It’s a little bit like drawing the lottery

A study of American and British expats’ educational strategies in Berlin

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Abstract

This study examines American and British middle class expats’ educational strategies in Berlin, Germany, from a Bourdieusian perspective. I argue that globalization and an increased mover population make it necessary to study the expat population, a social group that has been largely neglected in sociological research. The study explores the elementary school choices expats make for their children in the host country and how their educational strategies relate to the expats’ inherited and acquired cultural capital. Information was gathered through the statements of six American and British interviewees, interviews which were conducted in fall 2018. The interviewees were asked questions about their elementary school choices, their educational priorities, pastime activities and their own upbringings. The educational strategies were similar to those of specific middle class groups that, according to previous research, are characterized by high cultural capital. The interviewees in this study did however prove to be more idealistic than those specific middle class groups, and they made adjustments to their educational strategies to cater for their expatriatism. The prevalence and importance of liberal values had been passed on to the interviewees by their parents. In terms of choosing schools for their children they valued individuality, independence and cultural diversity. They also valued cosmopolitanism. The interviewed expats did not necessarily see themselves as bound to one country or nationality and they wanted the same perceived freedom for their children. They primarily chose local public schools for their children in attempts to acquire cultural capital, to ensure that their children integrated culturally and developed a fluency in German. Local public schools was the natural choice for expats with German partners, while expats with expat partners often found it difficult to decide against private international schools due to their struggles with cultural integration.

Keywords

Utbildningssociologi, utbildningsstrategier, skolval, expats, Berlin, Tyskland.
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Introduction and background

The purpose of this study is to examine expats’ educational strategies and how these relate to their social backgrounds and various forms of obtained symbolic capital. The focus is on American and British expats in Berlin. I have interviewed six expats about their choice of schools, their educational priorities and their own upbringings.

When studying immigrants it is important to distinguish between expats and migrants, social groups that research suggests are separated by class. Expats choose to leave their native countries for professional reasons or as personal development projects. Migrants on the other hand are motivated by basic needs.\(^1\) Previous research has focused on migrants over expats, and there is only very limited previous research on expats’ social reproduction strategies.

Globalization and a rising amount of movers contribute to an increased need for understanding the mover population. In the 1950s technology and trade agreements such as the EEC, which later became the European Union, allowed for the growth of multinational companies and for the moving of goods, workers and knowledge.\(^2\) Globalization intensified during the 1980s as multinational companies pressured governments to reduce tariffs and loosen their restrictions on immigration, which enabled extensive trade growth.\(^3\) Studies by the European Commission show that the amount of movers within the European Union continues to increase and that return numbers decline.\(^4\) The two most popular destination countries for European citizens are Germany and the United Kingdom, in 2017 these countries hosted almost half of all European movers.\(^5\) Berlin is one of the most popular destination cities, in 2013 immigrants accounted for a seventh of the city’s population, making it an appropriate geographic selection.\(^6\) With increased movement comes an increased need for


\(^3\) Jones, 2005, p. 34 and 37


\(^5\) Fries-Tersch et al, 2018, p. 183f

governments and companies to understand expat behavior, as these learnings can be utilized for integration purposes as well as companies’ HR strategies.

Something to keep in mind for this study is Berlin’s complex educational system. Education in Germany is largely regulated on state level, and in Berlin residents do not have free choice of primary school. Instead children are assigned to the school in the catchment area they live in. Parents can apply to schools outside their catchment areas if they would like a certain pedagogic orientation, if attending another school would ease after-school care of the child or if the child has friends in another school. Due to Berlin’s immigration history there has been extensive research on integration of migrants’ children into Berlin’s educational system, there has however been only limited research on expats’ children.

**Purpose and problem statements**

This study sets out to examine the educational strategies of American and British middle class expat parents living and working in Berlin, Germany. The interviewees are aged 35-45 and come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. The purpose of this study is to examine the elementary school choices expats make for their children, and how these choices relate to the expats’ symbolic capital and expatriatism. The purpose is broken down into the following analytical research questions, which are designed to encompass different aspects of the purpose:

1) How do the expats reason when choosing elementary school for their children and how does this relate to their experiences as expats?

2) How do the expats’ choice of elementary school and educational priorities relate to their own inherited and acquired cultural capital?

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical premise for this study is Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology. His theories and methodology serve the purpose of this study well as one of his research focuses was

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intergenerational transfer of social power. An additional benefit is that Bourdieu’s works are commonly used by sociologists, including the research this study is based on. This simplifies comparison of the results of this study with previous researchers’ results. To base the theoretical premise for a study on one author’s work can be limiting, but it can also provide opportunity. Rather than restricting the scope of the study to fit Bourdieu’s concepts, my goal is to use his concepts as analytical tools. This is how Bourdieu intended for usage of his concepts, as tools in a sociological toolbox. For this study, the most relevant Bourdieusian concepts are those of symbolic capital, social space and reproduction strategies. I will present them below, as a mutual understanding of these concepts’ meaning is important for interpretation of the study’s results, and further explain how the concepts are used in my study.

Symbolic capital

*Symbolic capital* can be described as material and immaterial resources used by the actors in the social space to gain advantage in relation to other actors. For something to qualify as *symbolic capital* its value needs to be recognized by other actors in the social space. There are three fundamental forms of symbolic capital. They are economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. *Economic capital* is capital that can be directly converted into money. *Social capital* is valuable social connections that can be indirectly converted to money or institutionalized in some form. *Cultural capital* is based on society’s dominating culture. It encompasses, amongst other things, education, language skills and information. Cultural capital can under some circumstances be converted into money, but it can also be converted into for example educational credentials. There are numerous subcategories of cultural capital, such as educational capital, which can be acquired with high grades and attending renowned schools.

