The Influence of Students' Social Background and Parental Involvement on Teachers' School Track Choices: Reasons and Consequences

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Abstract: In France, the transition from lower to upper secondary education is quite particular: families are involved in an institutionalized dialogue with the school. In the first step of this dialogue, the families pronounce a school track request; in the second step, the staff meeting formulates a school track proposition. As a third step, the families have the option to reject the staff's decision and if they do so, they are invited to discuss their request with the headmaster. Based on this obligatory talk, a decision is taken by the headmaster. This article investigates the influence of students' social background on the second step, *i.e.* the staff meeting's proposition. Based on rational action theory, first, a model is developed to explain the staff's decision-making and, second, this model is empirically tested with rich longitudinal data. In sum, the findings reveal that the staff's decisions are extremely driven by families' requests and, thus, reproduce the social class differentials that emerge through families' decision-making. Moreover, given the same request and school performance, the staff is even more likely to propose the general school track to families from higher social classes. Finally, the results show a notable impact of parental involvement on school staff's decision-making.

Introduction

Since World War II, the French educational system has gone through numerous reforms referred to as 'démocratisation'. All of these reforms aimed at raising the overall educational level and at reducing the intergenerational reproduction of social inequality (Mellizo-Soto, 2000). In 1989, the so-called *Orientation Law* ('loi d'orientation sur l'éducation') has been enacted. Up to then, the school track decision at the transition from lower to upper secondary education had been taken solely by the school staff meeting. Since the establishment of this law though, students and their families are involved in an institutionalized 'dialogue' (Masson, 1997) with the school. In the first step of this dialogue, the families pronounce a school track request; in the second step, the staff meeting formulates a school track proposition. As a third step, the families have the option to reject the staff's decision and if they do so, they are invited to discuss their request with the headmaster.

Based on this obligatory talk, a virtually binding decision is taken by the headmaster.

In line with the arguments of cultural reproduction theory, which claims that teachers act according to the interests of the dominant social classes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970), one objective of the *1989 Orientation Law* was to reduce social inequality in educational chances by transferring power of decision from the teachers to the families. Broad empirical studies for France show that during the last decades the overall association between social background and education has decreased (Brauns, 1998; Thélot and Vallet, 2000; Vallet and Selz, 2007; Ichou and Vallet, 2011).[1] Nevertheless, the same studies reveal that nowadays the impact of social background on educational attainment is still important and, beyond that, strong effects of social background on the transition to the higher secondary school track, even when students' school performance is controlled, persist (Duru-Bellat and Mingat, 1989; Duru-Bellat, Jarousse and Mingat, 1993; Duru-Bellat

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and Kieffer, 2001; Brinbaum and Kieffer, 2009). This result seems to reveal that the *1989 Orientation Law* has modified the process of the secondary school track choice in a way that still allows non-meritocratic decision-making. In fact, analyses of the school track demand by the families and the subsequent decisions by the staff meeting indicate that, in the majority of the cases, the teachers simply accept the families' requests and, hence, strengthen the social class effects net of school performance (Duru-Bellat and Mingat, 1993; Roux and Davaillon, 2001). Relatively few studies exist that investigate school track choices made by teachers. In contrast, the findings of these studies—notably for Germany—indicate that teacher decisions are less 'biased' by students' social background than choices made by the families themselves (*e.g.* Ditton, 1989, Ditton and Krüsken, 2006; Neugebauer, 2010; Dollmann, 2011). In light of these seemingly contradictory findings as to teachers' decision-making, one may wonder via which exact mechanisms the effect of students' social background on the staff's school track propositions operates and what the consequences of these mechanisms

are. The French dialogue between family and school appears to be an interesting opportunity to investigate these processes and, by that way, to learn more about the role of teacher decisions within the reproduction of educational inequality.

In order to investigate how social background affects the school staff's decision-making, I formalize a theoretical model based on rational action theory. I assume that the staff's choice is driven by a subjective evaluation of 'costs' (*e.g.* disapproval by colleagues, non-accomplishment of requests of the educational authorities) and 'benefits' (*e.g.* professional self-esteem). I expect the occurrence of these costs and benefits to depend on students' school performance, family's school track request, and parental involvement. As these factors are associated with family's social origin, I derive that important social class differentials in the staff's propositions are generated. I empirically test these assumptions using a longitudinal data set on French secondary students. Since the data provide detailed information about the dialogue, students' family background, school performance, and parental involvement, I am able to

Figure 1 French educational system.
Note: BAC = baccalauréat, BEP/CAP = professional diplomas, CP = preparatory class, CE = elementary class, CM = middle class, IUT = university instituts of technology, STS = higher technician section. *The diplomas 'BAC professionnel','CAP' and 'BEP' can be attained via an apprenticeship [A], too. Students who do an apprenticeship are enrolled in educational institutions called 'Centres de formation d'apprentis (CFA)' which in some cases are part of LPs (OECD, 1996, p. 275).
Source: Based on OECD (1996), Education at a glance, OECD, Paris, p. 274.

examine which characteristics of the students and their parents the school staff considers when making their decisions.

The French Educational System

Figure 1 presents the educational system existing in the late 1990s. In France, lower secondary education usually lasts 4 years. From the age of 10 or 11 to 14 or 15 students jointly attend the 'collège'. At the transition to upper secondary education families and teachers can choose between the 'lycée général et techonologique' (LGT) which corresponds to the general track, the 'lycée professionnel' (LP) representing the vocational track and repetition of school year (RSY). After having successfully attended two grades in the 'lycée professionnel', students can attain the vocational certificates CAP or BEP; after four grades, they reach the vocational baccalauréat ('BAC professionnel'). These vocational diplomas can be attained by means of an apprenticeship (A), too. Three years in the general track lead to the general or technological baccalauréat. Formally, all baccalauréat-diplomas allow for entry into higher education (OECD, 1996: p. 273). However, the general baccalauréat rather leads to university studies and 'grandes écoles', while the technological one directs to more vocational higher education (e.g. university institutes of technology—IUT) and the professional one often not leads to tertiary education at all (Ichou and Vallet, 2011).

