with more than half of households opting out from their local schools (Cordini et al. 2019).

Urban socio-spatial segregation has traditionally been strong in Oslo, if compared to other European cities and, among them, Milan and Barcelona (Tammaru et al., 2015). Indeed, Oslo is well known to be a dual city, and the dynamics of social polarization here have far origins

(Wessels, 2000). The Akerselva, the river that crosses Oslo in the north-south direction, has been considered the social and spatial division line between the rich and resourceful west of the city and the poor east since the 1800s (Wessel, 2000). Increasing levels of immigration have further strengthened the socio-spatial segregation patterns, as most immigrants have settled in the neighbourhoods where socioeconomic deprivation has been most visible. Against this background of relevant levels of residential segregation, students are mainly allocated to primary schools according to their home addresses. Since the mid-1990s families have had a right to choose a school outside their own catchment area, but there is no guarantee for admission, as it depends on the available places in the receiving schools. In 2019, around 75% percent of primary school children was attending school within their own catchment area, making Oslo an excellent location to study the effects of catchment area-based school policies and urban segregation (Cucca, Mouratidis, 2022). The city of Oslo is divided into 105 primary school catchment areas. The role of public schools is strong in an international comparison, as the number of private schools is low (only 4.5% of students in primary school attend a private institution) and they are institutionally highly controlled. As the vast majority of students attend their nearest public school, urban segregation has a direct effect on the pupil composition of the schools. Indeed in Oslo, residential segregation at the city level is higher than school segregation. However, this situation is not homogeneous, and there are few schools that are affected by a relevant “white flight” when it comes to more mixed catchment areas (Cucca, Mouratidis, 2022).

In Barcelona families can freely choose any public or private subsidised school. They express a set of school preferences, and in most regions students are allocated a school using an immediate acceptance algorithm (also known as the Boston mechanism). In cases of oversubscription, applications are prioritised using three main criteria: residential proximity, the enrolment of siblings at the school, and low household income (as a proxy of poverty). While these general criteria are set as a national regulation, local educational authorities can establish their own indicators to define residential proximity and thresholds for household income. In the case of Barcelona, the proximity criterion is organised in 29 catchment areas for primary education and 26 for secondary education. All families enjoy priority by proximity in a minimum of six public and six private subsidised schools, but all residents have the proximity priority for all public and subsidised private schools within their catchment area of residence, and, in case there is less school supply in their own area of residence, they have also proximity priority to some schools outside the catchment area. According to recent studies, 33% of 3-year-old students are enrolled in schools outside their catchment area of residence (Bonal et al., 2021). Regarding school sectors, the public sector enrolls only 44% of primary and lower secondary students, while 54% attend a private subsidised school and about 2% of students are enrolled in independent private schools (CEB, 2021). Public and subsidised sectors follow the national curriculum and are supposed to guarantee free education. However, costs exist in public and private subsidised schools, being higher in the latter. The social composition of the two sectors reflects significant segregation. For example, data for primary education shows that while only 47.8% of non-vulnerable students attend a public school, the numbers rise to 72.8% in the case of vulnerable students (36.1% and 56.8% in the case of secondary education) (Bonal et al., 2022). School segregation in Barcelona has experienced a slight reduction in the last few years. For primary education, the dissimilarity index (using vulnerability<sup>1</sup> as a variable) has gone from 0.53 (2018-2019) to 0.49 (2020-2021). Reduction is even clearer for secondary education, going from 0.59 to 0.39. However, data show significant variability in each of the 29 catchment areas, exceeding a dissimilarity index of 0.50 in

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<sup>1</sup> Children are identified as vulnerable in case they belong to families benefiting from Barcelona City Council’s Social Emergency Fund (for the 2019/2020 academic year) and the Covid Fund (2020/2021 academic year), as a proxy for students in extreme poverty, in case they are free school meal beneficiaries or if they have been classified as “students with socioeconomic needs”.



some areas, and falling to 0.1 in others. School segregation in Barcelona is higher than residential segregation. As in the case of Milan and other Mediterranean cities, the vulnerable population is distributed among all the neighbourhoods, and, despite the existence of some extremely deprived areas, most of the areas respond to a heterogeneous composition. School compositions are, however, less heterogeneous.

