

# Applying the Capability Approach to the French Education System: An Assessment of the "Pourquoi pas moi?" Programme

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**2013**

*Kevin André*

# **APPLYING THE CAPABILITY APPROACH TO THE FRENCH EDUCATION SYSTEM: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ‘POURQUOI PAS MOI?’<sup>1</sup> PROGRAMME**

**Kevin ANDRE<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** This paper attempts to re-examine the notion of equality, going beyond the classic opposition in France between affirmative action and meritocratic equality. Hence, we propose shifting the French debate about equality of opportunities in education to the question of how to raise equality of capability. In this paper we propose an assessment based on the capability approach of a mentoring programme called ‘*Une grande école: pourquoi pas moi?*’ (‘A top-level university: why not me?’ (PQPM) launched in 2002 by a top French business school. The assessment of PQPM is based on the pairing of longitudinal data available for 324 PQPM students with national data. Results show that the ‘adaptive preferences’ of the PQPM students change through a process of empowerment. Students adopt new ‘elitist’ curricula but feel free to follow alternative paths.

**Keywords:** Capability, Adaptive preferences, Agency, Education, Assessment, France.

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## Introduction

The French education system has come under much criticism. Most recently, it has been condemned for its lack of social openness, i.e. its inability to provide equal opportunities to every pupil and student, regardless of their social origin (Merle, 2009). However, figures show investment in education in France exceeds that of most OECD countries (Eurostat, 2012). Reforms put in place between the 1950s and the 1990s ended the previous two-tier system, in which most young people from disadvantaged backgrounds had little access to secondary level education and almost none to university. Today, over two-thirds of a generation of pupils takes the *baccalauréat* (up from one-third for those born between 1960 and 1970), giving them the right to continue to university studies. Even the drop-out rate, constantly raised in public debates, is the lowest it has been since the mid-1990s (DEPP, 2009).

This paper sets out to evaluate the experimental '*Pourquoi pas moi?*' (PQPM) mentoring programme, launched in 2002 by a high-ranked French business school. High-quality quantitative and qualitative data have been collected on the 324 student participants in PQPM. Using these data, in conjunction with national statistics (see below) and the results of various social scientific studies, provides a rare opportunity to assess the limits and efficacy of the school system in France and developed countries (countries that already have democratized high schools and universities). How can we further develop a *national* education system in a country that is characterized by an extremely diverse youth? Is it possible to integrate and promote diversity in a society where the only officially recognized differences are those derived from individual 'merit'? Is the meritocratic ideal still sustainable? To answer these questions, we will use the capability approach.

The capability approach has not been introduced in the field of education by French researchers although it is already popular in other European contexts, for example, Belgium (Verhoeven *et al.*, 2007) and the United Kingdom (Watts and Bridges, 2006). In France, it has been used in the economy of development (see for instance Dubois and Mahieu, 2009) and in the field of training and employment (see for instance Bonvin and Farvaque, 2007; Salais, 2005) but not in sociology of education.

In this paper we propose an assessment based on the capability approach of the 'Pourquoi pas moi?' ('Why not me?') mentoring programme (PQPM). Our proposition for assessing PQPM from a capability approach is twofold. First, the programme should *collectively* change the capability set of the students, more of whom people achieve the valued functioning (i.e. elitist tracks). Second, the students should feel *individually* free to choose their path. Afterwards, they should feel in line with their curriculum regardless of whether they choose the valued functioning or not.

Our study is an empirical, theoretical and methodological contribution to the issue of the assessment of education in developed countries through a capability approach; education is significant for the human development and capability approach (Walker, 2012) and the literature applying it to high income countries is emergent (Anand *et al.*, 2009).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we present the French meritocratic myth and the PQPM programme. We review arguments about the assessment of PQPM through the lens of the capability approach and the impact of PQPM on students' functioning and agency, and develop our hypotheses. Then we test our hypotheses through association and paired comparison tests on a sample composed of a national (French) dataset and survey. The paper concludes with a discussion of our findings and their implications for future research.

