Everyday consequences of selectiveness. Borderwork in the informal sphere of a lower secondary school in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland

Marja Peltola
Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT
The concerns over school segregation have gained salience in Finland in the last two decades, paralleling the discussions elsewhere in Europe. This article examines from the pupil perspective, how school segregation and school selection are 'lived' in a lower secondary school in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. Using the concept of borderwork, I examine the hierarchies produced by the divide between selective, mixed and non-selective school class groups in pupils’ social relationships, and how these hierarchies intersect with social class and racialization. The article is based on interviews of altogether 46 pupils in the 7th and 8th grades (aged 13–15). I argue that school class groupings are a strong organizing principle in pupils’ social relationships, and that pupils’ borderwork narratives on selective and non-selective school class groups build on and help consolidate the social class-based and racialized differences between the groups.

Introduction
The Finnish comprehensive school, with its egalitarian ideals and mission to guarantee a high-quality basic education for everybody, is one of the flagships of the Finnish welfare state and a source of national pride in Finland. The vast literature on inequalities in education in Finland shows, however, that this aim has always been only partially achieved. In the last two decades, residential and school segregation has been identified in the Finnish context as a new, growing challenge to providing equal educational opportunities (e.g. Bernelius and Vaattovaara 2016; Kosunen et al. 2016).

Studies of urban areas with longer histories of the phenomenon around Europe have established that residential segregation is related to school segregation, as it shapes the variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds of pupils in schools located in different residential areas. This, in turn, has been found to influence everyday lives at school and the learning outcomes obtained. The phenomenon is related to and works in parallel with the mechanisms of school selection, school choice and family capitals, and increases the vulnerabilities of less privileged – lower-class and minoritized – groups (e.g. Reay and Lucey...
Given that privilege in terms of resources to choose both a residential area and a school follows social class divides, and that racialization in education and in society has consequences to people’s social class positions (Andersson and Molina 2003; Gillborn et al. 2012), in school segregation, social class and racialization intersect most saliently.

The focus of this article is on the everyday consequences of segregation and school selection in a lower secondary school in a comparatively socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhood in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. School selection refers to policy and practice that enable schools to select part of their incoming pupil body, even in an officially non-selective education system such as that in Finland. School selection is intimately interlinked with school choice, which refers to parental preferences in finding a ‘suitable’ school and a school class group for their children. In the Finnish context, school selection and its interlinkages with segregation and social inequalities have thus far been examined as macro-level processes based on statistical data (Bernelius and Vaattovaara 2016; Kosunen et al. 2016), at the level of school class groups and their socioeconomic and ethnic composition (Berisha and Seppänen 2017), and from the perspective of parental school choice (Kosunen 2016). What have been largely missing, though, are the micro-level manifestations and lived consequences of school selection and segregation in everyday life at schools, and the agency of the people for whom the educational system is supposed to provide equal opportunities for building their future trajectories – the pupils.

I understand school selection as having consequences for social groupings and social relationships in the official and informal spheres of school (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000), and concentrate on how school class groups, organized on the basis of selectiveness, form and shape social hierarchies among pupils. I claim that school selection policies are reflected in everyday life at school in ways that reproduce the inequalities that exist in the residential area and in society at large. The study provides an analysis of a local manifestation of urban segregation in the Finnish context, where clusters of social disadvantage have grown, but segregation still remains moderate, and thus the boundary between advantage and disadvantage materializes inside schools. Internationally, the Finnish case provides a contextualized example of the pervasive ways in which inequalities related to social class and racialization are reproduced in education and how educational policies and practices participate in this reproduction, even when their principles aim for the opposite.

**Finnish context: segregation and selectiveness in comprehensive schools**

According to Vaattovaara and colleagues (2018), the spatial social mixing policies that have been used as a preventive policy against residential segregation in Finland, worked as intended until the 1990s. Since then, there has been a gradual but steady trend of increasing segregation. Residential areas remain socioeconomically heterogeneous, but spatial concentrations of deprivation are expanding and forming larger clusters (ibid.) Due to racializing mechanisms in society, socioeconomic segregation overlaps with ethnic segregation in Finland, parallel to other national contexts (Andersson and Molina 2003).

In international comparison, the levels of residential and school segregation in metropolitan Helsinki remain moderate, even when compared with urban areas in other Nordic countries (Tunström, Anderson, and Perjo 2016). However, school segregation is estimated to be increasing, and segregation between schools is greater than segregation between
residential areas (Bernelius and Vaattovaara 2016). This relates to school reputations and parental school choice in white Finnish middle-class families in particular (Kosunen 2016), in ways that suggest homologies in the practices of the white middle class in Finland and across national contexts such as the Netherlands and the UK (Reay and Lucey 2003; Boterman 2013).

Finnish comprehensive school is officially non-selective. However, since the mid-1990s and parallel to the rise of neoliberal thoughts in Finland, as in many European societies, schools have been allowed to specialize in certain areas such as science, sports or music. In practice, specialization means that some of a school’s pupils receive ‘teaching with a special emphasis’, where the national core curriculum is supplemented with classes in the chosen subject. Emphasized teaching is often organized in separate school class groups, and selection for this teaching is based on application and aptitude testing.1 Thus, emphasized teaching has introduced selectiveness within the officially non-selective education system, and these selective school class groups form the basis of distinctive practices of (parental) school choice in Finland (Kosunen 2016; Varjo, Lundström, and Kalalahti 2018; Tikkanen 2019).