Social capital and cultural capital, especially educational capital, is of especial relevance for this study. The study’s purpose is to examine the relationship between the expats’

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10 Broady, 1998, p. 7
11 Broady, 1998, p. 6
acquired symbolic capital and the educational strategies they choose for their children. The study’s interview questions have been designed to surface the expats’ social and cultural capital. Examples include asking the expats about their educational backgrounds, about the kind of esteemed cultural activities they engage in and prioritize for their children, as well as their parents’ priorities when they grew up. The expats’ own symbolic capital will then be studied in relation to the capital they are acquiring for their children. In the context of expats it is also important to study how the expats compensate for a lack of country-specific cultural capital in their adopted country, including linguistic capital, with other forms of symbolic capital. This was captured in the study’s interview questions by asking about problems the expats are facing in Germany and how they perceive their knowledge of the German culture and language.

Social space

Bourdieu defines social stratification in terms of social actors’ positions in what he refers to as a social space. He means that social classes in Marxist terms do not exist, but the power distribution between societal groups and individuals does. The social space illustrates where social actors stand in relation to each other. The group’s or individual’s position in the social space is determined by the volume and composition of their material and immaterial resources, their symbolic capital. The actors’ resources also determine the actors’ possibilities to move and act in the social space. The actors use their resources in order to defend or strengthen their positions in the social space. The social space manifests itself in this study as Berlin’s educational system. I aim to understand the expats’ actual and perceived positions in the social space by asking questions about their perceived understanding of German culture and Berlin’s educational system, as well as how they perceive their social networks and connections. This will allow me to study how they aim to reinforce positions of social power and how they attempt to compensate for lacking specifically German cultural, information and linguistic capital.

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Reproduction strategies

The actors in the social space act in order to defend their positions of power, not just for themselves but also for their families. The activities that individuals or families engage in to defend, or improve, their positions in the social space are known as *reproduction strategies*.

To this study, the most relevant reproduction strategies are *educational strategies*, or how families utilize the educational system to their advantage. The purpose of this study is to surface expats’ educational strategies and how these relate to their own symbolic capital. An important part of that is to understand the expats’ perception of their own upbringings, as parents’ choices are often reproduced. This was captured in the study by asking the interviewees questions about the kind of elementary schools they had attended and how they perceived the quality of education. It is also important to understand how the expats’ educational strategies are impacted by the fact that they are not operating in their home countries. This study captures this in interviews with expats through questions about how educational priorities would have varied if they had lived in their home countries and how they perceive their knowledge of the German culture and language.

I would like to emphasize what was stated earlier, namely that this study is not restricted to these concepts. Best would be to read this study with Bourdieusian glasses without blinkers.

Previous research

The purpose of this study is to identify the reasoning behind expats’ educational choices, and to understand how their educational strategies relate to their own symbolic capital. Although expatriatism as a social phenomenon is not recent, the ever-increasing amount of expats has resulted in unheard-of levels of societal impact. Due to the recency of the societal impact there has only been limited research on expat behavior, and very little research on expats’ educational strategies. Researchers’ focus has instead been on power dynamics either between different classes or between natives and migrants. There has been research on the educational strategies of the social groups of which expat

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populations are constructed, namely the middle and upper classes. I have defined the research relevant to this study by focusing on research that on the one hand deals with educational strategies of middle class parents and, on the other hand, those who have focused on expats’ educational strategies. Finally, I will give a brief description of Berlin’s educational system and integration of migrant children in order to contextualize the current situation in relation to expats’ educational strategies.

What is an *Expat*?

When discussing expats the first important distinction to make is between the terms *expat* and *migrant*. The term *expat* is short for *expatriate*, which Merriam-Webster defines as “a person who lives in a foreign country”. The term *migrant* is defined by the same dictionary as “someone who has moved from one country, place, or locality to another”. The distinction is important to make for this study as the definitions of the words are almost identical, but there is a clear socioeconomic bias in how these terms are being used. Gatti suggests in his 2009 study that class is what separates expats from migrants. His research found that what expats had in common was high levels of cultural capital. Expats choose to leave their native countries for professional reasons or as personal development projects. Migrants on the other hand are motivated by basic needs. Gatti’s definition is not necessarily exhausting, class is not necessarily the only definer of an individual’s expat status. Eurocentrism and racism are other factors that could impact whether someone is viewed as an expat or a migrant. It is reasonable to assume that an American hospitality worker would have a higher chance of being perceived as an expat than a Ghanaian engineer, despite the latter being from the higher class.

The second important distinction to make is to separate *organizational expats* (OEs) from *self-initiated expats* (SIEs). Przytula separated these terms from migrants in her 2015 study. She mapped previous research and common usage of the terms *expat* and *migrant*, as well as sub-terms, to understand usage of them. Her study is not a key, but it maps common usage. OEs are dispatched by their companies to perform time-limited work

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abroad. SIEs on the other hand decide themselves that they want to move.\textsuperscript{17} The distinction is important for two reasons. The first reason is that these groups behave differently, as proven by Peltokorpi and Froese.\textsuperscript{18} They found that SIEs are more likely to integrate and to adapt culturally to their new countries.\textsuperscript{19} The second reason is that while there has been significant research in the field of business studies on OEs and how they adapt, there has been very little research on SIEs, an expat segment of increasing importance. In terms of behavior OEs and SIEs appear to be similar to the sorts of cosmopolitans defined by Weenink in his 2008 study. In it he separates \textit{dedicated cosmopolitans} from \textit{pragmatic cosmopolitans}. Dedicated cosmopolitans view themselves as world citizens, they value multiculturalism and try to provide their children with an international outlook. Pragmatic cosmopolitans on the other hand are not motivated by values but by competitive advantage, they have often worked internationally and see the benefit of an international outlook for educational and professional reasons.\textsuperscript{20} The universality of Weenink’s definition is however unclear and can be interpreted as arbitrary as he strictly interviewed Dutch parents that had enrolled their children in international schools in the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{21}