## **Theoretical background**

### *The French meritocratic myth*

The most recent international PISA studies show that in France, more than in other OECD countries, social background is the main determinant for success in school (Baudelot and Establet, 2009). Longitudinal surveys also show a relative erosion of the school system's ability to mitigate the impact of social origins on school performances. Some anthropological and statistical studies argue that the 'democratization' or 'massification' process has in fact 'simply replaced the (early) elimination of pupils from underprivileged backgrounds through their 'conservation' in a state of failure until they leave school' (Poupeau and Garcia, 2006: quoted by Beaud (2008, p. 162). These 'children of the democratization', studied in Beaud's anthropological work (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999; Beaud, 2003; Beaud and Pialoux, 2005), were not correctly supported in a school system whose codes, rules and requirements were adapted to a much more privileged public, with higher social and cultural 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1979).

The school debate has been fueled in recent years by the riots involving young people from immigrant and working-class backgrounds in the suburbs of a number of French cities in 2005 (the so-called *crise des banlieues*). Their feelings of desperation were seen as the result of their lack of professional opportunities, discrimination, and the inability of their schools to ensure equal opportunities. Most problems begin during elementary, middle and high school and primarily concern low-achieving pupils. But paradoxically, media coverage of this issue focuses almost exclusively on inequalities at university level, in particular in top-level, Ivy-league-type institutions.

The French 'meritocratic' myth or ideal is indeed noteworthy. First, unlike in the US, for example, a social, economic, and professional hierarchy based on one's diploma is seen as

fairer than one based on professional success in business (Dubet, 2004). Thus, the meritocratic ideal in France merges with equal academic opportunities. Second, people still refer to a ‘golden age’ of meritocracy, when pupils from very disadvantaged backgrounds could make it to the top (see, for instance, the report from the conservative think-tank Montaigne in 2006). Despite the fact that during this ‘golden age’ social background was the main determinant for academic success, a select few from disadvantaged backgrounds still gained access to the elite through a system of early detection. With the exceptions of law and medical schools, which are open to every student with a *baccalauréat* – but which reduce the incoming class through a series of exams during the early years<sup>3</sup> – prestigious schools and universities select their students on the basis of anonymous entrance exams (*concours*) with strictly limited numbers. Succeeding in these very demanding and selective exams is therefore a sort of Republican rite of passage for the future elite.

When Nicolas Sarkozy, the former President of the French Republic (2007–12) gave an important speech on equal opportunity, he did so at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, the French equivalent of MIT or Caltech, whose alumni constitute a significant part of the French scientific, administrative and business elite.<sup>4</sup> Every year 400 students enter the Ecole Polytechnique, that is only 0,05% of the French student population in higher education. There is a tendency to evaluate the fairness and efficiency of the French school system through the social diversity of its small elitist institutions. If ethnic diversity is never directly evoked as a criterion and remains to a large extent taboo in France, which is officially blind to race and ethnic origins, promoting so-called visible minorities nevertheless constitutes an implicit goal of most policies directed towards ‘disadvantaged youth’.

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<sup>3</sup> The typical success rate for students in medical school is less than 20% during the first year.  
<sup>4</sup> 17 December 2008.

### *The 'Pourquoi pas moi?' programme*

In 2002, ESSEC business school<sup>5</sup> decided to launch an innovative programme of intensive tutoring to tackle the issue of equal opportunity. The goal was to help high school students with very few financial or cultural resources<sup>6</sup> reach their full potential. The programme was called '*Une grande école: pourquoi pas moi?*'<sup>7</sup> but quickly became known simply as '*Pourquoi pas moi?*' (PQPM). It was devised to help students gain access to the educational elite, and from there enter the French establishment. Nevertheless, PQPM ensures all students are free to follow the individual path they desire. Thus, the programme has only semi-elitist aspirations; it does not compel students to follow the elitist path, nor does it give special privileges to those who elect to do so.

PQPM is, in fact, a response to a rival programme, set up by Sciences-Po, the Paris Institute of Political Science, one of France's most renowned universities. A year earlier, Sciences-Po created a special entrance exam for high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In doing so, Sciences-Po broke a real French taboo, the equality of all taking the same *concours*. Its detractors saw this step as akin to US-style affirmative action. PQPM, however, more closely resembles an affirmative action programme '*à la française*', in that its goal is to ensure the *real* equality of all before an anonymous examination, and thus to restore a broken meritocracy.

For two and a half years, high school students with promising academic/scholastic potential are mentored by volunteer students from ESSEC for three hours per week. They also benefit from job shadowing, travel abroad, workshops on the academic track selection process, and so on. Once they pass the *baccalauréat*, and subsequently throughout their

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<sup>5</sup> Number 2 in the French national business school rankings. Graduates from ESSEC typically enter international firms, working as consultants, bankers, marketers, etc.

