Migration and Integration in France.
Academic Careers of Immigrants’ Children in Lower and Upper Secondary School

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the educational attainment of immigrants’ children in the French lower and upper secondary school, taking advantage of the 1989 French National Education Longitudinal Study (Panel national 1989 d’élèves du second degré), a panel study of over 22,000 pupils who entered lower secondary school (form 1) at about the age of 11 in September 1989. Our previous research on this survey had already established that immigrants’ children performed less well than their schoolmates in standardized tests administered in 1989 and that in 1991 immigrant families expressed stronger educational aspirations for their child than native families with similar socio-demographic characteristics. Using as a criterion the success in the baccalauréat examination after seven years in secondary school (or after seven, eight or nine years), we show that immigrants’ children are more successful in the French secondary school than native children with the same social background and family environment. We also show that, ceteris paribus, immigrants’ children are more persevering in the direction of success when they face school difficulties and that the strong educational aspirations immigrant families expressed have a mediating effect and partly explain the more favorable school trajectories of their children. We conclude that some similarity exists between these results and previous research on longitudinal surveys in Australia and the United States. Although they are strongly disadvantaged by their class location and their level of education, immigrant parents in France invest in the educational system to improve their children’s future, they develop strong educational aspirations for them and, in return, these socio-psychological factors have a key role in explaining the educational attainment of immigrants’ children in the French lower and upper secondary school.

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Introduction

As a consequence of the increase of immigration in numerous industrialized societies during recent decades, the number of children who are brought up in immigrant families has progressively risen and the educational attainment of immigrant children and children of immigrants has become an important issue of sociology of migration. Some studies concentrate on the achievements of these children to provide powerful comparisons between members of different ethnic origins. In the United States for instance, Portes and MacLeod (1996) have carried out a study of more than 5,000 second-generation high-school students in Florida and California and have compared children of Cuban and Vietnamese immigrants (representative of relatively advantaged groups) and of Haitian and Mexican immigrants (representative of relatively disadvantaged groups). The authors found that parents’ socioeconomic status and length of residence in the United States significantly affected the students’ academic performance as measured with standardized tests in mathematics and reading, but did not eliminate the effects of ethnic community.

Other studies are designed to incorporate not only immigrant children or children of immigrants but also native children. They therefore compare the educational attainment of the former group with that of the latter and examine how immigrants’ children adapt to school in the society of immigration and whether they are confronted with ethnic educational disadvantages. In Germany where secondary education consists of three hierarchically ranked tracks – Gymnasium, Realschule, Hauptschule – in which children are streamed at the end of elementary school, Alba, Handl and Müller (1994) have used the 1989 Microzensus and the German Socio-Economic Panel to study ethnic inequalities in the German school system. They found that, relatively to young Germans with identical socio-demographic characteristics, Italian, Turkish and Yugoslav children are overrepresented in the least prestigious track, leave it more often without obtaining any apprenticeship and are underrepresented in Gymnasium. Only the smaller group of Greek children contrasts with this picture and in some respects obtains better school careers than German children. Finally, the empirical test the authors provided in order to explain the school handicap faced by Italians, Turks and Yugoslavs highlights the role of both cultural aspects and continuity of school attendance in Germany.

However, it seems that the school situation of immigrants’ children can be strikingly different in different countries, even for children from the same origin. Let us consider now the Australian study conducted by Clifton, Williams and Clancy (1991). These authors have investigated data collected between 1975 and 1980 in a national longitudinal survey of pupils aged 14 in 1975 and followed up in subsequent years. They found
that, at the age of 14, pupils from Greek and Italian origins performed less well in English and arithmetic than other pupils with similar socio-demographic characteristics and Australian or English background. However, the former were more numerous than the latter to complete upper secondary school and the regression analyses the authors provided highlights the role of socio-psychological factors in these more favorable school trajectories: pupils belonging to Greek and Italian minorities found more support for their studies in their environment – friends, parents and teachers – and they also developed a more positive conception of their academic value.