Social class, racialized divisions and borderwork in school

The reform establishing selectiveness in the Finnish context was justified on the basis of alleged equal opportunities for choice, which would enable families to choose a school regardless of their residential area. As ample studies show, however, pupils and their families do not have equal resources for utilizing the school choice option. A large body of literature draws from the Bourdieusian theory in particular, showing that it is easier for families with middle-class resources to navigate the education system and capitalize their resources in order to reproduce their privilege among the young generation (e.g. Lareau 2003; Vincent and Ball 2007). Middle-class families have shown to avoid schools – and in the Finnish context, also school class groups within schools – whose pupil body is considered disadvantaged, following social class and racialized lines (Reay and Lucey 2003; Kosunen 2016). Consequently, selective school class groups are more commonly chosen and accessed by pupils of the white ethnic majority and with middle- and upper-middle class backgrounds (Kosunen 2016; Berisha and Seppänen 2017).

In the literature related to school selection and segregation in Finland, the informal sphere of school (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000) and the children’s and young people’s actions in either consolidating or challenging the segregation mechanisms related to social class and racialization have thus far received only little attention. According to Gordon and colleagues (2000), informal school is a sphere that exists alongside and inside the official school in the practices and social relationships of the pupils. The practices of the informal school may oppose those of the official school and therefore may be seen as deviant and undesired; yet the informal school takes its shape on the basis of the official school (ibid.).

The interrelationships between young people’s meaning-making, social class, racialized differences, and localities have, however, been widely studied. Theoretical perspectives on social class as an embodied experience and a process related to defining the value or respectability of lifestyles (Skeggs 1997) have been used in analyzing the continued importance of social class in young people’s lives (e.g. Hollingworth and Williams 2009; Tolonen 2013). Racialization and racism reproduce inequality in institutional settings such as school (Gillborn et al. 2012), but also shape young people’s informal relationships: studies of social
mixing’ show that even in surroundings celebrated for their diversity and conviviality, young people’s mixing across ethnic, racial and class-based divides remains limited (Hollingworth and Mansaray 2012; Kivijärvi 2014).

In this article, I combine studies of school segregation and selectiveness, and studies of young people’s meaning-making and distinctions, in examining the social divides in the informal sphere of a lower secondary school in the Helsinki metropolitan area. In this task, I utilize Barrie Thorne’s (1993) concept of borderwork to analyze how school class grouping based on selectiveness works as a set of distinctions in the informal sphere of the school, and how these distinctions relate to social class and racialization. Thorne developed the borderwork concept – inspired by Fredrik Barth’s (1969) analysis of ethnic boundary-making – to analyze how gender boundaries become activated and ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ consolidated as separate and opposing groups in the social interaction of school children (Thorne 1993). Following others who have applied the concept in the analysis of social differences beyond gender (e.g. Hollingworth and Williams 2009), I utilize the concept for analysing the social relationships between pupils in different – selective, mixed and non-selective – school class groups. I argue that in a school setting, school class groups may ‘interact with one another in ways that strengthen their borders’ (Thorne 1993, 65), and that this process may strengthen the social class-based and racialized divisions in the school as well.

Data and school context

The data utilized in this article draws from one year (2019) of ethnographic fieldwork in a lower secondary school in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. It is part of a larger dataset gathered in three schools in the metropolitan area in the context of the project Local Educational Ethos: a study on well-performing comprehensive schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The school in question is located in a relatively disadvantaged residential area, which nevertheless comprises smaller areas with different characteristics and reputations in terms of residents’ social classes and ethnic and racialized backgrounds, also mainly middle-class and white Finnish areas. Following the segregation patterns in Finland (Vaattovaara et al. 2018), disadvantage is concentrated in small clusters within the area. The share of residents with minoritized ethnic backgrounds is higher than average (17.7%) in the metropolitan area, but there is significant variance inside the residential area.

The fieldwork consisted of observation of the everyday school life of three school class groups from the beginning of their spring term in the 7th grade (when the pupils were 13–14 years old) until the end of their autumn term of the 8th grade (when the pupils were 14–15 years old), and individual, paired and focus group interviews of the pupils and school staff. Of the three school class groups observed, one was a selective group in which all the pupils received emphasized teaching and had entered the group via an aptitude test. One was a non-selective group in which all the pupils followed the regular curriculum with no emphasis. The third was a mixture of these two: two-thirds of the pupils received emphasized teaching and had entered the group via an aptitude test. One was a non-selective group in which all the pupils followed the regular curriculum with no emphasis. The third was a mixture of these two: two-thirds of the pupils received emphasized teaching and had entered the group via an aptitude test, whereas the rest followed the regular curriculum. In order to secure the anonymity of the school, I give no details on the emphasized subject but refer to the school class groups by the abbreviations EMP (the selective group), MIX (the mixed group), and REG (the group following the regular curriculum). The requisite ethical clearance for the study was received from the Education Division of
the city, and parental consent was obtained from all the parents of the pupils who participated in the study. All the pupils’ names in the article are pseudonyms.

This article’s focus is on pupil interviews \((n = 37)\), which were carried out either individually \((6)\), in pairs \((18)\) or in focus groups of 3–4 pupils \((13)\), according to the pupils’ wishes. Altogether 46 pupils participated in the interviews, most of them \((38)\) twice, during the fieldwork period. Of the 46 pupils, 18 received emphasized teaching in the EMP school class group, 11 received emphasized teaching in the MIX school class group, and 17 followed the regular curriculum without emphasis either in the non-selective REG group \((12)\) or in the MIX mixed group \((5)\). The interviews were semi-structured and included themes such as everyday school life, social groupings and friendships in the school, relationships with teachers, the importance of school, family, leisure time and neighborhood.

