Received: 23 April 2024 | Revised: 21 June 2024 | Accepted: 1 July 2024

DOI: 10.1111/soc4.13248

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

School choice and parenting strategies among Czech middle-class parents: Implications for social segregation in public schools

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Funding information
European Union - Next Generation EU, Grant/Award Number: LX22NPO5101

Abstract

Research examining middle-class parents' school choices often overlooks parents in post-socialist nations, where social reproduction may occur differently than in Western urban contexts. To bridge this gap, our study illuminates the intersection of Czech middle-class parents' school choices and parenting strategies. Drawing on 26 in-depth interviews with parents, we depict "cultivation for well-being" as a distinct parenting approach prevalent within a subset of the Czech middle class that challenges prevailing Western depictions of middle-class child-rearing strategies in relation to school choice. We describe five areas in which the parenting approach contrasts with concerted cultivation and intensive parenting: the promotion of unstructured free time, autonomous socialization with selected peers, a propensity to avoid confronting teachers, gentle support for children's interests, and a focus on emotional and physical wellbeing. We posit that "cultivation for wellbeing" serves as a mechanism for social distinction among a segment of middle-class parents, enabling them to distinguish themselves from other class segments by selecting and seamlessly accessing exclusive public school settings tailored to their nuanced educational preferences. The study underscores the need to reassess the dominant

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portrayals of middle-class parenting strategies, highlighting the complex interplay between child-rearing, school choice, and social reproduction in diverse cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS
concerted cultivation, intensive parenting, middle class, parenting strategies, school choice, social reproduction

1 | INTRODUCTION

Extensive research has highlighted the capacity of middle-class parents to impart their socio-economic advantage to their children through deliberate and resourceful school choices. Studies depict middle-class parents as increasingly apprehensive about their children's prospects, engaging in what has been termed “opportunity hoarding” (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Roda & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023) from early childhood. The parents also meticulously oversee their children's educational pathways (Cucchiara, 2013a; James et al., 2010) while maintaining exclusive educational environments, reflecting a broader aspiration to shield children from downward mobility (Lucey & Reay, 2002; Roda, 2017; Vincent & Ball, 2007). However, evidence on middle-class school choice comes particularly from Anglo-Saxon urban contexts with diverse social and ethnic compositions (Hernández, 2019; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014), in which a school's ethnic composition is used by White parents as a proxy for school quality (Holme, 2002; Saporito, 2003). In these settings, non-conventional school choices, such as enrolling children in ethnically diverse neighborhood schools, serve as points of pride and identity for some privileged parents (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). The narrative largely overlooks the non-Western, ethnically more homogeneous settings of post-socialist countries, where social inequalities also exist and are effectively reproduced by the educational system. How do middle-class parents navigate school choice in such environments?

In addition to strategic school selection, middle-class parents also adopt resource-intensive parenting practices that give their children advantages in institutional settings (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007). The practices, falling under the rubric of “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2003) or “intensive parenting/mothering” (Hays, 1996), include enrolling children in extracurricular activities, fostering emotional and verbal development, monitoring their educational progress closely, and coaching them to demand from authorities an accommodation of their unique requests/needs. Consequently, children acquire the ability to navigate diverse institutional environments, communicate effectively with authority figures, and develop self-confidence. While these practices may stem from concerns about downward mobility, some parents employ them without the main intention of transmitting their social standing to their children (Merry, 2023; Roda & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Roda & Wells, 2013). Rather, the parents are driven by an intrinsic sense of what constitutes good parenting, ingrained in their privileged social position (Bourdieu, 1984).

However, recent evidence suggests a more nuanced landscape of middle-class parenting approaches, with some diverging from traditional notions of concerted cultivation and intensive parenting. For instance, in Turkey, middle-class parents may temporarily deviate from concerted cultivation principles to navigate high-stakes tests (Çelik & Özdemir, 2022a. In the U.S., Debs et al. (2023) identify a segment of “happiness-oriented” middle-class parents who prioritize their children's wellbeing over academic or extracurricular success. This group could, according to the authors, potentially be relied on in public school social integration efforts, as many of them value social/ethnic diversity, prefer to choose a local school, or express preferences that align with inclusive education. This shift towards wellbeing-oriented parenting is evident in various cultural contexts (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Kampichler et al., 2018; Lee, 2024), underscoring the need to reassess prevailing portrayals of middle-class child-rearing strategies.

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To illuminate the intersection of school choice and parenting strategies, our study examines the parenting approaches of middle-class parents in the Czech Republic in relation to their elementary school choices. Drawing on 26 in-depth interviews with parents, we identify a distinct parenting approach, which we term "cultivation for wellbeing". The parents' aim in adopting the approach is to raise children who will be able to live a fulfilling life and effectively cope with modern pressures rather than succeed academically or accumulate material wealth. The approach is characterized by five key tenets that differentiate it from concerted cultivation: emphasizing unstructured free time, autonomous socialization with selected peers, avoidance of confronting teachers, gentle support for children's interests instead of academic pressure, and a focus on emotional and physical wellbeing. By implementing the approach, our respondents aim to instill in their children a specific set of traits and skills, including emotional and physical resilience, creativity, self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and self-confidence. We depict how "cultivation for wellbeing" serves as a means of social distinction, enabling a segment of Czech middle-class parents to distance themselves from other class segments by selecting and seamlessly accessing exclusionary public school settings catering to their nuanced educational preferences.