## Information provision: contents and means

The three different educational systems imply different information policies: according to the enrolment system. The type of educational offer and the cultural contexts, schools, institutions and local authorities provide different contents through different tools. Nevertheless, in each city, we can find signals of information asymmetry, with a part of the population having a strategic relationship with the information tools and contents, and with the whole educational system as well, and another part of the population struggling to navigate the amount of information provided and the tools used.

### Being informed about the enrolment process: the official information stream

In Milan, parents are warned about the start of the enrolment process through a letter sent by mail. The letter is sent by the Municipality of Milan to provide information about the enrolment process (i.e. link and deadline) but also to communicate which is the local school. The indication of the local school does not imply any type of obligation for enrolment, it is purely informative. The enrolment process is managed at the national scale, but the Municipality is involved in the process as a facilitating actor. The letter is usually received by parents at the beginning of January and the enrolment process closes at the end of the same month. At this point, families have usually already collected the information about schools and have already made a choice.

The City of Oslo, defined as the “owner” of all the public primary and junior-high schools based in the municipal area of Oslo, is the main responsible for the information provided to the families on school enrolment and choice. In general, individual schools do not have specific communication strategies oriented to attract new pupils, since free school choice is permitted, but not supported at the institutional level. Parents can get to know in advance the CA associated with the residential address by accessing the Oslo city website <https://www.oslo.kommune.no/skole-og-utdanning/>, which contains a section “Which school will attend your child”, where prospective parents can also find information on free school choice options.

In Barcelona, the body with primary responsibility for informing families about their first entry into the educational system is the *Consorci d'educació de Barcelona* (CEB), integrated by the local authority and the regional Government. CEB is responsible for the governance and organization of the education system in the city, in general, and, in particular, for the information to families that join for the first time the system (3-year-old children) or to those families transitioning to secondary education (12-year-old kids). For the pre-inscription process, CEB launches a campaign that adds value to public education underlining some of its core values. This campaign goes further than giving information to the citizens but ensures that each interested person knows their rights, the game rules, the educational offering and the enrolment procedure. This double dimension of the communication process leads to two types of communication products: a) Process Information (to ensure the right to schooling for all children on equal terms) and, b) Institutional communication campaign (to bring to light every public school as a quality, innovative and inclusive school).

In relation to the process information, it is published in the CEB website and managers and administrative school staff are invited to participate in some information sessions. Moreover, CEB has designed several mechanisms to make the enrolment process much easier (active mailing and

sms, virtual apps, administrative support, special needs attention staff, video tutorials, on-line translation services, etc.).

In relation to the communication campaign, CEB uses several communication resources such as street advertisements, media and social networks. All these tools spread the chosen message for the enrolment campaign.

### **Schools as key informants: Open days and schools' websites**

In Milan, *Open days* are surely the most common and used tools by all families regardless of their socio-economic profile or level of education<sup>2</sup>. Open days take place in November, a couple of months before the enrolment, and all schools usually host them during the same week, so it is not easy for parents to attend more than one or two of them. Open days are usually structured in a presentation of the school offer and in a walk around the schools' spaces, so that parents can also grasp the climate, the physical environment and the daily spaces their kids will use if enrolled. Presentations usually entail the introduction of the teaching body, the educational offer, the extra-school activities, and projects (music, sports, nature...). Room is also given to parents' questions. Open days are advertised on the municipal and schools websites. On the municipal webpage parents can find a link to a web portal (Geo School) in which they can locate schools on the map accordingly to the proximity to the residence's address. This link has been recently labeled "Discover your local school", in an attempt to enforce proximity. In addition, each school has its own website. School websites are usually organized in the following sections: contact information, plexus, teaching, projects, educational offer official documents (POFT) and news. Of course, school websites are not solely dedicated to providing information for the school choices, but they actually target mostly the current students' families to provide information and updates and to signal events or notices (about closure, changes or institutional arrangements). They provide also the Self-Evaluation Report (RAV) where families can find the results of INVALSI tests (national evaluation tests), projects, innovative actions, strengths and criticalities.