That immigrants’ children, sometimes from the same origin, achieve differently in the school system of different societies therefore suggests that national contexts and/or the specific organization of schooling in various countries play a part in the educational attainment of immigrants’ children compared to that of native ones. In this paper, we aim to study how immigrants’ children achieve in the French lower and upper secondary school, taking advantage of the 1989 French National Education Longitudinal Study (Panel national 1989 d’élèves du second degré), a panel study of over 22,000 pupils who entered lower secondary school (form 1) at about the age of 11 in September 1989. In the next section, we examine different factors which potentially affect the educational attainment of children, elaborating a distinction between factors which are supposed to be common to all children, i.e. immigrants’ children and native ones, and factors which may be more specific to the former group. Then, we present the main institutional features of French secondary school and also summarize our previous research about school careers of immigrants’ children in elementary school and lower secondary school, highlighting its limitations. Data, variables and method are the topics of the next section and the results are provided in the last but one section. Finally, we conclude the paper with a discussion of our results in the context of sociology of education and sociology of migration.

The educational attainment of immigrants’ children and native ones:
Common and specific factors

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

It is however doubtful whether social class, as operationalized with the occupational group of the head of the household, adequately captures all relevant features of the family which are likely to affect educational success. On the contrary, research on the determinants of educational attainment has amply demonstrated that a number of family aspects are at work. Some of them approach socioeconomic or material resources: in this respect, the occupational group of the head of the household obviously is a major variable, but maternal employment status and family income (or a proxy for it) also have to be considered. Secondly, the cultural resources inside the family are likely to affect the educational success of the child: parents’ highest diploma and any other family characteristic which might favor or help the child’s schooling are relevant here. Thirdly,
it is necessary to take account of other objective aspects in family situation which may be influential, notably structure of the family, total number of children and rank of birth of the child.

If immigrant families differ from native families not only on the basis of their distribution in social classes, but also on other characteristics such as parents’ education or family size, we may expect that introducing a full set of socio-demographic characteristics in the analysis rather than controlling only for the occupational group of the head of the household will allow us to assess the effect of immigration on educational outcomes much more precisely. In fact, if immigrant parents not only are manual workers more frequently, but also have less formal education and larger families (which is the case in France), we may predict that controlling only for the occupational group of the head of the household will produce a negatively biased estimate of the effect of immigration on educational success of the child.

With regard to the educational attainment of immigrant children and children of immigrants, two specific issues deserve special attention. The first one concerns the dynamics of change in academic performance that can be observed for immigrants’ children over the school career and the question is whether this dynamics differs from that observed for native children with similar socio-demographic characteristics. Immigrant children and children of immigrants grow up and are primarily socialized in a family which is often strongly marked by its native language and culture, then they are exposed to the educational system of the receiving society which can be conceived as an important institution in their secondary socialization. We might then expect that a continued school attendance in the society of immigration and the duration of exposure to its educational system have specific effects on the progress of immigrants’ children in academic performance.

In the available literature, some studies have examined whether, with regard to attainments measured with standardized tests, pupils belonging to immigrant families progress more in a given span of time than other pupils with similar characteristics. They have used analysis of covariance models to explain differences in a final level of attainment with a set of variables including an initial measure of the same proficiency. In such models, the regression coefficient estimated for a particular sub-group of pupils therefore indicates that, within the considered period, they made more progress, as much progress or less progress than other pupils who, in other respects, possess similar characteristics.

In an English longitudinal study of 20 comprehensive secondary schools, Smith and Tomlinson (1989) consistently observed that, between the ages of 13 and 16, pupils belonging to minorities progressed more in English and mathematics than their schoolmates of the same social classes. A similar result was obtained in France with a sample of nearly 3,000 children examined at the beginning and the end of the third year in elementary school (Bressoux, 1994) and in two studies about school careers in the first two years of lower secondary school (Ernst and Radica, 1994; Meuret, 1994). On the other hand, Mingat (1991) concluded in favor of greater progress, during the first year of elementary school, for foreign-born non-French children only, and obtained an opposite result for France-born foreign children. Finally, according to Serra and Thaurel-Richard (1994), the pupil’s nationality introduces no significant difference in attainments reached during the third year of elementary school.
In order to take account of this issue of dynamics in academic performance within our study, it will be necessary to control not only for a full set of socio-demographic characteristics, but also for an initial measure of academic performance, in some analyses of the achievement of immigrants’ children in the French lower and upper secondary school. In so doing, the assessment of the educational attainment of immigrant children and children of immigrants will be relative to other pupils with similar socio-demographic characteristics and the same level of academic performance at enrolment in secondary education.

Another important issue concerns the effect of motivation and educational aspirations of immigrant families on the educational attainment of their children. The desire for a better life and for upward mobility often constituted an important motive for decision of emigration. A lot of immigrant families nevertheless hold low social positions in the society of immigration. They could then perceive investment in the educational system as the main path to upward mobility available to them. Compared with other families endowed with the same material and cultural resources (which are notably linked to their social condition and their educational level), immigrant families would then hope more keenly that their children acquire high educational skills. In other words, there are grounds to think that immigrant children, children of immigrants and their families develop stronger expectations and aspirations towards the educational system of the receiving society than other members of the same social classes.

