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Institutional sponsorship and educational stratification: Elite education in France

Agnès van Zanten

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Henriot-Van Zanten, Agnès

Institutional sponsorship and educational stratification. Elite education in France

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ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR PÄDAGOGIK

**Exklusive Bildung und neue Ungleichheit.
Ergebnisse der DFG-Forscher-
gruppe „Mechanismen der Elitebildung
im deutschen Bildungssystem“**

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Exklusive Bildung und neue Ungleichheit

**Ergebnisse der DFG-Forschergruppe
„Mechanismen der Elitebildung
im deutschen Bildungssystem“**

Herausgegeben von
Werner Helsper, Heinz-Hermann Krüger
und Jasmin Lüdemann

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Agnés van Zanten

Institutional Sponsorship and Educational Stratification

Elite education in France

Abstract: Using Turner's ideal-typical distinction between two modes of upward mobility through education, 'contest' and 'sponsored' mobility, the first section of this article presents and discusses the concept of 'institutional sponsorship' developed to refine Turner's typology and adapt it to the study of contemporary educational systems. The second section analyses two main channels of institutional sponsorship, internal tracking and school segregation, using data from studies on the French educational system. The conclusion emphasizes the influence of the institutional sponsorship of educational elites on educational closure and inequalities.

Keywords: Educational Stratification, Sponsorship, Closure, Inequality, France

1. Introduction

This article is based on the theoretical framework devised by American sociologist Ralph Turner (1960), who draws an ideal-typical distinction between two modes of upward mobility through education: contest and sponsored mobility. In Turner's original concept 'contest' and 'sponsorship' are organizing norms. However, because they become embedded in institutional practices, these types also refer to the mobility channels (Kerckhoff, 1995) that make upwardly mobile trajectories possible. According to Turner, while the contest norm prevailed in the American educational system, sponsorship was a central pattern of the English system. In this article, I focus on the French educational system, which, from the outset, exhibited features stemming from both norms, with a view to pointing out some general processes that restrict access to elite positions in contemporary educational systems.¹

The article comprises two sections. The first presents the concept of institutional sponsorship that I developed in an effort to refine Turner's typology and adapt it to the study of contemporary educational systems. It also analyses two main channels of institutional sponsorship in the French system. In order to describe these channels, I rely mostly on the sociological literature on educational inequalities but also on my own previous work on school segregation, choice and competition (van Zanten, 2008, 2009;

¹ Many of the arguments discussed in this article are presented in more detail in van Zanten (2018), although the concept of 'institutional sponsorship' is developed more extensively here.

Felouzis, Maroy & van Zanten, 2013). The second section, faithful to Turner's perspective, which places key emphasis on processes of selection when comparing the normative underpinnings of each type, looks at the processes through which students are guided towards elite higher education tracks in prestigious *lycées*², as well as the procedures used to sort applicants by professors working in *classes préparatoires*.³ The analysis in this section draws on an empirical study of the selection and segregation of academic elites conducted between 2006 and 2013 and on on-going research into transition to higher education.

These two qualitative studies collated a broad range of data but only the material directly related to the questions addressed in this article will be cited. This material comprises an ethnographic study conducted in one elite state *lycée*, here referred to as 'François 1er', based on interviews with parents, students, teachers, and other school personnel as well as on observations of teacher meetings, meetings with parents, and school open days. The data drawn upon also includes an ethnographic study of the admission procedures in the CPGE at François 1er based on observations of the selection process and on interviews with the CPGE teachers involved in the selection committee.⁴

-
- 2 Secondary education in France comprises two levels: middle secondary schools called *collèges*, which educate youngsters aged 11 to 14 for four years, and upper-secondary schools called *lycées*, which educate youngsters aged 15 to 17 for three years.
 - 3 *Classes préparatoires*, or CPGE as they will be referred to in this article, are taken by students after the *baccalauréat* (final secondary school exam) for two to three years to prepare the competitive exams (*concours*) to enter the *grandes écoles* (special schools initially created by the State to train senior civil servants and now prestigious higher education institutions preparing students for a variety of professions and positions). The CPGE are officially viewed as a form of higher education, although they are still taught in secondary school buildings.
 - 4 This article draws primarily on interviews conducted with 20 parents, 39 students and 15 teachers, including seven form tutors, and with the administrative team (the head teacher and deputy head teacher) and persons in charge of pastoral care within the school (the *conseiller d'éducation* and three *surveillants*). We observed 15 *conseils de classe* (meetings – attended by the head teacher or deputy head teacher, the form tutor, subject teachers and parent and student representatives – that review each student's marks and progress, as well as discussing general questions affecting the class), four meetings with parents, six cultural events and four open days as well as many informal interactions between students and school personnel. The study of the admission procedures involved the observation of one selection session, interviews with the six teachers and the head teacher involved and close examination of 20 applications chosen to represent the variety of students' profiles with respect to previous *lycée* attended, gender and grades.

