‘Cosmopolitan start-up’ capital
mobility and school choices of global middle class parents
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Abstract

In this paper we study nineteen Global Middle Class (GMC) families currently residing in four global cities: Hong Kong, London, Buenos Aires and Tel Aviv. Through qualitative in-depth interviews, we sought to gather insights about GMC parenting strategies specifically drawing attention to the decision-making processes of school choice. To facilitate our analysis, we draw on Bourdieu’s (1986) theory on types of capital and Ben-Porath’s (2009) notion of bounded rationality. From the inductive analysis of our interview data with mobile GMC parents, we identified a subtype of cultural capital we called ‘cosmopolitan start-up capital’. The overall argument in our paper is that the accumulation of cosmopolitan start-up capital is a specific strategy guiding our GMC families’ school choice practices, set within a frame of mobilities. Given the growing number of mobile families who continuously enter and exit local education systems, focusing on this group is pertinent for policy-makers and practitioners around the world.

Keywords: School choice; global middle class (GMC); mobility; cosmopolitan start-up capital; Bourdieu
Introduction

School choice is not a simple, straightforward matter (Ball & Vincent, 1998). This is particularly the case for global middle class (GMC) families who frequently move between countries and school systems due to parents’ work requirements. Following Ball and Nikita (2014), we define GMC as a distinct group of middle class mobile professionals whose skill-sets are sought after by multi-national corporations (MNCs) usually located in global cities around the world. Relocation for work is the main reason for these families’ mobility, and the key distinguishing feature between them and their locally-moored middle class families (Yemini & Maxwell, 2018). Unlike non-mobile middle class families who have been shown to be adept at ‘playing the system’ and ensuring their children succeed (Lareau, 2002; Reay, 2006; Rowe & Windle, 2012), GMC families are continually having to navigate education systems in countries they might not be familiar with. Not only that, as most families will move again fairly soon, they also have to anticipate how best to prepare their children for the next move (and the one after that), all the while trying to maintain some continuity in their education.

Thus, as the number of GMCs continues to grow - reaching 87 million by 2021 (Finaccord, 2018) - the mobility of these families and their school choice strategies is an empirically necessary, and theoretically interesting, area of socio-cultural and educational comparative research that warrants our attention. This is the specific scope of our paper.

Unlike the families in Kenway et al. (2017)’s study on global elite school markets (Kenway, Fahey & Koh, 2013), the families in our study do not necessarily constitute a transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 2001). While in some circumstances they may be able to afford and may choose elite and/or international schools, most of the time GMC families consider a broader range of schools (Adams & Agbenyega, 2019). Ball and Nikita (2014) suggest that
while school choice has become a global phenomenon, local and national education systems are still highly relevant in determining it – not only for those from lower-resourced socio-economic groups but also for the middle classes (Ball, Bowe & Gerwirtz, 1996; Windle, 2015).

Parents have a multiplicity of reasons why they pick a certain school over other schools for their children (Ben-Porath & Johanek, 2019). It is argued in the literature that school choice is inherently about class reproduction but cannot be reduced to a definitive model of analysis or pattern (Ball, Bowe & Gerwirtz, 1996). Our paper is situated in the larger body of research on school choice, parenting and social class reproduction, but focuses on a relatively unexamined group (GMC), who move outside and across various education systems (Maxwell et al, 2019; Kiwan, 2019).

The GMC families we studied live in four global cities: Hong Kong, London, Buenos Aires and Tel Aviv. Through in-depth interviews with GMC parents, we sought to gather insights about GMC parenting strategies drawing analytic attention to the decision-making process of school choice in various contexts and locations. Our study is framed within the mobility turn in the social sciences (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007), addressing Ball and Nikita’s (2014) invocation “to attend more carefully to [school] choice in a framework of mobility” (p.82; our emphasis). The mobility turn implies focusing on flows and movements of people, capital, objects, information, ideas as a constitutive element of the lives, experiences, expectations and identities of many individuals and social groups. There are many diverse groups whose educational choices and careers are framed within a context of mobility, such as refugees, low-skilled migrant workers, international students, among many others. We argue that the resources, opportunities and trajectories of mobility of these groups are very different, and consequently it is necessary to study the specific experiences of each one. To operationalize a
definition of those belonging to the GMC group, we recruited individuals who had at least an undergraduate degree, worked for a multinational corporation, had relocated with their family for work at least twice and, given our interest in school choice, had school-aged children. As we will show, for this group, mobility is desired and valued, not least because of its contribution to professional and economic success, but at the same time it creates anxieties about the possibility of educating “rootless” children. This tension between mobility and rootedness is pervasive in the ways in which GMC families construe school choice as part of their class reproduction strategies.