The Australian longitudinal study we mentioned in the introduction is not the only research which underlines the existence of such socio-psychological factors. In an analysis of the American National Education Longitudinal Study which has observed a sample of 26,000 eighth graders since 1988, Muller and Kerbow (1993) present a figure which expresses the proportion of parents who expected their child to graduate from college by parents’ highest level of education and race/ethnicity. Without exception and for each parental educational level, the point of the diagram associated with whites is below the three others which concern Asian Americans, Hispanics and African Americans. Muller and Kerbow interpret this result as indicating that parents belonging to minorities are more sensitive than others to the social rewards brought by education. In an investigation based on the same survey, Kao and Tienda (1995) confirmed that foreign-born parents had significantly higher educational aspirations for their children than did native-born parents. They found empirical support for the thesis of ‘immigrant optimism’ according to which immigrant parents’ optimism about their offspring’s socioeconomic prospects decisively influences the educational outcomes of first and second generation youth. The results also suggest that behavioral differences between immigrant and native parents are essential ingredients in explaining the differential performance of immigrant and native youth.

In France, concluding a two-year research in about a hundred lower secondary schools, Grisay (1993) notes that immigrants’ children seem to be on average better disposed towards school than French youth of the same social class and that they are more anxious to ‘do the right thing’ and to conform to their teachers’ expectations. Closely similar observations were also made in England (Smith and Tomlinson, 1989). On the contrary in France, controlling for level of education and social class, Duru-Bellat and Jarousse (1996) found no significant difference between foreign and French families with regard to the hope that their child continues to study until *baccalauréat*. 


In the light of existing research therefore, it appears important to assess the influence of immigrant parents’ educational aspirations on the process of attainment of their children. More precisely, we may wonder whether, in the French context, immigrant families have more educational ambition than native families who belong to the same class and whether such a difference intervenes as a mediating factor to explain the academic performance of immigrants’ children.

**Previous research on the 1989 French National Education Longitudinal Study**

In France where schooling is compulsory up to 16, the educational system has been strongly reshaped in recent decades. Since the late 1970s, after five years of elementary school, lower secondary school (*premier cycle du second degré*) has been organized as a comprehensive *collège unique* which includes four grades and which is supposed to host all pupils during at least four years. As a consequence of an increase in educational participation and a wish to develop technical education, upper secondary school (*second cycle du second degré*) has been institutionally diversified. On the one hand, it offers a three-year ‘long’ cycle, combining general and technological tracks in the *lycées généraux et technologiques* and leading to the *baccalauréat général* and *baccalauréat technologique* diplomas. On the other hand, a ‘short’ cycle provides vocational education in the *lycées professionnels* where the students prepare for a BEP diploma (*brevet d'études professionnelles*) or a CAP diploma (*certificat d’aptitude professionnelle*) in two years; then, about 30% of them prepare for a vocational *baccalauréat (baccalauréat professionnel)* in two supplementary years and a smaller minority rejoins the technological track of the ‘long’ cycle.

In subsequent pages and for the sake of simplicity, we restrict the expression “upper secondary school” to the three-year ‘long’ cycle of upper secondary school. In the same logic, “admission to final year” means “admission to the last (third) year (*classe de terminale*)” in the ‘long’ cycle of upper secondary school” and “obtaining the *baccalauréat* diploma” must be understood as “obtaining the *baccalauréat général* or *baccalauréat technologique* diploma”.

In several publications in French (Vallet and Caille, 1996ab; Vallet, 1996) and working papers in English (Vallet, 1997ab), we took advantage of the 1989 French National Education Longitudinal Study to assess the academic success of immigrants’ children in the French elementary school and lower secondary school. More precisely, the examined sample comprised all children born the 5th of a month who entered lower secondary school (form 1) in September 1989 in a public or private institution of metropolitan France and whose family answered a complementary survey in spring 1991 [1]. In order to approximate the population of immigrants’ children, various criteria were used including nationality of the child, birthplace of the child, the number of years of schooling outside France, the number of years that the parents have lived in France, and the language spoken at home.