1.1 | Middle-class parenting, school choice, and social reproduction

Our understanding of middle-class parenting and school choice is framed by Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus, as well as by scholars who have extended these notions within the realm of education.

In the Bourdieusian paradigm (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), we understand the Czech educational system as a contested *field* where distinct social groups compete for power and influence. Those positioned at the top not only access resources to pass on their status to their offspring more easily but also dictate the rules of the game. These rules delineate which skills and accomplishments are deemed valuable and how they can be attained. In this dynamic milieu, a parent's social standing does not ensure its transference to the child because of the evolving definition of *capital* and the adaptability of the rules. While we situate the Czech educational field within the broader global educational arena, our study examines the unique facets of the Czech system that may call for different parenting strategies from those prevalent in Western societies.

Capital encompasses the resources that determine an individual's standing in the field relative to others. Bourdieu posits that the definition of capital in a given field evolves constantly, influenced by technological advances and broader societal shifts (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For instance, proficiencies such as multilingualism, once esteemed by prestigious universities globally, may lose their value in the admission process as real-time translation technology advances or most of the population acquires these skills. Conversely, skills that are currently undervalued may gain prominence, becoming so vital that individuals possessing these skills will help redefine the benchmarks of educational achievement.

However, capital and field alone do not explicate why certain groups persist in power in multiple social arenas and across generations. Bourdieu (1977, pp. 82–83) depicts *habitus* as the missing element, defined as a "system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks". Habitus, being semi-conscious, guides individuals' tastes, perceptions, and behaviors implicitly, making it challenging to disentangle the processes behind the transmission of privilege. For instance, middle-class parents may not be conscious of why they feel drawn to certain educational programs, adopt certain child-rearing strategies, or feel entitled to introduce teachers to their children's unique needs. However, collective similarities in habitus among certain groups can lead to structural inequalities, predisposing only some to adopt behaviors that are advantageous in the existing system.

Lareau (2003) further explores the function of habitus, field, and capital in the U.S. context, introducing two parenting styles that result in disparate learning opportunities based on socioeconomic backgrounds. *Concerted*

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cultivation, practiced in upper- and middle-class families, favors students in educational settings through several mechanisms. Children raised in line with concerted cultivation are taught from a young age to negotiate with their parents and other authorities, developing a sense of entitlement for their needs to be accommodated. Through entering a variety of extracurricular settings and being guided through these settings by hovering parents, the children learn to adapt to different institutional rules while witnessing that some directives are negotiable. While these children do not learn to self-entertain for long periods, they develop confidence in talking with authorities. In contrast, children from working-class and poor families, raised via the parenting style *accomplishment of natural growth*, are left with much more autonomy to organize their own free time and to make choices regarding extra-curricular or educational involvement. Directives are much more common in their homes, instilling a sense of powerlessness in the face of talking to adults or other authorities. While these children develop a crucial skill set that helps them function in their community, they do not acquire skills that would be useful in institutional settings, including the ability to make eye contact or shake hands firmly.

Nevertheless, Lareau's concepts may not apply to all segments of the middle class, particularly in non-Western contexts (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Perrier, 2013; Vincent, 2017; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). Even within Anglo-Saxon contexts, some middle-class segments oppose the frantic competition and overscheduling associated with concerted cultivation. For example, Debs et al. (2023) depict the parenting style of one segment of the middle class, named "happiness-oriented parenting", that places children's wellbeing, self-esteem, and social consciousness above academic performance or extracurricular achievement. The emergence of wellbeing-oriented parenting transcends cultural contexts (Aarseth, 2018; Kampichler et al., 2018; Lee, 2024), prompting a need for a reevaluation of prevailing depictions of middle-class parenting strategies.

The Central and Eastern European context, including the Czech Republic, offers a unique lens through which to investigate how middle-class parents perpetuate social advantage through child-rearing practices and school choices. Since the country's transition from a socialist regime in the 1990s, income inequality in the Czech Republic has remained relatively low compared to many Western nations (Večerník, 2022). However, the country has experienced changes in its socio-economic structure as a result of globalization, EU integration, and economic reforms. These changes have led to the emergence of two upper-middle class segments with differing forms of capital, comprising 30% of the population: the established middle class, characterized by higher incomes and wealth, and the emerging cosmopolitan class, distinguished by elevated social and cultural capital, proficiency in foreign languages, advanced digital competencies, and relatively low wealth (Prokop et al., 2019). The latter group was of particular interest to us in our research, as non-economic forms of capital play a pivotal role in navigating school choice in the Czech context. With private school capacity regulated by the Ministry of Education, resulting in 96% of the student population attending public schools (Statistical School Yearbook, 2023), middle-class parents compete especially for limited slots in selective public school programs. This necessitates a strategic combination of various forms of capital.