School Choice and the limitations on rational decision making

School choice has become a central theme in the sociology of education (Ben-Porath, 2009; Windle, 2015; Erickson, 2017, Vincent, 2017), with a focus on how inequalities and social class are constructed, reconstructed and reproduced through school choice strategies. Erickson (2017) found that parents had similar preferences for the kind of school they wanted for their children, even across different types of education systems, operating different kinds of school choices and approaches. He found that most parents prioritise academics over other concerns. Meanwhile, other studies have found that some parents were just as concerned about their children’s well-being as they were about their children’s intellectual development (Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007). There are also those parents who were more class-conscious. Leyton and Rojas (2017), for example, described middle-class mothers as having a preference for their children to mix with others from a similar class background. They spoke of working-class children in derogatory ways. Yet, at the same time, a well-known UK project found that particular middle-class factions actively chose urban schools with mixed population so as to

expose their children to diversity, which was interpreted as a future advantage (Crozier, Reay & James, 2011).

Choosing a school is a complex process that involves knowledge, emotions, intuitions, desires and is set within certain contextual possibilities and limitations. We find Ben-Porath’s (2009) bounded rationality approach useful to interpret the choices we found GMC parents making in our study. The notion of bounded rationality examines the processes of decision making with an emphasis on the limitations and challenges parents and families meet in making choices (Ben-Porath, 2009). The aim of Ben-Porath’s concept is to overcome the idea of the “narrow rational and utilitarian conceptualisations of the chooser” (Ball, 2003, p. 111), and to try to grasp the complicated cognitive and affective processes that are involved in decision making when families choose a school for their children (Ben-Porath, 2009).

From this perspective, there are two types of limitations on rational decision making. Contextual limitations point to how issues such as social class, ethnicity, gender, nationality could influence the possibilities that individuals have to access information to make purely rational choices. For example, in the case of GMC families, their choices could be limited by their national origin, their linguistic skills, their social networks and knowledge of the educational system into which they are moving, as well as by their future mobility plans. These kinds of limitations can condition individual preferences, but they do not completely determine choice processes (Ben-Porath, 2009). Other types of limitations are linked to the inherent ways in which people make decisions based on intuition, emotions, feelings and other factors that are not purely rational. These types of limitations point to how rational calculations are influenced by previous experiences, desires, and multiple aims and preferences we all hold.

Thus, the notion of bounded rationality recognizes that some elements of rationality and cost-
benefit analysis affect school choice, but that these rational calculations are bounded within a much more complex process of decision making.

In this paper, we use Ben-Porath’s (2009) notion of bounded rationality to consider the contingent, unpredictable and disruptive mobility trajectories that are constitutive of GMC families’ lives, and examine how mobility influences and frames the type of rationalities that these parents use when choosing their children’s schools, and the limitations that bound these rationalities. Using empirical data from our study, we combine Ben-Porath’s (2009) perspectives and arguments with Bourdieu’s theories on different forms of capitals to draw analytic attention to GMC parents’ decision-making process of school choice, and how they seek to invest in their children’s education to reproduce some of their socio-economic advantages in a cosmopolitan social space.