A subcategory of the expat term, and a complement to the OE term, that is frequently used in sociological research is \textit{global middle class} (GMC). In their 2014 article, Ball and Nikita define the GMC as employees and freelancers that move around the globe working with transnational business. Job functions are what separates the GMC from Sklair’s \textit{transnational capitalist class}. The GMC work operatively and can be referred to as a global service class, while as the transnational capitalist class are in positions of power and primarily work strategically.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Weenink2} Weenink, 2008, p. 1093
\bibitem{Ball} Ball, Stephen John and Nikita, Dimitra Pavlina. The global middle class and school choice: a cosmopolitan sociology, \textit{Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft}. 2014;17(S3):81-93. doi:10.1007/s11618-014-0523-4, p. 85
\end{thebibliography}
The distinctions between expats and migrants, SIEs and OEs, dedicated and pragmatic cosmopolitans as well as global middle class and transnational capitalist class are important for this study as they help build an understanding about the heterogeneity of mover populations. It will also ease interpretation of the study's results and put it into perspective. The truth is that movers are not a homogenous group, and movers are not valued equally by social actors in their adopted countries.

Education and integration in the city of Berlin

Before discussing immigrant integration in Berlin, there are two important things to note with the city’s educational system. The first thing to note is that not all educational tracks provide access to higher education. The second thing to note is that students are assigned to the school closest to their home address. There is however room for families to use the educational system to their advantages and there is significant evidence of white flight. In some schools there are high shares of children from non-German backgrounds, which does not represent the ethnic make-up of the catchment area.23 A popular way for parents to bypass the system is to register as separated and for one parent to “move” and register in an apartment located in the desired catchment area.24

There has not been much research on integration of expat children into Germany’s educational system, but integration of migrant children has been an important topic of research due to the country’s immigration history. Focus has been on migrants from Turkey, former Yugoslavia and Italy, where most migrants have come from. Although the impact of institutionalized racism is unclear, Alba (1994) and Worbs (2003) found in their studies evidence of ethnic disadvantages. The studies are older but they are still frequently used on the topic of integration, and I have not managed to find more recent studies that reach different conclusions in terms of ethnic disadvantage for second generation migrants. Alba and Worbs studied the educational routes of different samples of the population, and how many migrants could be found in the various educational tracks. Their studies are however not directly comparable, as Alba’s data is from the 1908s and Worbs’s from the 1990s. The primary reason for ethnic disadvantage appears to be that immigrant parents’ educational and linguistic capital hinders effective

23 Noreisch, 2006, p. 87
24 Noreisch, 2006, p. 82
navigation of the German school system. Presumably this would disadvantage not just the children of immigrants but all children from lower classes.

Although there has not to my knowledge been any research on the integration of expat children, it is important to put the results of this study into a larger perspective. Berlin’s educational system is not one that is easily navigated, and studies show that migrant children from lower classes are disadvantaged. It is unclear if this also applies to resource-strong middle and upper class expat children. I am hoping that this study will shed some light on how expats navigate Berlin’s educational system and how they attempt to compensate for their lack of cultural-specific and linguistic capital.

Families’ educational strategies

One problem with previous research covering the middle class’s and expats’ educational strategies is that it is almost exclusively based on interviews. This is arguably the best method when attempting to understand underlying reasoning. Interviews, however, always come with the risk of self-selection bias. For that reason they are the most reliable when combined with quantitative research, and that is something that is missing in the field. The previous research named in this study, Groves and O’Connor (2017), Vincent et al (2010), Raveaud and van Zanten (2007), is all based on interviews. The exception is Forsey et al’s 2015 study in which they studied posts in online forums. Of course with this method there are other problems, as there is no way of knowing who the posters are. There has however been quantitative research on the manifestation of first and second generation immigrants’ educational strategies, for example Alba’s and Worbs’s before-mentioned studies.

Educational strategies are a fundamental part of families’ reproduction strategies. Depending on their class and their symbolic capital families have different ways of navigating the educational system.

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Middle class parents view the educational system as more complex, with informed and active consumers, than lower class families do. They are likely to utilize their cultural and social capital in order to attain the desired educational goals for their children. This doesn’t mean that the choice of schools is completely rational for middle class parents, they are still heavily affected by emotion and the sense of belonging to certain groups.

With the rise of globalization other forms of capital have emerged that are of importance for educational strategies. Cosmopolitan capital is a subcategory to cultural capital that includes for example linguistic capital and the understanding of globalizing markets and societies. In his 2008 study Weenink found it to be of increased importance as part of reproduction strategies by members of higher classes in an attempt to gain social advantage.

Studies of the expat population in Berlin and Hong Kong have shown that whether the expats choose international or local schools for their children can be of secondary interest. Of primary interest is that expat parents’ educational strategies overlapped with middle class parents’ educational strategies. Expats actively research educational opportunities for their children in order to make informed decisions. Values and beliefs in multiculturalism also proved important for expat parents, but equally important was the acquisition of cosmopolitan capital.

The results of the studies on middle class parents and expat parents support the notion that there is a class aspect to the term expat. These findings are important to this study because they imply that, with some caution, findings regarding middle class parents’ educational strategies can be used to understand expat parents’ educational strategies.

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28 Vincent et al, 2010, p. 295
29 Weenink, 2008, p. 1092
30 Weenink, 2008, p. 1100f
32 Groves and O’Connor, 2017, p. 392f
This is an important learning due to the limited research that has been done on expat parents’ reproduction strategies.