While existing studies in the Czech Republic delve into middle-class parents' preschool choices (Kampichler et al., 2018), the interplay between elementary school choice and parenting approaches remains relatively unexplored. In the next section, we illuminate the features of the Czech educational field that could enable new insights into middle-class reproduction strategies vis-à-vis parenting strategies that pertain to elementary school choice.

1.2 | Elementary school choice in the Czech Republic

Historically, during the socialist regime in former Czechoslovakia (1948–1989), elementary school choice was nonexistent, with students being assigned to schools on the basis of their geographical location. Although all elementary schools adhered to the same curriculum, the system included "specialized" programs that conducted

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cognitive selection and admitted students from beyond the catchment area (for example, mathematics and foreign language programs). The educational landscape gradually shifted after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, with the adoption of neoliberal reforms. Since 1991, parents have had the freedom to choose any public elementary school that has capacity. Despite this, students are guaranteed a spot in their geographically assigned school, which takes precedence in admission if there is an excess of applicants.

Following the implementation of a National Curriculum Framework from 2005, schools gained significant autonomy to design their educational plans within the curriculum guidelines. In line with neoliberal ideals, public elementary schools were encouraged to declare various specializations and compete for parents as valued customers. Various specialized programs emerged, such as Montessori, Gifted/Talented, English-immersion, and Music, primarily appealing to middle-class families because of their ability to navigate the associated admission processes. Unlike the former "specialized" programs, these tracks were no longer monitored by the government.

The number of Czech parents actively choosing elementary schools has risen, particularly in the post-2010 era. Parents with higher educational levels gravitate towards schools and tracks with a specialization, as indicated by Straková and Simonová (2015). In addition, homeschooling, privately run, and parochial schools are on the rise, indicating a growing demand for diverse educational options. Nevertheless, the proportion of students in homeschooling, private, and parochial schools remains low (0.6%, 2.5%, and 0.8% of the student population: Statistical School Yearbook, 2023), prompting our focus on parents opting for selective schools/tracks within the public school system.

Presently, the Czech government is aiming to foster a more equitable elementary school environment. This involves encouraging students with special needs to attend regular elementary schools and providing supplemental resources for schools admitting students requiring additional support. These legislative changes have brought mixed results. Firstly, although cognitive selection during elementary school admission is prohibited, qualitative studies continue to reveal that schools covertly select students on the basis of cognitive skills or socioeconomic status (Svobodová, 2016). Furthermore, well-resourced parents routinely access high-demand schools by manipulating their residential address through acquaintances or paid services, a practice that is challenging for schools or authorities to monitor or limit (Smith Slámová, 2022). Additionally, certain specialized school tracks collect hidden fees or assess parents' social/cultural capital through admission interviews, granting well-resourced families easier access to oversubscribed programs. Thus, the parents' social, cultural, and economic capital continues to play a key role in admission to high-demand programs. Despite the government's stated efforts to promote educational equity, the Czech Republic consistently exhibits a strong association between a family's socioeconomic status and a child's achievement. For instance, 22% of between-student differences in the performance in mathematical literacy can be explained by variability in their socio-economic background in PISA 2022; this represents the fourth-highest value among OECD countries (OECD, 2023). Furthermore, the socio-economic status of a student's classmates strongly predicts his/her educational achievement. The system seems to fall short of its stated mission to reduce educational inequalities, placing a high demand on parents to choose the "right" school for their child.

In contrast to parents in other nations, Czech parents lack comparable indicators for estimating schools' quality. The majority of the Czech population is White, preventing parents from using the student body's ethnic composition as a proxy for the school's quality, however unreliable this indicator is (Saporito, 2003). Additionally, the absence of centralized tests comparing elementary schools' outcomes means that parents must resort to alternative measures to estimate school quality. Concurrently, the elementary education landscape is inherently competitive as a result of the early selection into multi-year gymnasia (the academic track) in fifth grade through a centralized high-stakes exam. Indeed, many families select elementary schools on the basis of their presumed capability to prepare students for this exam. In navigating this chaotic yet highly competitive educational field, middle-class parents may feel an urge to employ novel strategies for ensuring social reproduction as they select an elementary school.

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2 | RESEARCH METHODS

The study involved 26 semi-structured interviews with Czech middle-class parents conducted between 2018 and 2022 (seven fathers, 16 mothers; three respondents interviewed twice at different school choice stages). The primary research question explored why middle-class parents opt for selective public schools/tracks during their child's entry to elementary school. We focused on parents considering educational options beyond their neighborhood school, including selective specialized tracks within public schools and public schools offering a subject specialization in all classes. We employed a constructivist grounded theory research design (Charmaz, 2006).

Initially, nine participants were recruited in an affluent Prague district with public schools offering various specialized tracks, including a Montessori program, a Waldorf/Steiner program, and several English-focus programs. Here we approached parents who had selected or were still considering such programs; their children were mainly of preschool and elementary school age. We recruited participants through class teachers' emails, information sessions, preschool teachers' contacts, and snowball sampling. Additional participants were recruited through theoretical sampling to capture emerging concepts. At later stages, snowball sampling enabled us to reach middle-class parents nationwide in towns of different sizes, featuring diverse public school tracks and varied socioeconomic/ethnic compositions.