The dialogue between family and school starts right after the first semester of Grade 9. In a first step, the families have to submit a *school track request*. They do so via an 'orientation dossier' that is brought home by the students and filled in by his or her parents. At the end of the school year, this dossier will be transferred to the regional educational authorities and administration ('rectorat' and 'inspection académique') in order to be used for the official statistics on family requests (Masson, 1997: p. 135). After the dossier has been brought back to school by the student, the student's teachers meet to consider the family's request and—as a second step of the dialogue—to formulate a *school track proposition*. The staff meeting takes place once and is attended by all of the student's teachers, the class teacher, an orientation advisor and parents' representatives. The staff meeting's decision is communicated to the parents via the dossier again. Those families, who do not agree with the staff's decision, can reject it. The family's rejection can only lead to a reconsideration of the student's case, if the family attends an obligatory talk with the headmaster. If they do not, the proposition of the staff meeting remains binding. Based upon the obligatory talk with the family,
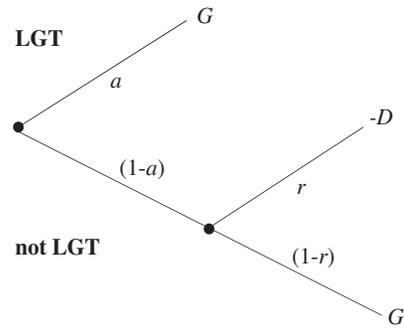

Figure 2 Decision tree for the staff meeting's decision-making.

the headmaster makes another school track proposition that normally is binding.[2]

Theoretical Model

I develop a theoretical model based on Subjective Expected Utility (SEU) Theory (Esser, 1999) that explains how social class differentials in the school staff's decisions, *i.e.* step two of the dialogue, emerge. For the sake of simplicity, I concentrate on the most popular school track, namely the general upper secondary school track (LGT). Therefore, the teacher's choice I focus on has the option LGT or not LGT, the latter corresponding to LP, A or RSY. I have settled for mathematical formalization in order to provide a clear overview over the decision-making parameters and to allow a precise analysis of interactions.

The Staff Meeting's Decision-making

I assume that the school staff subjectively evaluates costs and benefits of choosing LGT for a student and the probabilities that these costs and benefits will emerge. Figure 2 presents a decision tree that shall ease the understanding of this rational process. I propose that choosing LGT can have one of two sets of consequences for the teachers in the staff meeting, one set of positive consequence (benefits) or one of negative consequences (costs). The benefit G, the staff meeting can gain include a good reputation *vis-à-vis* colleagues and the headmaster and professional self-esteem for having taken an appropriate decision. The staff meeting can experience costs as well. These costs (D) consist of a bad reputation, lowered professional self-esteem and, in particular, disapproval by the headmaster. Literature dealing with

the dialogue and French secondary headmasters argues that the school staff, and in particular the headmaster, try to accomplish low numbers of rejections, because the educational authorities of the government request them to do so (Masson, 1997). Furthermore, a rejection is only valid if the parents attend the obligatory talk with the headmaster. Hence, it implies that the parents bother the headmaster and may initiate other time and energy demanding meetings with the teachers to persuade them of sending their child to the general track. Moreover, the whole school's image could be harmed, if the information that inappropriate school track propositions are made by its staff is spread. This is probable in France, where schools' reputations are usually widely known and play an important role, because parents strategically choose schools that promise more favourable learning environments and higher chances of attaining higher education.[3]

The emergence of these benefits and costs depends on probabilities. First, whether the staff meeting and the school can benefit from G depends on the 'appropriateness' of sending the student to LGT. If the student obviously has low chances of succeeding in the general track, proposing the general track would not provide the staff meeting with a good reputation and appreciation by the other teachers and the headmaster. The staff meeting's subjective evaluation that the student will succeed in the general track is denoted with a. Similar to the theories on family's educational decision-making, a is a function of the student's school performance. More specifically, the school staff considers visible performance indicators such as students' marks and number of repeated school years to evaluate their abilities and, by this means, their chances of success (Neugebauer, 2010). Moreover, the staff may directly consider ascriptive student traits such as social background or parental involvement, *e.g.* attendance at parent–teacher meetings, to estimate parents' competencies and willingness to support their child's education (Lareau, 1987; Neugebauer, 2010). Finally, the costs D emerge only if the parents reject the staff meeting's proposition. This subjectively evaluated probability that the family will reject (and attend the talk with the headmaster) is assigned with r. I propose that r is a function of the family's school track request, the student's school performance and the parents' involvement in their child's schooling: Only if the family's request was LGT, not choosing LGT would invite the family to reject; furthermore, if the student's school performance is neither very high nor very low, the parents will be more likely to reject, since the school performance does not clearly tell which school track would be perfectly appropriate regarding the student's

abilities; lastly, parental involvement in their child's schooling is a visible and distinct indicator for parents' willingness to invest in their child's schooling.[4]

Formalizing the staff meeting's decision-making leads to:

$$SEU\,(LGT) = aG + (1 - a)[r(-D) + (1 - r)G] \quad (1)$$

Equation (1) illustrates that the staff meeting chooses LGT if the student is likely to succeed there ($a = 1$), but opts for another (lower) track if the student will probably fail in the general track ($a = 0$). Therefore, in case the staff thinks the student will succeed, it will receive the benefit G, *i.e.* good reputation for the teachers and the school as a whole, professional self-esteem and the satisfying feeling of having taken an appropriate decision. Indeed, the benefit G does also depend on the probability that the student will *actually* successfully complete the general track. However, for the sake of simplicity, I assume that the staff meeting is very good in predicting a student's chances of succeeding in the general track and, thus, if the teachers think $a = 1$, the student is very likely to truly succeed. The other basic assumption I make is that the family will not reject if the staff proposes LGT, since this is the most demanded and prestigious school track.[5]

If the staff meeting thinks that the student would fail in the general track ($a = 0$), it will opt against LGT. Then, either the family rejects this proposition or it agrees. In case the family agrees, the staff meeting will experience no costs, but the benefits G. The staff meeting will receive good reputation and feel satisfied with their professional behaviour, since the student will succeed in a lower school track and this will show that the teachers and the whole school have made an appropriate decision. However, if the family rejects, the staff meeting will have to account for the costs D. Again, these include a bad reputation for the teachers and the school and disapproval by the headmaster, since the family will bother him when attending the talk and since the low rate of rejections required by the educational authorities will not be accomplished.