Mobility turn and cosmopolitan start-up capital: a conceptual framework

Bourdieu’s (1986) theory on different forms of capital has been used extensively, and continues to be so, in the sociology of education to explain how education contributes to the reproduction of social stratification. Indeed, “education was a key site through which Bourdieu developed his theoretical tools” (Brosnan & Threadgold, 2017, p.8). Our intention here is not to rehearse the entirety of Bourdieu’s theory, but to re-purpose his theory in response to calls for “renewed reflexivity” (Brosnan & Threadgold, 2017, p.2; Murphy & Costa, 2016; see also Mu, Dooley, & Luke, 2019) to how his work is deployed, specifically in a context of mobility.

Bourdieu’s theory of social stratification is based on the notion of a social space in which actors use different strategies to accumulate capital and to sustain or improve their position in relation to others. One of the main contributions of his theory is that it considers different forms of
capital accumulation. He distinguishes between economic, cultural and social capital, and refers to strategies of conversion through which one form of capital can be converted into another (e.g. economic capital can be used to buy access to a university degree that would provide cultural capital, which could then potentially be converted into more economic capital).

Bourdieu refers to an economy of practices of which mercantile exchange is one out of many other forms of transactions. The rationale to consider social and cultural attributes as a form of capital is based on the notion that “capital … in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate, and (has) as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.8).

There are several aspects of Bourdieu’s theory that are key when considering the specificity of GMC families and their parenting choices. First, the value of the cultural and social capital possessed by an individual should be considered in terms of its temporal and spatial situatedness (Bourdieu, Sapiro & McHale, 1991). Thus, conditions of mobility of GMC generate an extra challenge for parents in their reproduction strategies, as processes of accumulation, transmission and conversion of different forms of capital could be disrupted by their current mobility and the possibilities of further mobility. Second, social stratification is relational. It is defined in relation to others that inhabit the same social space. Thus, the particular position of GMC families within social space could have significant variations depending on the socio-economic conditions of the society in which they (temporarily) live.

For example, one of the GMC families in our study coming from the US identified as being middle class, but when they re-located to a poorer and more unequal society, such as Argentina, they gained access to the lifestyle of the elite there, mostly through the elite international school they chose for their children. Thus, processes of ongoing relocation could sometimes influence the class identity of GMCs in different ways.
Bourdieu’s theory has already been extended by some scholars to consider the situations of highly-resourced migrant families and how they choose certain kind of schools for their children as a strategy aimed at rapid accumulation of social and cultural capital in their new home cities. Ong (1999) first used the notion of ‘start-up capital’ in relation to how rich migrant families scout for “the right type of school and university central to their capital accumulation strategy” (1999, p.95). Next, Kenway (2017) utilised the term vis-à-vis how an elite school in Australia offered international students the necessary ‘start-up capital’ for those who plan to eventually migrate to Australia. The investment of economic capital for social and cultural capital accumulation in schools is core to the ‘start-up capital’ that these migrants acquire.

The notion of ‘start-up capital’ resonated with the comments of our interviewees, but the kind of ‘start-up capital’ analysed by Ong and Kenway was linked to strategies of rapid accumulation of social and cultural capital in the social space to which families migrate to, with the intention of settling. In the case of the GMC families in our study, given their situation of recurrent mobility, the kind of capital they seek to accumulate should be convertible to advantages in a broader, cosmopolitan social space (Beck, 2011). Thus, to account for the specificities of the strategies of school choice of GMC families we have developed the notion of ‘cosmopolitan start-up capital’.

We suggest that cosmopolitan start-up capital is a specific form of cultural capital that must be applicable and convertible in various national contexts worldwide. Parents in our study conceive this kind of capital as providing their children with the language skills, disposition to manage and even embrace uncertainty and newness, and an orientation towards building relations of sociality with others ‘not like you’. We examine whether parents articulate this
form of cultural capital as a necessary element in their school choice decision-making processes, how exactly they conceive such a capital as being made available to their children through school choice, and how it could eventually be converted in the future to a form of economic, cultural or social advantage. We also seek to understand how cosmopolitan start-up capital can be accumulated in one location, and then continue to be accumulated and activated over time, in different places (e.g. Adams & Agbenyega, 2019; Higginson, McLeod & Rizvi, 2019).