In Barcelona, Schools provide information to families, mainly through the organisation of School Open Days, and their own websites. During the Open Days, schools show their projects and let families visit their equipment and know their teaching staff. Schools have the autonomy to launch as many school open days as they consider, to update the presentation of their project on social media or even post advertisements on their school.

Schools in Oslo do not organize Open Days but each school use **social media such as facebook** to publish information on activities at school, providing pictures of the school facility, as well as the students and teachers. This is also a way to communicate a particular image of the school and the relation with the local community. What is quite absent, instead, is the information on aspects related to pedagogy and educational offer. This is mainly due by the general homogeneity of educational offer in Oslo, although small differences (for example use of iPad at school; few schools with specialization in music, dance, English).

### **Information about schools; official platforms**

In the case of Milan, since 2011 a ministerial platform has collected the information for each school. "Scuola in Chiaro" is the richest depository of information about schools. It provides different types of information: numbers of classes and students, location and conditions of buildings, educational offers including achieved results and future expectations, additional

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<sup>2</sup> This has been confirmed by a survey conducted in 2021 on school choice in Milan whose results have been described in detail in a forthcoming publication.

services and extracurricular activities. In addition, parents can find information on the socio-economic composition of the school (percentage of foreigners or students coming from disadvantaged areas) and INVALSI data. These last are data collected by INVALSI (National Institute of Evaluation of the Educative and Training System) and measuring the schools' performance. In primary schools these standardized tests are taken during the second and fifth grades. This means that on *Scuola in Chiaro* website parents can find the performance of each second and fifth-grade class in Math, Italian and English for each school, compared to the city, regional and national average. *Scuola in Chiaro* also provides information on teachers: the average age of the personnel, turnover rate, diffusion of certain abilities or skills (such as the knowledge of foreign languages).

While this platform is provided by the Ministry of Education, each school is in charge of its own page and the information uploading is made on a voluntary basis. This leads to great heterogeneity in the amount and quality of information available for different schools. In addition, the website is not really user-friendly. For instance, the language is technical, mostly used by principals, teachers and school workers. Also, data about performance are not really easy to be found and comprehended. Despite this being the only information about the level of achievement reached by the students in each school, research has noticed that this information has very rarely been mentioned among the criteria from parents interviewed (Cordini, *forthcoming*). This can be due to the already mentioned issue of accessibility of these data. In addition, not every school uploads them. The section where parents can find information about the test score is called "*Rendicontazione sociale*" (Social reporting) and includes more data than only the test results. Under this section parents can find the following sub-section:

- **Context and resources**, where the general context of the school is described. Schools can upload the percentage of foreigners, the socio-economic conditions, the presence of students with special needs and the social capital of the school (i.e. the link with other territorial realities: third sector, association...).
- **Results achieved**: this section describes the level of achievement that can be achieved in the different subjects by the students and the school, detailing also the evaluation criteria.
- **Future developments**: here projects or expectations for the future can be found (the most recent ones concern usually the extension of the teaching of digital skills, the strengthening of foreign language teaching or the acquisition of new materials).
- **Other reporting documents**, where test scores can be downloaded in a pdf file.

