

# Transition From Middle to High School in French Education Priority Areas: A High Stake in the Differentiation of Student's Curricula

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## Abstract

In France, the transition between the middle to high school is a key moment in the differentiation of student's curricula. This is when students enroll in either a general, a technological or a vocational stream which determines differential access to their further studies. This article focuses on how this transition impacts the students originating from underprivileged social environments. It is based on interviews with the education staff and students, along with questionnaires for the students. Our study highlights different type of guidance and the perception of students influencing their educational orientation. We question the inequalities that appear in these processes.

**Keywords:** Middle to high school transition; Curriculum differentiation; Educational inequality; Socioeconomic disadvantage; Educational orientation

## Introduction

In this article, we report on a study conducted in France, dealing with the transition between middle school (lower secondary education for all students aged 11 to 15) and high school (upper secondary education for students aged 16 to 18, divided into general, technological and vocational streams) (see Figure 1). This study is focused on students originating from underprivileged social environments attending schools in a Reinforced Education Priority Zone (REP+). The priority education policy in France is based on networks composed of a middle school and geographically close elementary schools that cater to communities experiencing economic, social, and educational disadvantage. The REP+ network represents the schools who serve the most marginalized students.

The research was carried out over three academic years (2016-2019) and was based on interviews with different types of educational staff (N=41) as well as interviews (N=57) and questionnaires (N=425) with students in their final year of middle school and first year of high school in the general stream. Our aim is to deepen the understanding of the elements that contribute to the decision-making process between the first and second cycle of secondary education. Figure 1

The results we present here focus on three dimensions. First, we look at how the school staff support students in their transition between middle and high school through the actions they set up. Secondly, we seek to understand how school guidance counseling is perceived by students. Finally, we analyze elements that may offer a better understanding of the processes involved in the differentiation of students' paths between middle and high school which implies different access to knowledge through the differentiation of curricula (vocational, technological and academic) and the potential personal and professional outcomes. We highlight, on the same part, the role that educational staff can play in this process.

## Review of literature on transition from middle to high school

Within the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) member countries, the most qualified individuals, particularly those who have access to tertiary studies, enjoy more favorable opportunities on the labor market; they are also those who partake the most in social activities, especially those related to culture and sports [1]. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the procedures for admission into tertiary studies in order

to better grasp what can prevent it, limit it, or favorize it. In that respect two factors appear to be particularly critical: first of all, the degree of selectivity within the tertiary studies admission system, since it conditions the possibility of access. Prior to this, the

moment when students must choose a stream for the second cycle of secondary school is at least as essential. Having chosen a vocational stream, in particular, diminishes drastically the possibility of accessing, or succeeding, in tertiary studies.

18 years old	Compulsory Education	University/ University Institutes of Technology/ High-level Technician Section (ISCED 4, 5, 6*)		
17 years		General and Technological High school / Upper Secondary School (ISCED 3*) Corresponds to "Lycée" in France	Vocational High School / Upper Secondary School (ISCED 3*) Corresponds to "Lycée" in France	Apprenticeship Training Centres
16 years				
15 years old				
14 years		Middle School Lower Secondary Education (ISCED 2*) Corresponds to "Collège" in France.		
13 years		Primary Education (Elementary School) (ISCED 1*)		
12 years				
11 years				
6 years		Early Childhood Education (Pre-school/ Kindergarten) (ISCED 0*)		
5 years				
4 years				
3 years old				

**Figure 1:** French education system

Studies on this transition between the first and second cycle of education remain less frequent than those that deal with other transitions such as primary to secondary school or between high school and tertiary studies. International comparisons are particularly difficult to conduct because of the differences between the various school systems. Reviews in the literature inherent to specific countries do however exist and bring to light new hardships facing students during this transition between the first and second cycle of education. Thus, in the USA, Benner [2] shows that some of the consequences of this transition are, among other things, a decline in academic achievements and a drop in grades, as well as additional difficulties in completing homework. This goes along with less involvement in extra-curricular activities, and also transformations in the well-being felt while at school. Furthermore, it impacts the composition of the students' relationship circles or their rapport with the school staff. Depending on the context, those hardships are not necessarily experienced in the same way. There are several contributing factors that create disparities, such as: the size [2] or the type [3] of the school [2], the way students are supported in their transition by their peers [4] or by the school staff and above all, the socio-economic background, ethnicity, and gender of the students [4,5,6].