2. Institutional Sponsorship and its Two Main Channels

2.1 Institutional Sponsorship in Contemporary Educational Systems

Any serious attempt to use Turner's typology today has to incorporate the changes that have marked school systems over the past 50 years, as well as the sociological interpretations that have tried to account for them. To my mind, in order to fruitfully apply Turner's typology to contemporary social and educational systems, it is important to refine it in two different ways. The first is to consider that, rather than revealing that one dominant norm is at play, most analyses of contemporary educational systems show the co-existence of both norms. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that since the 1960s the contest norm or, to use more modern terms, the principle of meritocracy, has become the formal, legitimate ideal of the majority of educational systems. On the other hand, it also results from the parallel fact that the spread of meritocracy has not abolished previous forms of sponsorship in most systems and has, in addition, given rise to new ones. The second way in which the typology warrants refining is that it is necessary to distinguish between two sets of actors – parents and teachers – who play a key role in sustaining the norm of competition but also in supporting two distinct, albeit intertwined and complementary forms of sponsorship: institutional and social.

The focus on this article will be on institutional sponsorship, that is to say the endorsement by both teachers and parents of the educational careers of certain children, facilitating their access to elite positions through various mechanisms and processes within educational institutions. Institutional sponsorship differs from social sponsorship in three important dimensions. The first concerns the types of actors involved and the

	Contest Mobility	Sponsored Mobility
Access to elite status, main mechanism and underlying metaphor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status is taken by aspirants' own efforts • Competition • Sporting event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status is granted on the basis of the qualities established elites wish to see in fellow members • Co-opting • Private club
Organisation of school careers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping everyone in the running until the final stages, by delaying absolute judgments as long as possible • Focus on principles and rules allowing a fair race. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early selection of students into tracks allowing access to elite positions • Focus on preparing recruits for their elite position
Mechanisms through which elites join the normative system in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecurity of elite position because each contest, rather than ensuring a definitive position, serves to qualify the participant for competition at the next higher level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early and thorough indoctrination in elite culture, combined with a sense of responsibility toward inferiors.

This table was drawn based on Ralph Turner's original article (1960). An article by London (1989) provides another example of a synthesis of both types.

Tab. 1: Some distinctive features of contest and sponsorship

power relationships between them. Educational institutions are the main actors involved in providing institutional sponsorship although both teachers and parents can call on it. However, when parents do so they have to accept that educational institutions have varying degrees of autonomy in deciding who can benefit from it (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; van Zanten, 2005). Conversely, social sponsorship falls to parents. The extent to which their perspectives and interests prevail depends upon the amount and type of resources they possess, but also on the degree to which institutions depend on these resources for their survival and development (Karabel, 1984).

A second difference, strongly related to the first, concerns the criteria that are used in each type of sponsorship to grant specific privileges to future elites. Institutional sponsorship tends to grant advantages to students on the basis either of their academic results or of their institutional background. Social sponsorship can also be based on academic criteria. For instance, parents can decide to devote more money and attention to the schooling of their most academically gifted or successful child. In general, however, parents either sponsor all their children equally or differentiate according to ‘ascriptive’ criteria such as gender or position in the family or to personality traits and tastes rather than ‘achievement’ criteria.

A third difference, again strongly intertwined with the first two, concerns the degree of legitimacy of each type of sponsorship. Because institutional sponsorship takes place within or among educational institutions, is initiated or conducted by educational professionals, and relies mostly on academic criteria, it is frequently perceived as a more legitimate form of privilege than social sponsorship. Indeed while the former is sometimes equated to rational and even fair treatment of students, the latter is more frequently seen as an unfair attempt to manipulate the rules of meritocratic competition. For this reason also, many sociological studies, including some of my own prior work, have devoted more attention to various forms of social sponsorship such as parental school choice or parental involvement in schools (Ball, 2003; van Zanten, 2009; Lareau & McCrory Calarco, 2012), than to institutional sponsorship.