The three school class groups differed from each other in distinctive ways, which reflects the heterogeneity of the neighborhood and follows the research findings that show that selective groups are more commonly chosen by white, middle-class families \((\text{Kosunen et al. 2016; Berisha and Seppänen 2017})\). The school class groups’ background features are presented in Table 1.

Certain vulnerabilities were more common among the pupils in the non-selective REG group than in the two others. An indication of these vulnerabilities is that the homeroom teacher of the non-selective group had filed child welfare notifications concerning one-third of the pupils in under a year, whereas in the other two school class groups, such cases were rare.\(^3\) The child welfare notifications were typically submitted on the basis of too many absences from school, which caused concerns over whether the parents were adequately able to support their child’s school-going.

The attitudes towards the study also varied from one group to another. In the selective (EMP) and mixed (MIX) school class groups, the initial reactions varied between neutral and interested, and the required parental consent forms were returned without major delays. In the non-selective REG group also, the majority of pupils eventually participated in the study, and considered it a positive experience. Yet, reaching this point required months of work of building a trust-based relationship with them. This difference may well be related to the researcher’s habitus as a white, middle-aged and middle-class academic, and the ways of introducing the study. However, it can also be interpreted as indicative of the comparatively low levels of trust the pupils in the non-selective school class group REG felt towards the school institution, and by extension, towards the actors and projects supported by the gatekeeping school authorities.

In the analysis, I focus on how the pupils talked about their own and the parallel school class groups, paying attention to acts of borderwork, which I see as consisting not only of the physical use of space and strategic avoidance and contact \((\text{Thorne 1993, 64–84})\), but

| School class group | EMP | REG | MIX |
|--------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Selectiveness      | Selective only | Non-selective only | Mixed |
| Number of interviewees | 18 | 12 | 16 |
| Gender balance     | 50–50 | Boy majority | Girl majority |
| Socioeconomic backgrounds | Majority from middle-class families | Heterogeneous | Heterogeneous |
| Ethnic backgrounds  | Almost exclusively white Finnish | Majority with minoritized ethnic backgrounds | Majority white Finnish |
also of narratives constructing and consolidating differences between the groups. My central
interests are the identifications and distinctions based on school class group borders,
together with narratives on encounters between the groups.

Thus, I analyze the data with the help of theory-driven thematic analysis, which also
draws from the narrative research tradition. Narratives are a central way in which individuals
make sense of their lives and surroundings, for themselves and to others. The narratives
present in an interview situation – as in any social situation – do not only reflect individual
or collective experience; they are also attached to the social context and the culturally
available story types that act as performative tools for representing oneself (Atkinson 2005).
Within the narrative tradition, a distinction has been established between ‘big’ or biographi-
cal stories, and ‘small’ stories that describe ongoing events and identifications and are a
part of interactive ways of performing the self (Bamberg 2006; Phoenix 2008). My focus
here is on the ‘small stories’, since this approach effectively reflects the fragmentary, collec-
tively produced and situation-specific nature of the pupils’ narratives and the shifting and
negotiated social positions they assumed themselves and allocated to others.

The empirical section is divided into three parts. The first discusses the narratives and
practices through which the borderlines of ‘us and them’ are built and consolidated along
the school class group boundaries. The second discusses the role that social class and racial-
ized difference played in these distinctions. The third section briefly discusses the impli-
cations of the school class group boundaries for the pupils’ relationships with the ‘official
school’, the teachers and the school institution.

‘Us’ and ‘them’: constructions of the selective, mixed and non-selective
school class groups

School class grouping is a strong principle that organizes social relationships in school.
School class groups not only define the study groups and therefore the amount of time spent
in certain social constellations; in the data, they are also present in the identifications,
distinctions and borderwork (Thorne 1993) between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The three school class
groups had different reputations in the school, which on the surface related to the differing
levels of academic orientation and compliance with the school rules, but which also carried
social class-based and racialized meanings.

A vast majority of the pupils stated that they liked their own school class group and had
friends there. Criticism towards classmates was raised at times, but generally the stories of
their own school class groups were coloured by feelings of familiarity and (relative) security.
Although social relationships within school class groups are organized hierarchically (e.g.
Mendick and Francis 2012), the grouping nevertheless seemed to enable feelings of belong-
ing and ‘we-ness’ – even if this was not equally shared among all – which marked the parallel
school class groups as social ‘others’.

Aurora and Sofia for instance, while claiming that their MIX school class group was ‘child-
ish’, still maintained that they liked this group the best, as it lacked the allegedly ‘irritating’
(REG) and ‘arrogant’ (EMP) characteristics of the pupils in the other school class groups:

R: What do you think, is your school class group similar to the other groups in this school?

Aurora & Sofia [in unison]: No.
R: Yeah. What sort of differences are there then?

Aurora: I think it's better than the other groups, like that-

Sofia: It is! Was it, which school class group is with us in Swedish class? […]

Aurora: I suppose it's the REG group or something.

Sofia: Yeah so and, they're irritating, all of them are irritating.

R: Oh, how?