France is a country that has been highlighted by international studies as being highly unequal, particularly because of the size of the gaps in educational success based on social origin [1]. Moreover, it is characterized by a particularly strong influence of diplomas on the social, economic and professional future of individu-

als [7]. The French curriculum is differentiated at the end of the middle school (see Figure 1). This is the time when students are oriented in different school tracks: the general stream, the technological one or the vocational one. This orientation is not only the choice of the student but a decision shared with the educational staff who can decide to allocate the student in one of those streams in relation in particular to school results. In this process, the social inequalities are strong [8]. and leads student to different kind of knowledges, different pedagogical practices, and, as OECD said on their report, different types of job and lives.

The inequalities in the transition from middle to high school particularly impact students from working-class families, those attending school in REP+, and boys. There are more students who have repeated at least one year by the end of middle school in REP+. That's mean they are older than the normal age for a class. This is mainly due to repeat years, i.e. the fact that the student has been in the same class for two consecutive years, due to an academic level considered insufficient to move up to the next class. On a national level 17% of the students had fallen behind by the end of middle school in 2016, whereas this rate is only 14.5% outside "regular" zones and 32% in REP+ zones [9]. Depending on the students' socio-economic background, their results at the national exam which takes place at the end of middle school (called the "diplôme national du brevet") show wide variations. The pass rate is: 97% among teachers' children, 83% among working class families, 73% among children with unemployed parents, and 76.5% for students enrolled in REP+ zones. It can be noted that, in the

education priority zones, on average girls achieve 10 points more than boys in their final overall mark (Ibid.). At the end of middle school, while 67.5% of students outside “regular” zones choose the general stream and 21% the vocational stream, 54% of the REP+ students choose the general stream and 37% the vocational stream. Additionally, gender plays a role, as girls are overrepresented in the high school general stream (54%) and underrepresented in vocational high school the high school vocational stream (42.5%) [10]. Similar differences stemming from socio-economic backgrounds and gender can also be found in other OECD countries [1,11].

The processes have consequences in the access to higher education: while 87% of French high school graduates pursue higher education, 97% of them come from the general stream whereas only 49% come from the vocational stream [12]. Moreover, while only 15% of general stream students leave the education system without high school diploma, that number climbs to 50% for their vocational counterparts. Finally, only 1% of vocational stream students achieve a Master’s degree compared to 88% for their general stream counterparts.

## Theoretical framework

*This paper is based on interdisciplinary research that crossed several fields: sociology, education sciences, political science, economy of education, geography. these different approaches have come together to understand the inequalities that arise in the transition from middle to high school, particularly for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, and the differentiation in school and curricula pathways that this entails.*

We understand the notion of curriculum in the strict sense of “the institutionally prescribed and functionally differentiated and structured set of everything that is supposed to be taught and learned, according to a determined order of programming and progression, within the framework of a given study cycle” (Forquin, 2008, p.8). More specifically, we question the function of the curriculum in managing student flows, differentiation and the channeling of cohorts. Indeed, “curricular devices” diversify into multiple tracks, classes, cycles, streams, options... These tracks are more or less divided and hierarchical. They also lead to variations in terms of content and culture, but also in the “social ordering” of pupils. This is the case during their school career, but also beyond in the professional field, according to the certifications obtained during the curriculum. Faced with this diversification of paths, students are highly unequal according to the “capital” they have to face learning and the selection criteria adopted [13,14].

## Materials and Method

The survey, approved by the ethics committee of Aix-Marseille University, crossed qualitative and quantitative data within an academy in the south of France:

➤ In 2017-2018, we focused on the issues which appear during the transition between the last year of middle school and the first year of high school from the school staff’s point of view.