The ambiguous status of institutional sponsorship with respect to contest mobility requires more detailed examination of the contest norm. Turner’s article and subsequent writings use the term ambiguously to refer, on the one hand, to what could be called, in contemporary terms, an ‘inclusive’ form of competition where all participants are kept playing the same game – that is to say, learning together in a common school system – for a long time, irrespective of their performance in different contests and, on the other hand, to an ‘exclusive’ form of competition.⁵ Rosenbaum (1975, 1979) has coined the term ‘tournament mobility’ to refer to this second type of competition where candidates’ chances of rising up through the ranks grow weaker with each competitive test in which there are always winners and losers. In the first type of low-stakes competition, students

5 As Turner’s expressions in the summary table suggest, he alternates between statements underlining the open nature of contest mobility (‘Keeping everyone in the running until the final stages’) and statements alluding instead to its closed nature (‘insecurity of the elite position’).

do not need any kind of specific sponsorship to move through the system. However, it is logical to expect that the second type of high-stakes competition will encourage both institutional and social sponsorship.

2.2 *Two Common Mechanisms of Institutional Sponsorship*

Institutional sponsorship was common in many European educational systems before meritocracy became the official norm and before major steps were taken to reduce social inequalities in access to secondary education, notably the widespread creation of free-of-charge state secondary schools and the development of a single comprehensive system of middle secondary schools, subsuming the different types of secondary schooling that existed previously. In France, discourse on meritocratic selection developed concomitantly with policy decisions leading to the creation of the *collège unique* in the 1960s and 1970s which replaced the previous tripartite system composed of the ‘small *lycée*’ attended by upper-class students, the ‘upper-primary school classes’ attended by the working classes, and the ‘complementary courses’ attended by lower middle-class students (Prost, 1968; Briand & Chapoulie, 1992).

2.3 *Internal Tracking as Pre-Selection into Elite Routes*

Abolishing the former distinct types of schools did not, however, abolish academic and social hierarchies. These hierarchies have subsisted in the formal tracks maintained in upper-secondary education and the more subtle forms of hierarchical differentiation that have developed in middle secondary education (Lucas, 2001; Kerckhoff, 2001). This transformation of the mechanisms of social reproduction through schooling have been accompanied by a major change in the ways in which different educational pathways are justified: the sponsorship norm has been officially abandoned in favour of a meritocracy norm, which mixes low-stakes and high-stakes competition. Students who fail to meet the requirements of exams and selection processes during secondary school are allowed to remain in the educational system but are allocated to less demanding and prestigious options and tracks. Because, in many systems, school professionals cannot entirely impose their decisions, and because the existing options and tracks offer different curricula, these processes are also frequently justified with reference to student and parent preference. However, one of the major effects of this first mechanism is that many students become outcasts on the inside (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1992) and are excluded from elite tracks at quite an early stage in their school careers, thus reserving these tracks for a small number of other students.

Recent studies on the French educational system have indeed shown that soon after selection was eliminated in the *collège unique* in the 1980s, various options developed in middle secondary schools offering a reinforced curriculum in languages, the arts, sports, or European culture which were taken up by a majority of successful upper- and

middle-class students while other options were designed for failing students from lower-class backgrounds (Broccolichi, 1995; Payet, 1995; van Zanten, 2012). These studies have also shown that, despite a dramatic rise in the number of students who continue into upper-secondary education, selection for the major upper-secondary tracks (the general, technical, and vocational *baccalauréats*) remains very stringent and is linked both to students' academic level and their social and ethnic background (Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 1988; Chauvel, 2014; Cayouette-Remblière, 2016). This leads to students with low grades from disadvantaged backgrounds being segregated in the vocational track and good students from upper- and middle-class backgrounds being aggregated in the general tracks and particularly in the science stream of the general track (Merle, 2000) which is the 'royal road' to elite higher education (Lidegran, 2017). Presently, 95.3% of students who go on to study at CPGE for their higher education have a general *baccalauréat* and 95.5% of those in the CPGE scientific classes – which are considered the more prestigious – have a general scientific *baccalauréat* (Dutercq & Masy, 2016). Internal tracking is thus clearly an institutional mechanism for the pre-selection of some students into elite routes in the French system.