The participants, most with at least a Bachelor's degree, were from five regions and included two foreigners. Their households exhibited diverse configurations of social, cultural, and economic capital, with abundant social and cultural capital being especially common. The participants relied on extensive social contacts to discuss school choices and strategies for navigating selective admissions, often using "hot knowledge" (Ball & Vincent, 1998) from privileged networks and sometimes arranging false addresses at the homes of their acquaintances living near popular schools. Many held advanced degrees or were proficient in foreign languages (English, German, Russian), having worked abroad or collaborated internationally. Economically, they claimed a modest lifestyle, driving cheaper cars, using public transport, or vacationing in the Czech Republic, allowing them to devote more time and resources to their children's upbringing and education. To further support their work-life balance, most participants' households had at least one parent who fit into one of the following categories: self-employed with a flexible schedule (e.g., graphic designer, consultant), partially working from home (e.g., programmer, architect, journal editor), holding a job that aligns with school hours and holidays (e.g., K-12 teacher, university professor), or staying home beyond the legally guaranteed parental leave period. Professionally, the participants overlapped most with the "technical middle class" and "established middle class" in the Great British Class Survey (Savage et al., 2013). However, income distribution differences for health professionals, scientists, and educators in Czechia hinder direct comparisons with these British class segments.

Interviews, lasting 60–90 min (some online because of COVID-19), focused on school choice criteria, schools considered, information sources, and circumstances influencing choices. The transcripts were anonymized and coded in MAXQDA and underwent open-to-selective coding (Charmaz, 2006). Simultaneous data collection and analysis guided participant selection and topic refinement; data collection ceased at theoretical saturation. To triangulate our findings, we drew on additional data sources: supplemental interviews with teachers and administrators, school admission documents, and field notes from school information sessions for parents. Credibility measures included member checking, peer auditing, detailed memos, and a research journal.

While the selective schools/tracks in our research did not collect data on the socioeconomic/ethnic composition of the student body, we observed numerous entry barriers to under-resourced families. Most of the programs collected monthly fees to supply educational services not available in regular classes at the same school, including native English speakers, monthly parent-teacher conferences, weekly progress reports, or modern classroom equipment. While portrayed as voluntary, the fees were collected from all families and at times exceeded the cost of private schools, blurring the line between public and private. The admission process typically involved additional steps or earlier deadlines, privileging children of well-informed parents. Most of the schools/tracks selected from a

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surplus of applicants via admission interviews with parents/students, covert cognitive testing, or special needs screening, enabling them to "cream-skim" a privileged student body. For these reasons, the public schools/tracks in our research represented socially exclusive opportunities inaccessible to most students.

3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The majority of our respondents identified with a parenting approach they thought distinguished them from most of the population, including from other middle-class parents. To some degree, this approach overlapped with concerted cultivation as a result of its emphasis on encouraging children to express their opinions/emotions and approach adults confidently with their demands and concerns. However, in other aspects, the respondents' parenting approach aimed to meet much broader objectives than those linked to concerted cultivation. The approach – which we named "cultivation for wellbeing" – placed the child's wellbeing and well-rounded development at the core of all parenting efforts, downplaying the importance of university education, entering a prestigious profession, or accumulating material wealth. In the results section, we first delineate five tenets of "cultivation for wellbeing" that distinguish it from concerted cultivation. Next, we illustrate that "cultivation for wellbeing" covertly functions as a means of social distinction, as it draws on the parents' time and social/cultural resources while aggravating socio-economic segregation.

3.1 | "Cultivation for wellbeing" contrasted to concerted cultivation

3.1.1 | Providing unstructured free time to foster well-rounded development

Structuring children's free time through enrichment activities is considered a vital component of middle-class parenting across different class segments and in diverse sociocultural contexts (Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007; Çelik & Özdemir, 2022a). Unlike prevailing trends documented in the literature, our respondents opposed what they considered to be the overburdening of children with "enrichment". Concerned about hindering well-rounded development, they limited their children's involvement in professional-led settings, emphasizing the importance of free play during preschool and elementary years for the nurturing of curiosity, creativity, empathy, and self-confidence.

For instance, Petr withdrew his daughter from an English-immersion preschool with abundant enrichment activities, moving her to a forest preschool that aligned better with his parenting philosophy. He explained the transition: *I am convinced that children develop best when they have a chance to express themselves spontaneously, without some super-sophisticated equipment… [At the forest daycare], the children have a forest that they go to, a yard to grow things in, they have sand, clay, sticks, and stones… and that's pretty much all they need.* Despite the fact that it offered fewer structured activities, Petr believed the forest preschool was more beneficial for his daughter's development. This sentiment was shared by others who prioritized protecting their children's free play, asserting that this approach resulted in a more well-rounded skill set.