Field surveys were carried out in 12 institutions (seven middle schools in REP+ zones and 5 high schools that accommodate REP+ zone students), by performing 41 in-depth interviews with several members of the education staff (Principals in charge of the management of the school; Principal education counselor i.e. CPE in charge of students’ lives outside class and of all matters related to discipline; The homeroom teacher is appointed by the Principal to provide personalized support to the students in a specific class and to coordinate and communicate between all those who play a part in education).

➤ In 2018-2019, we extended these investigations with a field study involving questionnaires (N=425) and interviews (N=61) among students in their last year of middle school (enrolled in 6 REP+ schools) and students in their first year of high school (enrolled in 5 schools including REP+ students).

Our methodology consists of combining quantitative and qualitative data collected over two school years from educational staff and students. The first year of our study, we do an analysis by categorization of the discourse of the educational staff. The year after, we mix a quantitative approach with statistical analysis of the questionnaire responses and an analysis by categorization of the discourse of the pupils. Based on this, we identified several elements about the guidance of educational orientation which influence the future curriculum.

## Results

### How establishments support the transition from middle to high school

#### The activities set up in middle school

In every middle school, specific activities are dedicated to facilitating orientation towards high school. There are two types of activities: some are done within the schools; others involve external partners.

The in-school activities were found in all the middle schools we interviewed. They fall under the responsibility of the homeroom teachers supervising the last year of middle school. Most of the time it involves devoting school time on a weekly basis to constructing educational orientation or career projects: individual interviews with the students, presentations or internet resources related to orientation, production of career description sheets, etc. In addition to the activities designed for all students, special attention can be given to those identified as having particular needs: those without career plans, or school dropouts.

Other activities involving a link with the destination high schools or other types of establishments are developed in parallel to the in-school activities. They are generally cited by several establishments in our sample, but are not present in all of the establishments surveyed: participation in “Open House days” at other schools; participation in career information forums or field trips aimed at finding out about specific careers; organization of mini-internships in high schools, most often in vocational high schools; talks from ‘student ambassadors’ (former middle school

students who have moved on to high school and come back to talk about their schooling); visits to a research laboratory or internships in companies. Again, some students are given special attention, particularly to help them develop their career project: observation internships in companies, presentation of careers by companies, mini-internships in companies or information about fields of study in vocational high schools.

### Integration of REP+ students in high schools

In some high schools, activities are organized to welcome students arriving from middle school. When they exist, they take very different forms. In one of our surveyed high schools, they take place as of the end of the last year of middle school, and 8 classes from different middle schools come to observe classes from the first year of high school. In another high school, these activities take place at the beginning of the school year. In a third school, they take place both during the last year of middle school and at the beginning of the first year of high school. Prior to their arrival in high school, activities related to sports and culture are organized for middle school students (for example, theater workshops for students in their final year of middle school led by high school teachers). Then, at the beginning of the school year, some time is devoted to the new students, so as to help them find out about the school's facilities and rules. In two high schools, in addition to these activities, a follow-up is organized. In the first, this follow-up takes the form of one-to-one interviews between a student and school staff. They focus on the academic and psychological difficulties encountered by the student and the development of his personal project. In the second high school, this follow-up takes the form of work on orientation and support for students coming from the same middle school, who are then grouped together in the same class in high school. It is a teacher from their home middle school who sets up a follow-up of their integration into high school (in French this project is called "suivi de cohorte"- cohort follow-up).

Depending on the high school, these actions may or may not be specific to REP+ students. In some high schools, they target everyone because REP+ students make up "100% of [their] numbers". In other schools, a specific follow-up of students from REP+ is provided and complements the more general follow-up common to students from all secondary schools. It consists in specific meetings for the families of students from these REP+ secondary schools and their teaching teams. Finally, in one high school where REP+ students are in the minority, no specific action was implemented for these students because, according to the educational teams, there is no need for it.

