

SOCIAL ORIGINS AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN FRANCE: A TRUE
MERITOCRACY?

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ABSTRACT

Vanessa Shadoian: Social Origins and Educational Attainment in France: A True Meritocracy?

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In the developed countries, inequality in access to primary education has become essentially non-existent. This is also becoming the case in secondary education, mainly at the lower secondary level, but such inequalities do still exist in upper secondary and higher education, despite the fact that they tend to be decreasing almost everywhere. Thus, contemporary studies in the industrial world are less concerned with issues of access, and increasingly concerned with inequalities in attainment and in educational opportunity, so as to determine the extent of the democratization of access to education. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the changes in inequality in educational opportunity in industrial societies since World War II, specifically in France. I will also analyze the changes in inequality of educational opportunity vis-à-vis immigrants in post-industrial societies and in France.

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Chapter I

Introduction

If education is considered as a public good that is beneficial to all—not just individuals, but also to their workplaces, their communities, as well as to society and the economy as a whole, we must then consider the extent to which education is distributed among the individuals which make up our society. In this paper, I will examine the educational inequalities that exist between individuals within the western, post-industrial society of France, in an effort to demonstrate changes in inequality of educational opportunity over time.

It will be essential to examine a range of the existing literature on the heritability of inequality and social mobility. In fact, the literature to date has provided surprisingly little evidence that links intergenerational difference and persistence to economic inequality or even inequality in general. Significant effort has been invested in establishing and quantifying the intergenerational relationship between educational opportunity and social background, and countless individuals have reached the same conclusion: the generations are not independent but that there is substantial mobility. There exists, however, far less consensus regarding changes over time or the extent of differences across countries. Yet there is consensus that no matter how large certain cross-national differences may be, they fall within a fairly narrow range.

I will first present an overview of the research efforts that have been pursued over the past several decades, in the framework of the Research Committee on Social Stratification

and Social Mobility of the International Sociological Association. Utilizing data sets from nationally representative statistical surveys, many researchers have been able to examine the scope, the structure, as well as the sequential dynamics of inequality of educational opportunity among men and women from different social backgrounds and diverse social classes. Within western post-industrial societies, sociologists have documented the presence of significant and persistent inequalities in educational attainment according to social and cultural origins. It was considered surprising during the 1980s and 1990s that there appeared to be a high level of constancy of inequality of educational opportunity between birth cohorts across several decades. This was unanticipated and even counterintuitive: a significant expansion in the provision of education took place in most western societies after the Second World War, and yet the immediate outcome was a virtually unchanged general level of inequality in the allocation of education between adults from various backgrounds. It will thus be useful to present the main theoretical arguments which contemporary sociologists use to explain such inertia in inequality in educational opportunity, as well as to induce recent scientific results in the same field. Thanks to recent improvements in statistic modeling, nominal changes in inequality of educational opportunity can now be discerned in specific countries. The process of democratization in education has undoubtedly been influenced by certain institutional and historical circumstances, which will be covered in this paper.

I will then narrow my analysis to examine the situation of immigrant children as well as children of immigrants in the educational systems of post-industrial societies, specifically focusing on the French case. Here it will be useful to utilize large scale longitudinal surveys—statistical surveys which follow up representative samples of pupils throughout the span of their academic careers. It will be possible, using such surveys, to assess how much

the children of immigrants achieve in the educational systems of the host country through a comparison of their performance and achievements with those of non-immigrant families. In a significant number of western societies, immigrant children as well as the children of immigrants demonstrate certain socio-demographic characteristics which would appear to be predictors of lower achievement. This can be considered because of the fact that they often disproportionately belong to manual worker families, their parents often received less of a formal education than parents from many native families, and they may often have more siblings than children from non-immigrant families. The latter is a trait that is also often associated with less noticeable educational achievement. In such societies, immigrant children as well as the children of immigrants are on the whole considered as being at a disadvantage in their educational careers when they are compared to the entire group of children from native families.

However, this is misleading: in several societies, including France, this conclusion is often actually reversed when introducing statistical controls for social background and family analysis. A plethora of studies have actually proven that children of immigrants usually perform better in their academic careers than native children from the same social background and social class, as well as family environment (including father's and mother's level of education and siblings). This phenomenon can be explained by the educational aspirations of immigrant societies—in host societies and *ceteris paribus*, they appear to have higher aspirations. This plays an important role in the development of their children's career goals, and their subsequent academic careers. Yet, this is not always the case, as research results which are based on certain large-scale representative surveys in some cases reveal striking differences: even after controlling for social background and family environment,

children of immigrants may still suffer from a significant and persistent disadvantage in the development of their academic careers. Consequently, the fact that children of immigrants (even those from the same origin) can achieve different results in the school systems of various societies would seem to suggest that national contexts as well as the way in which the school system is laid out in various countries would seem to play a part in the academic attainment of immigrants' children as opposed to native ones. Due to the fact that immigrants' children often happen to be from disadvantaged backgrounds, this would lead one to ask oneself what can be done, if anything, to reduce this disparity.

Chapter II

Changes in Educational Opportunity

Let us first take a look at progress and research methods in current comparative educational stratification research. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, most western societies have been characterized by an increased expansion of education at all levels, as we have witnessed considerable increases in the supply of formal education in subsequent birth cohorts in western post-industrial societies. In the majority of such societies, extensive school reforms have been implemented after the Second World War, in an effort to make schooling available to children from all social backgrounds and to promote equality of educational opportunity. Many researchers have endeavored to assess whether educational attainment has progressively become decreasingly dependant upon individual characteristics, including social origin, and whether or not a less unfair allocation of education has progressively emerged in modern western societies.