In the Oslo City website, until a few months ago it was available a link to the database "Minosloskole", a portal displaying many statistics related to the schools: among them, national test results, percentage of pupils in special education needs and second language training. All the information on "Minosloskole" was provided in the Norwegian language, including the explanation on the main indicators provided, eventually fostering information asymmetry among users able /not able to navigate statistics and familiar / not familiar with national test results outputs and other information. Test scores instead are still an important asset in the communication strategy of some private schools, that use these results intentionally to attract new pupils. The Municipality of Oslo has a dedicated website for general information, legal rights and contact points for users like parents and pupils as well as the general public. Most of this information is available in English and for certain information in several other languages (Somali, Polish, Urdu, Turkish...). "Osloskole" is a website that provides detailed information about all the public schools in Oslo (history of the school, results from Students and Parents surveys, news, events, etc). The same information is provided for each school, although schools have the possibility to personalize the website according to their needs. Still active is also "Skoleporten.no", a web-based portal for providing schools and school owners in Norway with relevant and reliable

data about primary and secondary education. The aim is to give schools and school owners (the local and county authorities) easy access to relevant and reliable information for use in local quality assessment activities. "Skoleporten.no" is a key part of the national quality assessment system and it provides data relating to the fields of learning dividends, learning environment, completion of upper secondary education, resources and school facts. The fields of learning dividends, learning environment, completion of upper secondary education and resources are called "assessment areas" as they contain relevant information for local assessment activities. The field "school facts" provides facts about Norwegian schools. Although the website is accessible to the public, the target is for expert groups.

In Barcelona, the contents of the educational offer information are available on the CEB website. There, families can look for institutional information on the process (key dates, requirements in every educational stage, criteria for school assignment, informative sessions schedule and open days data) and information on schools (ownership, school levels, project, complementary services, equipment and fees) and a search engine based on proximity to the postal code. Families can also find this information in leaflets (translated into the most used languages in the city) that are distributed in schools, nurseries, public libraries and other information points.

## **Information Policies and intervention specifically targeting the school segregation**

The role of information in driving school segregation mechanisms, as well as the potential of information policies in counteracting them are not recognized to the same extent in all the cities considered. In fact, different degrees of structuration are observed alongside with diverse scales of implementation.

**Milan**, for instance, does not display a structured strategy to counteract school segregation through information policies. An attempt has been made in the last few years to promote the proximity criteria, especially to make parents aware of the existence of a "local school". This intervention has implied mostly a relabelling of the already existing instruments, such as the GeoSchool portal. This instrument is in fact now presented as the tool to find your "neighbour school". Nevertheless, the main interventions to contrast segregation trends or effects come directly from schools. Schools work mostly on extracurricular activities, offering what more affluent parents might consider attractive, such as language, music, art classes, or they propose an alternative pedagogical approach, i.e. Montessori, Senza Zaino. These interventions are thought mostly in the direction of changing the school's reputation and attracting families to differentiate the intake social and ethnic composition. Whenever they are implemented only in some classes, they are likely to foster the within-school segregation or class segregation.

Of course, a school's reputation is considerably connected to the area the school is located in, then it is hard to change it by working only on the school itself. The more segregated and marginalized schools have been helped by the municipality to obtain some visibility in this process of changing the reputation. One example is the IC Colasanzio, a school located in a public housing neighbourhood characterized by a high rate of immigrants, mostly Arabic speakers, which has been for several years depicted by the media as the "ghetto school". The principal, supported by the Municipality of Milan, has introduced the Pizzigoni method, which foresees a spread use of outdoor educational activities (such as taking care of a vegetable garden, sometimes also of animals) and promotes learning through personal experience. On the occasion of the inauguration of the new method adopted by the school, the Councilor for Education chaired the event, which was also largely advertised by the media. While the intake is not considerably changed because of the housing stock in the area (mostly composed by public housing, then hosting low-income and foreign families), the school has attracted the attention both of policymakers and the media,

freeing itself by the “ghetto” label and being recognized as an innovative school in the Milanese scenario. Some other schools have tried to relabel themselves from a “ghetto school” to an “international school”. This is the case of the IC Cadorna, located in a mixed neighbourhood but suffering from school segregation because of the flight of Italian families towards more central schools. IC Cadorna has worked on its reputation, especially with the engagement of the parents’ association, promoting itself as an international school, where diversity becomes an added value rather than an issue, as in ghetto or segregated schools. Both these experiences have been successful in terms of softening segregation dynamics, as in the IC Cadorna, or segregation effects, as in the IC Colasanzio. Here, in fact, the school population is still mostly Arabic and the adaptation of the method to this intake has not attracted new Italian families (because of the high presence of foreign population in the school neighbourhood) but it has led to positive effects on school and students’ performance.