**Class** in modern society

There are different ways of defining *class*, a term that is often perceived as rigid and Marxist. Bourdieu developed *symbolic capital* and *symbolic space*, terms that have been widely accepted by sociologists. Economists and political theorists have found other terms. Richard Florida defines a new class system in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class, revisited* (2012). Florida has conducted quantitative studies of creative workers’ behaviors. He has also gathered data from various sources to support his theories on a modern day class system. According to Florida technology has changed society and the job market by changing how we perceive the value of creativity. Jobs have moved out of the factory and an increasing amount of workers are relying on creativity in order to perform their jobs. Florida defines this new group as the *creative class*. This new class can be described as a merger between the middle and upper classes. It’s characterized by its high cultural capital and its liberal values. It consists not only of artists and writers, but of professionals in business management and architects. Florida also splits the working class in two. He defines the *working class* mainly as production and maintenance workers. The ever-growing *service class* includes jobs involving for example food preparation or retail sales. Florida’s intention is to update the class system to fit the 21st century. His research has however been criticized for being arbitrary. Critics mean that his definition of the creative class is so broad that it can encompass almost all modern-day professions, leaving his definition effectively useless for studying distinguishing behavior. Regardless of the terms used to understand and explain social stratification researchers agree that if maneuvering society is a poker game, not everyone has been dealt the same cards.

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34 Florida, 2012, p. 53f
35 Florida, 2012, p. 31
36 Florida, 2012, p. 53f
37 Florida, 2012, p. 59f
38 Florida, 2012, p. 14f
39 Florida, 2012, p. 55
The *creative class* is in many ways a synonym for the acquisition of a new subcategory of cultural capital, a *creative capital* that implies a certain middle class habitus. Berlin is a city that relies heavily on artists and start-ups, and the creative class is an integral part of the city’s culture. This study examines educational strategies of American and British expats in Berlin, and some if not all interview subjects fall under Florida’s definition of the creative class. This is not surprising, according to Florida up 35-40% of Berlin’s workforce belong to the creative class. Florida’s broad definition of a creative class might to some seem at best opportunistic and at worst completely unvaluable. I have chosen to see it as a tool to identify common denominators in my interview subjects’ educational strategies. For that reason an understanding of what constitutes the creative class is important when studying Berlin’s expat population.

**Summary of previous research**

The chosen previous research is intended to highlight various aspects of the problem statement and to put it in a greater scientific context. Movers are not a homogenous group. The mover population consists of expats and migrants that are separated by class and ownership of symbolic capital. The expat population consists of self-initiated expats (SIEs) and organizational expats (OEs) that have been dispatched by their employers. Studies show that these groups behave differently, and presumably they have different ways of navigating Berlin’s educational system.

The notion that class is what separates expats from migrants is supported by studies of these groups’ educational strategies. Both middle class parents and expat parents have proved to make informed decisions when choosing school for their children, they are driven by values and a sense of belonging and they don’t hesitate to utilize their symbolic capital to gain advantage.

There are two things important to note with Berlin’s educational system. The first thing is that students are assigned to the school closest to their home address. The second is that not all educational tracks provide access to higher education. Both of these things

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40 Florida, 2012, p. 236
have proven to disadvantage migrant children from lower classes, but there has been no research on how resource-strong expat children from higher classes are impacted.

The creative class can be described as a merger between the middle classes and the upper class. It consists of professionals in creative fields, such as artists, architects and business managers, professions common to expats in Berlin.

**Method used**

The object of this study is not the expats themselves, but their choices of elementary school, the reasoning behind these choices and how these choices are impacted by their expatriatism. That makes interviews an appropriate method, as they allow for analysis of the interviewees’ reasoning and perception of the world.\(^{41}\) Interviews are however time consuming, something that limits the amount one can reasonably conduct in the scope of a study this size.

I have interviewed six expats in this study. The limited amount of interviews allowed for longer and more in-depth interviews than would have been possible with a higher amount of respondents. I primarily used snowball sampling to find the interviewees. I found one interviewee through personal contact and one after having put up a note in an international school, the other interviewees were found using snowball sampling. The problem with snowball sampling is selection bias, which could impact the study’s validity.\(^{42}\) Due to the amount of interviewees and the selection method, these interviewees cannot be considered representative for the expat population. This however should not conflict with the purpose of the study as its purpose is not to map all educational strategies but simply to provide insight into possible reasoning.

Interviews did allow me to address the purpose of the study, to understand the interviewees’ choices, their reasoning and how these related to their obtained symbolic capital. I met with the interviewees alone, without their families present, in order to minimize the risk of affected responses and groupthink. The duration of the interviews varied between 30 and 60 minutes. The quality of the interviews varied, it was partially

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\(^{42}\) Esaiasson et al, 2017, p.190f
due to my limited experience as an interviewer and partially due to the interviewees’ personalities. I perceived some interviewees to be very open and reflective while others were concise and reserved. Some interviewees contemplated the questions, others responded without much consideration.

Regarding the interviews there were ethical considerations to keep in mind. These included, but were not necessarily limited to, the following aspects. The first aspect was the importance of informing the interviewees of the purpose of the interview and the study. A second aspect was to only record an interview with the interviewee’s explicit permission. The third aspect was to provide the interviewees with as high a degree of anonymity as possible, without hindering interpretation of the study or its results.43

I chose to interview expats from the United States and the United Kingdom with children in Berlin. There are two main reasons behind the choice to interview expats from these countries. Firstly, these countries have similarly structured educational systems. My hope was that this will make it easier to determine which part of the expats’ reasoning is a direct result of the structure of the educational system and which reasoning is due to national culture in terms of norms, behaviors and beliefs. Secondly, choosing interviewees that are native English speakers ensures that the interviews maintain a certain flow and that the interviewees do not have to compromise their intended message. I chose Berlin due to the city’s high amount of expats.44

The interviewees have many things in common besides their nationalities. Although they live in different parts of the city they all live in areas that are characterized by high economic and cultural capital. They are also of similar socioeconomic backgrounds and age. All interviewees have attended university, most of them have BAs or PhDs. Their parents are or were, except for one father, college-educated despite it still being far less common for women to go into higher education in the 1970s than it is now. I have chosen interviewees with similar professions and socioeconomic backgrounds to allow for easier interpretation and comparison of the interviewees’ responses to the interview questions. I chose to work with an age bracket of 35-45 for two reasons. Firstly, I believe this age gap

43 Gustafsson, Bengt; Hermerén, Göran and Petersson, Bo. Vad är god forskningsedd? Synpunkter, riktlinjer och exempel. Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet, 2005
to be narrow enough to dismiss strong generational differences in terms of reasoning. Secondly, this age gap allowed me to locate respondents with children in elementary school or younger. The underlying assumption is that elementary school, along with high school, is one of the major educational crossroads that parents face and which trigger additional consideration.