### How families are involved by the establishments during the middle to high school transition

In most middle schools, orientation information for parents is provided, mostly in the form of group meetings and, in some cases, individual interviews. The handing out of the quarterly report cards is also an opportunity to invite parents to the school in order to discuss their children's school career. The aim is twofold: to inform them about what is possible at the end of secondary school,

and to help them in formulating orientation wishes for their child that are tailored to the expectations of the family as well as the student, along with what seems realistic in the light of the school results achieved. In one of the middle schools, an original workshop called "parents' café" has been organized and has regularly mobilized 40 to 60 parents to discuss various educational topics.

However, even if this issue is central, there are certain difficulties. On the one hand, when information meetings are organized, the rate of absenteeism among families is often high and, in most schools, there is little mobilization of parents on this issue. On the other hand, the effort to find an agreement between the school and the family, with regard to educational orientation, often comes up against tensions, conflicts even, especially when it comes to the choice between the general and technological stream and vocational streams. Families are therefore involved in issues regarding orientation, but often in a more consultative manner rather than as real partners.

### What students say about their transition between middle and high school

In this second part, we focus on how the students themselves perceive this transition from middle school to high school.

#### The students' decisions regarding orientation

When it comes to students' wishes regarding orientation at the end of middle school, 68% express the desire to pursue the general stream in high school, 23% want to go for the vocational stream and 9% do not know which stream to choose yet. Two main factors contribute to the construction of these wishes.

Firstly, these wishes are constructed through interactions with various interlocutors. The ones evoked the most are the parents (cited by 77% of middle schoolers). The family network in a broader sense (siblings, uncles/aunts, cousins, etc.) is frequently mentioned as well. Within middle schools, the class's homeroom teacher occupies a central place in the discussions surrounding orientation choices (60%). The other interlocutors within the schools (other teachers, psychologists working for the National Education authority, CPE) are less frequently mentioned (28%). Finally, other resources are also referred to by the students, in particular the internet and their peers who play an important role in discussions related to orientation choices (34% of students talk about it with their friends).

Secondly, academic results appear to be strongly taken into account by students when it comes to their choice of orientation. Thus, when we cross-reference the wishes expressed with the students' academic level, it is interesting to note that these two factors are strongly linked. Thus, 95% of the very good students and 93% of the good students want to go into the general stream. Among the weakest students, 67% want to go into the vocational stream, and 29% still want to go into the general stream. Finally, 53% of the intermediate level students would like to take the general curriculum, 28% would like to take the vocational curriculum, and 19% are undecided.



Upon entering high school, the vast majority of students in our sample (72%) are satisfied with their orientation and 63% of them are satisfied with the school they attend. In choosing their orientation in high school, most students say they have discussed it with their parents (61%), and, in second place, with their home-room teacher in the final year of middle school (50%). Next come other adults within the school (36%), their friends (32%) and siblings (25%). Their statements do not appear to be correlated either with the SPC of their parents or to the fact that they come from a REP+ middle school.

### The high school experience and its hardships

From the academic standpoint, the most widely shared experience among high schoolers is the plummeting of their marks. This is strongly expressed during the interviews, including by those who felt that they were among the best students in middle school. In the exchanges with the students, the transition to high school appears to also be a moment where new difficulties arise in terms of work methods, as well as the pace and content of learning, especially for students who were more “intermediate” in middle school.

This decline in their academic level is felt by the students and demonstrated by their lower GPA when entering high school. This is probably what makes the strongest impression on students experiencing this transition. The hardships felt by REP+ students upon their arrival in high school are also identified by the teaching staff who, during our study in 2017-2018, had outlined difficulties in oral and written mastery of language, and also highlighted issues of a methodological nature that they considered to be specific to these students.