<sup>6</sup> A typical PQPM student comes from a poor family – lowest 10% of the population – in which neither parent passed the *baccalauréat*. French is the second language for around 50% of PQPM students.

<sup>7</sup> 'A top-level university: why not me?'



further education, they are no longer mentored but are still accompanied by the PQPM team, which assists students with a variety of concerns (typically psychological support, strategy to change their academic track, housing and financial issues). Over 90% of PQPM students stay in touch with the programme throughout their higher education in one way or another.

The programme rests upon the following assumption: for these students, the real obstacle to entering a top-tier university is self-censorship, i.e. limited ambitions due to growing up in a disadvantaged context, and a lack of knowledge of important cultural codes. PQPM can thus be considered an empowerment programme, since its goal is to extend the students' freedom, by suppressing psychological, material and cultural barriers to their ambition.

#### *Assessing PQPM through the capability approach*

Amartya Sen's capability approach is appropriate because, first, *real (or substantive) freedom of choice*, the goal of the PQPM programme, is at the core of Sen's approach. Sociology of education is mostly interested in the way school shapes society and is shaped by society, how it produces and reproduces social inequalities. The *agency* of students is not taken seriously into consideration. Much more emphasis is put on how agency is determined by external forces, such as their position in the social order or their family strategies. Thus, the task of understanding how students actually learn is left to pedagogical studies. But neither pedagogical studies nor sociology really focuses on how students *make choices*, and how these choices change over time. National statistics, academic work, and the organization of the school system together form a seemingly complete picture, while individual students' freedom and self-initiative are left in the background. However, many problems within the

school system derive from a lack of concern and a feeling of desperation among middle and high school students who *are oriented* and deprived of any *agency*.

Conversely, the capability approach fully recognizes the importance of students' freedom (agency) while continuing to evaluate concrete outcomes or achievements ('functionings', to use Sen's terminology). According to Sen, 'a person's capability refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)' (1999, p. 75). Thus, Sen revisits the notion of equality (1995), which does not assure everyone the same destiny, nor give everyone the same means, but rather guarantees that everyone will have the opportunity to choose freely between different valued possibilities. Sen's work was intended to deal with groups or countries in a state of development and this theory is designed to deal with how things evolve diachronically. It might prove beneficial to consider individuals, especially young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as *people in a state of development*: how can we help them to achieve better results, while respecting their agency (freedom)? Freedom has an intrinsic value – we should value freedom for itself – and is instrumental – for instance, becoming the actor of your academic trajectory is a key factor of success (Sen, 1985).

The second reason Sen's approach serves our purpose is methodological. We follow Burchardt's (2009) notion of applying the capability approach to the problem of *adaptive preferences*. Sen criticizes utilitarianism for relying on subjective well being, without taking into account the fact that the criteria for what constitutes well being can be 'adapted' to specific situations, in particular, situations of deprivation. In our case, students from disadvantaged backgrounds could very well be happy with the *baccalauréat*, even if they could do much better, because no one among their relatives attended university. Sen's work

also underlines the danger of one-dimensional evaluations, whether they take a utility approach or an approach based on final outcomes (e.g. ‘cost-benefit’ evaluations, or the percentage of young people obtaining a university diploma). They ignore the value of freedom (Sen, 1999) and even worse, they could overlook much of what is currently taking place in some situations. For instance, Alkire’s fieldwork in Pakistan (2005b) demonstrated that a cost-benefit evaluation, focusing exclusively on financial indicators, fails to detect extremely important changes regarding the well-being of the population, such as increasing self-respect. The concept of capabilities, however, enables us to link functionings *and* agency: ‘Formulations of capability have two parts: valuable beings and doings (functionings), and freedom. Sen’s significant contribution has been to unite the two concepts, and any account of capabilities that does not include both misrepresents this approach’ (Alkire, 2005a, p. 118).

Burchardt does not challenge Sen’s reasoning and conclusions. But she raises the considerable problem of dealing with subjective adaptation in any attempt at operationalizing the capability approach. For Sen, one should contrast what is achieved by an individual or group (for instance, well-being) with their freedom to do so, in respect of their agency goals. Did they achieve what they wanted (agency goal achievements)? Were they free to choose these goals (agency goal freedom)? The point Burchardt makes is that *agency goals*, like utilities, are particularly subject to adaptation. Therefore, the evaluation of agency goal achievements could produce:

‘...similarly perverse results as evaluation of subjective well-being. Assigning two individuals to the same point in a distribution of advantage and disadvantage, because both are judged to have achieved their significant agency goals, when one has formulated his goals from a narrow range of experience

while the other grew up believing ‘the world was his oyster’, is misleading’ (Burchardt, 2009, p. 8).