## Findings

I will start with a short presentation of the interviewees, in order to simplify interpretation of the findings. This will be followed with presenting the findings thematically, based on relevant themes identified in the research material. The first theme is *Making the middle class*, in which I examine overarching reproduction strategies. This is followed by *Individualism makes a good school*, in which I dig deeper into the research material and surface the interviewees’ main priority regarding what makes a good elementary school. In *The German language and cultural integration* I study how the expats’ educational choices relates to matters of integration. The final theme is *To expats, friends are the new family* where I study how expats attempt to compensate for lacking cultural and linguistic capital using primarily social capital.

### Presentation of the interviewees

Below the interviewees are presented in a table. This will make it easier for the reader to understand the interviewees responses and to notice common denominators. Please note that the names are pseudonyms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Home country</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Move to Berlin (year)</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Parents’ jobs (father / mother)</th>
<th>Child(ren)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Tech</td>
<td>Stockbroker / Bank teller</td>
<td>Daughter (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Both teachers</td>
<td>Sons (4 and 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Tech</td>
<td>Both professors</td>
<td>Son (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Pharma</td>
<td>Engineer / Teacher</td>
<td>Sons (3 and 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finn</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Tech</td>
<td>Engineer / Lawyer</td>
<td>Daughter (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interviewees were similar in terms of age and socioeconomic background. There are however also differences that are important to note in order to understand the findings, such as how long the interviewees have lived in Berlin, their inherited cultural capital and the ages of their children.

Making the *middle class*

The interviewees’ educational choices varied. Chris, Dominic and Emily had chosen public schools in their catchment areas. Amy had chosen a public school outside of her catchment area, as it was located between her and her ex-partner’s apartments. Ben, who was relatively new to Berlin, had opted for a private international school for his children. Finn had not yet chosen a school for his daughter, who is in kindergarten, but he had a preference for public schools. What the school choices had in common was that they were motivated not by the acquisition of cultural and educational capital, but primarily by the pursuit of happiness and a sense of belonging. The expat middle class group in this study was characterized by its high cultural capital, and it showed many similarities with the specific middle class group studied by Raveaud and van Zanten and Vincent et al. Their studies showed a middle class group characterized by its high cultural capital as well as its liberal and caring perspectives.45 It is difficult to know if this was a coincidence, if Berlin attracts a certain type of people, or if it was simply this study’s interviewee selection. The fact that similar ideas about values and reasoning was raised by Groves and O’Connor in their study of middle class expats in Hong Kong suggests that this is not just the case with my interviewees.46 Overall, the educational strategies were more idealistic and less competition-oriented than the middle class strategies defined by Raveaud and van Zanten, Vincent et al and Groves and O’Connor. Although they do emphasize the importance of the pursuit of happiness and personal fulfillment, they paint a less idealistic picture. Raveaud and van Zanten claim that middle class parents are anxious about not being able to reproduce their privileged position, something I saw very few signs of in my study.47 If anything, the parents I interviewed were optimistic that their children would be at least equally as well off as they were. Their main priority was protecting their children, and that was the basis of their choice of elementary schools. When choosing

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45 Raveaud and van Zanten, 2007, p. 107
46 Groves and O’Connor, 2018, p. 388f
47 Raveaud and van Zanten, 2007, p. 112f
schools the interviewees valued that their children were heard, comfortable and that the school was within walking distance from their homes. Strong curriculums and school equipment were secondary.

Families are the foundation for social reproduction, as defined by Bourdieu. It was however unclear to me before I conducted the interviews, the extent of which habitus was passed down through generations. Although the interviewees acknowledged that their parents had directly or indirectly impacted their life choices, they did not understand the extent of the impact. The family’s influence manifested itself in several ways, which included not just educational strategies but also values and pastime activities. Emily, who works in the pharmaceutical industry, was the interviewee that appeared to be the most shaped by her upbringing. Not only had she chosen her profession to gain her father’s approval, she in many ways reproduced her own upbringing for her children. This was especially clear on the topic of pastime activities.

Saturday mornings we just spend together in pajamas getting to know each other. We don’t have anything particular we do, it’s just kind of catching up with friends, the kids might play the drums a bit or the piano. Our oldest son has a skateboard lesson or something. Mostly music, sports and relaxing. It’s quite similar to what I did when I was little. I had badminton for like two hours but some days we didn’t really do anything. Some days were just really boring.

The interviewees’ symbolic capital functioned as the foundation and a frame of reference for the educational strategies they chose for their children. This was a way for the interviewees to protect their children. Interviewees that perceived their elementary school years as happy wanted their children to attend schools similar to the ones they had attended. Interviewees that had been unhappy with their elementary schools used them as a reference for what kind of school not to put their children in. These interviewees saw it as if they corrected their parents’ mistakes. One way of correcting these mistakes was to be more hands-on than their parents had been. This parental hands-off mentality that characterized the interviewees’ upbringings appeared to be partially because of their

Bourdieu, 1998, p. 67ff
parents’ demanding jobs, but it was also in accordance with the parenting style of the 80s. Amy phrased it interestingly:

*It was the 80s, so gin and tonics five o’clock. Don’t disturb Mama Bear. It’s really different. She was hands off. We would hang together on the weekends, but it wasn’t like let’s go to the swimming pool or let’s go crafting. It was like all right see you later. But the 80s were really different, rich people were giving their kids to nannies, now it’s all like attachment parenting.*

The parents did not consider themselves very active in their children’s school work, they valued PTA meetings but did not necessarily see themselves helping out with homework. They were confident that they had chosen good schools for their children and therefore did not see the need to contribute. If their children did need help, however, they would provide their children with additional support or hire tutors.