The Generation of Social Class Differentials

I argue that social class differentials in the staff meeting's decision-making emerge through three mechanisms. The first mechanism is driven by the well-documented effect of social class on educational decisions. The findings of numerous studies reveal a positive relationship between students' social class and the likelihood that their family requests the school track that leads to the highest educational degrees (for France see, *e.g.* Duru-Bellat and Mingat, 1993; Masson, 1997; Roux and

Davaillon, 2001). This mechanism affects r, the staff's subjectively evaluated probability that the family will reject their decision: The more favourable a family's social background, the higher the probability that the family requests LGT and, hence, the higher the likelihood that the family will reject the staff meeting's proposition (if this is not LGT). The second mechanism refers to the primary effects of social stratification, *i.e.* the effects of social background on ability (Boudon, 1974). Here, I follow a notion of the seminal rational-action models developed by Erikson and Jonsson (1996), Breen and Goldthorpe (1997), and Esser (1999) to explain the educational decision-making of students and their parents: The families consider students' school performance to evaluate the student's chances of success as these chances determine the benefits and costs they associate with their choice; since social background strongly influences students' school performance, social classes differ in their evaluation of the chances of success. Correspondingly, a, the staff meeting's evaluation of the student's chances to succeed in LGT, increases with students' social background. The third mechanism operates through social class differentials in families' *cultural capital* and the parents' involvement in their child's schooling.[6] According to a considerable part of the literature dealing with cultural capital, parents (and students) from higher social classes make use of certain cultural resources in communicating with teachers to obtain preferable treatment (Lareau, 1987; Lareau and McNamara Horvat, 1999; Reay, 1999). These studies draw on Bourdieu's argument that schools' culture resembles the culture of the social elites enabling middle and upper class children to achieve higher levels of academic achievement than their school mates from less favourable classes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970). Parents that have the linguistic abilities and habits valued in school feel more comfortable in the school context and in interacting with the teacher and the headmaster (Lareau, 1987; Reay, 1999, 2005) and, hence, are more likely to reject the school's decision and to meet the school staff in order to persuade it from sending their child to the general track. Due to the specific 'middle-class culture' of the educational system, parents from higher social classes feel more comfortable in the school context, have the disposition to successfully deal with the school staff and, therefore, are more likely to take part in school events such as parent–teacher conferences, open house and volunteering in class rooms (Lareau, 1987; Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996; Lee and Bowen, 2006) and to initiate meetings with the teachers (Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996; Reay, 1999, 2005). I argue that this kind of parental involvement plays a major role in the staff meeting's

rational decision-making. As mentioned above, additional parental participation is supposed to be taken into account by the school staff when they evaluate r, the probability of rejection. The staff supposes that the more the family is involved the more likely it is to reject, to attend the talk with the headmaster and to bother the teachers with additional meetings. At the same time, the staff might consider parental involvement when assessing a, the student's chances of success. As argued by qualitative studies, teachers 'interpret[ed] parental involvement as a reflection of the value parents placed on their child's educational success' (Lareau, 1987: p. 81).

Hypotheses

Against this theoretical background, I advance two hypotheses. *H1* deals with the effect of a, G, r and D on staff meeting's proposition: *the higher the social class position of a family the more likely the staff meeting is to propose LGT.* Moreover, since the staff looks at students' school performance to evaluate a, at family's request to asses r and at parental involvement to estimate both a and r, I further hypothesize: *the positive effect of students' social background on the staff meeting's decision is mediated by students' school performance, family's school track request and parental involvement.* *H2* refers to the interaction between a and r on staff meeting's proposition. When a student is indicating low chances of success, the staff meeting will opt against LGT if the family is not likely to reject its proposition. As outlined before, to assess the probability of rejection the staff considers family's request, parental involvement and, again, students' school performance. Consequently, *given relatively low and middle performance levels, family's request and parental involvement have an additional positive effect on the staff's LGT-proposition.*

Empirical Analysis

Data, Sampling and Variables

The data employed stems from a representative longitudinal study commissioned by the French ministry of education. The 'panel d'élèves du second degré' followed students who entered lower secondary school in 1995 up to their transition to upper secondary education in 1999 (2000 or 2001, depending on the number of school years they repeated). In the first survey year (1995), the headmasters of 5,686 lower secondary schools reported the socio-demographic characteristics (*e.g.* age, social, and immigration background) of 17,830 students. In 1998, the parents of 17,684 students received a

questionnaire that collected information on their socio-demographic characteristics, their involvement in their child's education and other school relevant issues. 15,290 families returned the questionnaire. At the end of lower secondary school, *i.e.* in 1999 for those students who did not repeat school years and in 2000, respectively, 2001 for those who did, the headmasters documented every step of the dialogue.[7] Excluding students who do not live with at least one of their parents (132

students), for whom the report on the dialogue is missing (2,545 students) and those who have missing values on the relevant variables (946) reduced the initial sample to 11,667 students.