The same problem occurs with ‘agency goal freedom’, defined by Sen as the freedom to pursue ‘whatever goals or values he or she regards as important’ (Sen, 1985, p. 203, cited by Burchardt, 2009, p. 8). Burchardt remarks that they may well be adapted to particular situations. Moreover, a case study of the 1970 British Cohort Study<sup>8</sup> proves Burchardt’s point, that the problem of adaptation is indeed very common and central. Thus, it becomes extremely difficult to use different people’s capability sets to evaluate the level of inequalities. Burchardt’s work eventually led to a very practical conclusion: the capability approach could be used only if ‘the process by which agency goals, aspirations and preferences that influence selection of functionings have been formed as an explicit part of the evaluation’ (2009, p. 16). Furthermore, one should move ‘from a static to a dynamic conception of capability assessment, including examining the freedom (or lack thereof) an individual has accumulated over his or her lifetime to date’ (2009, p. 17). In the following evaluation, these two conditions are met thanks to the data gathered in our research. This will give us the opportunity to test the capability approach fully.

### *The impact of PQPM on students’ functionings and agency*

Even if functionings have been replaced by capabilities as the main variable of the assessment, they are still the first data for evaluation since the capability set is hardly measurable in and of itself (de Munck and Zimmermann, 2008). Sen acknowledges this difficulty: ‘Capabilities aren’t directly observable/measurable and must be constructed through/based on underlying/a set of presumptions’ (Sen, 1995, p. 52). Achievements are

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<sup>8</sup> A continuing, multi-disciplinary, longitudinal study following the development of more than 17,000 people born in the UK in one week in April 1970.

always considered ‘key indicators of progress’ (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 303) and, most of the time, capability assessment is based on an ‘enrichment of functionings’. But which functionings should we use to assess PQPM?

If Sen insists on the importance of functionings in the capability assessment, he refuses to provide a normative list. It should derive from an act of reasoning (Robeyns *et al.*, 2000). If we follow this idea, considering the goals of PQPM – helping students reach their potential and raise their ambitions – there is clearly a will to push these disadvantaged students towards elitist tracks in higher education. One of the main targets for PQPM students is therefore to enter prep schools for top-level universities (*classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles*, or CPGE). Since the CPGE are considered the royal road to the elite, they are regarded as a major player in the production of inequality in the education system. Figure 1, produced by the French Ministry of Education, shows this clearly.

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Figure 1 about here  
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Forty-two per cent of high-school students from upper-class backgrounds who pass their *baccalauréat* with distinction enter elitist tracks, as opposed to a mere 19% of those from lower-class backgrounds (DEPP, 2008, p. 2). If school results are the main factor influencing a student’s determination to take an elitist track, the impact of social conditioning is evident. There is indeed a kind of self- or collective censorship of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (DEPP, 2005), called ‘adaptive preferences’ within the capability approach. Gender-oriented preferences also play an important role: 50% of boys pursue elitist tracks when they obtain distinctions at *baccalauréat*, while only 25% of girls do so (DEPP, 2008, p. 2).

With this in mind, PQPM was developed with an aim to change the adaptive preferences of underprivileged yet high-performing students, especially girls, and to deconstruct their social conditioning so that they would follow more challenging paths. One of the main functionings to which the programme aspires is increasing the probability that a student takes the elitist path. Since ‘the concept of functionings reflects the various things a person may value doing or being’ (Sen, 1999, p. 71), taking the elitist path is a functioning with a practical dimension (you need to enter it, have adequate grades, and even know it exists) and a personal dimension (you need to value admission to it). Therefore, our first hypothesis is that PQPM students do pursue elitist tracks more often (functioning hypothesis)

This mere hypothesis would be insufficient to say that the capability set has expanded: ‘in assessing human development, a focus on achieved functionings alone, like a focus on utility, is incomplete’ (Alkire, 2005a, p. 7). We have to ‘enrich’ it with pieces of information about what students ‘value and have reason to value’. What matters is not only what people manage to do but also what they value.