Compulsory schooling, the generalization of secondary instruction, and the broadening access to tertiary education are all indications of public willingness to make varying levels of schooling accessible to classes for whom this was previously inaccessible, and to reduce inequalities when it comes to education. All in all, social inequalities in schooling today remain quite visible. Yet, they have been diminished in the past several decades, not only because of the general prolongation of studies but also in qualitative terms.

Schooling has long played such a central role in France, even when the number of people that actually attended school were limited. Schooling is even more important than ever, now that it involves the masses: 125 years ago, compulsory education went up to the age of thirteen, and 45 years ago it was raised to the age of 16. In the past two decades high school attendance has become practically ubiquitous, and today many speak of the ‘generalization’ of tertiary education. The number of years that the average French person stays in school is now 19, and education’s structural role has in turn become strengthened. Along with the growing importance of education has come the increase of inequalities in the school system—including geographic inequalities, gender inequalities, and social inequalities. The ability to effectively succeed in such an educational system presupposes that educational inequalities are not that significant.

Equal opportunity when it comes to education, or *l’égalité des chances devant l’école*, is a fairly recent ambition, whose origins can be observed at the end of the Second World War. Previously, the school system could not really be deemed a system at all: there were two separate branches—primary and secondary. Now, the two branches have been fused together—all students go to *collège*, two-thirds go to *lycée*, or *lycée professionnelle*, and then more than half of them go on to tertiary education. There has been what is termed as a “*massification*”, a general prolongation of academic studies as well as a general growth of school attendance for all young people of all origins. This *massification* can be accompanied by a simple translation of inequalities, with young people of modest social origin achieving scholastic levels previously unattained, yet the differences in academic destiny of those of modest social origin remain just as strong. The *massification* can, instead, go hand in hand with a reduction of such differences, which would correspond with a diminution in the link

between social origin and academic destiny, with an increasing access to advanced degrees for young people of modest social origin. In the latter case, the level of democratisation is more pronounced and the reduction in the disparities between social milieus is often termed “qualitative democracy” (Prost, 1986).

The question of equal opportunity in education is often presented in somewhat different terms: is this massification of education, which is evident and incontestable, accompanied by an increased level of educational opportunity? In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to retrace the evolution of inequalities in schooling since the early twentieth century. The question is not only related to education, as, in the past 40 years or so, an individual’s level of education has played an increasingly important role in the access to social positions, which in turn determines the constitution of the elites in society. Succeeding in school has essentially become a necessary element for life-success, as other methods of becoming a “self-made man” through involvement with groups such as unions, political parties, or even entirely individual success are becoming less effective. Social inequality in education weighs more and more on the creation of the elite, whether it be its renewal, and enlargement, or, on the contrary, its auto-reproduction.

Sequential dynamics of inequality of educational opportunity has been studied using a variety of conceptual and quantitative frameworks, and several generations of empirical research can thus be discerned. Up until the late 1970s, the linear regression model of educational attainment was considered optimal. The first period provided answers to the change over time in the effect of social origin variables on the average number of school years completed. Throughout the years it has been increasingly acknowledged that the expansion of education in modern societies has resulted in an historic decline in the

dependence of educational attainment on social origins. For example, in France, it has been assessed that considering the socio-economic group of both the father and the mother, as well as the highest diploma of the father and the mother, in addition to gender accounts for 32.3% of the total variance in education for men and women born before 1939, but for only 20.3% for men and women born between 1964 and 1973 (Duru-Bellat & Kieffer, 2000). In general, in a comparative study that reported linear regressions for each cohort in eight nations, there was an apparent downward trend in the proportion of variance attributed to background variables in six of these eight societies studied (Treiman & Ganzeboom, 2000).

Hence, this first generation of educational stratification research established irrefutably that educational expansion in a society should weaken dependence of educational attainment on social origins. Yet, a major shortcoming of this approach emerged in the 1980s. Firstly, the linear regression model of years of education on social origin combines changes in the accessibility of education, with minor changes caused by educational expansion as well as changes in the fundamental association between social origin and educational attainment, which is generally conceptualized by most experts as the best measure of inequality of opportunity. Sociologists then have become increasingly more interested in the “pure” association between social origin and education, evaluated net of the educational expansion.

The second period of educational stratification research commenced with the proposal of the sequential logistic regression model of educational transitions—a model which assesses the net effect of social background variables on the odds of surviving each progressive transition (Mare, 1980, 1981). Using this model, it has been observed in many countries that social origin effects progressively decline from the earliest to the latest school

transitions (Muller& Karle, 1993; Shavit & Blossfeld). For example, social background effects in the transitional period between elementary education and lower secondary education are generally stronger than those in the subsequent transition from higher secondary education to tertiary education. This progressive decline over school transitions has often been attributed to the following process: from the earliest to the latest school transitions, differential drop-out rates systematically reduce heterogeneity between children from different social origins on unmeasured determinants of school continuation (such as ability and motivation), and because of the correlation between these two variables and social origin, greater homogeneity on unmeasured factors at higher levels of schooling lessens the effects of social background variables (Mare, 1981;82). A related argument insists that over birth cohorts educational expansion increases the proportion of the total population which is exposed to a given transition. Its heterogeneity on unmeasured determinants of school continuation is likely to grow, and, as a consequence, the effects of social background variables on the odds of surviving that transition are likely to increase over cohorts.