2.4 Aggregation into Specific Schools as a Pathway of Upward Mobility

Another central mechanism of institutional sponsorship is the way students are aggregated into specific schools. Before the 'democratisation' of secondary education, differences already existed in France, as in many countries, between secondary schools of the same type, in terms of both intake and students' future educational pathways, depending in particular on the state or private status of the school but also on its location. These differences have, however, become more pronounced as schools and upper-class parents have resorted to strategies of competition and choice to limit the upward mobility of failing and average students from non-elite backgrounds (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1995).

The double transformation of private schools is particularly interesting to analyse from this perspective. Until the 1960s, these schools recruited and attracted students on the basis of their parents' religion (95% of them are still officially Catholic) and conservative leanings. However, the creation of the *collège unique*, which went hand in hand with the development of catchment areas for state schools, coincided with another important reform: the recognition by the State that private schools fulfilled a public service and were therefore entitled to state funding (Tanguy, 1972). This reform allowed private schools to radically restructure and address the growing demand from upper-class parents, who were turning to them because they were perceived as providing better learning conditions especially due to the fact that, contrary to state schools, they could select their students (Prost, 1968; Ballion, 1980). Until the 1990s, however, elite private *lycées* and CPGE still attracted fewer academically able students and were less academically selective than state *lycées* meaning, in turn, that they were less successful in getting their students accepted in elite CPGE or *grandes écoles*. As a result, upper-class parents zigzagged between state and private schools with a significant pro-

portion choosing a private middle secondary school but then moving their children to a prestigious state *lycée* (Langouët & Léger, 1991). However, their increasing attractiveness has led private schools to become more selective with the end result that elite private *lycées* now have better results at the *baccalauréat* than public *lycées* and that elite private CPGE are now ranked ahead of elite public CPGE on the basis of the percentage of students accepted into the most prestigious *grandes écoles*.

Meanwhile, the institutional sponsorship of students within the state sector has not disappeared and the differences between *lycées* in this respect have increased as a response to the quantitative democratisation of upper-secondary education (Felouzis et al., 2013). One small policy decision that deserves attention is that while students are generally allocated to state *collèges* and *lycées* on the basis of their location and, more recently, through online matching platforms, the two most prestigious *lycées* in Paris have continued to be allowed to select their students, which has led to a high concentration of excellent students from upper-class backgrounds in these two schools. Another more recent decision that it is important to underline is that, in Paris, the current matching algorithm used to allocate students to *lycées* gives priority to those who live close to the school they request and to holders of scholarships in an effort to reduce social segregation but it also gives extra points to students with high grades, a policy choice that has increased the degree of academic segregation between *lycées* (Fack, Grenet & He, 2017). In other words, both the existing differences between schools and the present procedures governing access to them constitute another form of institutional sponsorship.

3. Institutional Sponsorship in Access to Elite Higher Education

Between 1999 and 2012, with little change from one year to the next, more than 75% of students at the *lycée* François 1er opted to pursue their studies in a CPGE and a highly prestigious CPGE for the vast majority.⁶ Since 2013, however, a substantial number of students have started to go to university, a shift that is mainly due to the new selective degree programmes that have been introduced.⁷ However, so far this change – which has resulted in a ratio of 4/5 going to a CPGE and 1/5 going to university – has not challenged the pre-eminence of the CPGE (which are only attended by 7% of higher education students) as the preferential track to the elite, whether at François 1er or among students attending similar public or private *lycées*. Conversely, while the CPGE have become somewhat more diverse since 1995, proving to be less academically, socially, and geographically selective on average (Dutercq & Masy, 2016), the most prestigious of them have not significantly changed their dominant pattern of recruiting excellent students from upper-class backgrounds from a small number of *lycées* located in Paris,

6 Data indicated on the establishment's website.

7 In France, standard undergraduate degree courses at university have traditionally been non selective, with the baccalauréat being the only entrance requirement.

the Parisian region and a few big French cities. Institutional sponsorship plays a major role in maintaining this ‘high status track’ (Kingston & Lewis, 1990).