In fact, some parents deliberately chose schools without after-school care or summer programs, considering it a commitment to the child's well-being rather than a barrier. The goal was to free their children's time, seen as crucial for fostering imagination and pursuing personal interests. For example, Vaclav's expectation of an "ideal" elementary school was one that would allow his children to be "mediocre" academically and *didn't take up too much of their time, so that they could pursue their own projects*. Our respondents emphasized the difficulty of catching up on well-rounded development later in life and expressed confidence in their children's ability to excel academically at later stages of schooling, driven by intrinsic motivation.

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3.1.2 | Supporting autonomous socialization with the "right kind" of peers

Lareau (2003) depicts middle-class children as lacking the opportunity to socialize freely with their peers and siblings because of the intense organization of their free time. This can lead to their inability to self-entertain for extended periods, as they constantly look to adults for structure. Contrary to this trend, our respondents prioritized their children's ability to engage freely with their peers after school. Zdena's noteworthy sacrifice involved relocating to the city for her daughter to bond with Waldorf/Steiner classmates after school. Although the move made Zdena, in her words, "completely unhappy", she saw benefits as her daughter formed connections with peers in the area: *Now in fifth grade, I am starting to see the benefits [of the move]. She calls me – mom, I am going to see Rosa. Because there are perhaps five other parents in that classroom who also bought an apartment in the area.*

This relocation pattern, observed in other middle-class parents, reflects the parents' attempt to approach the neighborhood school ideal, with a privileged twist. Middle-class parents such as Zdena utilize their economic capital to relocate to the vicinity of a selective public school program, creating an environment where their children can "spontaneously" form friendships with preferred peers. Zdena, for instance, wanted her daughter to limit her interaction with children from regular classes because of her concerns about unlimited TV access: *If she went to visit classmates and watched TV there, I would mind that at such a young age.* Since the daughter bonded with Waldorf classmates whose parents also set limits on technology/media use, Zdena trusted her daughter's socialization would take place within acceptable bounds. Therefore, the high level of autonomy given to the children was bounded by the social status of the families who were able to earn access to the selective tracks, which was very different from the autonomy given to children by their working-class parents (Lareau, 2003).

3.1.3 | Conserving energy by avoiding confrontation with teachers

Middle-class parents are also depicted as negotiating proactively with teachers and administrators to secure advantages for their children, as outlined by Lareau (1989, 2003). Unlike this portrayal, our respondents viewed negotiating with regular public school teachers as futile and energy-draining. Their concerns included fear of negative consequences for the child and a belief that engaging in disputes with teachers in regular public schools was unproductive. These apprehensions were captured by Jitka, who opted out of her neighborhood school: *You can't sacrifice your children [to a school's reform]… perhaps [you could] as a public person or as a citizen, but not as a parent… there must be more such [complaining] parents, or else you will be the complainer and the child will bear the consequences.* A former left-wing party member, Jitka could have used her extensive experience with local government and civic engagement to help improve her children's local school. Instead, her assumptions about how public school teachers respond to parents' change-making efforts led her to avoid the endeavor.

Contrary to depictions in some Anglo-Saxon contexts (Calarco, 2018; Cucchiara, 2013b; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Lareau, 1989), our respondents did not anticipate being treated as "valued customers" in neighborhood public schools. They believed their awareness of Czech schools' weaknesses, coupled with an inability to bring change, would lead to their frustration and suffering. Parents anticipated disagreements with teachers on various aspects, such as rewards and punishments, homework load, classroom dynamics, and instructional methods. Despite holding advanced degrees, some in education, they felt in an inferior position to bring up concerns with teachers and administrators. For example, Ivona assumed the teachers in her neighborhood school would communicate with her *in a position of a superior to an inferior* if she complained about an excessive homework load, draining her energy while contributing to her family's distress. She elaborated: *In the end, my stress would be passed on to my daughter… the stress from being forced [by teachers] to push her to do things that make sense to neither of us.* To circumvent such challenges, most respondents sought schools or tracks known in their social networks as "parent-friendly" — a characteristic viewed as a scarce commodity in the Czech system. In these programs, they expected their complaints to blend with other parents' demands, shielding their children from stigmatization and possibly leading to positive changes.

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3.1.4 | Prioritizing gentle support for the child's interests over pressure to compete

Normalized depictions of the middle class also include parents' tendency to push the child to compete in sports, music, and academic subjects (Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007; Çelik & Özdemir, 2022a). In contrast, our respondents opposed such pressure, considering it a defining feature of their parenting style that distinguished them from other middle-class segments. Vaclav, for instance, viewed himself as distinct from Czech middle-class parents aiming for the academic track (gymnasium), believing that allowing his children to develop at their own pace would yield optimal results: *I think that [the other parents] want to solve a lot of problems early. They want to be certain that they are on the right track… Whereas my wife and I think that everything will resolve itself at the right time.* Vaclav's quote captures frictions present among different segments of the Czech middle class. Some parents view elementary schools mainly as a preparation for high-stakes tests while others expect schools to meet broader objectives.

As an alternative to the academic race, parents embracing "cultivation for wellbeing" advocated gently encouraging their children to forge their own unique path, even if it diverged from traditional academic trajectories. For example, some respondents were open to the idea of their child skipping university or envisioning a profession not yet in existence. They prioritized the child's interests and hobbies over formal education, trusting their children's capacity for lifelong learning. The prevailing sentiment was that success would follow naturally without the need for external pressure.