With regard to the measurement of academic success in elementary school, we used retrospective information collected in autumn 1989 from the secondary school and in spring 1991 from the family and we considered as an indicator of success the fact that the pupil did not repeat a year. According to such an indicator, we systematically observed that immigrants’ children were less successful than their schoolmates in the French elementary school, but except for pupils who migrated themselves (i.e. children born in a foreign country and children who experienced elementary school years outside France), this difference generally
disappeared after controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, notably parental social class and level of education.

With regard to the measurement of academic success in lower secondary school, we used the information collected from the school over the four years after enrolment in secondary education, i.e. till June 1993. The chosen indicator of success combined completion of lower secondary school in due time (no year repeated among the four required) with orientation towards long studies leading to baccalauréat. According to such an indicator, we again observed that immigrants’ children were less successful than their schoolmates in the French lower secondary school. However, in comparison with the gap measured in elementary school, the difference was subsequently reduced. More surprisingly, the difference was even systematically reversed in regression analyses controlling for socio-demographic characteristics of children and their families: the academic careers of immigrants’ children in the French lower secondary school were therefore better than those of their schoolmates who, in other respects, possessed similar social background and family environment.

It therefore appeared that belonging to immigrant minorities had at first a nil or negative effect, then a positive one. Although such a change over time might suggest that while social and cultural handicaps affect the performance of immigrants’ children in primary school, their performance improves as they become more acquainted with the system year after year, we found no real support for this thesis in the results obtained at the brevet examination (after four years in secondary school). And we found much more support in favor of the ‘family mobilization thesis’ (Van Zanten, 1997) according to which immigrant parents’ aspirations and their practices in relation to schooling play a central role in their children’s success at school: ceteris paribus, immigrant families expressed stronger aspirations towards long studies and more ambitious school career plans for their children. For instance, in spring 1991, immigrant parents were more prone than other (comparable) parents to wish that their child continues studying till 20 or more and they were also more prone to tell that a tertiary education certificate is the most useful diploma to find a job; in June 1993, after four years in lower secondary school and relatively to other families with similar socio-demographic characteristics, immigrant parents more often asked for an admission of their child to upper secondary school [2].

Although these results convincingly suggest that in French society the educational system appears to immigrant families as an important vehicle for social mobility, two potential limitations of our previous research lie in the fact that only incomplete careers in secondary school were analyzed and that, in the absence of quantitative measures of school performance or grades, admission to upper secondary school was considered as the main indicator of success in lower secondary school. The real issue of academic careers in the French secondary school is therefore unknown and the degree to which immigrant families’ aspirations actually facilitate the educational attainment of their offspring still is an open question.

Longitudinal information is now available for the same pupils about seven, eight or nine years of secondary school including presentation as well as success or failure at the baccalauréat examination. With these more complete data, it is therefore possible to study more thoroughly the dynamics of schooling for immigrants’ children in France, to assess how they achieve in the French lower and upper secondary school
and to examine to what extent significant differences exist between ethnic groups with regard to school performance.

**Data, variables, and method**

*Data.* Our data come from the 1989 National Education Longitudinal Study (Ministry of Education, DPD). The sample we examine comprises all children born the 5th of a month who entered lower secondary school (form 1) in September 1989 in a public or private institution of metropolitan France, whose family answered a complementary survey in spring 1991 and whose situation has been traced till seven years, eight years or nine years after their enrolment in secondary education. Of the 18,699 cases eligible for the analysis, 41 (0.2%) were lost in the construction of the variables and 1,344 (7.2%) were lost as a consequence of sample attrition (32 for death, 167 for leaving for abroad and 1,145 for failure of the follow-up). The total sample size is then 17,314. In the present version, we introduce no correction for potential selection bias, either as a consequence of non-response to the family survey or as a result of sample attrition [3]. Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages for all the variables in the analysis.

*Dependent variables.* Two series of temporally or logically ordered dichotomous variables constitute our dependent variables. The first series corresponds to the most stringent criterion of success in secondary school: admission to upper secondary school after four years, i.e. without repeating a year; admission to final year after six years, i.e. without repeating a year; obtaining the *baccalauréat* diploma after seven years, i.e. without repeating a year; obtaining the *baccalauréat* diploma with distinction (*mention assez bien, bien, très bien*) after seven years. Among these four variables, we consider the third one as the major indicator of success in the school career: only 30.9% of the pupils have completed secondary school in seven years and have passed the *baccalauréat général* or *baccalauréat technologique* examination. The second series of variables corresponds to a less stringent criterion of success in secondary school as it permits that the pupils repeat a year once or twice or as it authorizes more complex paths in secondary school [4]: admission to upper secondary school after four, five or six years; admission to final year after six, seven or eight years; obtaining the *baccalauréat* diploma after seven, eight or nine years; obtaining the *baccalauréat* diploma with distinction after seven, eight or nine years. Within this series again, we consider the third variable as the major indicator of success: 56.7% of the pupils have passed the *baccalauréat général* or *baccalauréat technologique* examination after seven, eight or nine years in secondary school.