3.1 *Chartering and Channelling into Elite HE Tracks*

François 1er students’ overwhelming preference for the CPGE-*grandes écoles* pathway is due to both axiological and instrumental reasons. They place it at the pinnacle of the educational system, with university disciplines such as medicine and law or studies in major selective establishments such as Sciences Po (Institute of Political Science)⁸ still relegated to the second rank, because they continue to see the CPGE as the pathway of ‘honour’ (d’Iribarne, 1989; Bourdieu, 1996), leading to the positions of power and influence that are reserved for the indisputable winners of the final meritocratic contest (Dubet, 2004; Duru-Bellat, 2009; Tenret, 2011). Considerations of a more instrumental nature also come into play, however. There is no doubt that the CPGE-*grandes écoles* pathway remains the safest and most direct way of obtaining a well-paid job in France, not only within the State, which created these programmes to train and recruit its senior civil servants (Suleiman, 1978; van Zanten & Maxwell, 2015), but also in the private sector.

3.2 *Anticipatory Socialisation into Elite Tracks*

However, the fact that these students collectively choose this pathway is also the result of deliberate efforts by educational professionals to push and support them in that direction, most frequently with the help of their upper-class parents. Educational professionals charter and channel students into this pathway in various ways. Following Meyer (1970), by ‘chartering’, I refer to a process of ‘anticipatory socialisation’ (Merton, 1968) in which educational institutions, in this case elite *lycées* such as François 1er, and their educational professionals adapt their activities to the expected futures of their students, turning this adaptation into a moral imperative or ‘mission’.

At the *lycée* François 1er – like many elite private or state *lycées* – many of the teachers, who attended a CPGE themselves, feel compelled to prepare students for these tracks by replicating the expectations and practices of their colleagues who teach in them. They systematically cover content that ranges beyond the *lycée* syllabus and give their students a very heavy workload, preparing them for the demanding environment

8 Sciences Po Paris is one of the few French prestigious higher education institutions that admits students directly after the baccalauréat. It has become increasingly popular among elite students due to its broad undergraduate curriculum in the human and social sciences (which contrasts starkly with early specialisation in universities) and to the variety and high degree of recognition in the labour market of its 27 Master’s degree programmes in areas such as Finance and Strategy, International Public Management or Public Policy.

of the CPGE with their logic of drawing maximum profit from schoolwork (Bourdieu, 1996; Darmon, 2013). They also use methods that are strongly influenced by those used by their CPGE colleagues and the marking system in place is very harsh, encouraging students to enter into a *concours* frame of mind from an early stage⁹:

In lycées like this one, you've got to go very fast. Other establishments are very rigorous about following the syllabus and, that's it, they don't ask them to do more than the syllabus. Here, it's a lot more than the syllabus. We do everything off the syllabus too, you know [...] I tell them: "We're doing this, because you'll need it next year" and also, we know that the amount of work we're asking of them, they'll have the same problem next year. (Mr. Frémont, physics teacher, form tutor for a final year *lycée* class)

In addition to that, this type of training can also be seen – in direct reference to Turner's model – as an early socialisation into elite culture and preparation to occupy elite positions. *Lycées* such as François 1er visibly emphasise students' acquisition of a broad culture and of general intellectual skills and, more invisibly, teach students to work quickly and under pressure and to select and apply knowledge instrumentally, which are features highly valued in elite jobs and positions in France (Mangset, 2018).

3.3 *Narrowing Horizons, Encouraging Strategic Choices and Giving Tailor-Made Advice*

Students are 'channelled', or directed, towards this specific type of higher education in three main ways. First, by narrowing their horizon to make them view the CPGE as the most desirable option and to imagine themselves in the CPGE world in very concrete ways. The CPGE are the main focus in guidance documents and meetings. For example, in a document entitled 'Post-secondary career guidance' that François 1er distributed to parents and students and was also accessible on the *lycée* website, 14 of the 18 pages outlining the space of higher education in France were devoted to presenting the CPGE. Similarly, in the four higher education guidance meetings with parents that I observed during my fieldwork, almost an hour and a half out of the two hours were devoted to discussing these classes. In addition, a very large number of CPGE classes are taught within the walls of the *lycée* itself, a factor that is known to have a significant influence on students' choosing a CPGE (Nakhili, 2005). Students are therefore also invited to meetings where the CPGE teachers give them precise information about how these courses are run and where they can lead and are given a chance to talk personally with