The interviewees in this study were characterized by high levels of cultural capital and liberal values. In this sense they are very similar to the specific middle class groups studied by Raveaud and van Zanten, Vincent et al and Groves and O’Connor. The primary goal with the expats’ educational strategies was for their children to develop in a safe environment that would allow them to be themselves. The definition of a safe environment varied depending on the interviewees’ inherited and acquired cultural capital. In almost all cases that meant making the same decisions as their parents had made, alternatively correcting what they perceived had been their parents’ educational mistakes. In terms of school as well as pastime activities, the interviewees were generally more active parents than their parents had been. The interviewees noted a change in parenting trend since the 1980s, when they themselves grew up. They generally perceived themselves as more involved in their children’s lives than their parents had been in theirs.

**Individualism makes a good school**

Values were the most important thing that the interviewees’ parents had passed on to them, and that the interviewees in turn were now trying to pass on to their children. Their parents had encouraged independence, individualism and diversity, qualities highly
valued by the interviewees. The fostering of these qualities were the interviewees’ primary definer of what makes a good school.

Most parents agreed that what makes a good school is caring teachers, non-rigid structures and sufficient space for children’s individualism. Individualism came in different forms. For some parents it meant individualized exams, for others it meant catering to a wide variety of interests. Others raised the importance of customizable curriculums and caring teachers that saw their children. Finn had a negative view of the U.S. educational system:

*In America it’s so clear that they were trying to build a workforce. It’s what they call the Prussian model. That’s what school is for, to build little workers. I take seriously what the kids’ interests are and what their learning styles are.*

Except for Ben, who was relatively new to Berlin, all interviewees had chosen public schools for their children. Choosing free public schools over private international schools was not motivated by monetary factors but primarily by principles. International schools in Berlin are, with the exception of John F. Kennedy School, private and usually have tuition fees of €10-20K per year. Despite this only Amy, a single mother, brought up tuition fees as a factor in the decision-making process. Worth noting is however that the interviewees in this study generally earned above-average salaries and had partners with similar economic capital. Instead of private international schools the interviewees chose public schools as a way to ensure that their children could be themselves and grow to their full potential. The interviewees acknowledged that private schools had more resources and would probably provide a higher class education for their children, but they were largely perceived as homogenous and by some interviewees even stuffy. They might however have chosen private schools for their children had they felt that public schools would have provided subpar education. The idea that private schools are homogenous was the strongest in interviewees that had not attended private schools themselves. Prejudices against private schools are common in the U.S. and the U.K. due to cost of education. Renowned private schools, such as Ivy League colleges and Eton college, can cost up to $75K per year. The cost of quality education brings social polarization, and renowned private schools are often perceived to produce a certain kind of upper middle class habitus that the interviewees in this study could not relate to. These standpoints
might however translate poorly to Berlin where education is largely free and where the most renowned universities, such as Humboldt University, are public. Chris wanted his son to grow up in a diverse environment that he felt a private school could not provide.

_Mostly private schools put you in kind of a different view. They’re slightly unrepresentative I think of people in general. What’s important for us is that the people our son is surrounded by children that are not homogeneous._

In that sense they were staying true to specific middle class values tied to a high cultural capital defined by Raveaud and van Zanten, namely expressive well-being, instrumental success and intellectual development. However, in contrast to Raveaud’s and van Zanten’s interviewees, my interviewees sacrificed educational prestige on the altar of individualism. The interviewees’ focus on individualism and diversity, both in terms of class and multiculturalism, might have been amplified by their expat status. They wanted their children to speak several languages and to understand different cultures. Some of them ensured this by sending their children to public schools, but traveling with their children was another way of encouraging cosmopolitan values. About half of the interviewees were dedicated cosmopolitans. They had lived abroad for many years, they spoke German fluently and they no longer saw themselves as belonging to one country or culture. Instead they saw themselves as world citizens, or in Chris’s case, citizens of the Western world.

_I don’t see myself as German, as American, as Russian, Jewish, Armenian or whatever. These are all things that have been attributed to me officially and unofficially at various points in my life. But it’s truly dependent on perspectives. I’m certainly a Westerner. I’m not from the Muslim world, I’m not Asian, African or Latin American._

The interviewees’ liberal values manifested themselves in different ways in their educational strategies, primarily in their quest for individuality for their children. The importance of individuality and independence had been passed on to the interviewees by their parents, and they were now passing them onto their children. In their choice of elementary school the interviewees’ main priorities were that the schools encouraged individuality and independence and that the schools were ethnically and culturally diverse. It is unclear if the focus on diversity was amplified by their expatriatism and the increased awareness of cultural diversity.
The German language and cultural integration

Peltokorpi and Froese found in their 2009 study that self-initiated expats are more likely to integrate and culturally adapt than organizational expats, which is supported by the interviewees’ statements in this study.\textsuperscript{49} All interviewees in this study were self-initiated, except for Ben who had received some pressure from his employer to move and therefore was somewhere in between self-initiated and organizational. The interviewees were almost exclusively planning on staying indefinitely in Berlin, something that impacted their choice of schools. They were however open to leaving at some point. About half of the interviewees were open to returning to their native country, the other half were open to moving to new countries and experience new cultures. Except for one, all interviewees had opted for putting their children in public schools. It was clear that the interviewees had chosen public schools because of the hope that their children would acquire a certain cultural capital necessary for them to thrive in Germany. They all spoke predominantly English with their children, and they hoped for their children to be bilingual. The parents hoped that in public school their children would develop a fluency in German, as well as integrate in German culture. In school the children would learn things that their parents were not able, or willing, to teach them.