*Variables of interest.* A shortcoming of the 1989 National Education Longitudinal Study is that no information is available about the parents’ birthplace so that the population of immigrants’ children cannot be rigorously isolated. We therefore use three variables in order to approach this population: nationality of the child, duration of stay of parents in France and number of foreign attributes. The information about nationality of the child was collected from the school in autumn 1989 and we use this variable in two versions (a dichotomous one and a detailed one with eleven categories) so that comparisons between nested models will provide us with statistical tests about similarity or difference between foreign nationalities. In the sample we examine, 7.5% of the pupils are foreigners. Among them, Moroccans, Algerians and Portuguese are the most numerous, followed by Turks, Tunisians and South-East Asians.
In the complementary family survey, the question about duration of stay in France was asked separately for the father and the mother, and our variable takes into account the longest duration. Three categories correspond to the population of interest: neither of the parents has always been in France, but at least one of them has lived there for more than 20 years (7.1% of the pupils); neither of the parents has lived in France for more than 20 years, but at least one of them has been there for 5 years (5.4%); the parents have been living in France for less than 5 years (0.3%).

The number of foreign attributes is the most synthetic variable. The possession of a ‘foreign attribute’ is defined as presenting one of the five following characteristics: having a foreign nationality, being born outside metropolitan France, having experienced at least one elementary school year outside France, having no parent who has always lived in France, speaking regularly another language than French with the parents. Nearly 20% of the children we consider present at least one foreign attribute; 3.7% possess two, 4.3% three, 2.3% four and 0.3% five. Table 2 presents the composition of number of foreign attributes according to the initial variables. It clearly appears that pupils with at least two foreign attributes may be considered as closely approximating immigrants’ children.

**Socio-demographic characteristics.** The information collected primarily from the family (spring 1991) and secondarily from the school (autumn 1989) permits us to define eleven variables that measure socio-demographic characteristics of the children and their families which are likely to affect school success.

The occupational group of the head of the household (in a detailed classification with 19 categories) is the primary variable to approach socioeconomic or material resources, but we also use maternal employment status and the average number of persons by room. Although maternal employment may reduce the amount of time the mother spends in order to help her child in school activities, it may also increase the economic resources and the standard of living of the family. Finally, in the absence of any direct information about family income, we consider the ratio of the total number of household members to the total number of rooms in the house or the flat as a proxy for it. In so doing, we obtain an (inverse) indicator of material well-being for which we expect a negative effect on the child’s school success [5].

The highest diploma of the mother (or of the only relative in the event of absence of the mother) is the primary variable to approach cultural or educational resources inside the family, but we also introduce three dummy variables corresponding to particular situations which might favor or help the child’s schooling: whether or not one of the parents followed post-school training on his own initiative; whether or not one of the parents is a teacher in primary, secondary or tertiary education; whether or not the child has an older brother or sister in upper secondary school or university.

Finally, in the light of existing research on the determinants of educational attainment, the structure of the family, the total number of children, gender and rank of birth of the child are introduced as socio-demographic characteristics which might affect the child’s success in secondary school. Table 4 presents the logistic regression analyses of the two major indicators of success in secondary school on the full set of socio-demographic characteristics. Each of the eleven variables significantly affects the educational outcome in one or both regressions. The highest diploma of the mother, the occupational group of the head of the household, the structure of the family and gender have especially large effects.
**Initial academic performance.** A measure of academic performance at enrolment in secondary education will permit us to assess the achievement of immigrants’ children in comparison to other pupils with the same level of initial performance. The measure uses standardized test scores in French and mathematics or, if these scores are unavailable, school principals’ assessments of pupils in reading, written French, oral French and mathematics at the beginning of form 1. This is an ordinal variable which closely approximates a quartile distribution [6].

**Educational aspirations of the family.** Using the answers to the complementary family survey administered in spring 1991, we build two dummy variables which are able to capture the parents’ educational aspirations and expectations for their child: whether or not the parents wish that their child continues studying till 20 or more; whether or not the parents tell that a tertiary education certificate is the most useful diploma to find a job.