⁹ *Concours* are the examinations at which students must succeed to be admitted into the *grandes écoles*. The level of competition is very high because the number of places is limited and very small. For instance, at the École Polytechnique, which is one of the most famous *grandes écoles*, only 415 places are proposed each year to French CPGE students.

them. Furthermore, given that the majority of François 1er's students choose a CPGE after their *baccalauréat*, teachers frequently call on their network of former students to present these classes to their students.

A second form of channelling consists in encouraging students to choose tracks and options strategically with a view to improving their chances of admission into the most selective and prestigious CPGE. Although grades remain the most important factor in admissions, institutional sponsorship of this sort also plays a role. As pointed out in the previous section, in order to go on to be accepted into a scientific CPGE, it is necessary to select (and be selected for) the general scientific track in the second year of *lycée* schooling. However, when it comes to admission to the most selective of these CPGE, some of the options chosen by students also constitute an extra advantage because they provide additional indications of academic excellence. In addition, by choosing extra, non-compulsory, optional subjects (Greek or Latin, a particular modern language, a European section, or music or theatre options, etc.) – which often follow on from earlier educational choices mentioned above – and therefore by sitting two additional optional exams, students at *lycées* such as François 1er increase their chances of getting the highest possible level of honours in the *baccalauréat*.¹⁰

A third form of channelling resides in the high quality of higher education advice provided to students in elite *lycées* such as François 1er as compared to other *lycées* (van Zanten et al., 2018). Three factors contribute to this quality: anticipation, organisation, and personalisation. At François 1er, students are expected to start thinking about their higher education plans from their very first day of school when the head teacher's welcome address informs them that the *lycée* is the first step to higher education. All school professionals devote considerable time to guidance following quite a strict division of work: teachers are expected to provide students with an accurate evaluation of their academic strengths and weaknesses, while the head teacher and deputy head teacher give students information about their chances of being accepted by various types of CPGE depending on their teachers' assessments but also on what they know about previous admission rates for past cohorts of students. Educational advisers are expected to provide students with information about open days, higher education fairs and related ways to gather information but they also talk to students about the personal experiences of previous CPGE students. This is in sum a 'tailor-made' approach to students' transition to higher education, which involves considerable time and effort from educational professionals in helping students find the elite track and institution that most closely fits their tastes and talents: "Each student has their place, but they have to find it. Educational guidance is really tailor-made. That's why it takes time" (Mr. Clément, maths teacher, form tutor).

10 When the system changed and optional exam marks were included in calculating the final overall average for the *baccalauréat*, this rapidly and significantly increased the number of students who obtained the highest honours (*mention 'très bien'*). A quarter of students at CPGE obtain this level (Lemaire, 2008) and 59% of students at François 1er, where the percentage was only 20% in 2005 before the calculation system changed.

3.4 Institutional Advantages in the Selection Process

While, officially, recruitment to a CPGE is purely meritocratic, in reality, CPGE teachers acting as members of selection committees also resort to institutional sponsorship.¹¹ The presence of this sponsorship among these institutional gatekeepers (Ciccourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Karen, 1990) of academic excellence is, to a large extent, due to the fact that, unlike in the United States, judgments are not based on results in standardised tests but rather on marks that are not the result of a standardised evaluation either. The selection process for the CPGE – and since 2009 for the whole of higher education – takes place before the students have actually sat their national *baccalauréat* exams. While the fact the *baccalauréat* is national does not entirely exempt it from local arbitration (Merle, 2007), the marks in the students' reports submitted for their applications vary even more than those obtained in the *baccalauréat*. These variations depend not only on students' characteristics (social background, ethnicity, sex, and age) but also the teaching context (regional education authority, establishment, class).