Sofia: Well, like, and at least the EMP group is really, I'm so happy that I wasn't put in the EMP group, I would've killed myself. […]

R: So, what's so irritating about the people in the EMP group?

Sofia: They're all arrogant.

Aurora: Yeah, they are, all a bit…[takes an arrogant look]

Sofia: They're all like, 'bitch, bitch' […] Really, a bit like that, so I don't know, I think our class group is the best.

Aurora: I think so too.

[Paired interview, girls aged 13 and 15, one with mixed parentage, one with an ethnic minority background, MIX]

This affective distinction makes one set of difference ('childishness') irrelevant, but highlights the importance of others, this way consolidating the idea of separate, qualitatively different school class groups (Thorne 1993). The extract also illustrates how the narratives constructing 'us' and 'them' took shape through a dialogical process of negotiation and affirmation.

It was rather common, especially among the boys in all the school class groups, to avoid presenting themselves or their school class groups as too obedient or 'swotty', which reflects the uneasy relationship between masculinity and school success (Asp-Onsjö and Öhrn 2015). However, the non-selective REG school class group was congruently described as 'wild' or restless by the pupils in all three school class groups. For pupils in the selective (EMP) and mixed (MIX) groups, this difference was part of a moral distinction related to 'suitable' levels of 'caring about school' (see Hollingworth and Williams 2009). The pupils of the non-selective REG group discussed their school class group's 'wildness' in a rather matter-of-fact manner, but also critically:

Bekim: They don't really let you study in peace, like for instance our school class group, so, you can't study. Or yeah, you can study but it's hard. And because of this, sometimes, even I don't let others study in peace, by accident. Because there's so many people and it's hard to notice, if we talk, and suddenly you just notice that your voice is so loud and.

R: Yeah, so it's easy to go along with the things that the others do, too?

Bekim: Yeah, right.

[Individual interview, a boy aged 14, ethnic minority background, REG]
However, the pupils in the non-selective group REG also described their school class group, as a community, in positive terms, especially on the basis of its inclusive spirit in which ‘everybody got along with each other’.

The majority of the teaching was organized in the pupils’ own school class groups, as is common in Finnish comprehensive schools. This practice allows the ‘we-ness’ related to school class groups to develop, but it also makes opportunities to socialize with pupils from other groups comparatively rare. Optional subject classes and some language and physical education classes were, however, organized across the school class group borders. In these classes the pupils from different school class groups had the opportunity – and no other option but – to socialize with each other. These classes were material for the narratives on the ‘other’ school class groups, and often moments of spatial and verbal distinction and borderwork. In terms of use of space, the pupils consistently located themselves in shared classrooms in ways that maintained the school class group borders. Attempts to temporarily dissolve these patterns for official school purposes were often faced by the pupils’ marked reluctance.

The following extract is from three boys’ narrative on a physical education class, where the girls of the MIX school class group were supposed to practice dancing with these boys from the non-selective REG group. It highlights the avoidance and borderwork of the girls in the MIX group based on negative evaluation of the ‘others’ in terms of both school class group and gender:

Iiro: They [the girls in the MIX class] say, like, totally weird stuff about people. That they’ll get Ebola if they dance [with us]…

Veeti: Yeah, in the 7th grade (previous term) they said they’d get Ebola if they had to dance with us.

Tuomo: Because we’re such retards. But they themselves are, like, they have blue hair, they have lego backpacks and their stories are like fifth-graders’ (11-year-olds’) stories.

[Focus group, three boys aged 14, white Finnish backgrounds, REG]

The way in which the MIX school class group’s girls compared interacting with the REG school class group’s boys to an infection risk is a powerful act of othering that resonates with Thorne’s (1993, 73–76) analysis of claims of contamination as statements of social distance and superiority. Tuomo’s (ableist) explanation ‘because we are such retards’ refers to a shared understanding of the REG school class group’s reputation as an academically less valued, ‘problematic’ group. The boys answer to the insulting distinction in the interview situation by negatively evaluating the girls’ embodied characteristics. However, it appears that in the incident described, the MIX group girls have had more power to reject the REG group boys than the other way around, and by so doing they have re-established the existing hierarchical divide between the school class groups in the school.

Although avoidance and distinction were common among pupils from different school class groups, it is noteworthy that more neutral and friendly encounters occurred, too. A group of three boys, who followed regular curriculum in the school class group MIX, even expressed a wish to study in the non-selective school class group REG instead of their own, because some of their primary school friends did so. This wish illustrates how friendships that crossed school class group borders tended to take place between pupils who had a
shared primary school history, or who either both were in emphasized teaching or both were following the regular curriculum.

**Social class and racialized differences in descriptions of school class groups**

As part of the interview discussions on families, I gained approximate knowledge of the pupils' parents' positions in the labor market, based on which I assessed that they roughly corresponded to earlier studies' observations that accessing a selective school class group require middle-class resources (Kosunen 2016). The family backgrounds of the pupils following the regular curriculum were more heterogeneous, but not necessarily 'disadvantaged'. In the young people's narratives, social class was present mainly in evaluations of embodied and lifestyle-related issues such as leisure, interests, consumption and clothing (Hollingworth and Williams 2009; Tolonen 2013; cf. Skeggs 1997). In terms of ethnic and racialized differences, the school class groups differed from each other significantly, as only a few individual pupils in the MIX and EMP school class groups, but a majority of pupils in the REG school class group, were from minoritized ethnic groups. However, generally, the school class group-based nature of the racialized difference was seldom addressed in the school; instead the school as a whole was considered 'multicultural' by the school staff in particular, partly in ways that celebrated (alleged) conviviality and even colourblindness in the pupils (cf. Hollingworth and Mansaray 2012).