Thus, through the analysis the school choice decision-making processes of the GMC families that participated in our study, we aim to understand how the mobile conditions of these families influence the kind of capital that they seek to accumulate, and to what extent it can be considered a kind of cosmopolitan start-up capital. In addition, the concept of bounded rationality will help us explore the kind of specific limitations and challenges that the unpredictable and disruptive mobility trajectories of GMC families place on their school choices. Based on the accounts of our participants we also intend to further elaborate a definition of cosmopolitan start-up capital as a heuristic concept that could be used to interpret the strategies of capital accumulation of GMC families and, maybe, other similarly mobile families.

A brief methodological note

This paper emerges from an international collaborative project funded by the British Association of Comparative Education. We are a team of scholars originally from the UK, Hong Kong, Israel and Argentina. Using a snowball sampling strategy, we recruited up to five global professionals working in each of the city where we reside(d). Our findings emerged from our inductive analysis of the whole data set – 19 families – but to illustrate our key
arguments in this paper we present a detailed analysis of four families because of their relevance to the themes we are discussing.

As a reaction to the call to move away from methodological nationalism, we framed our study within a mobility framework. We also followed Beck’s (2011) call for a cosmopolitan sociology which aims at finding reference points for sociological analysis that overcome “the national” as the taken for granted container of social processes, but at the same time avoids taking as a starting point universalist abstract concepts such as “world society”. Thus, an effort to understand processes of cosmopolitization implies defining units of research that no longer coincide with the national, without ignoring the relevance that nations and nationality have in social processes such as the ones analyzed in our study.

Addressing the challenge posed by Beck, our point of departure and unit of analysis is not the nation state, nor is it an abstract entity. It is a very concrete group of people: The Global Middle Classes. GMC members recruited for our study adhered to a stringent set of criteria: holding as a minimum an undergraduate degree, working for a multinational corporation, having relocated with their family for work at least twice, and having school-age children. If our unit of analysis is the GMC, then we take our interviewees as one group. Their national origin, their language, religion, the places to which they have moved can be important as long as our participants consider them a relevant reference in their school choice strategies. In this sense, the GMC are our unit of analysis, but at the same time, in our broader study (reported on also in Yemini et al., 2020) we attempt to understand if such a thing as the GMC exists, i.e. do they “enact social class”.

We conducted in-depth interviews with one family member – the one adhering with our criteria - following a guide comprised of several different thematic areas and indicative questions on issues relating to experiences in a wide range of areas of parenting and educational choices in both formal and non-formal arenas. Participants were asked about their professional and personal biographies and mobility experiences; their children’s education and schooling; home practices in relation to language, identity and cultural/religious habits; friendships and networks they belonged to; their broadly understood worldviews; to articulate how they would describe their and their children’s identity; and aspirations for their and their children’s futures.

The semi-structured interviews (as per Johnson & Christensen, 2014) were conducted by the authors in person or via video link mainly in English, but also in Spanish and Hebrew (based on the informants’ preferences). In these cases, the quotes, originally transcribed in the interviewees’ mother tongue, were translated into English and then re-checked with the original language recording to avoid errors in the translation process. In this manner and through the use of quotes in general, we aimed to maintain the participants’ authentic voices throughout the article to the best of our abilities, mindful of the potential danger of speaking for others or asserting our own opinions and perceptions over those expressed directly by the parents themselves (Clandinin, 2006). The interviews lasted between one and two hours, were recorded and transcribed verbatim, immediately following the data collection. All names used are pseudonyms.

Following the data collection and initial analysis, we generated theoretical explanations for the social phenomena that were derived from interviews, using grounded theory which is particularly suitable for this kind of data collection method (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). This mode of analysis has been selected due to scarce research in the field. The analysis was
conducted using the stages described by Thornberg & Charmaz (2014, pp.156-158) and included initial (open) coding followed by focused coding and theoretical coding. However, coding was not treated as a linear process; instead, to be sensitive to theoretical possibilities, we moved back and forth between the different phases of coding.