What about the students who decide to follow alternative paths? Many PQPM students do indeed opt for different directions than the elitist track. The programme does not consider these students failures; nor, officially, is a single student taking the elitist path considered a success for the programme. Nevertheless, we can fear that the ESSEC mentors – who have themselves barely finished the elitist track – are actually advocating their own model of success. PQPM has been indeed accused of imposing an implicit form of social domination (Allouch and van Zanten 2008, p. 54). Is the value of public university discredited by PQPM? Are students *implicitly compelled* by their mentors to pursue elitist tracks instead of public university? This is a major issue, since some sociologists lament the devaluing of university compared to the *grandes écoles* (Beaud and Convert, 2010).

Education is never ‘value-free’ (McLaughlin, 2003, cited in Vaughan and Walker, 2012). PQPM is value-oriented, as is the French educational system. Students should be made aware of what is regarded by the political, social and economic establishment as the best course of study.<sup>9</sup> But we have to check whether the capability set of students has really been expanded and not ‘merely influenced or “shaped”’ (Vaughan and Walker, 2012, p. 508). We need to check that PQPM did not replace one pre-existing source of social conditioning with another. Therefore, our second hypothesis is that PQPM students are free not to choose the elitist track (agency hypothesis).

Sen defined agency as ‘what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important’ (1985, p. 386). There are many ways of assessing agency. Most of the time, qualitative data are gathered. But some subjective quantitative measures of human agency have been proposed and exist in the literature (Alkire, 2005c). Economics increasingly makes use of self-reported accounts in its assessment of human development, and psychology has done so for a long time (Anand *et al.*, 2009). We propose to follow this stream of research.

According to self-determination theory (see for instance Ryan and Deci, 2000), autonomy is an innate human psychological need. People’s inner motivation cannot be developed without a sense of autonomy. This natural need for autonomy has been linked to the notion of agency (Alkire, 2005c). But considering human agency as self-determination can be problematic in an educational context. Because students are young, they are sometimes placed in heteronomous situations with their teachers or family, who consider they

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<sup>9</sup> This statement may sound bizarre but unlike the UK or the US, there is a kind of opacity in France about higher education. Of course, most French people know the equivalent of ‘Oxbridge’ or Ivy-League universities, but how to access them, the tactical choices that they need to make, remain unclear to many high-school students. Besides, the system is extremely complex: the CPGE system prepares for schools delivering the best diploma for engineers and business students. But law and medical schools remain in the world of the public university. What this means is that one can enroll without going through an entrance exam; all that is needed is a pass at *baccalauréat* – but the subsequent failure rate is extremely high.

have a better idea of what is good for them. Education is also based on authority and not only on autonomy. Again, education is value-oriented and not value-free. How can we know if this authority is acceptable from an agency perspective? Under what conditions is this influence acceptable?

A possible answer comes with the idea of self-acceptance, defined as ‘having a positive attitude towards oneself and one’s past life’ (Alkire, 2005c, p. 235). Self-acceptance means individuals agree with their past choices and are aligned with them at the present time. This is of considerable importance as school choices have a long-term impact, and conflicts between parents and children, as well as advisors and students, often arise from different time perspectives. A major concern for PQPM is whether students are aligned with their past academic track. Does their curriculum reflect who they think they are? This question has to be linked to whether or not they follow the elitist path. Students who do not follow elitist tracks should not feel less comfortable with their past choices than students who do. They should not have a feeling of depreciation about not following the so-called royal road.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

This study combines a publicly available, national French dataset and a survey. The first set of data that we use is a panel of students entering secondary school, produced by DEPP<sup>10</sup>/INSEE.<sup>11</sup> Since 1973, the Ministry of Education has regularly undertaken studies of panels of pupils in order to observe their academic trajectory longitudinally. During the 1970s

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<sup>10</sup> *Direction de l'Evaluation, de la Prospective et de la Performance* (Department of Assessment, Prospects and Performance) in the French Ministry of Education.

<sup>11</sup> *Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques* (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies).



and 1980s, four such surveys were implemented. The last available survey started in 1995 and concerned 17,830 students enrolled in the first year of *collège* (middle school) from 1995 to 1996 in a public or private institution. These students were followed throughout their schooling in secondary education through their administrative records. In 2002, around two-thirds of them took their *baccalauréat*. Further questionnaires were conducted via telephone or mail to track their trajectory into higher education.