Discrimination did not appear to be a factor in the choice of school, this issue was only raised by one non-white interviewee. The white interviewees were not worried about their children being disadvantaged in a public school in comparison with German children, and probably rightfully so. It is difficult to deny the privilege white Caucasians hold in relation to other social groups, such as migrants. Bourdieu talks about cultural and linguistic dominance in a national sense, but if his theories were to be translated to a global or transnational perspective, Anglo-Saxon culture and English would arguably end up at top of the social strata.\textsuperscript{50} Dominic, a Brit and the only non-white interviewee, did however raise the topic of racism.

\textit{I went to a predominantly white school. I was bullied and teachers ganged up on me. Before that I hadn’t experienced racism, so I didn’t know why I didn’t like school. But}

\textsuperscript{49} Peltokorpi, 2009, p. 1106
\textsuperscript{50} Bourdieu, 1986, p. 46
my mom took me out and put me in a private school, with kids from all over. So I think that’s really important, to have a good mix of children of different nationalities.

For interviewees with German partners the choice of public school was easier, while as interviewees with expat partners noted that they would have felt more comfortable had their children attended international schools as they themselves did not feel culturally integrated. Amy, an American with a Danish ex-partner, felt culturally alienated and did not want to pass on her sense of alienation to her daughter:

*I feel a little bit outside of the community. I myself personally as a parent would feel really comfortable at a place like that. But the point is, it’s not a very integrated place you know. And even if I might leave I’m going to be here a long time. My ex was also super against that kind of model of being sealed off from German culture. So I could understand that, we don’t want to pass on our problems to the next generation, feeling outside of Germany culturally.*

Expats with German partners were a lot more culturally integrated than expats with expat partners. It was clear that social connections were a big part of perceived cultural integration. Expat couples were generally segregated from Germans and had few, if any, German friends. Expats with German partners, on the other hand, had adopted their partners’ social circles and therefore had more German friends than expats. This eased cultural integration and improved the expats’ German proficiency, the expats that were fluent in German all had German partners. The expats with German partners were also the ones who perceived themselves to be the most multi-cultural and the least bound to their national cultures. Dominic, a Brit who has a daughter with a German woman, had primarily German friends but from different migration backgrounds. This suited him well, as he himself grew up in London with Nigerian parents:

*I have more German friends but they all have different migration backgrounds. I have a lot of Yugoslavian, Asian, African and East European friends, but most of them grew up here. So I don’t actually have that many expat friends.*

The expats’ acquired cultural capital and their residential plans proved important for the interviewees’ educational strategies. The expats that were planning on staying indefinitely in Berlin had chosen public schools for their children, regardless of whether
or not their partners or ex-partners were German. Their hope was that public schools would allow their children to acquire cultural capital, specifically fluency in German and integration into German culture. For expats with German partners this decision came naturally, as they had acquired more cultural and linguistic capital. Expats with expat partners on the other hand struggled more with cultural integration, they were however not worried about being discriminated against.

To expats, friends are the new family

The interviewees struggled to varying degrees with navigating Berlin’s educational system. They ended up with different educational strategies, but they had all done their research and made active choices in terms of education. They attempted to make up for lacking informational capital using primarily their social capital. They utilized their connections in order to find out more about which schools were considered good and they used connections to get their children into those schools. The interviewees’ strategies correlate with the findings of Vincent et al, Raveaud and van Zanten. They claim that middle class parents with high levels of cultural capital view the educational system as more complex, with informed and active consumers, than lower class families do. They are likely to utilize their cultural and social capital in order to attain the desired educational goals for their children. It is possible that the complexity of Berlin’s educational system contributed to how active the parents were in their school choices. Even expats that had lived in Berlin for over ten years and that had German partners perceived the educational system as difficult to maneuver. Dominic compared getting into a good school to winning the lottery.

_The German system is very difficult. Once you’ve been allocated a school, generally that’s what you get. It’s a little bit like drawing the lottery. If you’re lucky you get a good school, if you get a bad school you have to consider moving to get a different school._

Despite all attendees acknowledging the complexity of the educational system, only two interviewees perceived language and culture as real barriers to making informed

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51 Vincent et al, 2010, p. 284
decisions. These interviewees tried to compensate for their perceived handicap with additional online research and posting questions on expat forums. Emily, a Brit with a British husband, struggled with making the right school choice for her son.

*For us it is quite a daunting process because with the language barriers and not growing up in the system as well. Understanding how things work is quite difficult. We have expat friends whose kids are three and they’re already thinking about elementary schools.*

Most of the parents perceived their social capital provided them with enough information to make informed decisions. Friends informed them not just of which schools were the best ones, but also what they should look for when attending open houses. Ben, an American who had moved with his wife to Berlin only a couple of years ago, had relied heavily on friends when choosing a school for his son to attend.

*I guess we wanted an international school because we didn’t like the idea of dropping children off in a school where they really didn’t speak the language. And then we talked to a lot of friends about which ones were the better ones. We applied to six or seven schools and got into two.*

The interviewees’ acquired social capital was crucial to their educational strategies. The expats acknowledged the complexity of Berlin’s educational system, and utilized their social capital in order to navigate it. Some interviewees were aided not just in choosing schools, but also with getting into their desired schools. Friends and colleagues provided the expats with the support and information they needed in order to make informed decisions, and they did not hesitate to utilize their social capital in order to fulfill their educational aspirations.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine expats’ educational strategies and how these relate to their expatriatism and their obtained symbolic capital. I defined two research questions: 1) *How do expats reason when choosing elementary school for their children and how does this relate to their experiences as expats?* and 2) *How do the expats’ choice of elementary school and educational priorities relate to their own inherited and acquired*
The study focused on American and British expats in Berlin. I interviewed six expats about their educational strategies and their cultural capital. The interviewees had much in common in terms of age and socioeconomic backgrounds. They had chosen different kinds of schools for their children. Some had decided to keep their children in the public school that they had been assigned to, others had applied for public schools outside their catchment area, and one interviewee had chosen a private international school for his children. Although the expats had constructed different educational strategies, the underlying reasoning and priorities were strikingly similar. The expats’ inherited and acquired cultural capital was the foundation for their educational strategies, but they made adjustments to cater for their expatriatism.