The codes included ‘school choice in a new setting’; ‘criteria for school choice’; ‘motivations for mobility’; and ‘children’s futures’. The analysis was led by one member of the team, and then discussed at length within the whole team. We then sought to develop an appropriate theoretical framework that appeared to speak to the interview data. We found that our GMC parents kept referencing the different types of capital they wanted their children to acquire when they shared with us their decision-making process of school choice. Of course, they did not use Bourdieu’s language, but they referred to ‘skills’ and ‘knowledge’ or general ‘cultivation’ through the school, as well as to the advantages that these could have in future relocations of the family. Parents wanted to ensure that their children should themselves have the opportunity to frequently relocate as adults. They also mentioned the challenges and limitations they found when choosing schools due to their contingent mobile trajectories. These themes were generative for us, and led to a final stage of theory-informed deductive analysis specifically focused on what we called cosmopolitan start-up capital, itself informed by the notion of bounded rationality.

**Data analysis: Cosmopolitan start-up capital**

We introduce our first mobile family, the Chan family. Jackson is a first-generation migrant from Hong Kong to Singapore. He received his education in Singapore and began a career in a multinational company as a management trainee after graduating from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Joining this company was the beginning of his ‘mobile

Jackson’s mobility trajectories took him from Singapore to London, Romania and finally, back to Hong Kong where he currently resides at the point of our interview. But his family is waiting on the call to move again. While his 2-year old daughter is currently enrolled in an International Baccalaureate (IB) school, he described the whole decision-making process of school choice for his daughter as “a big struggle”.

Because Jackson is familiar with the education system in Hong Kong and how it works, he said he could have put his daughter in a pre-school where she could transit smoothly to a connected primary school and secondary school - what it is known in the Hong Kong education system as the “through train system”. But Jackson ended up enrolling his daughter in a private International Montessori School following the IB curriculum, known for its “dual language Montessori setting” and “full development of each child”. He unequivocally said that “I do want my children to succeed in life and ideally go to the best school, get the best education, get the best networks and the best branding”...“to seek that 1% advantage”. Taking into consideration his mobile career trajectory, Jackson anticipated that the IB system would be the best option for his daughter because if his family moved back to London, for instance, “IB conversion there is easy”. The IB, in this case, serves as a buffering element to balance future uncertainty, enabling a sense of stability on one hand, and allowing easier conversion of credentials for someone who anticipates that they will frequently be mobile in the future. In this way, attending such an expensive school would give his daughter the advantage of accruing cosmopolitan start-up capital with the kind of “dual language learning environment” and “all roundedness” promoted by the school.

Jackson’s case illustrates how familiarity with the Hong Kong educational setting helped him and his wife navigate the system, and have a better understanding of the options available for
them. However, his decision was constrained because of the need to accumulate capital that could be converted in situations of further mobility. Thus, Jackson chose a school that would enable his daughter to accumulate a cosmopolitan start-up capital that would better advantage her given the family’s planned future mobility, seeking primarily to reduce the risk of experiencing dis-continuity in her education trajectory in the cosmopolitan social space they lived their lives in. His strategies would have been quite different if they were settling in Hong Kong.

Next, we introduce the Zhao family whose school choice illuminates other ways in which mobility influences the type of rationalities that GMC parents use when choosing their children’s schools, and the limitations that bound these rationalities. The Zhao family is represented in our study by Linda, originally of Malaysian nationality, who migrated with her family to Auckland, New Zealand when she was 14 years old. After graduating from university, she worked as an accountant for several years, but found life in New Zealand too monotonous and left for London to take a ‘gap year’. While holidaying in London, fortuitously she found a job as a consultant in a children’s hospital in Central London and worked there for over a year and a half. In London, she met Jason from Hong Kong, now her husband, who was also working in London. They relocated back to Hong Kong a few years later.