This was recently highlighted for the case of France in two papers based on large representative samples (Vallet, 2004; Vallet & Selz, 2005). Considering thirteen five-year birth cohorts born between 1908 and 1972 (or nineteen three-year birth cohorts born between 1920 and 1976), Vallet demonstrated that the dynamics of the association between social origin and the odds of surviving a given transition is strikingly different from the earliest to the latest school transition. As far as the first transition goes (i.e., receiving some sort of a diploma rather than none at all), a downward trend in the general strength of social origin effects has been apparent since the beginning of the twentieth century. The same goes for the 1938-1942 birth cohort for the second transition that concerns getting at least a lower

secondary or lower vocational diploma versus receiving only a primary education certificate. On the contrary, remarkably constant social origin effects characterize the third transition. Finally, a slow increase in social origin effects appears from the 1938-1942 birth cohort for the fourth transition. This transition examines the odds of getting at least a tertiary education degree versus getting only a higher secondary or technical education diploma. A clear trend is thus discernable—that the educational expansion within a society is accompanied by a progressive decrease in social origin effects in the first school transitions, but by a progressive increase in social origin effects in the final school transitions. Thus, with the educational expansion, inequality of opportunity related to social origin seems to leave the bottom of the educational system and to rejoin the top.

The sequential model of educational transitions is therefore a powerful tool used by many sociologists to analyse structure and change in inequality of opportunity related to social origin within the structure of the educational system. As it closely parallels the decision process of continuing along the educational career, it provides clear measures of social origin effects that are specific for each transition examined. Thus the sequential model leaves the following question unsolved—if, in any given country, social origin effects decline over birth cohorts for some transitions, yet remain stable or increase for some others, what is the eventual result in terms of temporal dynamics in the fundamental association between educational level attained and social origins in that country? (Thélot and Vallet, 2000). Over the past years sociologists have essentially focused on this question, utilizing recent advances in log-multiplicative modeling such as the Unidiff (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Xie, 1992) that permits statistical discernment of historical trends.

It will be useful to outline the main findings that exist in this research field. A key comparative project of empirical analyses was conducted by Shavit and Blossfeld, compiled in the work *Persistent Inequality: Changing Educational Attainment in Thirteen Countries* (1993). It comprises studies of thirteen different countries: six Western European countries (Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, West Germany), three Eastern European countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland), and four non-European (Israel, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States), carried out by experts in the social stratification and school systems of each particular country. Most contributors used similar background variables (including father's occupation or social class, and father's education) and outcomes (years in the educational system, transitions from primary to secondary school, from lower to upper secondary, and from higher secondary to tertiary), and they used identical methods (linear regression models of education, logistic regression models for transitions). The country chapters assessed change in educational inequality via cohorts from cross-sectional surveys. The study addressed a number of hypotheses. According to the modernization hypothesis, one might expect social origin effects to decrease generally, while the reproduction hypothesis states that inequalities may decrease at lower transitions because of educational expansion, though not on higher transitions. The socialist transformation hypothesis assumes that there would be an initial reduction in social origin effects that would be followed by increased effects as new elites pursued their interests. Finally, the 'maximally maintained inequality' or MMI, hypothesis predicts that the effects of social origin decline only at those transitions for which the attendance rates of the privileged classes are already saturated.

The major result of this project was that it found minimal change in socio-economic inequality of educational opportunity, as there was virtual stability across cohorts in the association between social origins and educational transitions, which the editors consider a clear refutation of the modernization hypothesis. There were only two countries out of the whole lot, the Netherlands and Sweden, which experienced a decline in social origin effects for transitions within secondary education, and in both these cases that decline occurred before the attendance rates of the upper classes were saturated. This contradicts the MMI hypothesis. In the chapter on Sweden, for example, it was suggested that the effects of improved living conditions, school reforms and reorganization, and the equalization of the standard of living in this country were probably the best explanations for the declining association (Jonsson, 1993). These speculations have since been confirmed by demonstrating the importance of decreasing income differences and increasing income security, as well as the comprehensive school reform (Erikson, 1996; Jonsson & Erikson, 2000). Yet, Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) stressed that, in the totality of all the countries examined, the transformation of the educational system did not lead to a reduction in the association between social origins and any of the educational transitions. Finally, the result of the comparative project did not particularly provide convincing support for the socialist transformation hypothesis.

The book *Persistent Inequality: Changing Educational Attainment in Thirteen Countries* was thus a very important step in establishing the conclusion that inequality of educational opportunity is characterized by a significant degree of temporal inertia. Yet, since its publication, its results have been scrutinized and some have been contested. In particular, subsequent analyses based on more comprehensive samples or different statistical

modeling have shown equalization trends in certain countries. In Italy, a reanalysis of the data revealed declining effects of the father's education on the probability of completing the lower levels of the educational hierarchy (Shavit & Westerbeek, 1998). An equalization trend was also demonstrated for Germany (Jonsson, Mills, & Muller, 1996) as well as perhaps Norway (Lindbekk, 1998), while the results for Sweden (Jonsson & Erikson, 2000) and the Netherlands (Sieben, Huinik & de Graaf, 2001) have been substantiated. However, in some other countries a degree of constancy in inequality of educational opportunity prevails. This is the case in Ireland (Breen & Whelan, 1993; Whelan & Layte, 2002) as well as the United States (Hout, Raftery & Bell, 1993; Mare, 1993; Hout & Dohan, 1996). For Soviet Russia, a mixed pattern was in the association between social origin and education declining at secondary education but strengthening in access to university (Gerber & Hout, 1995); but a later study found that, in post-Soviet Russia, the association has, if anything, increased (Gerber, 2000). According to most recent research, however, it is likely that many countries share a relatively modest change toward a decreasing association between social origin and educational attainment. A research project that jointly analyzed comparable data from eight different European countries— Britain, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden—for cohorts born between 1908 and 1972, was able to detect declining association between social origin and educational attainment for all of them except for Ireland and Italy, though it must be noted that these two countries had the smallest sample sizes of the data set (Breen, Luijkx, Muller & Pollak, 2005). The same paper also showed that the distinction, evident in the older cohorts, between countries that are highly inegalitarian, with a high correlation between social origin and educational attainment (such as France, Germany, and Poland) and the more egalitarian ones with a lower correlation