The interviewees were characterized by their high cultural capital and their liberal values. They believed in the importance of individuality, independence and diversity. These were values that had been passed on to them from their parents, and that they were now reproducing in their children. It is possible that liberal values and expatriatism feed into each other. It takes a certain focus on individualism and soul-searching to leave your home country, values that are amplified after the move by the increased awareness of cultural diversity. School was perceived as an important place for social reproduction as children spend so much time there. For that reason it was important to the interviewees that the chosen school’s values matched their own. In their choice of elementary school the interviewees’ main priorities were that the schools encouraged individuality and independence and that they were culturally diverse. Curriculums and school resources were perceived as less important. For that reason most parents had decided on public schools for their children. Public schools were generally perceived as more culturally and socioeconomically diverse, while as private schools were perceived as homogeneous and unrepresentative of society. It is possible that these opinions were a result of the structure of the educational systems in the U.S. and the U.K., where the cost of education results in more extreme social polarization than in countries where education is free of charge, such as Germany.

Besides the liberal values displayed by the interviewees that were closely related to their inherited cultural capital, they displayed cosmopolitan values that were closely related to their expatriatism and their acquired cosmopolitan capital. The expats did not see themselves as bound to one country and they wanted the same perceived freedom for
their children. The interviewees’ cosmopolitan values, and the cosmopolitan capital they had acquired, was an important factor in the construction of their educational strategies. Expats that were planning on staying in Berlin indefinitely had chosen to put their children in public schools. Their main goals were cultural integration and the acquisition of linguistic capital. For expats with German partners it felt natural to choose public local schools, as they were well-integrated culturally and had acquired social and linguistic capital in Germany. For expats with expat partners however the choice between public German schools and private international schools was more difficult. These expats felt as if they would probably have been more comfortable with international schools, but they acknowledged that what was comfortable for them and what was best for their children may not correlate. The utilization of social capital was however important to all interviewees. They acknowledged that Berlin’s educational system was complex and difficult to navigate, therefore they emphasized the value of social capital.

Although there has been only limited research on the expat group and almost none on expats’ educational strategies, the findings of this study, and others before it, can help build an understanding of expats’ educational strategies. The interviewees in this study held creative jobs and belonged to Florida’s creative class. They were middle class and characterized by their high cultural capital. These are traits that characterize expats, according to Gatti, and the creative class according to Florida.  

The educational strategies of middle class families with high cultural capital has been studied by Vincent et al, Raveaud and van Zanten, and in Groves’ and O’Connor’s case with an expat focus, and their results have much in common with the educational strategies presented in this study. Although these studies have been conducted in London, Paris, Berlin and Hong Kong they highlight transnational similarities in middle class educational strategies. There are two overarching similarities. The first similarity is the prevalence and the importance of liberal and cosmopolitan values. The second similarity is the importance of social capital and the willingness to utilize cultural capital in order to attain educational goals. The interviewees in this study did however appear to be less competitive than the interviewees in the other studies. Although the informants in this study raised the

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importance of cultural integration and fluency in German for their children, they were generally idealistic dedicated cosmopolitans, rather than the pragmatic and competition-oriented informants prevalent in previous research. Rather than educational prestige the interviewees attempted to acquire cosmopolitan capital for their children, typical traits for expats and cosmopolitans according to Forsey et al and Weenink.56

Due to this study’s small sample it is not possible to draw any general conclusions about the expat population, but it does highlight transnational denominators in the middle class’s educational strategies. For a better understanding of expats’ educational strategies more extensive studies need to be conducted that cover a more diverse span of nationalities, ages, socioeconomic backgrounds and host countries. Of especial importance, not just to research on the expat population but on the middle class in general, would be a more quantitative approach as studies on educational strategies tend to rely on interviews. Although interviews do surface reasoning in ways other methods are not able to, it is important to note that the extensive work that comes with the interview method makes it impossible to study larger samples of the population and that interviews always come with a certain self-selection bias.

References


Interview guide

Introductory questions

- How old are you?
- What do you work with?
- Where are you from?
- Could you tell me about when you relocated to Berlin and why?
- Are you planning to stay in Berlin?
  - If not, where and when are you planning to relocate?
- Do you speak German?
- Do you have German friends?

Inherited and acquired capital

- Did you attend university? If yes, what did you study?
- What do/did your parents work with?
- Did your parents attend university?
- Did you perceive your parents as supportive when you were in school?
- Do you perceive your parents as influential in your choice of education and profession?

School choices and reasoning

- How old are your kids?
- Are your kids attending elementary school already?
  - If yes, what kind of school? Religious, pedagogic niche, international?
  - If not, have you thought about the kind of school you would like for him/her/them to attend?
- How do you support your kids in their schoolwork?
- What was/is important to you when choosing an elementary school for your kids?
- What do you think makes a particularly good school?
- What do you think makes a particularly bad school?
- How important do you think you planning to stay in/leave Berlin is for your school choice?

Social and cultural capital

- How do you perceive your social network in Berlin?
- How does your social network in Berlin compare to that in your hometown?
- What do you do in your spare time?
• What do you do with your kids in your spare time?
• What sort of activities do your kids engage in outside of school?
• What sort of activities did you engage in as a kid?
• Do you think your educational choices and your cultural priorities would vary had you lived in your hometown?
• Do you want your kids to integrate into German society? If yes, what do you do to ensure this?

Closing questions

• Do you have anything you would like to add?