Staff meeting's proposition

The central dependent variable is step two of the dialogue: the staff meeting's proposition. Although the staff can choose between four alternatives (LGT, LP, A,

Table 1 Descriptive statistics (analysis sample, $N = 11,667$)

	Min.	Max.	Mean (SD)
Family's request			
LGT	0	1	0.68
LPA	0	1	0.29
RSY	0	1	0.03
Staff meeting's proposition (central dependent variable)			
LGT	0	1	0.61
LPA	0	1	0.33
RSY	0	1	0.06
Final outcome of the dialogue			
LGT	0	1	0.62
LPA	0	1	0.31
RSY	0	1	0.07
Social background			
EGP I	0	1	0.22
EGP II	0	1	0.20
EGP III	0	1	0.23
EGP IV	0	1	0.11
EGPs V–VII	0	1	0.24
Marks	0.85	19.5	11.05 (2.78)
Repetition of school years up to Grade 9	0	1	0.21
Parents' membership in parent association	0	1	0.16
Meetings initiated by the parents	0	1	0.33
Attendance to official parent–teacher meetings	0	1	0.85
Immigration background			
French origin	0	1	0.73
French nationality, born abroad/foreign nationality, born in France	0	1	0.04
European immigrant	0	1	0.02
Non-European immigrant	0	1	0.06
Mixed origin[a]	0	1	0.15
ZEP school	0	1	0.10
Private school	0	1	0.21
Town size			
Rural to 5,000 inhabitants	0	1	0.20
5,000–20,000 inhabitants	0	1	0.18
20,000–200,000 inhabitants	0	1	0.27
200,000–2,000,000 inhabitants and Paris	0	1	0.35

SDs for dummy variables are omitted. LGT = general track, LPA = vocational track, RSY = grade retention, ZEP = 'education priority zone'.
[a]'Mixed origin' includes students with one French parent and one immigrated parent or parent with French nationality born abroad or with foreign nationality born in France.
Source: *Panel national 1995 d'élèves du second degré*, ministère de l'Éducation nationale, DPD; own calculations.

RSY), I concentrate on the options LGT (general track) and LP or A, combined to the vocational track. I focus on students who reach the dialogue for the first time, thus, the proposition was made either in 1999, in 2000 or 2001 (depending on how many school years the student has repeated during primary and secondary education). Table 1 reveals that the staff proposes the general track to 61 per cent of the families and the vocational track to 33 per cent.

Family's request

In line with the operationalization of the staff's proposition, I differentiate between LGT and LPA and concentrate on families who make the request for the first time. 68 per cent of the families request the general track, while 29 opt for the 'lycée professionnel' or an apprenticeship (LPA) (Table 1).

Family's social class

Information on mother's and father's occupation is provided by the family questionnaire in 1998. In the survey, occupations were categorized according to the French official socio-professional categories. I defined these categories according to the eight EGP classes (Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero, 1979; Brauns, Haun, and Steinmann, 1997), since this scheme is widely acknowledged for the operationalization of social class within European comparable research on social stratification. In order to take account of both parents' social class position, I assigned the one parent with the 'higher' social class position using a dominance order proposed by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992: p. 266). I then generated a social background variable that consists of five categories: (i) 'EGP I' includes higher grade professionals, administrators, and officials, managers in large industrial establishments and large proprietors (22 per cent; Table 1); (ii) 'EGP II' consists of lower grade professionals, administrators, and officials, higher grade technicians, managers in small industrial establishments and supervisors of non-manual employees (20 per cent); (iii) 'EGP III' assembles routine non-manual employees of higher grade (in administration and commerce) and routine non-manual employees of lower grade in sales and services (23 per cent); (iv) 'EGP IV' includes small proprietors and artisans with or without employees, farmers, smallholders and other self-employed in primary production (11 per cent); and (v) 'EGP V, VI, VII' includes technicians of lower grade, supervisors of manual workers, skilled manual workers, semi- and unskilled manual workers in industrial as well as agricultural production and students whose both parents or one single-parent have never worked, are 'housewives' or who have no precise profession (24 per cent).

Students' school performance

I employ marks and repeated school years to represent students' school performance. French marks usually range from 0 to 20 (0 corresponding to the lowest mark, 20 to the highest). For the analyses, I have calculated the average of every student's mark in French and in Math. They are the average of the marks the student has received in Grades 8 and 9 (mean $= 11.05$, Table 1). Unfortunately, the marks cannot be disentangled for every grade. Furthermore, I employ a variable that indicates whether a student has repeated 1 or 2 years up to Grade 9 (21 per cent; Table 1). By this means and as the sample consists only of students that reach the dialogue for the first time, this variable does not take into account school year repetitions that have been 'produced' by the dialogue.

Parental involvement in their child's schooling

I use three measures from the 1998 family questionnaire to operationalize parental involvement: firstly, parents' membership in a parent association, secondly, whether the parents have initiated meetings with the teachers, thirdly, whether the parents have attended official meetings with the teachers which are organized by the school several times a year. The first binary variable is based upon the question: 'Are you member of a parent association?'. The other two variables have been generated by means of the question: 'Since the beginning of the school year, have you had the chance to meet one of your child's teachers? At [official] teacher-parent meetings? On your own initiative?' 16 per cent of the parents are member in a parent association, 33 per cent talked to their child's teachers at meetings they had initiated by themselves and 85 per cent had the occasion to talk to the teachers at official parent–teacher meetings (Table 1).

Controls

Finally, I add four variables as control variables. The first variable represents immigration background. It is based upon parents' nationality and country of birth and consists of five categories: (i) 'French origin' (two parents of French nationality and born in metropolitan France); (ii) 'French nationality, born abroad/foreign nationality, born in France' including parents from the French overseas territories; (iii) 'European immigrant'; and (iv) 'Non-European immigrant', both categories consisting of students with two parents of foreign nationality and born abroad; and (v) 'Mixed origin'

containing students with one parent of French origin and one from category (ii), (iii), or (iv). The second control variable indicates whether the school the student attends is located in a ZEP, *i.e.* an 'education priority zone'. These schools are located in disadvantaged areas and receive additional resources (*e.g.* extra instruction hours, bonuses for teaching staff) to develop educational methods to reduce social inequality (Bénabou, Kramarz and Prost, 2009). Although the effectiveness of this program in terms of students' school success could not be proven (Bénabou, Kramarz and Prost, 2009), the staff considerably differs as compared to other public and private schools: the teachers tend to be younger, have a different teaching style and closer relations to the parents of their students (Chauveau, 2001). The third control variable denotes whether the student is enrolled at a private school. Public and private schools differ with regard to their social distribution and the average

performance level of their children (Nauze-Fichet, 2004; Tavan, 2004). It is particularly important to control for this school type, since French families have the freedom to choose schools they are not locally assigned to and school choice has been found to be strongly influenced by family's social origin (Meuret, Broccolichi and Duru-Bellat, 2001). As the population in French urban areas differs in terms of attitudes and resources from the people living in rural parts of France, I take into account the size of the town where the student goes to school. As shown by Roux and Davaillon (2001), families from Paris and larger cities are more likely to request the general track than families that live in the country side. To control for the urban–rural discrepancies, I employ a variable with four categories: (i) 'rural to 5,000 inhabitants', (ii) '5,000–20,000 inhabitants', (iii) '20,000–200,000 inhabitants', and (iv) '200,000–2,000,000 inhabitants and Paris'.