**Organized leisure and fashion as social class-based distinctions**

Earlier studies (e.g. Lareau 2003; Vincent and Ball 2007; Berg and Peltola, 2015) have established that organized leisure activities are one of the ways through which middle-class parents reproduce classed resources for their children. They also play a role in school choice and selection through creating interest and providing the children with skills that act as embodied cultural capital when applying to selective school class groups (Kosunen 2016). The social class-based dimension of organized leisure was reflected in the identifications and distinctions among the pupils as well. In the following extract, two boys from the non-selective REG school class group discuss why they dislike the pupils of the selective school class groups. Deniz's affective distinction from the pupils in the selective groups is made concrete in his contempt towards a particular hobby some of them were engaged in, and Rahul refers to the interconnectedness of the hobby and selectiveness: the hobby is what has helped the pupils access the selective group.

R: There are those emphasized teaching groups, too, EMP and MIX, so, do they ever hang with you?

Deniz: No, I hate them.

R: Ok. Why?

Deniz: They're so irritating. Those people [engaged in a particular hobby] in EMP, I don't like them. I don't know why.

Rahul: It's probably because you don't like [the hobby].

Deniz: Well that's like, one reason.
Rahul: I don't like them either. [...] It's like, they get emphasized teaching, for which they've had to do the admission test thing. Then they all take part [in organized leisure activities].

[Paired interview, two boys aged 14, ethnic minority backgrounds, REG]

The narrative tells us about different interests which may also be interpreted as indicative of different social class positions, and of attached resources or the lack of such to pursue a certain lifestyle.

The pupils in the selective (EMP) and mixed (MIX) groups, for their part, not only considered their leisure activities personally meaningful, but sometimes saw them as connected to characteristics such as better academic and time management skills, which were thought to guarantee a bright educational future (see Berg and Peltola 2015). Such assumptions – sometimes confirmed by the teachers – were used to build distinctions from the pupils of the non-selective school class group:

Mona: In the selective groups maybe, people are generally more interested in school. [...] Even the teachers say, 'it's likely that many of you will go to academic upper secondary school,' since people get quite good grades anyway.

R: Why do you think it is that in EMP people are more interested in school? [...] Silja: You need to think, 'ok I have [a hobby] tomorrow, so today I'll do this, study for an exam, because I won't have the time tomorrow' and so on. [...] Mona: The timetable, exactly (...) (it) at the same time helps you study for exams.

[Paired interview, two girls aged 13 and 14, one with a white Finnish background, one with mixed parentage, EMP]

It thus seems that the ability of organized leisure to transmit social class-based resources was recognized among the pupils.

Social class and school class group boundaries also intertwined in the evaluations of the pupils' appearances and clothing (cf. Tolonen 2013). Finnish schools do not adhere to school uniform policies and clothing styles vary according to pupils' wishes and resources. According to Inka from the selective EMP school class group, pupils in her school class group were generally recognized based on their exclusive brand clothes. Inka did not want to identify with a particular fashion style herself, but she constructed herself as a person who has the economic means for consuming high-quality brands:

Brands are quite like this, a thing for the EMP group, quite a few have them. Then for my part, I think since the 5th grade [11 years] or something, I prefer quality to quantity. [...] I've heard that people in the EMP group can be recognized quite easily based on this, we always have brand clothes.

[Individual interview, girl aged 14, white Finnish background, EMP]

While exclusive brands thus were a means of social class-based self-representation for the pupils in the selective EMP school class group, cheaper (mass) brand products were not always positively charged items in the school. This was revealed, for instance, by the girls of the MIX school class group referring to the girls of the non-selective REG school class group by the derogatory term 'massalissu' (in Finnish), which means a young female interested in mass fashion but lacking intelligence or individuality, implying a social class-based
The term itself and its lack of a male counterpart also draws attention to the gendered nature of the school’s informal but social class-based norms and hierarchies (Skeggs 1997). The risks related to mass fashion were further illustrated in discussions on ‘fake’ brands, the use of which was grounds for mockery. ‘Fake’ brands were a concern for the pupils in the non-selective REG school class group in particular, which may be understood as indicative of their worry about ‘passing’ in the social class-based school hierarchies in a parallel way with the working-class women analyzed by Skeggs (1997) worried about ‘passing’ as respectable and middle class.

Unlike the pupils of the selective EMP group, many of the pupils of the MIX group self-identified as people who did not care about ‘mass’ trends, and legitimized a taste based on the values of individuality and environmentally-friendliness instead. This position manifested in preferring self-made or flea market clothes to brand clothes. Thus, it was possible to question the value of brands; however, confidently defending a more ‘individualistic’ style required resources that at least partly seemed to connect to high levels of cultural capital.

**Racialized difference between the school class groups**

Ethnic and racialized difference was negotiated in complex ways in the ‘multi-ethnic’ non-selective REG group, where the pupils’ various minoritized backgrounds were commented on daily. Unlike for the pupils in the two other groups, for the pupils in the non-selective REG group, ethnic diversity was mundane and partly tied to the ‘we-ness’ of the school class group (Bunar 2010). In a focus group of four girls with minoritized ethnic backgrounds, the REG school class group was in unison described as ‘the immigrant (school class) group’. The term ‘immigrant’ here did not refer to the pupils’ migration experiences per se, given that most of the pupils in REG school class group were born in Finland and one-third of them were actually white Finnish. I interpreted the choice of term – which carries racializing and negative connotations in Finnish, similar to several other national contexts – thus a way to acknowledge the racialized position as being different to that of the white Finnish norm still pervasive in Finnish schools, and to reclaim the negatively defined category.