This uncompromising support of their children's choices was rooted in the respondents' own experiences, with some questioning the value of their university degrees and advocating alternative career paths. Lukas was skeptical about the overall value of formal schooling: *I don't like how the system is set up. It holds the children for nine years of compulsory school, then four years of high school, and then there is big societal pressure to attend university…that's 18 years of sitting on your butt and there are very few real things you get to do, it's mostly frontal teaching. I think it's wasted time for young adults.* Like other parents, Lukas thought the education system failed to provide sufficient opportunities for career exploration and personal growth. Career changes were common in our group, and the parents aimed to spare their children the uncertainty and dissatisfaction associated with a rigid career trajectory that some of them had experienced. The respondents trusted that allowing their children more flexibility would save time and energy in the long run. The emphasis was on personal growth, resilience, and the assumption that pursuing one's passions would inevitably result in financial flexibility. For instance, Ivona hoped her daughter's trajectory might resemble the one of her acquaintance who had attended mainly private schools: *[The acquaintance] doesn't let anything discourage her, she simply trusts herself… Since she was gifted at foreign languages, she currently speaks four of them and this passion of hers is also her source of income. She is not afraid to express her opinion or to make mistakes.* The anecdotal evidence captures Ivona's hopes of the freedom and flexibility her daughter will gain by avoiding mainstream public schools. While personal growth factors are emphasized, the quote reveals an assumption that following one's passions also results in financial stability.

3.1.5 | Promoting emotional and physical wellbeing

While middle-class parenting is often linked to exhaustion of the whole family as a result of hectic schedules (Lareau, 2003), the primary focus of our respondents was on their children's physical and emotional wellbeing. Our respondents expressed concerns about practices they thought persisted in Czech public schools, such as oral exams, unaddressed bullying, and a lack of consideration for diverse student needs. They saw public schools as an oppressive environment, undermining children's self-esteem, creating lifelong trauma, and leading to psychosomatic problems, as captured by Ivona's quote: *No-one feels safe when [a teacher] lectures him/her in front of the whole class or calls on him/her in front of everyone for an oral exam.* The parents also feared that teachers placed more emphasis on obedience than reasoning, hindering critical thinking. In addition, parents assumed their children would feel abandoned in emotionally challenging situations. Jana, on her idea of "typical" Czech teachers: *They don't*

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care much about what the children need at a given moment. They have studied, so they know a lot of things, but if a student cries, who knows how they will react? Although these images were based mainly on the parents' memories from the socialist or early post-socialist schools, the prevailing sentiment was that public schools have not changed much.

Because of these negative stereotypes, our respondents expected that if they enrolled their child in a regular public school, they would have to compensate for the harms done by the school. Vaclav, who chose a neighborhood school, planned to protect his children's emotional wellbeing through one-on-one conversations after school, contextualizing the teachers' problematic statements and balancing the school's excessive emphasis on academic performance: *I will encourage (my children) not to take the teachers too seriously but to treat them with respect. And to search for an optimal amount of effort.* However, most respondents were unwilling to exert the effort to compensate for teachers' anticipated wrongdoings, or they thought the harm could not be undone. This applied especially to parents with extraordinarily sensitive children or those with strong convictions about how socio-emotional development was best accomplished. Ivona, whose preschool-age daughter suffered from psychosomatic complications in stressful situations, considered it a necessity to enroll her daughter in a safe environment with like-minded families and teachers: *I think it might be more comfortable to keep the child … perhaps for nine years in some kind of a bubble, to let the child gain some self-confidence.* Ivona viewed the elementary school years as an exceptionally vulnerable period during which placing her daughter in an exclusionary program that prioritized emotional wellbeing and respectful communication was a necessity.

Physical health was also a significant concern, with parents critical of the assumed sedentary practices in public schools and wishing the children could learn outside in all types of weather. This preference for outdoor learning was viewed as deviating from societal norms, as most other caregivers – including most middle-class parents – supposedly did not welcome outdoor learning or free play. Zdena explains: *When my mother used to pick up [my daughter from the after-school program at the Waldorf school], she nearly had a heart attack because she had to pick up such a "muddy ball" and they went outside even in the rain… Or some other parents, they were angry that the teacher let the child play freely*. Some parents opted for specialized programs within public schools that prioritized outdoor activities to avoid conflicting with other parents' demands.

Additionally, our respondents selected public school programs popular among health-conscious families to address nutritional concerns. Adela expected meals provided in a regular public school to lack variety and deviate from her family's nutritional standards: *The lunches there are typically: meat, gravy, rice – meat, gravy, potatoes – meat, gravy, pasta – meat, gravy, rice. For a snack, a bread roll with some cream cheese, processed cheese, or even [a Czech biscuit]. These are things that we don't even give to [our son]*. Parents also objected to teachers offering sweets as a reward, a practice witnessed in public daycare facilities. Although the parents were sometimes invited to provide a healthy substitute, they feared their child would feel left out. Lenka: *My child will get dried plums or raisins, while the others get candy? That's silly, isn't it*? Another concern was that public school classmates could spoil their children's tastes by bringing processed snacks. For instance, Zdena appreciated the Waldorf/Steiner program partly because the parents there agreed on limiting their children's exposure to processed foods: *We agreed among ourselves that children will bring no sweets, such as chocolates or candy, but they can bring things like a tart.* Parents were also critical of some public schools allowing vending machines with unhealthy snacks. A natural solution to these concerns was the choice of a program popular among health-conscious families.