(such as Britain, the Netherlands, and Sweden) has somewhat diminished, in part because the biggest declines in inequality of educational opportunity have been observed in the countries with a greater initial level of inequality.

It will be useful to examine more closely the mean characteristics of structure and change in inequality of educational opportunity within France (Smith & Garnier, 1986; Thélot & Vallet, 2000; Vallet, 2004). As can be seen in Table 1, evidence suggests that in the first birth cohort of 1908-1912, the median birth cohort 1938-1942, and the last birth cohort 1968-1972; educational destination strongly depends on social origin. For example, in each generation, men and women with origins in the ‘teachers and assimilated occupations’ category are the most advantaged, as shown by the percentage of those who reached a lower or upper tertiary degree. Using the same criterion, children of higher grade professionals and managers, then children of lower-grade professionals and technicians are the second and third groups in each generation again. However, children of farmers and smallholders and children of agricultural and unskilled manual workers were equally disadvantaged in the 1908-1912 birth cohort: the percentage distributions are very close and in each case approximately two-thirds received no diploma. In the 1938-1942 birth cohort the offspring of both social groups were once again quite close and still appeared to be the most disadvantaged concerning their educational qualifications. Yet children of farmers strongly improved their relative position between the 1938-1942 and 1968-1972 cohorts. At the end of that period their educational destinations are considerably more favorable than those of children of agricultural and unskilled manual workers. They also appear to be better off than those of children of skilled manual workers and slightly better off than those of routine non-manual workers. The examination of row percentages suggests that there is a strong inertia

in the association between social origin and educational destination in France but that a degree of change has taken place from the early decades of the twentieth century in which children of farmers played a significant part (Vallet & Selz, 2005).

Statistics divulge that the general strength of the association net of educational expansion between social origin and educational destination has declined by 35% (in logged odds ratios) over sixty years. Though this decline constant for the most part, changes in the origin-education association was especially sharp between the 1933-1937 and 1948-1952 birth cohorts. It then leveled off for the most part in the three ensuing cohorts, but shrunk again in the very last birth cohort (1968-1972). The decline in inequality of educational opportunity in France therefore seems highly independent of many major secondary school reforms introduced starting from the end of the 1950s expressly to promote equality of educational opportunity. However, the sustained trend toward equalization between the 1933-1937 and 1938-1942 birth cohorts may confirm Prost's original study according to which a reform disseminated in 1941 by the Minister of Education Carcopino to integrate the *écoles primaires supérieures* in the secondary school system, had positive effects on the inequality of educational opportunity (Prost, 1990). This downward trend was more pronounced among women than among men, particularly because the former were characterized by stronger origin-education association until cohorts born in the mid-1930s. Its existence does not depend only on the specific variable used to define social background. Yet change in the association between origin and education nevertheless appears more resistant to general inequalities (such as parents' education) than to socio-economic inequalities (such as parents' social class). This finding has been demonstrated in the Netherlands as well (De Graaf & Ganzeboom, 1993). Statistical modeling also demonstrates

that the improvement of educational opportunities among sons and daughters of farmers played a significant part in accentuating the equalization trend but was not the only factor in creating it. This result has also been obtained in Germany and Sweden (Jonsson, Mills and Muller, 1996). Above statistical uncertainty, these assessments exemplify that despite whatever decline that there may have been in inequality of educational opportunity, there has not been a very substantial change in society.

Following original work by Boudon (1974) in the framework of rational action theory, many sociologists have put forth theoretical and formal models to account for the relatively high degree of inertia in inequality of educational opportunity despite progressive educational expansion (Erikson & Jonsson 1996; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Jonsson & Erikson, 2000). Empirical tests that are quite convincing of these models have also been published (Need & de Jong, 2001; Davies, Heinesen & Holm, 2002; Becker, 2003). These theoretical efforts hold certain elements in common.

In explaining educational inequalities, it is necessary to distinguish a difference between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ effects. Primary effects are all those that are expressed in the observed association that exists between children’s social origins and their average level of academic performance—children of more advantaged backgrounds perform better, on average, than children of less advantaged backgrounds—such a difference seems to appear quite early on at school and is cumulative, as the disparity has a tendency to increase along the track of the academic career. However, the determinants of this difference in academic ability may be quite varied, such as differences in home environments, in intellectual stimulation, in cultural factors, in number of siblings, etc. If we assume that differences in academic ability are controlled, secondary effects would be those that are revealed in the

actual choices that pupils and their families make throughout the span of their academic career, including the choice of exiting the school system. On the other hand, the perceived benefit associated with continuing with education is lower in these families than in less disadvantaged ones because continued education will not necessarily be considered an essential condition for the former to avoid social relegation and to maintain the family position into the next generation. Such assessments of cost, benefit, and risk generally depend on the family's position in the social structure. Less advantaged families may be more responsive to the risk of failure associated with continuing in education, especially in cases where the child's performance may not be stellar. The structural and long-lasting nature of such differences in the assessment of cost, benefit, and risk associated with school continuation would explain the persistence of secondary effects, and in turn the considerable inertia that characterizes socio-economic inequality of educational opportunity.