The second data source we used is a follow-up questionnaire for PQPM students. Every year, a detailed questionnaire is sent to alumni to determine their precise curriculum. There are eight groups of PQPM students who took their *baccalauréat* and who are now undertaking higher education (n = 324). Group 8 is in the first year after the *baccalauréat*, while the first cohort is in its eighth year after the *baccalauréat*.

To examine functionings and agency from a capability perspective, previous research has shown that priority should be given to longitudinal data. We needed data about what students achieved, what influenced their choices and how their agency goals were designed (Burchardt, 2009). Such data are very difficult to gather. One advantage of PQPM is that it makes such data available, since students are followed from the beginning of high school to the present day. The contribution of PQPM data is also to give insight about the agency process of students; DEPP/INSEE data do not provide such information.

### *Measures*

*PQPM.* PQPM students are those who took their *baccalauréat* and participated in the programme for at least three years. Non-PQPM students come from the DEPP/INSEE sample.

*Elitist tracks.* Engagement in elitist tracks was measured using education choices data toward CPGE using the DEPP/INSEE panel design. CPGE is a competitive two-year course that prepares students for the entrance exam for the *grandes écoles*. Entrance to CPGE is selective and relies on school exam results.

*Self-acceptance.* The following question was included about this issue: ‘Up to this point, are you in line with your curriculum?’ A Likert scale was provided with four possible responses (Not at all, Somewhat, Mostly, Entirely). Self-acceptance was coded as 1 when answer was ‘Entirely’ and zero for other answers. This question was not asked of students who finished PQPM within the last two years.

### *Empirical strategy*

It was not possible to construct a randomized trial with a control group since we needed the longitudinal data and the time-span dating from 2002. Thus we built a quasi-experimental evaluation where treatment and comparison groups are matched on observable characteristics. To ensure the comparability between national and survey data, we built a restricted paired sample based on the following criteria: gender, *baccalauréat* with distinction, social background of the head of the household, *baccalauréat* sections and origin of parents (French metropolitan, foreign non-metropolitan, mixed origin), which are the five main criteria reported to influence the choice of elitist tracks in the literature (DEPP, 2008). Excluding missing and non-matching observations, our final paired sample consists of 204 (408 data points).

Table 1 presents a comparison of the initial and final paired samples. We observed a minor bias in the paired sample. Aside from a slightly under-represented (about six points) proportion of students with *baccalauréat* with distinction and geographical origin, the final

sample remains representative (differences inferior to three points). We can observe that the paired PQPM sample has, as expected, a very strong over-representation of foreign lower-class origin.

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Table 1 about here  
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To test our hypotheses, we computed association tests (Chi-square test) and paired comparison tests (McNemar's tests). McNemar's test is appropriate to analyze paired data proportions from binary variables (McNemar, 1947; Sheskin, 2004, 1193). Chi-square tests were used when evaluating agency hypotheses since no data concerning agency has been included in national statistics and therefore no comparison is possible. To complement our descriptive analysis and deepen our interpretation, we adopted a mixed design of research. Semi-structured interviews have been made (n = 20).

## **Findings**

In order to test our functioning hypothesis we computed a series of paired comparison tests, displayed in Table 2. To examine enrolment in elitist tracks across the PQPM students compared to their peers, we conducted a McNemar's test. The results showed that PQPM students choose elitist tracks more often (30.3% vs. 19.31%) and revealed a significant association ( $p = 0.014$ ). Examination of the engagement in elitist tracks across female PQPM students and their counterparts reflected significant results. PQPM female students engage significantly more often in elitist tracks than their counterparts (35.66% vs. 15.79%,  $p < 0.001$ ). If we control geographical origin and distinction, we also observe significant associations.

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Table 2 about here  
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To test our agency hypothesis, we computed additional association tests on PQPM data. In order to examine the link between engagement in elitist tracks and self-acceptance, we ran Chi-square tests. *Elitist tracks* is considered an independent variable and no longer as the dependent variable as for functioning assessment. *Self-acceptance* is considered the dependent variable to test the agency hypothesis. Results are presented in Table 3 and showed no significant association between elitist tracks and self-acceptance.