Among the pupils in the ethnically Finnish-majority mixed (MIX) and selective (EMP) school class groups, in turn, ethnicities were seldom discussed. Abstract notions that ‘(ethnic) background does not matter’ were common in interviews, but white Finnishness still marked a silent and rather self-evident difference from the non-selective school class groups. Meri and Alisa from the MIX school class group explained that the small number of pupils with minoritized backgrounds in emphasized teaching was due to different interests and lack of knowledge about the school choice option in minority ethnic families:

Meri: I think it [the lack of ethnic diversity in the school class group] has to do with the emphasized teaching too, because some people don’t necessarily want it, because Nadja and Sofia [the only girls with non-Finnish backgrounds in the MIX group], neither of them is in emphasized teaching. […]

Alisa: Maybe they just don’t know or, don’t understand that option.

Meri: Yeah, Nadja hadn’t even heard about emphasized teaching.

[Paired interview, two girls, aged 13–14, white Finnish backgrounds, MIX]
Thus, the pupils’ borderwork narratives built on constructions of and assumptions related to social class and racialized difference, which overlapped the school class group boundaries, or at least were constructed as doing so.

**Relationships with the official school**

In terms of assessing the consequences of selectiveness, it is useful to briefly look at how the school class group boundaries organized the pupils’ relationships with the official school. In all three school class groups, the relationships between individual students and the school or individual teachers were heterogeneous. Here, however, I concentrate on what was told about the relationships between the school class groups as communities and the official school.

The reputation that the non-selective school class group REG had as the ‘wild’ and disruptive group in terms of the official school was, according to the pupils’ narratives, sometimes legitimated by the teachers. For instance, Meri, Ellen and Linda from the MIX school class group described how teachers told them that their school class group was ‘easy’ or ‘nice’, or even the teacher’s ‘favourite’, and compared them with the other school class groups.

Meri: [The teacher] said that she could never leave the REG school class group alone for even five minutes, like, she couldn’t even go to get some papers from the copy machine in a classroom next door, because in the REG group there would be, like, five heads and four legs ripped off in that time. (…)

Ellen: [Another teacher] complains too, we are her favourite class. (…)

Linda: She’s always very happy if she has just had a class with the REG group or [another parallel] group, and, ‘they almost tore my head off, but now I have a class with you’.

[Focus group, three girls aged 14, white Finnish backgrounds, MIX]

The pupils in the non-selective REG school class group, on the other hand, had experiences of teachers expressing exhaustion and frustration due to their behavior that was seen as disruptive. They considered many of the sanctions they faced, both individually and collectively, understandable and necessary. However, many of them also had profound experiences of not being liked – collectively, as a school class group – by the teachers.

R: How about the teachers, do you think they’re fair or do they treat people, like, equally?

Jamila: They treat us like dogs.

R: Dogs? How?

Jamila: They can’t treat us like human-beings. (…)

Tanja: With [a teacher], I remember, well, yes, our group was noisy, ok, then she was like, ‘if I was your mother’ or something like that, ‘I wouldn’t have wanted to give birth to you’.

Rosi: She said that?

Tanja: Don’t you remember, she said something like that.

Nura: Yeah, like, ‘I wouldn’t have tolerated you’, something like that.

Tanja: Then everybody was like, ‘wow’…
Jamila: I remember her saying that she didn't think we would ever get a job.

Tanja: Yeah, she said that too, she said quite a lot of things.

[Focus group, four girls aged 13–14, minority ethnic backgrounds, REG]

When reading narratives like the one above, one must bear in mind the performative distance and dislike that some of the pupils in the non-selective REG group showed towards the official school. However, it was very clear that the experience of being collectively insulted by a teacher had been deeply hurtful. Further, even though several other teachers consciously aimed to affirm and support these pupils in particular, the negative experiences seemed to be generalized more broadly as: 'Every teacher probably hates us' (Tanja, aged 14, minority ethnic background, REG). Teachers' low expectations are detrimental for pupils from all backgrounds, but these and other forms of categorization and social control may be disproportionately targeted to minoritized pupils (Gillborn et al. 2012; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018). Given the social class-based and racialized differences between the school class groups, the encounter described in the extract certainly is an example of how teachers’ practices have the power to reproduce inequalities where social class and racialization intersect.

Despite their rather fragile trust in the teachers and the school as an institution, the non-selective REG school class group, as a social community, seemed to be able to support some of its vulnerable members, even in regard to schoolwork. For instance, when reflecting on her school-going, Amanda, who had a deeply troubled life situation and for whom attending school was hard, stated that her school class group was a reason to come to school.

R: What's good about this (school)?
Amanda: Well maybe… I don't know. This school class group [in a whisper].
R: Your school class group?
Amanda: Yeah, yes. Even though it may be the only problem class in the school, it's still a good place to be.

[Paired interview, girl aged 14, minority ethnic background, REG]

It seems likely that a different kind of environment – a school class group with a stronger preference of middle-class academic orientation, for instance – would have intensified Amanda’s feelings of exclusion rather than supported her. Thus, especially from the pupils’ perspective, an ‘optimal’ school or school class group environment is not (only) about academic skills and the capitals available in a group, but about feelings of belonging and security (Bunar 2010).