Existing research has attempted to evaluate the relative importance of primary and secondary effects. Erikson & Jonsson (1996) estimated that relatively equal proportions of class differences in educational attainment derive from primary and secondary effects, but a recent British study indicates a greater proportion of primary and secondary effects, both of which appear to have remained quite stable since the 1970s in the United Kingdom (Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe, & Yaish, 2005). In addition, Breen, Luijkx, Muller, & Pollak (2005) recently suggested that the declining trend in inequality of educational opportunity they observe for six different European nations might be related to significant temporal changes in the cost factor of family educational decisions as well as a decline in primary effects because of the long term improvement of general living conditions.

Chapter III

Immigrants and Educational Opportunity

As a consequence of the increase of immigration in several industrial societies during the past decades, the number of children who are brought up in immigrant families has progressively risen and the educational attainment of immigrant children and children of immigrants has become an issue of paramount importance in the field of sociology of education. There are some studies that concentrate on the achievements of these children to provide telling comparisons between members of varying ethnic origins. For example, in the United States, Portes & MacLeod (1996) carried out a study of over 5,000 second-generation high-school students in Florida and California and have compared children of Cuban and Vietnamese immigrants (thought to be representative of relatively advantaged groups) and of Haitian and Mexican immigrants (representative of relatively disadvantaged groups). The authors established that parents' socio-economic status and length of residence in the United States significantly affected the students' academic performance as measured by standardized tests in mathematics and reading, yet did not eliminate the effects of ethnic community.

Other studies have been designed not just to incorporate immigrant children or children of immigrants but native children as well, in order to allow for a better comparison. These studies have compared the educational attainment of the former group with that of the latter and they examine how immigrants' children adapt to the school system in the host society, as well as whether they are confronted with ethnic educational disadvantages. In Germany, for example, where secondary education consists of three hierarchically ranked

tracks in which children are distributed at the end of elementary school, Alba, Handl, & Muller (1994) have used the 1989 Microcensus and the German Socio-Economic Panel to study ethnic inequalities in the German school system. They discovered that, in comparison to young Germans with identical socio-demographic characteristics, the Italian, Turkish, and Yugoslav children are overrepresented in the least prestigious tracks, that they leave school more often before having successfully completed their apprenticeship, and that they are underrepresented in the Gymnasium. It is only a small group of Greek students who contrast with this representation and in some respects have been known to obtain better results than even some German children. The empirical test that Alba, Handl, & Muller used in order to provide an explanation of the school handicap faced by Italians, Turks, and Yugoslavs highlights the role of both cultural aspects and continuity of school attendance in Germany.

Nevertheless, it seems that the school situation of immigrants' children can be strikingly different in various countries, even for students of the same origin. In the Australian study conducted by Clifton, Williams, & Clancy (1991), the authors investigated data that was collected between 1975 and 1980 in a national longitudinal survey of pupils followed up in subsequent years. It was discovered that, at the age of 14, pupils from Greek and Italian origins performed less well in English and arithmetic than other pupils with similar socio-demographic characteristics and an Australian or English background. Yet, the Greek and Italian students were more numerous than the Australian and English pupils to complete upper secondary school. The analyses the authors provided highlighted the role of socio-psychological factors in the more favorable school paths: pupils belonging to Greek and Italian minorities perhaps found more support for their studies in their environment, from

their friends, parents, and teachers, and this seems to have helped them to realize a positive conception of their academic value.

The fact that immigrants' children, sometimes from the same origin, achieve differently in the school system of different societies therefore suggests that national contexts as well as the specific organization of schools in various countries plays a part in the educational attainment of children, which elaborates the distinction between factors that are probably common to all children—immigrant as well as native—as well as factors that may be more specific to the former group.

In sociological literature, it is widely recognized that the assessment of the effect of immigration on educational success has to be disentangled from the effect of other attributed characteristics such as gender and social class. This is true, for example, in France where, due to the correlation often observed between immigration and belonging to the working class, early research systematically compared the educational outcomes of foreign born children born in a manual worker family with those of French children of the same class (Clerc, 1964; Boulot & Boyzon-Fradet, 1988).

It seems unlikely however that social class, as considered with the occupational group of the head of the household, adequately captures all relevant features of the family that could possibly affect educational success. Still, much research on the determinants of educational attainment has amply demonstrated that a number of family aspects are clearly at work. Some of them measure socio-economic or material resources, and in this way, the occupational group of the head of the household is a major variable, though maternal employment and family income do also need to be taken into account. Secondly, cultural resources inside the family are likely to affect the educational success of the child, as parents'

highest diplomas as well as other family characteristics which might favor or help the child's academic career are very relevant. Thirdly, it is very necessary to take account of other objective aspects in family situations that may be influential, especially the structure of the family, the total number of children, and the rank of birth of the specific child.

With respect to the educational attainment of immigrant children and children of immigrants, two specific issues deserve particular attention. The first one concerns the dynamics of change in academic performance that can be observed for immigrants' children over their school career. The challenge is to decipher whether these dynamics differ from those observed for native children with similar socio-demographic characteristics.

Immigrant children and children of immigrants are primarily socialized in a family which is very often strongly marked by its own native language and culture, and it is only afterwards that they are exposed to the educational system of the host society, which can be conceived as an important institution in their secondary socialization. It might then be expected that a continued school attendance in the host society and the duration of exposure to its educational system have specific effects on the progress of immigrants' children in academic achievement.