**Method.** Starting with the differences Table 3 reveals between immigrants’ children and their schoolmates with regard to the major indicator of success in secondary school (obtaining the *baccalauréat* diploma after seven years), we analyze these differences and assess the school performance of immigrants’ children in a series of logistic regression analyses (Table 5). Model I only contains the variable of interest, i.e. it expresses the gross effect of the variable, then statistical controls are progressively and incrementally added for the occupational group of the head of the household (Model II), for all other socio-demographic characteristics (Model III), for initial academic performance (Model IV) and for the educational aspirations of the family (Model V). In a second step, using the same strategy of analysis, we decompose success in secondary school in two parts, success in the *baccalauréat* examination *per se* and success in the school career, either in the lower or in the upper secondary school (Tables 6 and 7). In a third step, we present a brief analysis of ‘strong success in secondary school’ using the last variable, i.e. obtaining the *baccalauréat* diploma with distinction after seven years (Table 8). Finally, to confirm our main results, we perform a similar analysis using a less stringent definition of success in secondary school (obtaining the *baccalauréat* diploma after seven, eight or nine years) (Tables 9, 10 and 11).

**Results**

Contrary to recent French research which has studied the success of immigrants’ children in the *baccalauréat* examination using either a retrospective design (Tribalat, 1996) or a cross-sectional design (Laacher and Lenfant, 1997), we study it in a longitudinal or prospective perspective. As Table 3 indicates, 31.8% of French secondary school entrants obtain the *baccalauréat* diploma after seven years, i.e. without repeating a year, but the corresponding rate is 24.7% for South-East Asians, 20.2% for Portuguese, 19.1% for Moroccans, 18.2% for Tunisians, 16.9% for Algerians and only 12.9% for Turks. Compared to their French schoolmates, foreign children therefore are at a disadvantage in the French secondary school and the number of foreign attributes as well as the duration of stay of parents in France highlight similar, albeit slightly smaller, differences.

Using success at the *baccalauréat* examination after seven years as the dependent variable, Table 5 analyzes these differences in a series of logistic regressions. Let us consider the dichotomous nationality variable. In model I which only contains this variable, the gross handicap of foreign children is large and highly
significant for the coefficient is estimated at -0.66. In model II which adds control for the occupational group of the head of the household, the coefficient is reduced to -0.10 and it becomes non significant. Therefore, differences in class locations between foreign families and French ones are responsible for a large part of the handicap of foreign children in the French secondary school. More surprisingly, when the full set of socio-demographic characteristics is introduced in the regression model (model III), the coefficient estimated for foreign pupils becomes positive (+0.25) and significant at the one per cent level. The conclusion therefore is that foreign children obtain the baccalauréat diploma after seven years more often than French children with similar social background and family environment. In model IV which adds control for the level of academic performance at enrolment in secondary school, the net advantage of foreign children increases (+0.42), consistently with our previous result that foreign pupils performed less well in French at the outset of secondary school than their French schoolmates with similar socio-demographic characteristics (see note 6). Finally, we also showed in our previous work that immigrant families had stronger educational aspirations for their child in spring 1991 than native families with similar characteristics. In model V which includes the variables that measure parental educational aspirations, the net advantage of foreign children decreases (+0.32), thereby suggesting that the educational aspirations of immigrant families play a part in the success of their children in secondary school. It however remains that foreign children obtain the baccalauréat diploma after seven years more often than French children with similar social background and family environment, with the same initial level of academic performance and with similar parental educational aspirations.

The general pattern we have just described in the series of logistic regressions with the nationality variable is clearly replicated with the duration of stay variable (see in particular the categories ‘more than 20 years’ and ‘between 5 and 20 years’) and with the number of foreign attributes variable (see in particular the categories ‘two’, ‘three’ and ‘four’ foreign attributes). When the detailed version of the nationality variable is taken into account, positive and significant coefficients in models III, IV and V are obtained for South-East Asians, Moroccans and Portuguese only. However, the statistical test between nested models for the existence of a difference between foreign nationalities never is significant, but we must stress that such a test is probably not a very powerful one as some nationalities only correspond to a few pupils in the National Education Longitudinal Study.