3.2 | A subtle form of social distinction

We have presented "cultivation for wellbeing" as a parenting style that could potentially benefit the child both personally and professionally, without placing the same pressures on the family as concerted cultivation. Our respondents' strategies often involve reducing stress and pressure for both themselves and their children. By prioritizing their children's well-rounded development and well-being over traditional markers of success such as prestigious university education or high-status professions, these parents are effectively creating an environment

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that fosters a sense of "ease" through positive parenting styles (e.g., Brown et al., 2020; Sanders et al., 2014). This strategy contrasts with more competitive and structured child-rearing practices known as concerted cultivation or intensive parenting (Hays, 1996; Klimor Maman et al., 2024). Here, we would like to reflect on the privileged nature of "cultivation for wellbeing" that is not as evident as in concerted cultivation, characterized by packed schedules and intense parental involvement. However, even "cultivation for wellbeing" inadvertently results in educational inequalities, despite the parents' rejection of competition, overscheduling, and academic pressure.

Most of our respondents reasoned about school choice without any knowledge of their own privilege, unaware of the crucial role their economic, social, and cultural capital played in accessing high-demand programs. For instance, Zdena vaguely recalled filling out a questionnaire on Montessori pedagogy when she sought admission to an oversubscribed Montessori track: *There was a questionnaire that… if you know that you want your child to be admitted to a Montessori school, you know what to check off. If you are not completely stupid.* Zdena did not reflect that a questionnaire she viewed as idiotic could have posed a major barrier to parents who had not attended Montessori seminars or read Montessori parenting guides.

Similarly, parents often misrecognized that their chosen programs were attended by students from privileged backgrounds. When Lukas was asked about the social exclusivity of his chosen private school, he emphasized the "normality" of the parents selecting the school: *I find them all completely normal. In [our city], there are a lot of middle-class people who can afford this. They are not some kind of rich people who have decided to pay for elite education. I definitely wouldn't want that.* The quote illustrates that Lukas judged the social privilege of other families in the program by how much they deviated from his own (middle-class) status. By normalizing the middle-class background of other families in the program, Lukas failed to recognize that admission to the school was contingent upon sufficient social, cultural, and economic capital. Likewise, other respondents insisted that the schools/tracks they selected for their children were "diverse". However, their conceptualizations of diversity mainly included children's personalities or learning needs rather than socioeconomic or ethnic diversity.

Furthermore, the respondents rarely reflected that their educational preferences, emphasizing well-rounded development and health, were intertwined with their privileged social position. The parents drew on their resources and expertise to decode nutritional labels, supply healthy snacks, or provide appropriate equipment for year-round outdoor learning, assuming that all parents who "cared enough" would do the same. Their intellectual jobs enabled them to view physical activity outdoors as a welcome complement to sedentary work rather than as an indicator of underpaid manual labor. Consequently, programs emphasizing emotional and physical wellbeing attracted a privileged pool of applicants, resulting in other benefits enabled by the resources voluntarily supplied by the parents: teaching assistants in each classroom, native English speakers, beautified school yards and community gardens, guest speakers, or frequent field trips. Unlike in other contexts (Çelik & Özdemir, 2022b; Cucchiara, 2013b; Posey-Maddox, 2013), these benefits rarely extended to students in regular classes at the same school, enabling socioeconomically privileged students to gain access to superior educational services within the public schools as a by-product of their parents' educational preferences (similarly to some music classes in Sweden: Lilliedahl, 2021).

We also noted our respondents' unconditional trust in their children's ability to self-carve their own path, which contrasted sharply with the "fear of falling" and intensive parenting practices (Ball, 2003; Ehrenreich, 1989; Roda & Wells, 2013). We could best understand this trust by the families' convenient combination of social, cultural, and economic capital, which positioned them favorably to raise and educate children even in comparison to other middle-class segments. Many of our respondents held jobs that enabled them to spend quality time with their children during the afternoons, weekends, or holidays; some even switched careers to accommodate family life. Several of the mothers stayed at home for four or five years to develop a close bond with the child and provide enhanced learning opportunities. The parents also supplied their children with a plethora of books, learning tools, and art supplies; the children of our respondents were reading, writing, and counting ahead of their grade level without their parents' conscious intent to foster academic skills. Additionally, the children's "self-chosen" free-time activities were implicitly guided by the parents' privileged tastes and preferences (Bourdieu, 1984), with the

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parents emphasizing creative tasks over repetitive ones. Moreover, our respondents were willing to sponsor their children's pursuits for years, demonstrating a level of openness and financial security. For example, Lukas envisioned his children taking a gap year at the end of compulsory education to explore their interests before continuing their education: *If they are good at music, they could go play the guitar for a year; why not? Let them tour concerts, get to know people, learn about the environment in which they would work.* Lukas felt secure enough to overlook the potential downsides of his children deviating from a traditional academic trajectory or entering the highly competitive music industry. Like other parents in our research, he disregarded the fact that his very ability to sponsor his children's interests was enabled by him climbing the academic ladder and obtaining a highly-skilled job.