In the multitude of available literature, several studies have examined whether, with respect to attainments measured with standardized tests, pupils belonging to immigrant families' progress more in a given span of time than other pupils with the same characteristics. They have used analyses of covariant models in order to explain differences in a final level of attainment with a set of variables. In such models, the regression coefficient estimated for a particular sub-group of pupils indicates that, within the considered period, they made either more progress, an equivalent level of progress, or less progress than

the other pupils who in certain respects possess similar characteristics. In a British longitudinal study of twenty comprehensive secondary schools, Smith & Tomlinson (1989) consistently observed that, between the ages of 13 and 16, pupils belonging to ethnic minorities progressed more in the English language and mathematics than did their classmates belonging to the same social classes. A similar result was obtained in France with a sample of close to 3,000 children who were examined at the start and end of their third year in elementary school (Bressoux, 1994) and in two studies about school careers in the first two years of lower secondary school (Ernst & Radica, 1994; Meuret, 1994). On the other hand, Mingat (1991) concluded that there was greater progress, during the first year of elementary school, for foreign non-French born children only, and obtained an opposite result for French-born foreign children. Lastly, according to Serra & Thaurel-Richard (1994), the pupil's nationality introduces no significant difference in attainments reached during the third year of elementary school.

Another important issue concerns the effect of motivation and educational aspirations of immigrant families on the educational attainment of their children. The aspiration of a better life and upward social mobility often constitutes an important motive for the decision of emigration. Many immigrant families nevertheless hold somewhat low social positions in their host society. They might then perceive investment in the educational system as the main path to upward mobility available to them. Compared with other families endowed with the same material and cultural resources (notably linked to their own social condition and their educational level), immigrant families would then hope even more that their children acquire a high level of educational skills. Thus, there are grounds to think that immigrant children, children of immigrants and their families develop stronger aspirations

and expectations towards the educational system of the host society that other members of the same social classes, which in turn drives them to want to succeed.

In several publications based on research carried out in France, (Vallet & Caille, 1996; Vallet 1996), the 1989 French National Longitudinal Study (NELS) was used in order to assess the academic success of immigrants' children in the French elementary school and lower secondary school. More specifically, the examined sample pupils comprised all children born on the fifth of any month who entered school in September 1989 in a public or private institution in metropolitan France and whose family responded to a corresponding survey in of 1991. In order to approach the population of immigrants' children in the absence of any information about parents' country of origin, various criteria were used, including nationality of the child, place of birth, the number of years of elementary schooling outside of France, the number of years the parents have lived in France, and the language spoken at home.

Concerning the measurement of academic success in elementary school, retrospective information collected in 1989 from secondary school was used. An indicator of success was considered the fact that the pupil did not repeat a year of school. According to the findings, children of immigrants were less successful than their French classmates in French elementary school, with the exception of pupils who had migrated, (i.e., those who were born in a foreign country or who experienced elementary school years outside France). But, this difference tended to disappear after controlling for a set of socio-demographic characteristics including social class of the head of the household, father's and mother's level of education, and number of siblings. Standardized test scores were also analyzed in French and mathematics at the outset of secondary school. Foreign pupils on average obtained 8.7 %

points lower in French and 6.1 % less points in mathematics. Once again, differences in socio-demographic characteristics between foreign and French pupils were largely responsible for this achievement gap. In an analysis controlling for family and social background, the regression coefficient estimated for foreign pupils were no more significant in mathematics and amounted to -1.4% in French. To summarize, the net disadvantage of foreign pupils in French represented only 16% of the gross handicap; its size was also close to the net difference between pupils in a family of three versus two children.

With respect to the measurement of academic success in lower secondary school, the information that was collected from the school over a period of four years after enrolment in secondary education was used. The indicator of success was combined with the completion of lower secondary school in due time, with an orientation towards long studies leading to the *baccalauréat*. With this indicator, immigrant children were again observed to be less successful than their schoolmates in French lower secondary school. However, in comparison with the gap measured in elementary school, the difference was subsequently reduced (Vallet, 1996). Perhaps more surprisingly, the difference was even systematically reversed in regression analyses controlling for socio-demographic characteristics of children and their families—the academic careers of immigrants’ children in French lower secondary school were thus better than those of their schoolmates with a similar social background and family environment.

It therefore appeared that belonging to immigrant minorities at first had a negative effect, and then a positive one. Although such a change over time might suggest that, while social and cultural handicaps affect the performance of immigrants’ children in primary school, their performance improves as they become more acquainted with the system year

after year, there has been no real evidence for this conclusion in the results obtained at the *brevet* examination (which takes place after four years in secondary school). Much support was found in favor of the ‘family mobilization thesis’ (Van Zanten, 1997), according to which immigrants’ parents aspirations and their practices in relation to schooling play a very central role in their children’s success at school—*ceteris paribus*, immigrant families expressed stronger aspirations towards longer studies and more ambitious school plans for their children.

Although similar results suggest rather convincingly that, in French society, the educational system appears to immigrant families as an important vehicle for social mobility, two potential limitations must be emphasized—first, only incomplete careers in secondary school were analyzed, and, second, in the absence of quantitative measures of school performances or grades, admission to upper secondary school was considered the main indicator of success in lower secondary school. The real issue of academic careers in the French secondary school was therefore unknown.