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Table 3 about here  
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## **Discussion**

We observe a predominantly gender-oriented impact concerning enrolment in elitist tracks. This makes sense, as the majority of PQPM students' parents were born in countries where women are not empowered to study and work as they are in France. This can also be explained by the fact that girls tend to perform better and achieve better grades than boys. This is important, since grades are the biggest barrier to entrance into a preparatory course. The effect is also very clear when we compare only students who obtained their *baccalauréat* with distinction. It is consistent with research that cites grades as the determining factor for entry to elitist tracks (DEPP, 2008). If we put this dimension aside, it makes the impact of the PQPM programme even clearer.

Concerning agency issues, no correlation is found between self-acceptance and enrolment in elitist tracks. It therefore seems that PQPM students feel comfortable in not

pursuing elitist tracks. Qualitative data are instructive to support these results. When we performed interviews with alumni of the programme, students explained why they chose to go to non-selective universities or follow elitist tracks. Florence, for example, said that the ESSEC mentors clearly encouraged her to work towards elitist tracks, the ‘royal road’. The mentors are familiarized with the danger of advocating their own model of success during meetings with programme heads who affirm that their rejection of the Sciences-Po model leads to the idea that one cannot proscribe one single model of success. However, the mentors also point out to their students the academic, social and economic hierarchy of higher education. Aside from its educational merits, elitist tracks or CPGE are ‘royal roads’ because they open up the widest range of options: *‘It gives us more choices, because I can always go back to the public university afterwards, or I could go to Science Po,’* said Florence. Her acceptance of the logic of the benefits of the ‘royal road’ is evident in her statement. Florence has not adopted this reasoning naively, as she is also aware of the system’s limitations and risks: *‘I was glad because there weren’t only mentors saying, ‘CPGE is great!’ There were some who said, ‘It was hell!’* Such advice from mentors is also tempered and balanced by the opinions of other actors involved in her educational goals. Her teachers, despite Florence’s exceptional grades, considered her to be ‘too scholarly’ for CPGE. Moreover, she always took the opinion of her family into consideration and involved them in her decisions (during CPGE, she left her internship to return home to live with her parents). Through the interplay between these three points of view (family, teachers and mentors), it seems that Florence has become the agent of her own career path. Florence eventually entered ESCP, one of the top three French business schools, with HEC and ESSEC.

Let’s take another example of a student who decided to go to university. Lin was born in China; her parents are Chinese merchants who currently live in China – Lin was until recently an illegal immigrant. Her mathematics teacher told her: *‘You must go to CPGE,*

*because you have potential.*' A brilliant student who arrived in France towards the end of *collège*, without a word of French, she still managed to attend regular classes. However, she simply did not want to attend a CPGE: '*According to the interviews, I understood that there would be a lot of work.*' Her family context and temperament led her to university, where the lifestyle and the rhythm of work suited her better. She plans to attend a business school at the same time and hopes to keep a range of possibilities open. The decision here was shaped by the personality and character of the student, and does not seem to be a constraint. We see here that although PQPM tends to push some students towards elitist tracks, the programme does not discredit other paths or goals. This is a very important issue since other qualitative research in other European countries has shown that 'what may be perceived as an injustice from the government's vantage point within the social hierarchy may well be perceived as something very different by those the government claims to be reaching out to' (Watts and Bridges, 2006, p. 147). PQPM students should become aware that the elitist track *may* provide something of value; but we should not presume that it *should* be pursued.

However, PQPM's perspective on educational choices is mainly instrumental. If freedom of choice seems to be consistent with a change in valued functionings, the value given to education is based on the achievement of vocational paths to success. Martha Nussbaum's recent writings (2010) show the dangers of 'for-profit education' and why we should be cautious about approaching it. Indeed, PQPM considers educational choice as part of a personal strategy for success and self-actualization but not as a way to become a citizen and to build democracy. There is a risk that we do not aim at the central human functional capabilities listed by Nussbaum (1999), such as being able 'to form a conception of the good' or 'to live with and toward others' (1999, p. 54). When we look at the fields of study chosen by PQPM students and compare them to those of DEPP/INSEE panel students, we observe that PQPM students choose fewer humanities and more business tracks. This programme is

therefore in a way exacerbating the ‘silent crisis’ that happens nowadays: ‘humanities and the arts are being cut away [...] seen by policy-makers as useless’ (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2). This is a matter of political concern that could be balanced with individual empowerment of the student beneficiaries of the programme.