**Also Oslo** does not display a structured strategy to counteract school segregation through information policies. School reputation is a very relevant factor affecting school choice in Oslo. The first dimension of reputation is however related to neighbourhood level. As mentioned earlier, Oslo is an extremely divided city, and according to a recent investigation (Haandrikman et Al. 2021) it scores first among Nord-Western European capitals as far as macro-areas segregation is concerned. It means that the areas characterised by quite homogeneous population are extended and easy to identify at geographical scale. However, at school level, there are situations of even more extreme overrepresentation of minority tongue pupils in comparison to the general level of the district, probably due to high levels of school choice and white flight affecting specific schools (Cavicchia & Cucca, 2020). This is reported in the easter-outer area of Oslo and in some schools in the easter-inner area. According to a recent article (Kadasia et Al., 2020), this is the case of a school located in a gentrifying area of Oslo city centre, which is characterised by a high percentage of municipal housing stock and residential instability. For some of the parents interviewed by the authors, the local school was a crucial reason in the decision to move out of the area before children school start; for others it was an influencing factor. According to the authors, the reasons were mainly related to a poor reputation of the school due to a large «proportion of low-resource immigrants at school» and residential instability due to short rental contracts in the area. Among those parents with pre-school children, information shaping their perception of the local school was mainly second-hand (such as information from friends and acquaintances, or media). The perceptions were mainly related to language competence and learning environment, and the informants seemed to be hesitant about sending their own children to the local school. Indeed, this is among the cases with lower percentage of children attending the local institution (Abildsnes, 2020). Emotions were also part of these stories. Most informants reported a complex internal discussion in connection with the choice of moving out from the district. Several pointed at the moral implications of moving out, such as bad conscience: "I felt, it may be me, that we fail when we move" (woman in her forties). "I kind of sit and think about so many of these things; I have a little bad conscience and I am little angry with myself»(man in his thirties) (Kadasia et Al., 2020),

To sum up, school reputation basically follows a territorial pattern in Oslo and it’s strictly related to the social composition of the neighbourhood. However, some schools in similar areas may be affected by specific dynamics of stigmatization due to statistics or second-hand information related to school composition (more than the quality of the education offered). No specific communication strategies oriented to contain the white flight has been systematically provided at city level. Instead, Oslo is very much oriented towards compensatory policies to counteract the possible “neighbourhood effects” of a concentration of “difficult living condition”, as defined in these plans. However, as reported in the literature, area based policies may signal treated schools as low-achieving and socially disadvantaged. In this case, some families may try and avoid such

schools, because they infer low school quality, or low peer quality, or anticipate bad reputation effects (Hastings et al., 2009; Gamoran, 2016).

In **Barcelona**, access to information on the 'quality' of schools is highly uneven and depends, in most cases, on the resources that the interested family can mobilize. The first aspect to consider is the lack of objective data to measure the quality of the schools. Likewise, families use other indicators as a 'proxy' of the quality of the school such as: the grades in the basic skills tests, the neighbourhood where the school is located, the ownership of the institution or its social composition.

The reputation of schools is, to a large extent, a clear indicator of both its quality (including here all different aspects such as the educational project, facilities and installations...) and its social composition. This plays a fundamental role when families consider one school or another: those schools with the worst reputation will be the least desired and vice versa.

In this sense, for some years initiatives have been carried out that try to reverse the bad reputation of the most segregated schools in the territory. An example of this is the 'Magnet Program'. Through partnership strategies with institutions of excellence, the aim is to give a 180° turn to the school project and improve its desirability and, consequently, the number and profile of families that choose the institution. However, the results are ambiguous (some schools manage to make this change, while others do not) and this transformation is complex and requires the parallel application of other measures that promote balanced schooling in the territory.