In a subsequent paper (Vallet & Caille, 1999), a rather stringent criterion of success in secondary school, that of obtaining the *baccalauréat general* or *baccalauréat technologique* diploma after seven years, was used in addition to a less stringent criterion which permitted the repetition of a year in secondary school, either once or twice. Based of such indicators, immigrants’ children were at a clear disadvantage in French secondary school. For example, only 19.4% of foreign pupils who entered secondary school were successful at the *baccalauréat* exam after seven years as opposed to 31.8% of French pupils; only 41.8% of the former passed the examination after seven, eight, or nine years as opposed to 57.9% of the latter. However, these differences had nothing to do with an ethnic educational

disadvantage because most of them disappeared after controlling for the occupational group of the head of the household. Moreover, when a more complete set of socio-demographic variables was introduced in order to take account of a number of family characteristics likely to affect school success, the difference practically reversed: immigrants' children were more successful in French secondary school than native children who had the same social background and family environment, and the difference was even more pronounced when the statistical analysis controlled for the level of academic performance at the outset of secondary school. The difference was also more significant with the less stringent criterion of success than with the more rigorous one, thereby suggesting that, compared to other pupils, the children of immigrants were more persevering in the direction of success than when they faced school difficulties. Lastly, the differences between the children of immigrants and native children decreased when the educational aspirations of the families were included in the regression model. This type of result therefore indicated that the strong aspirations immigrant families expressed in 1991 had a mediating effect and partially explained the more favorable school trajectories of their children. It is difficult to say whether these results applied to the different foreign nationalities to the same extent because the design of the National Education Longitudinal Study did not allow powerful comparisons between them. It is however noteworthy that these results were reproduced on one or both criteria of success for five of the six most numerous groups in the survey—Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Portuguese, and South-East Asians—and that only Turks seemed to be the exception in this respect (Brinbaum and Kieffer, 2005).

The net advantage of the children of immigrants over native children did not seem to correspond to a higher rate of success at the *baccalauréat* exam. In addition, among pupils

who passed the examination, a complementary analysis suggested that the children of immigrants success rather accumulated over the entire school career, primarily in lower secondary school and secondarily in upper secondary school, and the educational aspirations of immigrant families played a part in this process.

Some similarity therefore exists between the results provided by the French 1989 National Education Longitudinal Study and those exhibited by Clifton, Williams, and Cancy (1991) in Australia, by Muller and Kerbow (1993), by Kao and Tienda (1995) in the United States, and by Brinbaum and Kieffer (2005) in France. Although they are strongly disadvantaged by their class location and their level of education, immigrant families in France seem to invest in the educational system in order to improve their child's future, they develop strong educational aspirations for them, and, in return, these socio-psychological factors have a key role in explaining the educational attainment of the children of immigrants in the French lower and upper secondary school.

Over recent years, several French studies have examined whether these findings may be substantiated or made more specific. Using simultaneously the 1980 and 1989 NELS, Bénabou, Kramarz and Prost (2004) have controlled for a number of socio-demographic and contextual characteristics; they have observed that foreign pupils manage to have better access to secondary school and also obtain "better" diplomas than comparable French pupils. On the basis of a time-diary complementary survey, Cibois (2002) has shown that North African children more often adopt 'school-willingness' behaviors in the home. The most recent continued studies have for the most part been carried out in the context of the 1995 NELS, a representative sample of all secondary school first for entrants in September 1995 whose school trajectories had been followed up on afterwards. This survey also has been

supplemented by a 1998 family survey (which permits a rigorous identification of immigrant families) and a 2002 youth survey. The latter has specifically examined the role of youth's experience of schooling as well as their educational and occupational plans for the future.

Caille and O'Prey (2002) have confirmed the lower achievement of children of immigrants relative to other children in elementary school and lower secondary school, and they have also confirmed that this achievement gap is considerably reduced or even reversed in analyses that take socio-economic and family characteristics into account. They have also provided rather convincing evidence that, over the four years of lower secondary school, children of immigrants progress more in French, foreign languages, and mathematics than do their classmates of the same family and background situation. The same authors have also observed that, especially because of their lower education level, parents of immigrant children were less able to aid their children in their schoolwork, and have less contact with their teachers and school officials. These differences with native families are not fully eliminated after controlling for a number of socio-demographic characteristics. However, that does not mean that immigrant families have less interest in their children's schooling. For example, (with the ever-present exception of Turks) immigrant families tend to pay for private lessons just as often as manual worker native families. Also, immigrant families register their child in a public library considerably more often than all other families. Second, Brinbaum and Kieffer (2005) as well as Caille (2005) have scrutinized the educational aspirations of parents and youth in immigrant families. They have confirmed that immigrant families have more ambitious school career plans for their offspring than do native and comparable families, elaborating a yet further distinction between families of North African and Portuguese origins. These educational aspirations are also less than in

native families when the adolescent encounters difficulties at school. Finally, parental aspirations are transmitted to children of immigrants who reinterpret them. Seven years after entering secondary school and despite their academic achievement which is on average less than favorable, adolescents in immigrant families plan to engage in tertiary education more frequently, choosing relatively short commercial and administrative paths rather than long and purely academic tracks, a difference which may be related to the view, in immigrant families, of the educational system as the direct method of improving material life conditions.

Finally, it is also worth emphasizing that the above results, entirely obtained on French large-scale and longitudinal surveys, are not at odds with two recent reviews of the corresponding literature in the United States (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Waters & Jiménez, 2005). As Kao and Thompson stated in their conclusion in 2003 (435), “overall, there are many signs of optimism. Racial and ethnic gaps in educational achievement and attainment have narrowed over the past three decades by every measure available to social scientists. Educational aspirations are universally high for all racial and ethnic groups as most adolescents expect to go to college. However, substantial gaps remain, especially between less-advantaged groups such as African Americans, and groups considered more advantaged such as whites and Asian Americans. The racial and ethnic hierarchy in educational achievement is apparent even across varying measures of the academic experience.”