Table 2 Social class differentials in school performance (results from OLS regression on marks and binary logistic regression on repetition of school years)

| | Marks | | Repetition of school years up to Grade 9 | |
	b	SE	*b* std. *y*	SE
Social background				
Ref. EGP V–VII				
EGP I	2.12***	0.08	−0.70***	0.08
EGP II	1.45***	0.08	−0.43***	0.07
EGP III	0.56***	0.08	−0.09**	0.06
EGP IV	0.66***	0.09	−0.20***	0.08
Immigration background				
Ref. French origin				
French nationality, born abroad/foreign nationality, born in France	−0.27*	0.13	0.03	0.11
European immigrant	−0.17	0.17	0.12	0.16
Non-European immigrant	−0.98***	0.13	0.04	0.09
Mixed origin	−0.27***	0.07	0.05	0.07
Town size				
Ref. < 5,000 inhabitants				
5,000–20,000	−0.15	0.09		
20,000–200,000	−0.19*	0.08		
200,000 Paris	−0.43***	0.08		
ZEP school	−0.06	0.10		
Private school	0.12*	0.06		
Constant	10.40***	0.07		
R^2/Pseudo R^2	0.10		0.04	
N	11,667		11,667	

*$P < 0.05$; **$P < 0.01$; ***$P < 0.00$.
SEs in the analysis of marks are adjusted for school-level clustering.
b std. *y* = *y*-standardized logit coefficients, SE = standard error, ZEP = 'education priority zone'.
Source: Panel national 1995 d'élèves du second degré, ministère de l'Éducation nationale, DPD; own calculations.

Empirical Results

The empirical results are presented in three parts. In the first part, the relationship between social class and family's request, the staff meeting's proposition and the final school track outcome of the dialogue is shown in order to describe the general context and the 'consequences' of the staff's decision-making. Herein, I test one of the three 'bridge hypotheses' on the antecedent mechanisms creating social class differentials regarding the parameters required by the theoretical model. Briefly, the 'bridge hypotheses' embrace the positive effect of social background on (i) the probability that a family requests LGT, (ii) on students' school performance in terms of marks and repeated school years and, (iii) on parents' involvement in their child's schooling. In the second part of the 'Results' section, I test the other two 'bridge-hypotheses'. Finally, in the third part, I test hypotheses H1 and H2 in order to *explain* social class differentials in the staff meeting's school track proposition.

The average marginal effects (AME) shown in Figure 2 correspond to Boudon's 'secondary effects', *i.e.* the effects of students' social background on school track choices given the same performance level. They have been gained by logistic regression models containing social class of the family, students' marks, repetition of school years, and the control variables (immigration background, school type, and town size). Figure 2 reveals that the family's request, the staff's proposition, and the final outcome of the dialogue are significantly affected by family's social class and, thereby, provides support for the first 'bridge hypothesis'. Comparing the left graph and the one in the centre, one can see that the staff's proposition is somewhat less affected by social background than the family's own request. By tendency, this result is in line with previous studies that found weaker secondary effects on teacher decisions as compared to family decisions. However, the difference between the AMEs is small and their confidence intervals overlap. Moving from the graph in the centre to the one on the right, we see that the effect of social class slightly increases. Overall, the average effects of EGPs I and II are 'the highest' on the family's request, decrease a little for the final outcome and are 'the smallest' for the staff's proposition. Still, the social class effects vary only little over these three steps of the dialogue.

Table 2 supports the second 'bridge hypothesis' on the positive relationship between social class and school performance: The more favourable the social background of a student, the better are her marks and the less likely she is to have repeated at least 1 year up to Grade 9. Table 3 addresses social class differentials in parental involvement. Regarding membership in parent associations and attendance to official parent–teacher meetings, one notices highly significant effects of all social classes. The coefficients point in the expected direction: The higher the social class position of the parents the more likely they are to be member in a parent association and to attend official parent–teacher meetings. However, the effect for meetings with the teachers initiated by the parents is not significant for EGP IV and only weakly significant for EGP III. Parents with immigration background are significantly less likely to be member in a parent association than French parents. Private school and living in Paris or large cities has a positive effect on initiation of meetings with teachers. Parents of students attending schools in ZEPs are more likely to attend official parent–teacher meetings probably because, there, parents are more encouraged to do so.

Table 4 lists the results of logistic regressions of the staff's proposition (LGT versus LPA). Here, I test the decision-making model developed to explain social class differentials in the staff meeting's school track proposition. I start with testing hypothesis H1. In all models, I control for immigration background, town size, and school type. Comparing the social class effects in Models 1 and 2, one notices that a large part of the highly significant social class differentials in the teachers' decision is driven by social class differentials in marks and repeated school years, *i.e.* the primary effects. In line with previous research, given the same performance, students with immigration background have higher chances of receiving an LGT proposition (*e.g.* Duru-Bellat, 2002). This chance increases with town size, but is negative for students enrolled in private schools. Adding family's school track request dramatically reduces the effect of students' social background and even eliminates the significance of the coefficients of the lower and middle EGP classes (Model 3). Though, the coefficient of EGP I remains highly significant (b std. $y = 0.11$, $P < 0.00$) and the one of EGP II weakly significant (b std. $y = 0.07$, $P < 0.05$) indicating that net of students' school performance and his or her family's request, the staff meeting is more likely to propose LGT to students who belong to higher social classes than to students from the lowest social classes (reference category EGP V–VII). When parental involvement is held constant (Model 4), the y-standardized coefficient of EGP I is slightly reduced and loses some significance (y std. $b = 0.09$, $P < 0.00$). If students' parents are members of a parent association, this positively affects the probability that the staff meeting proposes the general track, while if parents have initiated meetings with the teachers, the staff is less likely to opt for LGT. I suggest that the findings presented by Table 4 can partly be