In order to obtain the baccalauréat diploma after seven years, the pupils had to gain admission to final year after six years, i.e. without repeating a year, and to be successful in the examination. Table 6 partitions the probability of the first event in its two constituent parts, success in the baccalauréat per se and success in the preceding school career. With regard to the success in the examination, no significant difference remains for the duration of stay variable or the number of foreign attributes variable when at least the full set of socio-demographic variables is introduced in the regression (models III to V). It is necessary to control for the initial academic performance in order to get the same outcome with the nationality variable in two categories. The regression coefficients are also remarkably stable before and after the introduction of parental educational aspirations in the model. But the main result in the first part of Table 6 is that it does not display any positive and significant coefficient. We therefore never observe that immigrants’ children are more successful in the baccalauréat per se than their schoolmates with given characteristics: this is not in the examination itself that the net advantage of immigrants’ children Table 5 revealed originates.
The second part of Table 6 confirms that the entire school career is responsible for this net advantage. The general pattern of regression coefficients over the series of models closely resembles that analyzed in Table 5, but positive coefficients in models III to V tend to be slightly larger and more significant than corresponding ones in Table 5. For instance, compared to French children with similar socio-demographic characteristics and the same level of academic performance at enrolment in secondary school, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Portuguese, South-East Asians and nationals of other non-European countries more frequently gain admission to final year after six years. The decrease of these positive coefficients between model IV and model V again suggests that the educational aspirations inside immigrant families have a mediating effect in the occurrence of successful school careers for their children.

Pursuing the same logic, Table 7 partitions the probability of success in the entire school career in its two constituent parts, success in lower secondary school and success in upper secondary school. A difficulty in the comparison lies in the fact that four years are involved in the former part as opposed to two only in the latter part. The results nevertheless suggest that the net advantage of immigrants’ children mainly originates in lower secondary school for it is there that the regression coefficients are generally larger and more significant. The mediating effect of parental educational aspirations is also much more pronounced in lower secondary school than it is in upper secondary school. It is however worth mentioning that upper secondary school also plays a part, even minor, in the production of the difference. For instance, as indicated in the first part of Table 7, the pupils whose parents have lived in France for 5 to 20 years are more successful in upper secondary school than their schoolmates with the same class origin and whose parents have always lived in France. And Portuguese pupils also provide an interesting example: no significant difference appears in lower secondary school between these children and French pupils with similar socio-demographic characteristics, but the former are significantly more successful than the latter in upper secondary school.

Finally, Table 8 examines the occurrence of an uncommon outcome which consists in obtaining the baccalauréat diploma with distinction after seven years. Let us consider the analysis performed on the total sample with the dichotomous version of the nationality variable. No significant difference remains in models III, IV and V, which means that French and foreign secondary school entrants with similar socio-demographic characteristics do not significantly differ in their probability of passing the baccalauréat with distinction seven years later. However, when the analysis is restricted to the subsample of pupils who obtained the baccalauréat diploma after seven years, the probability of getting a distinction is systematically lower among foreign children in each of the models, thereby suggesting that their performance at the baccalauréat examination is less remarkable than that of their schoolmates. Rather similar, but slightly less clear results are also obtained with the duration of stay variable and the number of foreign attributes variable.

In Tables 9, 10 and 11, we replicate our general analysis using a less stringent criterion of success in secondary school (obtaining the baccalauréat diploma after seven, eight or nine years) which notably permits that the pupils repeat a year once or twice. Generally speaking, the main results we have previously discussed still reappear though with an important nuance: an increase in the net advantage of immigrants’ children over native ones with similar social background and family environment. This is especially clear in the comparison between Table 5 and Table 9 in the analyses which use the dichotomous nationality variable: the regression coefficient estimated for foreign children increases from +0.25 to +0.45 in model III, from +0.42 to +0.62 in
model IV and from +0.32 to +0.45 in model V. Such a result strongly suggests that immigrants’ children who confront some difficulties in their school trajectories persevere more in the direction of success than native children with similar characteristics and who face the same situation.

**Conclusion**

How immigrants’ children adapt to school in the society of immigration and whether or not they are confronted with ethnic educational disadvantages are two important issues in sociology of migration. In this paper, we aimed to study how immigrants’ children achieve in the French lower and upper secondary school, taking advantage of the 1989 French National Education Longitudinal Study, a panel study of pupils who entered lower secondary school at about the age of 11 in September 1989. Our previous research on this survey had already established that immigrants’ children performed less well than their schoolmates in standardized tests administered at the outset of secondary school, but the same research had also shown that in 1991 immigrant families expressed stronger educational aspirations for their child than native families with similar socio-demographic characteristics. However, the real issue of academic careers in the French secondary school was unknown and we might wonder whether immigrant families’ aspirations actually facilitate the educational attainment of their offspring.