The CEB launched The Shock Plan against Segregation and for Equal Opportunities and Educational Success (SP) in 2018/2019. It has gradually increased its coverage, starting with first grade of preschool education (3 years-old, P3) and lower secondary (12 years-old, ESO1,) in 2019/2020 and adding every year a new school grade. The SP has two goals. First, it aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of socially disadvantaged students among schools in the city of Barcelona, including both public and private subsidised schools. Each school must reserve a number of seats for vulnerable students, which must be a proportional quote of the total number of vulnerable students living in the reference catchment area. Second, the SP ensures gratuity of access to school activities and educational services to beneficiaries. It guarantees gratuity of books and materials, excursions and other supplementary educational activities. School Free Meals are also granted to beneficiaries.

The balanced distribution of socially disadvantaged students is based on the early identification of vulnerable students before the enrolment process starts and information policies to vulnerable families to provide them information on the benefits of being part of the Shock Plan. Special information tools have been designed for low-income families that have the right to occupy a reserved seat in a prevention program against segregation and can have free fees even in associated schools, information about food scholarships and other educational scholarships and information about fees payment and the procedures, even if they are optional (in relation to private subsidised schools) or those in relation to service use (food, excursions, scholar material). Schools are requested to publish this information on their websites, but it isn't mandatory so there is missing information.

Non vulnerable families are also a target of the information policies in Barcelona. In the last years, the objectives of the communication campaigns have undergone a change. The quasi-marketing approach, -where information about each school articulated the strategy to encourage competitive choice among families- has been replaced by a new framing to promote the idea of educational quality in all the public schools. These are some the messages recently used: *"Barcelona és una bona escola"* (Barcelona is a good school), *"En educació fem equip"* (In education we're a team) or *"Ens apuntem al futur"* (We're joining the future). However, information on schools is also an important part of the communication content. The CEB offers support and resources to the most challenging schools to develop their own information campaigns and has

also promoted an intensive process to renew installations, facilities and educational projects of those schools with greatest difficulties to be considered as an interesting option for non-vulnerable families.

### **Analysis: how these communication contents and tools can affect segregation dynamics'**

The information asymmetry about schools in Milan is not caused by the lack of information, but rather by limited and differentiated use of the available means, which results often hard to access and to use, especially for low-educated parents. This creates also an issue of trust, especially towards official information sources with the remarkable exception of the Open Days. Official sources of information provide in fact qualitative and quantitative data on the environments, personnel, curricular and extracurricular activities, projects, future expectations, evaluation criteria and performance. Actors at several scales have also taken a major role in promoting a more informed choice and counteract stereotypization of peripheral schools. The main flaws of the information tools seem to derive from an issue of communication and scarce accessibility of the means themselves. Unfortunately, they tend to contribute to the asymmetry rather than soften it, by reinforcing the strategic relationship that the most educated and resourceful families already have with the school system. Browsing the Scuola in Chiaro website and understanding the information about test-score or school composition implies some digital and cognitive skills that are not equally spread in the population. In addition, it is difficult to translate this information into quality indicators. Open days, which are the most used and appreciated formal source of information, are often considered an advertisement moment, whose information should be balanced with those collected through word of mouth. As confirmed by principals<sup>3</sup>, parents address the school by asking for very practical information, having already made a choice on the basis of informal talks with other parents or friends. The social capital owned by families plays an important role in defining the quality of the informal information collected: wider and stronger the networks of relationships and more confident parents feel about their choice, even if not entirely based on official sources of information. Territorial features seem also to play a great role in affecting parental choice, so that reputation is mostly built by the context in which the school is located, and this is hardly to be addressed solely by strong information policies. Despite that, there is some evidence that when the initiative of a school is supported by the Municipality some changes are foreseeable, as in the case of the IC Colasanzio in Milan.