Table 3 Social class differentials in parental involvement (results from binary logistic regression)

	Membership in parent association			Meetings initiated by the parents			Official parent–teacher meetings		
	b std. *y*	SE		*b* std. *y*	SE		*b* std. *y*	SE	
Social background									
Ref. EGPs V–VII									
EGP I	0.93***	0.10		0.12***	0.06		0.47***	0.09	
EGP II	0.68***	0.10		0.13***	0.06		0.46***	0.09	
EGP IIIab	0.30***	0.10		0.07*	0.06		0.19***	0.08	
EGP IV	0.41***	0.12		−0.06	0.08		0.19***	0.10	
Immigration background									
Ref. French origin									
French nat., born abroad/foreign nationality, born in France	−0.30***	0.16		−0.02	0.10		−0.15*	0.13	
Europ. immigrant	−0.50***	0.29		−0.08	0.15		−0.19*	0.17	
Non-Europ. immigrant	−0.55***	0.21		−0.10	0.10		−0.40***	0.11	
Mixed origin	−0.04	0.07		0.05	0.06		−0.07	0.08	
Town size									
Ref. < 5,000 inhabitants									
5,000–20,000	0.00	0.09		0.09*	0.07		−0.09	0.09	
20,000–200,000	−0.01	0.08		0.08*	0.06		−0.11*	0.09	
200,000 Paris	0.08	0.08		0.19***	0.06		−0.04	0.09	
ZEP school	0.06	0.11		−0.09*	0.08		0.07***	0.10	
Private school	−0.05	0.07		0.25***	0.05		0.16	0.08	
Pseudo R^2	0.08			0.02			0.03		
N	11,667			11,667			11,667		

*$P < 0.05$; **$P < 0.01$; ***$P < 0.00$.

SEs are adjusted for school-level clustering.

b std. y = y-standardized logit coefficients, SE = standard error, ZEP = 'education priority zone'.

Source: Panel national 1995 d'élèves du second degré, ministère de l'Éducation nationale, DPD; own calculations.

interpreted as evidence for hypothesis *H1*. Social class differentials in the staff meeting's proposition seem to be caused by the staff's evaluation of *a*, the student's performance (via marks and repetition of school years) and *r*, the likelihood that the student's parents will reject their proposition (via the family's request and membership in parent association). However, the negative effect of meetings initiated by the parents seems to contradict the assumption that parents who are involved have higher chances that their child receives an LGT proposition. As the children of these parents show a relatively low performance (mean mark = 10.4; 29 per cent have repeated at least one school year—numbers are not shown in Table 3), I suggest that the initiation of meetings with teachers took place 'urgently' because the school track decision was approaching and the student's transition to LGT was unsure. Hence, this type of involvement seems not be the one that teachers value as indicating high chances of success. At the same time, this result implies that teachers do neither think that parents who initiate meetings will reject their proposition.

In order to test hypothesis *H2*, I include interaction terms of marks and family's request, respectively, parental involvement (Models 5 and 6, Table 4). While the interaction of marks and the three parental involvement variables yield no significant coefficients, the one of marks and family's request reveals a highly significant positive effect. The reduced main effect of the request shows that families who demanded LPA have a little chance of still receiving an LGT proposition. The interaction effect indicates that for families who requested the general track the corresponding chance further increases with students' marks.

Figure 4 presents predicted probabilities gained by Model 5 for students' belonging to EGP II, who did not repeat school years, who are of French origin, living in a town of 20,000 to 200,000 inhabitants, with parents who attend official parent–teacher meetings.[8] Figure 4 illustrates the interplay of family's request and students' school performance on staff's proposition: In case the family has requested the general track, the staff is willing to propose LGT even when students' marks are rather

Table 4 Determinants of staff meeting's school track proposition: LGT compared to LPA (results from binary logistic regressions; y-standardized)

	Model 1 b std. y	SE	Model 2 b std. y	SE	Model 3 b std. y	SE	Model 4 b std. y	SE	Model 5 b std. y	SE	Model 6 b std. y	SE
Social background												
Ref. EGPs V–VII												
EGP I	1.19***	0.08	0.58***	0.11	0.11***	0.17	0.09**	0.18	0.10**	0.18	0.10**	0.18
EGP II	0.75***	0.07	0.36***	0.09	0.07*	0.17	0.07*	0.17	0.07*	0.17	0.07*	0.17
EGP III	0.27***	0.06	0.14***	0.08	0.04	0.15	0.03	0.16	0.03	0.16	0.03	0.15
EGP IV	0.36***	0.07	0.17***	0.10	0.03	0.19	0.02	0.19	0.03	0.19	0.02	0.19
Immigration background												
Ref. French origin												
French nat., born abroad/foreign nat., born in France	0.01	0.11	0.10*	0.16	−0.08	0.22	−0.07	0.22	−0.07	0.23	−0.07	0.22
European immigrant	0.08	0.16	0.17*	0.21	0.00	0.28	0.01	0.28	0.01	0.28	0.01	0.28
Non-European immigrant	−0.07	0.10	0.15***	0.14	−0.03	0.20	−0.03	0.21	−0.02	0.21	−0.03	0.21
Mixed origin	−0.01	0.06	0.06*	0.09	0.02	0.16	0.02	0.16	0.03	0.16	0.02	0.16
Town size												
Ref. <5,000 inhabitants												
5,000–20,000	0.01	0.07	0.07*	0.10	0.02	0.19	0.02	0.19	0.02	0.19	0.02	0.19
20,000–200,000	0.12***	0.07	0.17***	0.09	0.06	0.17	0.07	0.17	0.07*	0.18	0.07*	0.17
200,000 Paris	0.11***	0.07	0.22***	0.09	0.04	0.17	0.05	0.17	0.05	0.17	0.05	0.16
Private school	−0.13***	0.06	−0.18***	0.08	−0.15***	0.13	−0.14***	0.13	−0.15***	0.13	−1.04***	0.13
ZEP school	−0.07	0.08	−0.02	0.11	−0.01	0.19	−0.01	0.20	−0.01	0.19	−0.01	0.19
Marks			0.24***	0.02	0.15***	0.03	0.15***	0.03	0.10***	0.04	0.13***	0.06
Repeated school year(s)			−0.50***	0.08	−0.27***	0.11	−0.26***	0.11	−0.27***	0.12	−0.26***	0.11
Family's request (LGT)					1.18***	0.19	1.18***	0.19	0.30*	0.65	11.72***	0.19
Parent association							0.11***	0.17	0.11	0.17	−0.11	1.09
Meetings initiated by parents							−0.05*	0.11	−0.05	0.11	−0.18	0.66
Official teacher–parents meetings							0.02	0.15	0.01	0.15	−0.15	0.70
Interaction of a and r:												
Family's request × marks									0.08***	0.06		
Parent association × marks											0.02	0.11
Meet. init. by the parents × marks											0.01	0.06
Off. teacher–par.-meet. × marks											0.02	0.07
Pseudo R²	0.12		0.49		0.81		0.81		0.82			
N	10,886		10,886		10,886		10,886		10,886		10,886	