Much of the respondents' transmission of privilege was further masked by their good intentions to bring about positive change in the education system. Some believed avoiding local public schools was activism to improve the system's overall quality, unaware of the barriers their chosen schools posed to under-resourced families. The blind trust in market mechanisms, coupled with a desire to bring about change, is captured in Lukas' statement: *When a system lacks competition, it decomposes. So we trust, think, and hope that [our choice of a selective innovative program] will put pressure on the traditional system to reform itself and improve.* Others expressed similar convictions, accusing parents who chose a neighborhood school of preserving the status quo instead of pushing for modernization of the education system. However, the parents' change-making mindsets contrasted sharply with the reality of which students had access to the programs of their choice, being "skimmed" from regular public schools as a consequence of these exclusionary school options.

4 | CONCLUSION

This study depicts "cultivation for wellbeing" as a distinctive parenting approach that shapes Czech middle-class parents' elementary school choices. The parenting approach is characterized by five principles that differentiate it from concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003): prioritizing unstructured free time, encouraging autonomous socialization with preferred peers, avoiding conflicts with teachers, supporting children's interests, and emphasizing emotional and physical wellbeing. Contrary to claims that concerted cultivation is becoming normalized as a parenting strategy in the Global North (Vincent, 2017; Vincent & Ball, 2007; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016), the findings reveal nuanced ways in which ostensibly non-competitive parenting practices also confer advantages.

Parenting styles resembling "cultivation for wellbeing" have been observed globally, challenging conventional notions of middle-class child-rearing. Adding to this line of research, we illustrate that even parents who are opposed to competition may inadvertently employ practices that give their children an advantage in the areas of cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. In addition, the parents may be unaware that their parenting practices lead them to seek exclusionary school settings, or that their access to the exclusionary settings is mediated by their social and cultural capital.

Our research reveals specific complexities in the Czech system that may have parallels in other contexts. A growing segment of Czech middle-class parents prioritizes shielding their children from the perceived "oppressive environment" of public schools, viewing this strategy as more crucial for their child's success than fostering the ability to adapt to various institutional environments (for similar findings in Turkey, see Çelik & Özdemir, 2022b). While these parents emphasize well-rounded development, emotional/physical wellbeing, and appreciation of diversity, they believe that in the Czech setting, these aspects are best fostered through socially exclusive educational settings. Additionally, the parents feel pressured to choose exclusive school settings because of a perceived scarcity of opportunities for parental involvement in regular public schools. Thus, the parents feel compelled to select schools/tracks known in their social networks as "parent-friendly". This strategy represents a Czech parallel to U.S. parents' assertive agenda-pushing in public schools (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2003; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Since educational fields closer to the Czech context may witness related trends, a continued exploration of

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middle-class parents' educational strategies is necessary to uncover how social reproduction is accomplished in diverse educational settings.

In line with Bourdieu's habitus theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), we demonstrate that it is not important whether parents *aim* to accomplish social reproduction, but whether their privileged position equips them with a unique set of tastes, preferences, and beliefs that lead them to position their children favorably in a certain field. In contrast to Anglo-Saxon contexts, Czech middle-class parents' educational preferences appear delicate, involving specific tastes regarding their child's classmates' eating habits, media consumption, or access to technologies in addition to teachers' emphasis on physical and emotional wellbeing. However, these peculiar preferences can lead to similarly stratifying educational choices as those of parents who emphasize academic achievement when the school system features a variety of exclusionary tracks catering to a broad palette of middle-class tastes.

In Czech society, where between-class and within-class differences are not as pronounced as in many Western countries (Prokop et al., 2019), middle-class parents may feel an even stronger urge to distinguish themselves through their school choices, corroborating Bourdieu's view that social class is not fixed but constantly negotiated and constructed within specific social contexts (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Ultimately, the educational field's structure and the limits imposed on middle-class distinction-seeking behaviors may play a more important role in shaping social inequalities than what values and goals middle-class parents claim to pursue through their school choices. We conclude that while parenting approaches that emphasize non-academic factors may facilitate social integration in some settings (Cucchiara, 2013b; Debs et al., 2023), this may not apply to education systems in which public schools cater to middle-class parents' nuanced educational preferences while employing admission practices that aggravate socioeconomic segregation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This output was supported by the NPO “Systemic Risk Institute” number LX22NPO5101, funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU.

Open access publishing facilitated by Univerzita Karlova, as part of the Wiley - CzechELib agreement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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How to cite this article: Smith Slámová, R., & Simonová, J. (2024). School choice and parenting strategies among Czech middle-class parents: Implications for social segregation in public schools. *Sociology Compass*, e13248. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13248

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