While interviewing high schoolers from our sample on the subject of homework, around 50% of them state that they either “sometimes” or “almost always” have difficulty completing it. Those results are quite similar to those observed in middle school. However, an increasing lack of external help in completing their homework is reported by students once they enter high school compared to what was available in middle school. The majority of students report receiving no help, which means either “never” or “rarely” (67% in high school, 60% in middle school), about one-fifth receive help “sometimes” (18% in high school, 21% in middle school) and a minority receive help either “often” or “very often” (10% in high school, 16% in middle school). We also note a significant drop in the help provided to high schoolers compared to middle schoolers regardless of from whom this help is offered by. The availability of help decreases, whether it comes from parents (30% in high school, 36% in middle school), siblings (25% in high school, 29% in middle school), or, less frequently cited, other adults such as school staff or outside help (11% in high school, 23% in middle school).

## Discussion

### A decision-making process with multiple factors involved

During the middle to high school transition, the questions regarding orientation choice are essential. It seems to us that four factors in particular are involved in these decisions.

The first is a general French context where vocational streams are often perceived as a less desirable. It’s not the same thing in other countries such as Switzerland, for example, where these streams are much more highly valued. The sociologist Palheta [15] describes the vocational stream as “a dominated order of teaching”. Thus, for students and their families, the desire to be oriented towards general and technological streams is commonly expressed as a desire to avoid short cycle vocational education. Orientation towards vocational streams is therefore often a default choice dictated by the impossibility of orientation towards a general or technological path.

A second factor is that of academic success which, as we saw above, is strongly linked to orientation choice, but is rarely perceived as having a true impact on this choice (Broccolichi & Sinton, 2011). Thus, the relation between academic success and orientation choice does not seem to be the focus of systematic work in middle school, with a view to preparing students for high school and its more demanding expectations. It does not receive special attention in high school either to provide support regarding the new work methods expected. Orientation decisions often ratify pre-existing gaps in academic achievement without offering students real opportunities to overcome them.

A third factor relates to the socio-geographic context specific to the institutions. Specific local factors (proximity or not to another sought-after high school, reputation of the school, specific arrangements within the school, modes of transport, etc.) appear to be significant in the choice of orientation for students and their families. These “effects of context” thus contribute to the fact that some schools are sought after a while, on the contrary, others are avoided (Author reference n°1).

A final factor is what assistance schools make available to help students and their families in their decision-making process. Our analyses show that the focus is often on a purely practical form of guidance. Most often, it is a matter of informing students about the options available to them in high school and the procedure for applying. On the other hand, what is much less developed are the activities related to deeper dimensions which nevertheless contribute to orientation choices. For example, work on representations within the courses offered (especially gendered ones). Also work on the behaviors required in a particular chosen path or self-projection into the perspective of long cycle streams. It is therefore to be feared that what the schools set up to help students and their families in their decision-making concerning orientation will reproduce underlying inequalities. These inequalities identified in the surveys carried out on the orientation choices of students from working-class backgrounds are as follows: the lack of self-projection in subjects considered “unlikely”, the reproduction of stereotypes, particularly gendered stereotypes, and the discrepancy between perceived and true expectations in high school, for example.

## The emergence of new difficulties in high school

Though the high schoolers we interviewed express a relatively high degree of satisfaction when as regards their schooling, their experience of entering high school coincides with the emergence of new difficulties, especially for those coming from REP+.

One of these difficulties relates to the drop in marks and academic achievement. This situation does not exclusively concern French high schoolers: Benner [2] shows in his review that in the United States as well, this decline in academic achievement is particularly noticeable during the transition from middle to high school. He also points out that students who leave the school system without a diploma are those whose marks have dropped substantially during this transition. This decline is even more pronounced when gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background are taken into account (Benner et al., 2017; [6]). We can therefore question the effects this situation has on the perception of knowledge for the students in question, as well as their self-image, particularly for those who are less equipped to deal with these new expectations. It can be noted that this dimension of academic success is rarely taken into account by the educational institutions we met with. Yet studies show that one of the factors facilitating the transition from middle to high school is precisely the emphasis placed on the academic preparation of students, by allocating them additional study time, tutoring and assigning the most experienced teachers to them [16].