3.5 Giving Priority to Contextual Factors

The committee members' attention focuses mainly on these contextual elements. This is particularly the case in elite state CPGE whose members prove to be more attached to a narrow definition of meritocracy involving formal 'blindness' to personal factors than their counterparts in elite private CPGE. CPGE teachers on these committees do not believe that grades in themselves can be trusted as objective measures of students' academic work and used to rank their applications (Porter, 1995). Ironically, this is a consequence of the logics of institutional sponsorship developed by parental choices concerning tracks and schools and educational professionals' selection of students for the latter, which all lead to high levels of social and academic segregation between classes and educational establishments. This segregation is, in turn, responsible for variations in teachers' grading as they adapt their marks to the supposed general level of the class or school in question (Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 1997; van Zanten, 2012).

The uncertainty stemming from the CPGE teachers' belief that significant differences exist between one class or school and another – which is not totally inaccurate but does frequently exaggerate the degree and potential impact of these differences – is compounded by the pressure they feel to be able to predict students' future performance two or three years later in the *concours*. Marks only measure prior performance, whereas the elite CPGE want students who can succeed in these very demanding and competitive *grandes écoles* entrance exams; students who, in the teachers' jargon, 'have reserves' (Darmon, 2012). Although marks are supplemented by teachers' comments, CPGE professors still feel it necessary to use additional indicators concerning students'

11 This section of the article is based on work conducted in collaboration with Hugues Draelants (see Buisson-Fenet & Draelants, 2013).

actual room for progress. For them, this progress also depends on students having previously acquired certain attitudes, such as the ability to handle the competitive pressure resulting from the fact that very selective CPGE are composed of a high concentration of students who were previously always ‘top of their class’.

These areas of uncertainty led the team in charge of selecting candidates for François 1er’s CPGE that I observed to rely strongly on contextual information: the students’ *lycée* and class, the subjects they took in their final year along with their marks, their class ranking and teachers’ report for each subject, the number of students in the group, and the head teacher’s overall report and comment on the application. My interviews further revealed that the candidate’s school was an essential criterion that strongly influenced how the marks and reports were examined. With a view to recruiting the best students, it was indispensable that the schools with the harshest marking system were not put at a disadvantage, but even more that schools with a lenient marking system not be given an unfair advantage.

3.6 Relying on Personal and Local Knowledge

In order to evaluate the candidate’s school backgrounds quickly, the teachers used their own personal knowledge of some establishments, but they also regularly used an ‘in-house’ document devised by the head teacher including an evaluation of students’ results during the first term at the CPGE according to the *lycée* they came from and their grades. These results were used to observe the degree of discrepancy between the results obtained in the feeder *lycée* and at François 1er’s CPGE and to make lists of *lycées* that could be ‘trusted’ (Barber, 1983; Porter, 1995) and those that could not. While the former included a small number of disadvantaged *lycées* that only advise their very best students to apply and that have learnt over time to adapt their marks to the expectations of elite CPGE, the majority were unsurprisingly elite *lycées*:

We have, maybe not really detailed knowledge of all the establishments [...] but a – I don’t want to use the term ‘file’ – a sort of history of a countless number of *lycées*, whether state or private, including completely unknown *lycées*, with no reputation whatsoever, and from small towns in the provinces. What we systematically do in a *lycée* like this one – I launched this a few years ago – even if it’s not for every class, but in the *conseil de classe* for the first term, we have the pile of applications from the students in that class [...]. We try and see if there’s any distortion, any contradiction [...]. When there’s a big discrepancy between the results [obtained at their original schools and the results obtained in their first term at the *prépa* in this school], we don’t draw any definitive conclusions, because we wait to see how the year plays out and some students can start off badly, and then two years later, get into the best *grandes écoles* in engineering or business. So we’re very cautious about that. But, it allows us to list the establishments where we’ve noticed a huge discrepancy. (M. Durand, head teacher)

Indeed, while the general level ascribed to the student's school, class, and class rank are carefully scrutinised when the establishment is not a well-reputed school, conversely, in this mode of selection, students from schools that are well known to the teachers and well regarded are at an advantage. This effect is most pronounced for the students who started at François 1er at *lycée* level. These students are perceived favourably because they have benefited from anticipatory socialisation into the demands of the elite CPGE by the chartering efforts of their *lycée* teachers and from having been familiarised with their curricular offerings and students' experiences through the channelling process to which they were subjected. Some of them can also count on 'bartering' (Persell & Cookson, 1985) on their behalf from CPGE teachers who might have heard of them from their *lycée* colleagues or talked to them before the application process, as well as from the head teacher who knows each student personally.¹²