The Zhao family has two children, one in P1 and the other in P2 (6 and 7 years old, respectively), in the local schooling system in Hong Kong. Hong Kong middle class parents usually place a high premium on sending their children to an English-Medium-Instruction school (EMI) or an international school if they can afford it (Choi, 2003). Although the Zhao’s could afford to send both kids to an international school as they were high income earners, they decided otherwise. Contrary to many parents in their local environment, they have chosen to
send their children to a local primary school where the medium of instruction is Chinese, also known locally as CMI school. They have taken a firm stand that both their kids must learn Chinese, and therefore, enrolled them in a local primary school. Linda said in the interview:

...since we are staying in Hong Kong [for now], I think it’s a good opportunity to learn a good foundation of Chinese...if they don’t learn it [now] it’s very hard, very challenging for them to learn at a later stage... Why must [they] go to an international school? If I must pay international school fees, I would rather move my whole family back to New Zealand...there [are] still many choices [and] channels that you can learn English.

The local school that both their children attend is a prestigious one, which they managed to gain access to via the district-run ballot system. As a local from Hong Kong, Jason knew how to navigate the system. They moved to a more expensive residential neighbourhood near the school to be eligible for the ballot. Additionally, for Linda, who had moved quite a lot during her early years, it was important to lay down some ‘roots’ as she explained:

“I am quite influenced by my parents because I am born in Malaysia and there are a lot of Malaysian Chinese who don’t know how to write or even don’t know how to speak [the language]. Because my parents are very respectful of Chinese [culture and tradition], so they think Chinese [people] at least must know how to speak, how to write.”

Thus, in the case of the Zhao’s they decided to use the move to Hong Kong as an advantage, and ensure their children learnt Chinese. By deciding not to send their children to an international school they might be restricting their options for further mobility. Yet, they prioritized instead the possibility of transmitting to their children an attachment to their
linguistic community. The acquisition of this linguistic capital could be essential for future careers in Hong Kong and perhaps even for the much larger Chinese job market, not to mention the premium on such linguistic skills world-wide. In this way, they, too, aimed to develop a kind of cosmopolitan start-up capital that facilitates a link to their cultural heritage while simultaneously giving their children an advantage in the future labour market, as China continues to grow as a world economy. The necessity to balance acquiring cultural capital that could be easily convertible for future mobility and developing in their children a belonging to the parents’ cultural heritage was salient in many of the GMC families we interviewed. In the Zhao’s case – a desire for their children to be fluent in Chinese may meet both these needs, but for other families, whose native language is not such a dominant world language, the tension may cause more concern about the ‘best’ decision.

Our next mobile family, the Esposito family, comes from Argentina. Their mobility trajectories are just as convoluted. Antonio and Florencia moved to the U.S. where they completed their MBAs in New York City and Columbia universities respectively. Upon graduation, both secured jobs in London and worked there for four years. However, Antonio’s job required him to relocate to Luxembourg where they stayed for one and a half years. They then moved to Madrid, where they remained for four years. After a short stay in Sao Paulo, they eventually returned to Buenos Aires where Antonio took up a new job. What stands out in the Esposito’s family mobility trajectory was that at a certain stage they decided to prioritise their children’s education over their professional careers, which led to them moving back to their home country. As Antonio said in the interview:

...the decision was that we wanted to make a choice once our older son was approaching primary school. At that point we were asking ourselves if we wanted to
live for good abroad or to go back and live in Argentina, if we would have wanted to stay for 4 or 5 more years abroad, the decision of going back would have been much more difficult for our children, and for us too. But, mainly for them because we thought that the adaption of a boy in fourth grade was much harder than that of a boy entering first grade.

The Esposito family has three children – 5-year-old twins and an 8-year-old son - and when they eventually moved back to Argentina, all three were enrolled in Antonio’s alma mater, an elite bilingual school. The school choice decision-making process for the Esposito family appeared less complex than for the Chan and Zhao families. They strongly believe in sending their children to a Spanish-English bilingual school. First, the children’s native language was Spanish, yet Antonio understood that “[English language] is a necessary requirement today for any company”, so he wanted his children to be able to acquire this linguistic capital advantage too.