Conclusions and discussion

Andersson and Molina (2003, 261) argue that urban segregation is too often understood in a static way, neglecting the power relations in which segregation is rooted but also people's agency and how the borders between spaces are reinforced or crossed in everyday life. In this article, my aim has been to examine the social space of a lower secondary school in a heterogeneous but relatively disadvantaged residential area from a perspective that is
sensitive to both the power related to social class and racialization, and the pupils’ agency in reproducing hierarchies and segregation.

I took the school class group borders, defined on the basis of selectiveness and aligning with social class-based and racialized difference, as the starting point of my analysis. By using Thorne’s concept of borderwork (1993), I showed that the social boundaries between the school class groups are established and maintained in the informal sphere of the school and enacted by both avoidance and contact. The focus on borderwork between the school class groups reveals that social class and racialized distinctions constructed by young people – in this case – coincide and work in parallel with the selectiveness in the school’s admission policies and grouping practices in ways that reproduce and consolidate inequality where social class and racialization intersect (cf. Gillborn et al. 2012). The parallels in the organization of social relationships at the levels of official and informal school therefore highlight the pervasiveness of social class-based and racialized inequality in education.

It is, however, important to bear in mind that the meaning and importance of particular boundaries are shifting and (partly) defined in situation-specific ways (Thorne 1993). In the data, the importance of school class group borders was emphasized at least partly because reflection on the issue was prompted by the interviewer, and when discussing other topics, the divides and hierarchies within the school class groups gained salience. Thus, borderwork processes are not absolute or unchanging.

The borderwork processes tend to highlight the similarities and downplay – at least momentarily – the heterogeneity within the groups, correspondingly highlighting the differences between the groups (Thorne 1993). Therefore, the social class-based and racialized meanings given to the differences between the school class groups in the borderwork narratives contribute to strengthening the social class-based and racialized reputations attached to selective and non-selective school class groups. These, in turn, contribute to residential and school segregation via the middle class’ practices of school choice (Kosunen et al. 2016).

The central role of the official school’s grouping practices as the base on which the informal school’s distinctions and borderwork are built highlights the informal school’s embeddedness in the official school (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000). The customary grouping practices in schools in Finland, that is, organizing emphasized teaching in separate school class groups, aligns the structurally produced inequalities of social class and racialization with school class group boundaries. Avoiding such alignment in grouping is, however, possible, as is exemplified in the school class group MIX, where some pupils received emphasized teaching and some did not. Although adopting such practice more commonly in grouping would not mean that young people cease making school class group-based, social class-based and racialized distinctions, it would at least unravel one overlap of hierarchies within schools.

In international comparison, the Finnish context is characterized by moderate levels of residential and school segregation, together with a long tradition of emphasizing egalitarian ideals while not reaching them in practice. Although challenges related to school segregation are likely to be different in other national contexts, the analysis highlights a need to understand and examine segregation not only in terms of differences between schools but as a phenomenon that manifests in varying ways inside schools, in official school practices, and at the level of informal school and peer relationships.
Notes

1. Aptitude tests test children’s ‘aptitude’ in the emphasized subject, such as musical aptitude or sport success. Gaining entrance to emphasized teaching thus requires not only parental resources for the application itself but embodied cultural capital in the child, often obtained through organized activities and ‘concerted cultivation’ (Vincent and Ball 2007; Kosunen 2016).

2. The author thanks Academy of Finland for funding the research project (nr. 314735).

3. Child welfare notification is a mechanism through which a professional or any concerned citizen may notify child welfare social workers of a concern they have regarding an individual child’s wellbeing. Filing a notification leads to a process in which social workers investigate whether child welfare interventions are needed in order to secure the child’s wellbeing. All authorities working with under-aged children are obliged by law to submit a child welfare notification if they are concerned about a child.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Marja Peltola 0000-0001-9991-6518

References

Andersson, Roger, and Irene Molina. 2003. “Racialization and Migration in Urban Segregation Processes. Key Issues for Critical Geographers.” In Voices from the North - New Trends in Nordic Human Geography, edited by Jan Ohman and Kirsten Simonsen, 261–282. Farnham: Ashgate.

Asp-Onsjö, Lisa, and Elisabet Öhrn. 2015. “To Pass the Test: The Timing of Boys’ Parallel Positioning.” Education Inquiry 6 (2): 25466. doi:10.3402/edui.v6.25466.

Atkinson, Paul. 2005. “Qualitative Research – Unity and Diversity.” Forum: Qualitative Research 6 (3): 26. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0503261.

Bamberg, Michael. 2006. “Stories: Big or Small. Why Do We Care?” Narrative Inquiry 16 (1): 139–147. doi:10.1075/ni.16.1.18bam.

Barth, Fredrik. 1969. “Introduction.” In Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, edited by Fredrik Barth, 9–38. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Berg, Päivi, and, Marja Peltola. 2015. “Raising Decent Citizens—on Respectability, Parenthood and Drawing Boundaries.” NORA- Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research 23 (1): 36–51. doi:10.1080/08038740.2014.938116.

Berisha, Anna-Kaisa, and Pia Seppänen. 2017. “Pupil Selection Segments Urban Comprehensive Schooling in Finland: Composition of School Classes in Pupils’ School Performance, Gender, and Ethnicity.” Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research 61 (2): 240–254. doi:10.1080/00313831.2015.1120235.