Chapter IV

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that, even or perhaps especially in affluent societies, there is relatively strong, persistent, and pervasive inequality of educational opportunity between children and adults with different ascribed characteristics such as social origin and ethnic origin. Indeed, it took several years before quantitative sociologists became able to discern modest change in the temporal dynamics of the association between social origin and educational attainment, beyond the change mechanically afforded by educational expansion. On the basis of what has been shown, progress towards more educational opportunity seems to have intervened in periods of declining income inequality and was also a consequence of school reforms, notably the introduction of the comprehensive school system that has resulted in postponing the earliest decision in the school career. That view is coherent with the fact that, in Germany, a country characterized by a highly and early-tracked educational system, children of immigrants are strongly disadvantaged in their educational attainment relative to native children with the same family and social background.

Inequality of educational opportunity is also characterized by strong temporal inertia because families themselves may be at the root of such inequality. This is the case because of the different abilities families in different social classes have to provide learning environments that result in high academic ability—what sociologists have called ‘primary effects’. But this is also the case because families in different social classes create inequality

of educational opportunity by themselves, on the basis of their different assessment of benefits, cost, and risk or probability of success associated with further education—what sociologists have deemed ‘secondary effects’. We certainly need very active and specific policies to be able to modify the positions of different social classes with respect to these parameters.

Yet longitudinal studies of the educational attainment of the children of immigrants also tell an interesting story, especially with respect to their contradictory success. These studies demonstrate that immigrant families’ high educational aspirations can, to a certain extent, change the future of their offspring. They also suggest that the lack or weakness of parental education has different effects on how families consider their children’s’ future, if it is due to non-existence or deficiency of the educational system in their country of origin—which is often the case among immigrant families in France—or if it comes rather from school difficulties encountered during their youth—which more often concerns parents with low levels of education who have always lived in France.

In conclusion, it would seem desirable for experts and policy-makers who wanted to make a difference, to concentrate more on the attainment of the weakest and on ensuring that school corresponds to a similar experience for all pupils, so that researchers could focus less on disparities between groups and its role in social mobility. Although not directly treated in this paper, all pupils do not, at present, receive the same education, and if and when they do, this would contribute to the development of a more democratic and fair society.

Appendix

TABLE 1: EDUCATIONAL DESTINATIONS FOR DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF SOCIAL ORIGINS IN THE 1908-1912 BIRTH COHORT (N=3,577), 1938-1942 BIRTH COHORT (N=25,493), AND 1968-1972 BIRTH COHORT (11,063)

	Birth Cohort	No Diploma	Primary Education Diploma	Lower Secondary Diploma	Lower Vocational Diploma	Higher Secondary Diploma	Tertiary Degree	Total
Farmers	1908-1912	66.1	28.4	1.3	2.3	1.1	0.9	100
	1938-1942	28.0	40.2	4.6	18.0	4.5	4.6	100
	1968-1972	9.6	0.8	2.3	33.3	21.1	32.9	100
Artisans and Shopkeepers	1908-1912	38.2	45.1	5.6	6.2	3.5	1.4	100
	1938-1942	14.2	24.9	10.2	21.9	12.4	13.5	100
	1968-1972	12.8	1.4	5.6	31.4	15.8	33.1	100
Higher-grade Professionals and Managers	1908-1912	19.7	24.9	12.3	12.5	16.0	14.6	100
	1938-1942	7.1	7.3	8.3	12.8	20.5	44.0	100
	1968-1972	4.9	0.1	3.0	8.7	18.6	64.8	100
Teachers and Assimilated Occupations	1908-1912	17.1	25.7	8.6	7.3	21.6	19.8	100
	1938-1942	4.9	2.0	7.2	11.3	18.9	55.7	100
	1968-1972	4.2	0.3	2.5	8.0	15.6	69.4	100
Lower-grade Professionals and Technicians	1908-1912	15.2	35.1	15.6	16.5	12.4	5.2	100
	1938-1942	9.6	14.0	10.9	24.6	18.3	22.5	100
	1968-1972	7.4	0.3	4.4	18.3	20.4	49.3	100
Routine Non-Manual Workers	1908-1912	39.1	38.1	5.5	10.3	4.1	2.9	100
	1938-1942	15.4	21.7	9.4	28.3	12.6	12.6	100
	1968-1972	14.5	0.7	5.4	31.2	19.5	28.6	100
Foremen and Skilled Manual Workers	1908-1912	45.9	37.6	3.6	9.3	2.3	1.3	100
	1938-1942	20.8	30.1	5.6	29.1	8.3	6.1	100
	1968-1972	19.1	0.8	5.5	35.2	18.1	21.4	100
Agricultural and Unskilled Manual Workers	1908-1912	65.2	27.8	1.1	4.8	0.8	0.3	100
	1938-1942	30.2	33.4	4.7	23.4	4.7	3.6	100
	1968-1972	27.3	1.7	6.6	38.2	14.1	12.2	100
Total	1908-1912	51.5	32.7	3.8	6.2	3.4	2.4	100
	1938-1942	20.8	28.1	6.7	23.3	9.5	11.6	100
	1968-1972	15.0	0.8	5.0	28.6	17.7	32.9	100

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