To summarise the situation in Oslo, as reported above, until few months ago, when the national test results and other statistics on socio-demographic composition of schools were public, the main challenge in relation to the information provided on the public schools in Oslo was this ambiguity: on the one side a general aim to keep school choice at a low level and support the local school principle; on the other side providing extensive information about each school, eventually driving information asymmetry. Systematic empirical evidence of the implications of this factor on school choice is missing. However, master thesis reporting qualitative analysis on school choice in Oslo (Rogne et Al. 2021) highlight how they have affected parental strategies in terms of school selection or relocation before the child reaches the school-age, which is by far the most important strategy for school choice in Oslo. In the last years there has been an increasing attention on school segregation and one target for criticism has been the publication of test results and statistics. In the recent book « School choice - about schools that compete and students who are selected away», author Ida Søråunet Wangberg (a journalist) has written about her personal experience as

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<sup>3</sup> Focus groups have been conducted with school principals among the activities for the Erasmus Plus Project ECASS (European Cities Against School Segregation)

a parent dealing with school choice in Oslo. Through a journalistic investigation, based on interviews and social-media analysis, she reports about increasing class- and ethnic division in the Norwegian capital. Wangberg believes that segregation increased after the former Conservative City Council introduced free school choice, along with the publication of school results in the early 2000s. According to the journalist, behind the diffuse label of "good" and "bad" schools, there is little about the quality of the schools (teaching or infrastructures). On the opposite, she believes that what is crucial in the processes of reputation formation and stigmatization is the perceived "quality of the students".

In Barcelona, available information about schools refers to issues such as the pedagogical project, the schedules and complementary services (extracurricular activities, dining services...). There is no official information on the quality, the educational level or the social composition of schools, but it is available to families through more informal channels or through observation during the School's open days.

In this sense, information policies in Barcelona show a growing tension between the management of information for non-segregative purposes and an educational quasi-market system based on the need to differentiate information in order to choose a school. This tension translates into the coexistence of a general information plan that aims to fight against school segregation and the schools' information campaigns addressed to the attraction of potential families. During these open days, schools show the characteristics of the different school models in terms of organization -schedule, complementary services, direct and indirect costs-, in terms of pedagogical project -singularities of the project, results...- and with regard to the kind of families they address -according to the language code used or the social profile of families attending the event-. The diversification of school supply produces a kind of competition among schools -to attract more and most advantaged families- and among families -to get a sit in most desired schools. While schools focus their information events in showing their own and specific educational projects and how interesting they are, the local authority aims at explaining the general school offer and the quality of all the schools of the city. However, the CEB also participates in this quasi-market logics, offering support to those less desirable school to increase their capacity to attract families by improving their educational project or by helping them to develop their communication campaigns.

Although the impact of all these different strategies have not been assessed, data on school segregation in Barcelona shows an important reduction on school segregation during the last years. From 2018, segregation index has decreased 23% at pre-primary education and 26% for secondary education.

**Tabella 1. Summary of the information policies/tools and their main features in the three cities**

	Milano	Oslo	Barcelona
Main provider	School, municipalities (state just as a provider of the platform)	Municipality / State	Local Authority and Schools



Tools	School and institutional Websites  Open days	Mainly websites and databases. No Open Days	Websites  Information campaign  Open days
Provision of information on <i>organizational inputs</i>	Public information but not always homogeneous about educational and pedagogical offer, extracurricular activities, socio-economic composition, teachers' turnover, % of non-italian students	Public and not-homogeneous info on: pedagogic choices (use of ICT, special curriculum, other initiatives)	Public but not-homogenous information about educational projects, activities, facilities...
Provision of information on <i>organizational outputs</i>	Public and not homogeneous information, especially not user-friendly, on national test results, teachers' turnover	Public and homogeneous info on: national test results, percentage of children with immigrants background, special needs children, survey on parents and children school satisfaction	No information is officially provided on test results or school social composition
Criticatilities	Lack of a structured approach in providing information about schools: all the information is available, but hardly reachable by all the households, leading to high degrees of information asymmetry and a lack of trust into the institutional channels.	Ambiguity: on the one side a general aim to keep school choice at a low level; on the other side providing extensive information about organizational outputs in each school, eventually driving information asymmetry.	Tension between general information provided by local authority to inform about enrolment process and to reduce competition among schools and, simultaneously, the need to promote open days where schools show their singularities to become attractive for families.