Antonio chose to send their children to his alma mater school because “it offers a lot of exchanges with other countries; although for short periods of times, via Skype or by having the possibility of sitting for international examinations, this allows the children to feel connected to the world”. Yet this openness to the world is complemented by the fact that it was the same school he had attended as a child. Antonio stressed that he had explored the possibility of sending them to other, more prestigious schools, but he felt at home in his school and liked the idea of giving his children a similar experience to the one he had. The importance of promoting “roots” in their children was so important for the Esposito family, that it was key in making the decision to return to Buenos Aires, de-prioritising the needs of their professional careers as
they wanted their children to develop a strong sense of Argentine national identity. Their rationalities where bounded by emotions and attachments. As Antonio stated:

...if we stayed for some more years it would have been more difficult because he [their eldest son] would have found it hard to develop a sense of Argentine national identity – which is very strong here. So, he would have had a hard time being an equal to his peers”.

The decision-making process in the case of the Esposito family illustrates how most of the families we interviewed emphasised the importance of developing in their children certain skills – a major world language, as well as an openness to the world that could help them be mobile in their future careers. Yet, at the same time, this preparedness for mobility was complemented with the need to develop in them roots and a sense of belonging to a place or a nation. For the Esposito family, school choice is closely connected to their own ‘worldly’ travel and residence in different places where they had experienced for themselves the kind of international exposure and cosmopolitan exchange that is possible – something they sought the school they chose to replicate in some way. However, they chose to invest in this kind of cosmopolitan start-up capital in their home country, facilitating the anchoring of the children to their own culture to generate a kind of “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Appiah, 2006)

The fourth mobile family which illustrates some of the further complexities that GMC families face in the decision process of school choice is the Levy family from Tel Aviv, Israel. Here, bounded rationality significantly affected their ability to choose and led them to actively consider further relocation to increase their school choice options. Yaron left Tel Aviv to the go to the U.S. to obtain his MBA at UC Berkley. After graduation he returned to Israel, got
married and relocated with his family to Atlanta, Georgia. His two girls (who are currently 7 and 13 years old) attended pre-schools in Georgia. The family then returned to Tel Aviv. During the interview, Yaron constantly compared schooling in Georgia with what is on offer in Tel Aviv, and described how he wished for his daughters that they were in a more English-speaking environment. When the family had relocated back to Tel Aviv, Adi, the eldest child was on a waiting list for an art school because she appeared talented in this area (and was pre-selected through a rigorous examination process), but Adina, their youngest, was sent to a state school in their neighbourhood.

The Levy family regarded the education system in the U.S. as “great” as there was “a balance between the social and academics”. They also liked the diversity in the school because “it’s better preparation for life, [where they get to] see different people, get different things from different people…”. It also helped that there were other children from Israel in the school whom they could form friendships with. When they moved back to their hometown, they wanted to find a similar kind of school, but had to settle for less. The school Adi was sent to, for instance, cancelled a “native-speakers programme”, which meant that Yaron and his wife were frustrated that Adi could not build on the linguistic capital she had begun to acquire in the US. Yaron prized the learning English for his girls and they “wanted them to keep the English”. This appeared central to the Levy’s conceptualisation of cosmopolitan start-up capital:

...dealing with challenges, facing challenges, academic, social and importantly, they can see things in English, now when we go abroad, they can listen to English in guided audio tours and it opens them and makes them to be much more international and understand others.
Thus, the idea of educating their children to “be international” and open to diversity was key for the Levy family, as they wanted to give their children the opportunity to reproduce the kind of lifestyle and socio-economic advantages they had benefited from. However, the context in Tel Aviv limited their strategy. They were looking for schools that would either continue to seamlessly build on what had been accumulated to date – mobility, language, international environment - but relocating back home had severely limited their school choice. This prompted the Levy’s to being open to the possibility that Yaron’s work would allow him to be re-located again. They argued this was the only way the cosmopolitan start-up capital they had invested in could continue to be acquired and later activated. The Levy’s also illustrated this constant desire to reap the benefits of mobility while also creating a sense of rootedness. While in the US, they valued the presence of other Israeli families that could help their children to embed a sense of being Israeli, while back in Israel they sought a cultural diversity that they could not find.