In this paper, we have used a rather stringent criterion of success in secondary school (obtaining the *baccalauréat général* or *baccalauréat technologique* diploma after seven years) and we have also used a less stringent one which notably permits that the pupils repeat a year in secondary school once or twice (obtaining the *baccalauréat général* or *baccalauréat technologique* diploma after seven, eight or nine years). On the basis of such indicators, immigrants’ children clearly are at a disadvantage in the French secondary school. For instance, only 19.4% of foreign pupils are successful at the *baccalauréat* examination after seven years of secondary school as opposed to 31.8% of French pupils; only 41.8% of the former pass the examination after seven, eight or nine years as opposed to 57.9% of the latter. But these differences have nothing to do with an ethnic educational disadvantage for the major part disappears after controlling for the occupational group of the head of the household. Moreover, when a more complete set of socio-demographic variables is introduced in order to take account of a number of family characteristics which are likely to affect school success, the difference is even reversed: immigrants’ children are more successful in the French secondary school than native children with the same social background and family environment and the difference is still more marked when the statistical analysis controls for the level of academic performance at the outset of secondary school. The difference is also larger with the less stringent criterion of success than with the most rigorous one, thereby suggesting that, compared to other pupils, immigrants’ children are more persevering in the direction of success when they face school difficulties. Finally, the difference between immigrants’ children and native ones decreases when the educational aspirations of the families are included in the regression model. Such a result therefore indicates that the strong aspirations immigrant families expressed in 1991 have a mediating effect and partly explain the more favorable school trajectories of their children. It is difficult to assess whether these results apply to the different foreign nationalities to the same extent for the design of the National Education Longitudinal Study does not allow powerful comparisons between them. We may however notice that they are reproduced on one or both of the criteria of success for
The net advantage of immigrants’ children over native ones does not correspond to a better success at the *baccalauréat* examination *per se*. Moreover, among pupils who pass the examination, our complementary analysis of getting a distinction suggests that immigrants’ children obtain less brilliant results than their schoolmates. The net advantage of immigrants’ children rather accumulates over the entire school career, primarily in lower secondary school and secondarily in upper secondary school, and the educational aspirations of immigrant families play a part in this process. We have already shown in a previous paper that, at the end of lower secondary school and compared to other families with similar socio-demographic characteristics, immigrant parents more often ask for an admission of their child to upper secondary school. It is however unlikely that family demands are the only causes of the net advantage of immigrants’ children over native ones for the difference in the probability of success does not seem so important at the *baccalauréat* examination.

In our opinion, some similarity exists between the results provided by the French National Education Longitudinal Study and those exhibited by Clifton, Williams and Clancy (1991) in Australia and by Muller and Kerbow (1993) as well as Kao and Tienda (1995) in the United States. Although they are strongly disadvantaged by their class location and their level of education, immigrant parents in France invest in the educational system to improve their children’s future, they develop strong educational aspirations for them and, in return, these socio-psychological factors have a key role in explaining the educational attainment of immigrants’ children in the French lower and upper secondary school.
Notes

[1] The response rate to the complementary family survey was 80.6%.

[2] This result was obtained in logistic regression analyses controlling for social class of the head of the household, father’s highest diploma, mother’s highest diploma, mother’s employment status, number of children in the family, gender of the child, rank of birth of the child, presence/absence of an older brother or sister in upper secondary school or university, structure of the family and child’s academic performance at enrolment in secondary school.

[3] Our previous work on the 1989 French National Education Longitudinal Study has however suggested that the 19.4% non-response rate to the family survey has not introduced a substantial bias in the population of respondents (Vallet and Caille, 1996a: 118).

[4] For instance, after lower secondary school, entering vocational education to prepare for a BEP diploma, then rejoining the technological track of the long cycle to prepare for a baccalauréat technologique diploma.

[5] We expect that the child’s school success is the lowest in the highest category of the variable (at least 1.2 person by room) which corresponds to the inferior level of material well-being.

[6] An analysis of the standardized test scores (whose range was 0-100) has shown that, relatively to French form 1 entrants, foreign pupils obtained 8.7 points less in French and 6.1 points less in mathematics on average. Differences in socio-demographic characteristics are largely responsible for this achievement gap: in an analysis controlling for family and social background, the regression coefficient estimated for foreign pupils is no more significant in mathematics and amounts to -1.4 point only in French (Vallet and Caille, 1996b). Closely similar results were also obtained in the Netherlands (Van’t Hof and Dronkers, 1994).

References