*P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.00.

SEs are adjusted for school-level clustering.

b std. y = y-standardized logit coefficients; SE = standard error, ZEP = 'education priority zone'.

Source: Panel national 1995 d'élèves du second degré, ministère de l'Éducation nationale, DPD; own calculations.
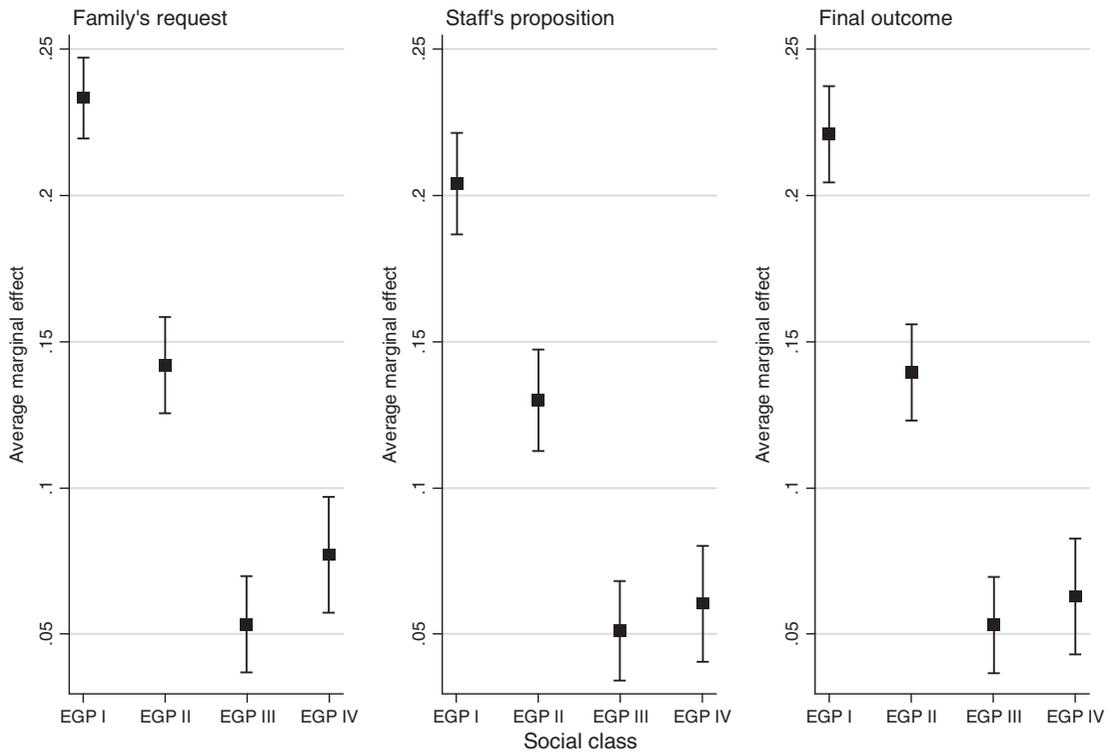
Figure 3 Average marginal effect of social class on family's request, staff meeting's proposition and the final outcome of the dialogue (LGT versus LPA).
Note: Reference category for calculation of social class effect is EGP V-VII; estimates obtained from logistic regression models containing social class, marks, school year repetition and controls.
Source: Panel national 1995 d'élèves du second degré, ministère de l'Éducation nationale, DPD; own calculations.

low (marks > 5). In contrast, when the family has demanded LPA, the staff proposes the general track only if the students' marks are at least of 10. The slopes show that the probability increases comparatively less with students' performance when the family has requested LPA. In line with *H2*, the effect of family's request varies by students' school performance. It is smallest in the lowest performance levels, increases in the middle ranges and diminishes in higher performance levels. This result can cautiously be interpreted as support for the interaction of *a* and *r*: When students' performance is not clearly indicating students' chances of success, the staff assumes that the family is likely to reject and this probability of rejection certainly is even higher when the family has requested LGT.

Summary and Discussion

The aim of this article was to investigate whether and how social background of students affects the decision-making of the school staff within the French

institutionalized dialogue between family and school. The analysis reveals strong effects of students' social background on the school track decisions their parents and their teachers make and on the final outcome of the dialogue. The staff meetings' school track proposition is as highly affected by student's social class as the family's request and little social class effects seem to be generated by the following steps (*e.g.* family's rejection).