Conclusion

Our study on school choices of GMC parents living across different parts of the world is based on a relatively small sample and it is intended as a way of exploring a much-needed set of conceptual tools to facilitate the further development of this under-researched area. Even though in this paper we focused on the narratives of four families, these are representative of some common patterns among the 19 families we interviewed. The mobile trajectories of GMC families were influential in the ways in which they sought to reproduce, through school choice, some of the advantages that they accumulated through their mobile working life. Yet, at the same time, we found that most of them shared an anxiety about the possibility of educating rootless children, hence the continual debate about how to ensure a fluency in their native language and/or the development of a national identity.
The Zhao and Esposito families, for example, asserted the need to maintain a form of rooted cosmopolitanism – a strong sense of ‘where they come from’, but able to be mobile nonetheless. This appeared to directly shape the school choices they made. Meanwhile other participants – Jackson and Yaron – noted the importance of investing in cultivating global capabilities, which was often equated to fluency in English or international accepted credentials. The recognition that mobility is not just about physical movement, but is also connected to being able to live and thrive in a transnational space, led to the understanding that linguistic resources of bi- and multi-lingualism was central to the future advantages sought by these families through their school choice decision-making. But the notion of cosmopolitan start-up capital is much more than a commitment to acquiring the necessary linguistic skills to prosper.

The mobile experiences of GMC families shaped the kind of strategic approaches parents had as they sought to acquire for their children certain capitals that could help them reproduce the kind of opportunities that transnational mobility had generated for the parents. However, this rational and strategic approach was affected by two types of limitations. Most of the GMC parents we interviewed had lived a spatially rooted childhood where they developed a strong place-based identity. They started their mobile trajectories when they were older, as they accessed university or the labour market. The difficulty in reproducing similar experiences for their children created nostalgic anxieties about maintaining a sense of place-bound attachment – even when that “place” could be imaginary for the children (Yemini, et. al. 2020). This emotional limitation affected school choice decisions and, in some cases, it even influenced the career choices of GMC adults. In this way, parents’ rational calculations were influenced by previous experiences, desires, and multiple aims and preferences that connected past,
present and future aspirations. On the other hand, contextual limitations to real ‘choice’ often existed. Many educational systems did not seem very well geared towards meeting these various needs of mobile families, except for the network of International Baccalaureate (IB) schools. As we started this study, we expected the IB to be prominent among the choices of GMC families, and were surprised to find that most parents that participated considered other options as more desirable to develop the kind of cosmopolitan start-up capital they sought to acquire for their children.

Thus, we argue that cosmopolitan start-up capital is not only about developing cultural attributes linked to a mobile future (such as proficiency in global languages, for instance English or Chinese), but also about the challenge of developing certain identity roots while permanently on the move. Cosmopolitan start-up capital, as we showed, is shaped differently in various contexts and it involves both a set of global competencies and local embeddedness of identity, both carefully managed by parents in our study through the school choices they made and their planning of future mobilities.

Our findings are not enough to confirm the unequivocal existence of the GMC as a distinct social class, but the consistency of participants’ commitment to a kind of cosmopolitan start-up capital that we have explicated here, suggests that there may be some evidence for making such a claim, and that further empirical and theoretical analysis of this social group and their strategies of reproduction would be worthwhile.

It is also important to stress that the economic situation of GMC families gave them a range of options, though as we have emphasised this was bounded by context and emotions, from which to choose when deciding how to invest their economic capital with the aim of converting it
later on into social and cultural capital for their children through schooling. The situation for other highly mobile groups, such as refugees or low-skilled migrant workers, would be very different in terms of their available capitals, opportunities, and trajectories of mobility, and how these constrain their school choice strategies and possibilities. Thus, although the notion of cosmopolitan start-up capital could potentially be used as a heuristic concept to interpret the strategies of capital accumulation in different kinds of mobile families, it would need to be adapted to consider a variety of situations in terms of available capitals and strategies of conversion through school choice.

References