4. Conclusion

In France, the school trajectories of the future elites are marked by closely intertwined logics of contest and sponsorship, both institutional and social, with the first functioning as the official norm and the second as the informal norm and each one fuelling the other. Many parents and education professionals consider that the very closed nature of the competition at hand makes it legitimate to implement logics of sponsorship. In return, for many of these actors, the existence of such logics of sponsorship (which are both criticised and considered inevitable) justifies maintaining strict competition in order to counterbalance them. These logics take different shapes at different levels of education. They are toned down at primary school level but become more visible in secondary education through the tracks and schools chosen by and allocated to students. They then become even more exacerbated during the transition to higher education, with specific strategies used in elite *lycées* to prepare students for elite higher education tracks and specific selection strategies prevalent among CPGE teachers, which advantage students from these *lycées*.

The institutional sponsorship that has been analysed in this text contributes to educational inequalities not only by preserving the institutional and social closure of elite higher education tracks (Parkin, 1974; Murphy, 1988), but also by reinforcing the segregation between tracks and schools in upper- and even middle-secondary schools. A system that works in this way also affects the legitimacy of the social order. While the need

¹² François 1er accepts 40% of its own students to its CPGE. While François 1er students' chances of being accepted are extremely high compared to students from other schools, showing the strong prevalence of an internal logic of institutional sponsorship, it seems quite low to parents who frequently choose François 1er as a *lycée* with the expectation that their sons and daughters will go on to its prestigious CPGE. This therefore leads to some tension between teachers and parents and shows that institutional and social sponsorship can sometimes clash.

to train competent elites is the main argument used to justify maintaining distinct and hierarchised pathways within higher education, their existence sets processes in motion upstream that impair the efficiency of modes of selection. The French education system manages to carve out an elite but it draws on a social and academic pool that is extremely limited: The mechanisms presiding over the selection of the best students soon leave by the wayside not only the students who cannot be strongly sponsored by their parents but also those who are not in a school environment doing everything possible to ensure their intellectual progress and upward mobility. It is therefore unsurprising that there should be such distance and increasing suspicion in the relationships between, on the one hand, the minority of those who owe their positions to narrow institutional pathways of social reproduction and, on the other hand, the majority of those excluded from these pathways from an early stage.

The French case is not an exception. Existing studies on grading, tracking, school segregation or selection into higher education conducted in other countries show the early and continuous differentiation of students' careers within contemporary educational systems. However, in order to compare the degree to which each system tolerates or encourages institutional sponsorship alongside its official meritocratic ideal and the forms taken by that sponsorship, it is necessary, on the one hand, to focus not on a single dimension or a single group of actors but on relationships between different dimensions and actors and on the patterns that they have created over time and sustain in schools' everyday activity and, on the other hand, to turn the gaze upwards to focus on elite routes and destinations. Comparative analyses of this kind, which should also include an examination of how institutions justify their support of future elites and the effects of this sponsorship on those who are excluded from it, would be a major contribution to research on how schools shape society by classifying and processing young people into institutionally embedded and socially differentiated categories and pathways (Benavot, 1997; Ciccourel & Kitsuse, 1963).

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Zusammenfassung: Unter Einbezug der idealtypischen Unterscheidung zweier Arten von Aufstiegsmobilität durch Bildung, Wettbewerb und ‚gesponserte‘ Mobilität von Ralph Turner, erschließt Agnès van Zanten anhand Turners Konzepts des ‚institutionellen Sponsorings‘ den Zusammenhang der Mechanismen von Wettbewerb und Sponsoring in der Reproduktion von Bildungseliten. Studien zu Auswahl- und Segregationsprozessen akademischer Eliten im französischen Bildungssystem, die zwischen 2006 und 2013 durchgeführt wurden, wie auch ein laufendes Forschungsprojekt, welches den Übergang zur höheren Bildung untersucht, zeigen auf, dass die Bildungsverläufe zukünftiger Eliten in Frankreich durch eng miteinander verknüpfte Wettbewerbs- und Sponsoringlogiken gekennzeichnet sind.

Schlagnworte: Stratifizierung des Bildungssystems, Sponsoring, Segregation, Ungleichheit, Frankreich

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