## Final remarks

The unequal access to information according to social characteristics but also the different ways to use it generates inequality and segregation. As long as there continues to be a high correlation between the social profile and the school choice mechanisms, an unbalanced distribution of students will continue to be produced and reproduced. Thus, this trend has to be broken and information policies can play a role. One of the main challenges for policymakers is to provide balanced and adequate information to families about different institutional arrangements and schools' characteristics with the objective to achieve an equitable distribution of vulnerable families among all schools. Our analysis identifies two challenges.

First, the three cities have traditionally provided information without answering to the information asymmetry. Choice opportunities have proved to be unequal according to families' different social backgrounds, both in terms of access to information and in relation to the criteria guiding choice. These inequalities generally result in school segregation. To compensate for information inequalities, it is necessary to address different messages to targeted audiences, both to respond to their specific interests and concerns during the enrolment process and to induce a different logic of choice that may reduce school segregation. In order to establish information policies that are effective in the fight against school segregation, it is necessary to establish differentiated information campaigns according to the target audience. Targeted information, as an alternative to standardised communication strategies, allows local education authorities to expand information and at the same time to make visible some aspects of schooling that are not always considered by all families in the school choice process. This implies taking into account the different interests, realities and goals of the different groups of families that shape the school ecosystem of each city. Barcelona has started to work on this idea by sharing the information material in different languages and by preparing special information strategies addressed to vulnerable families.

Second, school social composition, and especially the presence of children with immigrant background, is usually interpreted by families as an indicator of low achievement and bad performance. Beyond the attempt to change school compositions, local authorities should try to work on the message of diversity as a positive value to change this narrative. Nevertheless, most parents are not aware of the instrumental advantages for their children of living in a diverse learning environment and they see only the potential flaws: slowdown of the learning activities, relational difficulties, exposure of their children to unpleasant and not accepted behaviours. In order to counteract this narrative, information should stress the instrumental advantages of a heterogeneous environment. Milano has experienced positive changes by working together with some schools in the change of reputations linked to their heterogeneous social compositions.

Our analysis shows that there is still much scope for information policies to exploit their potential as instruments for combating school segregation. Barcelona, Milano and Oslo have traditionally based their information policies on the provision of information to let families choose school in a more rational and evidence-based decision. Oslo is an example of strategy oriented to share information about schools, including t-scores and social composition, although school choice is possible but not welcomed by local institutions. Barcelona avoids publishing this kind of information and focuses the content of the information in pedagogical aspects. In between these two extremes, Milano makes information about performance and composition available but difficult to be reached furtherly widening the divide between families having different resources. The importance of choice in explaining spatial inequalities has increased with the introduction of market-oriented reforms and the increasing competition among schools. These three cities are good examples on how school choice has become a stressful process for families and how information policies, far from reducing school choice anxiety, have contributed to its increase. However, in recent years, some changes have taken place in the information strategies designed by local authorities. The awareness of the negative effects of information policies has forced some

of these changes. Barcelona has promoted a general strategy aiming to reduce competition among schools and to highlight the quality of all of them and Oslo has stopped publishing statistics related to the schools on the municipal website.

It is clear that local authorities have started to be aware that basing information policies on transparency without considering other determining factors can generate negative consequences on school segregation. However, most of the analysed information policies in these three are still addressed to allow a more conscient school choice, while information asymmetry and other choice constraints are not solved yet. Thus, information policies are nowadays more a tool for quasi-market than an instrument to fight school segregation.

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