Bernelius, Venla, and Mari Vaattovaara. 2016. “Choice and Segregation in the ‘most Egalitarian’ Schools: Cumulative Decline in Urban Schools and Neighbourhoods of Helsinki, Finland.” Urban Studies 53 (15): 3155–3171. doi:10.1177/0042098015621441.

Boterman, Willem. 2013. “Dealing with Diversity: Middle-Class Family Households and the Issue of ‘Black’ and ‘White’ Schools in Amsterdam.” Urban Studies 50 (6): 1130–1147. doi:10.1177/0042098012461673.

Bunar, Nihad. 2010. “The Geographies of Education and Relationships in a Multicultural City: Enrolling in High-Poverty, Low-Performing Urban Schools and Choosing to Stay There.” Acta Sociologica 53 (2): 141–159. doi:10.1177/0001699310365732.
Gillborn, David, Nicola Rollock, Carol Vincent, and Stephen J. Ball. 2012. “You Got a Pass, so What More Do You Want?’: race, Class and Gender Intersections in the Educational Experiences of the Black Middle Class.” Race Ethnicity and Education 15 (1): 121–139. doi:10.1080/13613324.2012.638869.

Gordon, Tuula, Janet Holland, and Elina Lahelma. 2000. Making Spaces: Citizenship and Difference in Schools. London: MacMillan.

Hollingworth, Sumi, and Katya Williams. 2009. “Constructions of the Working-Class ‘Other’ among Urban, White, Middle-Class Youth: ‘Chavs’, Subculture and the Valuing of Education.” Journal of Youth Studies 12 (5): 467–482. doi:10.1080/13676260903081673.

Hollingworth, Sumi, and Ayo Mansaray. 2012. “Conviviality under the Cosmopolitan Canopy? Social Mixing and Friendships in an Urban Secondary School.” Sociological Research Online 17 (3): 195–206. doi:10.5153/sro.2561.

Joseph-Salisbury, Remi, and Laura Connelly. 2018. “If Your Hair is Relaxed, White People Are Relaxed. If Your Hair is Nappy, They’re Not Happy’: Black Hair as a Site of ‘Post-Racial’ Social Control in English Schools.” Social Sciences 7 (11): 219. doi:10.3390/socsci7110219.

Kivijärvi, Antti. 2014. “Interethnic Affiliations and Everyday Demarcations of Youth in Finland. Empirical Glances through Multisited Interviews and Observations.” Young 22 (1): 67–85. doi:10.1177/1103308813512928.

Kosunen, Sonja. 2016. Families and the Social Space of School Choice in Urban Finland. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

Kosunen, Sonja, Venla Bernelius, Piia Seppänen, and Miina Porkka. 2016. “School Choice to Lower Secondary Schools and Mechanisms of Segregation in Urban Finland.” Urban Education 55: 1461–1488. doi:10.1177/0042085916666933.

Lareau, Anette. 2003. Unequal Childhoods. Class, Race, and Family Life. Berkeley: University of California.

Mendick, Heather, and Becky Francis. 2012. “Boffin and Geek Identities: abject or Privileged?” Gender and Education 24 (1): 15–24. doi:10.1080/09540253.2011.564575.

Phoenix, Ann. 2008. “Analysing Narrative Contexts.” In Doing Narrative Research, edited by Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou, 64–77. London: Sage.

Reay, Diane, and Helen Lucey. 2003. “The Limits of ‘Choice’: Children and Inner City Schooling.” Sociology 37 (1): 121–142. doi:10.1177/0038038503037001389.

Skeggs, Beverley. 1997. Formations of Class and Gender. Becoming Respectable. London: Sage.

Thorne, Barrie. 1993. Gender Play. Girls and Boys in School. Buckingham: Open University.

Tolonen, Tarja. 2013. “Youth Cultures, Lifestyles and Social Class in Finnish Contexts.” Young 21 (1): 55–75. doi:10.1177/1103308812467671.

Tikkannen, Jenni. 2019. “Parental School Satisfaction in the Context of Segregation of Basic Education in Urban Finland.” Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy 5 (3): 165–179. doi:10.1080/20020317.2019.1688451.

Tunström, Moa, Timothy Anderson, and Liisa Perjo. 2016. Segregated Cities and Planning for Social Sustainability – A Nordic Perspective. Stockholm: Nordic Centre for Spatial Development NORDREGIO. https://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1128924/FULLTEXT01.pdf.

Vaattovaara, Mari, Anssi Joutsiniemi, Matti Korttineen, Mats Stjernberg, 2018. and, and Teemu Kemppainen. “Experience of a Preventive Experiment: Spatial Social Mixing in Post-World War II Housing Estates in Helsinki, Finland.” In Housing Estates in Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Segregation and Policy Challenges, edited by Daniel Baldwin Hess, TiitTammaru, and Maarten vanHam, 215–240. Cham: Springer.

Varjo, Janne, Ulf Lundström, and Mira Kalalahti. 2018. “The Governors of School Markets? Local Education Authorities, School Choice and Equity in Finland and Sweden.” Research in Comparative and International Education 13 (4): 481–498. doi:10.1177/1745499918807038.

Vincent, Carol, and Stephen Ball. 2007. “Making Up’ the Middle-Class Child: Families, Activities and Class Dispositions.” Sociology 41 (6): 1061–1077. doi:10.1177/0038038507082315.