The second difficulty which students entering high school emphasized is related to homework. Furthermore, these complications are accompanied by a decrease in the amount of help from family and friends, particularly for REP+ students, and the loss of certain homework help systems available in middle school but no longer in high school. Some students then try to seek help outside school, in particular through the actions deployed by social centers or associations, but for others, these difficulties are a cause of dropping out or even abandonment. Homework at home is therefore an additional source of difficulty in the transition from middle to high school for students whose academic level is impacted by their arrival at high school and who do not have sufficient personal or family resources. Here again, this situation is not unique to France and is found, for example, in the United States [2].

High schools and their teaching staff seem to take little notice of these new difficulties and do not necessarily consider that more sustained integration procedures are necessary for students arriving from REP+ middle schools. The risk is then that the schools concerned may be "indifferent to differences" and, by treating these students like any others, may not be able to provide a suitable response to their more specific needs. As a result, the new difficulties that emerge in high school can become insurmountable obstacles, especially for the students with the least academic assurance and those with fewer resources outside school, such as those from REP+ and thus preventing students from benefiting from the curriculum they are following.

## The role played by the family

The role played by the family and their implication in their

children's schooling is complex and sometimes contradictory [17], but several studies insist on the positive effect this "involvement has on the students' academic achievement and behavior" [18-21]. In our study, this question of the families' role has been raised both with educational teams and with students.

From the educational staff's point of view, it appeared that the involvement of families was described as unimportant. In middle school, teachers report high absenteeism from meetings and potential conflicts during the formulation of orientation wishes when those of the family do not coincide with those proposed by the institution. In high school, depending on the school, the relationship with families is varied. Some schools report organizing specific meetings at the beginning of the school year for the families of students from REP+ middle schools, others show parents around the school, and a few report that they do not organize anything specific. However, Jeynes' [22] work shows a positive association between parents having opportunities for communication with teachers regarding their child's progress and pupils' academic achievement.

From the students' point of view, parents appear to be their privileged interlocutors, ahead of the family network in the broad sense (brother and sister, uncle/aunt, etc.), friends or educational staff. One of the main topics discussed with the family is the question of their orientation in high school, but also, and even more so, their post-graduate studies and their future career. Contrary to the findings of Patrikakou [20] and Zill and Nord [23], children's communication with their parents about orientation issues, far from decreasing over time, tends to increase over the years and as the student progresses through the school curriculum. This observation is rather positive in the light of Mc Neel's work [19], which shows a significant relationship between parent-child discussion and student achievement, even if this is nuanced depending on whether it is a conversation with the father or the mother [24,25].

That being said, the involvement of parents when it comes to homework drops with time. Fewer and fewer students report receiving help with their homework, and more specifically help from their parents, even though these are the people who help them the most compared to other resources (peers, teachers, etc.). However, several studies have shown a positive association between parents checking a child's homework and academic achievement [22, 26], even if checking homework does not necessarily mean that they help them with their homework but rather that they are attentive to the fact that the homework is done. Several reasons have been cited in the work of Chen [18] and De Bruyn [27] to explain the decrease in the number of students reporting that they receive help from their parents to do their homework. This may be due to the fact that as children progress through school, the course content becomes more complex, and the curricula become more demanding. This may be perceived as intimidating for parents, particularly in light of their own educational background and level of study. It was also seen that there are fewer mechanisms to involve parents in the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle of secondary school. Finally, teenagers become more independent, and parents may exert progressively less influence over them.

Finally, the paucity of the effort to involve parents by the educational teams in the middle to high school transition seems strongly out of step compared to the role parents have in choosing an orientation according to the students. This observation, like those of other studies [28-31], challenges the idea that working-class parents give up on their children when it comes to support for their schooling.

## Conclusion

The transition between middle and high school involves important academic, social and economic stakes on an international scale. Our study shows that this moment merits investigation in order to understand the crossroads that students may have to deal with and how the schools and support programs can play a role. Beyond specific information linked to a given national context, several dimensions of our analysis overlap with studies carried out in other countries. Extending this research by making comparisons with more varied school systems would be particularly enlightening in order to grasp not only the processes at play, but also to study the diversity of the answers to the questions raised at this crucial point in the curriculum.

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