Furthermore, the results confirm the findings of previous studies examining the dialogue: The staff's decision-making is extremely driven by family's request and, therefore, it reproduces the large social class differentials that emerge through families' decision-making. In contrast to previous research, I find that given the same request and the same performance, the staff meeting is even more likely to propose LGT to students from the higher social classes than to students from the lower ones. This result leads to different interpretations. Either, it indicates that the teachers use students' social background to assess the students' chances of success (*a*). Or, the staff employs students'
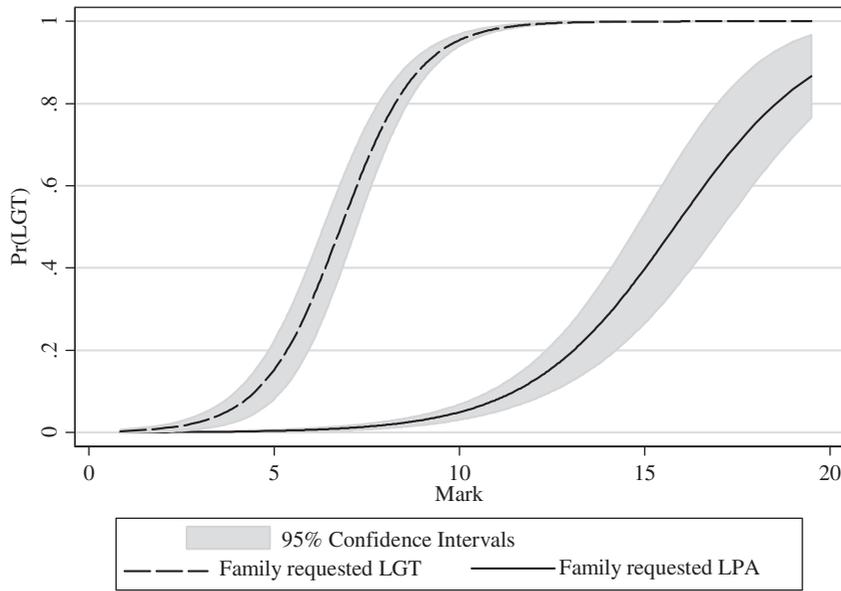
Figure 4 Effect of students' school performance on the probability that the staff meeting proposes LGT (instead of LPA) conditional on family's request (LGT versus LPA)—predicted probabilities based on estimates from Model 5 in Table 4.
Note: LGT = general track, LPA = vocational track. Estimates apply for students from EGP II, of French origin, living in a town of 20,000 to 200,000 inhabitants, with parents attending official parent-teacher meetings.
Source: Panel national 1995 d'élèves du second degré, ministère del'Éducation nationale, DPD; own calculations.

social background to evaluate *r*, the probability that his or her parents will reject and bother the headmaster. Alternatively, the remaining significant effects may be interpreted as support for the ideas of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory: the school staff acts as 'gatekeeper' by recruiting higher and middle class students for the general track and preventing lower class students from upward social mobility.

Moreover, an important role of parental involvement becomes apparent: membership in parent association appears to be a good way for a family to convince the staff meeting to propose the general track. This seems to be either because the staff meeting wants to avoid family's rejection, or because it thinks that this type of parental involvement is an indicator for students' future chances of success. Meetings initiated by the parents, however, seem not to be the involvement that teachers reward with LGT propositions. Finally, attendance at official parent–teacher meetings may show no effect at all because most of the parents attend these meetings (85 per cent; Table 1).

This article provides three main insights. First, although the dialogue has been implemented to reduce social inequality, it stabilizes and even increases social inequality since staff meetings' decisions are strongly determined by families' requests and since, given the

same request, the staff meeting is more likely to send a student from the higher social classes to the general track than one from less favourable classes. This finding implies that shifting decision-making power from the families to the school can be counterproductive under certain institutional circumstances. It may be that educational systems in which families do not make their request *prior* to the staff's decision and where governmental authorities do not direct the schools to prevent rejections by the families are more successful in reducing social inequality. Second, the quantitative results of this analysis confirm the findings of qualitative studies that claim the importance of social class differentials in parental involvement. Finally, the rational action approach appears to be an appropriate theory to explain school staffs' decision-making. However, since in this study students' performance, parental involvement, and students' social background were used to operationalize different parameters at the same time, further empirical evidence for the exact mechanisms has to be provided by research with more detailed data.

Notes

1   As for other European countries, there is a debate on whether the association between social

background and education has persisted (Goux and Maurin, 1997) or decreased. For France, the overall association declined, but social class differentials regarding the attainment of the different *baccalauréat* have remained (for more detail see, *e.g.* Ichou and Vallet, 2011).

2   However, as a subsequent step of the dialogue, the family can, again, reject the decision of the headmaster. Given this second rejection, a general meeting of selected school-external teachers, the headmaster and the parents' representatives makes another decision. It is the binding final outcome of the dialogue.

3   Along the 'démocratisation' the regulations regarding family's freedom of school choice were also altered. Before, parents had to enrol their child in schools they were locally assigned to, but since the early 1980s this local commitment has been increasingly softened (*e.g.* Meuret, Broccolichi and Duru-Bellat, 2001).

4   Besides, it is argued that the school track decisions of the teachers and of the headmaster also depend on the possibilities of the surrounding upper secondary schools and companies to accept students from the lower secondary schools (Briand and Chapoulie, 1993). Unfortunately, I cannot directly test the effect of these factors, since I have no information on the supply of the nearby upper secondary schools and firms.

5   Nevertheless, there are a very small number of families who reject 'higher' propositions (0.3 percent). However, I ignore these within my theoretical modelling, since they can be seen as an exceptional group for which distinct hypotheses would have to be made.

6   The literature dealing with the term 'cultural capital' varies a lot regarding the way in which it defines and operationalizes it. I rely on the circumscription of cultural capital as 'familiarity with the 'dominant culture'', since this best describes the facet of cultural capital that corresponds to families' capacities to deal with the school staff.

7   In an additional surveys, a subgroup of these students was further observed during higher education and when entering the labour market.

8   Corresponding graphs have been generated for students belonging to the other social classes and holding constant the other variables at different

values. The slopes of the two curves basically remain the same.

Acknowledgements

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