### **Conclusion and further research**

The assessment of PQPM found that the programme influences disadvantaged students, mainly girls and students who achieve a distinction in the *baccalauréat*. This requires a modification of the capability set to value new functionings that were not previously valued because of social conditioning, such as the opportunity to pursue an elitist track. The influence of PQPM can be considered not only as a modification of the capability set, since there is not a decrease in agency, but as an empowerment, an expansion of the capability set. Both qualitative and quantitative data seem to confirm this from a self-acceptance perspective. One explanation of this consistency between impact on functioning and agency could be found in the personal care given by mentors to mentees, which is very different from the institutional relationship between a teacher and a student. Personal care-giving has been related to the capability approach in the case of people with disabilities (Nussbaum, 2006). Further research might find empirical verification that capability set expansion in educational settings should include personal care-giving, for example through mentoring, if the students’ agency is targeted through the same process of modifying functioning.

This paper also makes a theoretical contribution about agency, stressing that self-determination does not necessarily have an intrinsic value in the field of education because it is not value-free. External influence may sometimes be closer to students’ self-actualization than their own self-determination. This is consistent with humanistic psychology, which puts the development of the person (Rogers, 2005) at the heart of the analysis. The general preference for the notion of person rather than individual has been otherwise assumed for

capability approach (Ballet *et al.* 2007). The notion of person assumes interdependency with other people and with environment whereas the notion of individual implies independence.

A methodological contribution is to combine tests of impact on functioning with quantitative and qualitative data about agency. We have proposed that the valued functioning (here elitist tracks or CPGE) could be used as a dependent variable for functioning assessment. It would be used as independent variable for agency assessment in order to verify that the modification of functioning has been through a process of agency or constraint.

This paper is not without limitations. The questionnaire about agency was given once in 2012 and should have been given in successive years since the start of the programme. The assessment of self-acceptance should be strengthened, using a specific measurement scale including more than one item. Another limitation is the fact that national statistics do not take into account the way agency has been built. We were not able to compare PQPM students with a control group. The only question that is close to the issue of agency in the national statistics is: ‘Are you enrolled in the division you hoped you would be at the end of high school?’ This question is asked the first year after the *baccalauréat* and not repeated afterwards, despite the fact that time facilitates further reflection on this question. Another available data point concerns the area of study at the end of *collège*, where 39.3% of students said they were forced to choose a path they did not want (DEPP, 2005). These data are interesting but do not provide information about how choices are made and how the students understand these choices when reflecting on them in the future. They take the choice of the student for granted whereas, as Burchardt shows, agency goals have to be part of the assessment.

We therefore recommend that national statistics should include longitudinal data about agency, not taking agency for granted but considering it as the result of a process. This could help to make agency a true part of the reflections on justice in education. Further



research might put together new studies based on a control group that integrates such longitudinal agency data.

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**TABLE 1: Description of samples**

	Initial PQPM Sample N = 324	Paired PQPM Sample N = 204	Diff.
<b>Gender</b>			
Females	211 (65.33%)	134 (65.69%)	+0.36
Males	112 (34.67%)	70 (34.31%)	-0.36
<b>Baccalauréat</b>			
With distinction	214 (66.25%)	123 (60.29%)	-5.96
Without distinction	109 (33.75%)	81 (39.71%)	+5.96
<b>Social origin</b>			
Top management	17 (6.27%)	14 (6.86%)	+0.59
Middle management	45 (16.61%)	39 (19.12%)	+2.51
Farmers, tradesmen, merchants	31 (11.44%)	25 (12.25%)	+0.81
Clerical workers	53 (19.56%)	34 (16.67%)	-2.89
Blue-collar workers	125 (46.13%)	92 (45.10%)	-1.03
<b>Baccalauréat sections</b>			
Scientific	188 (59.87%)	120 (58.82%)	-1.05
Economics	107 (34.08%)	69 (33.82%)	-0.26
Literature	19 (6.05%)	15 (7.35%)	+1.3
<b>Geographical origin</b>			
French/Metropolitan	51 (17.77%)	47 (23.04%)	+5.63
Foreign/Non-Metropolitan	195 (67.94%)	126 (61.76%)	-6.18
Mixed origin	41 (14.29%)	31 (15.20%)	+0.91

**TABLE 2. Descriptive statistics and paired comparison tests**

Elitist tracks	Panel	N	Pairs	Percentage		McNemar's test		Gain	Loss
				National <sup>(1)</sup>	Program me	Statistic	Prob.		
	All	408	204	19.31%	30.30%	6.041	0.014**	23.04%	12.75%
Elitist tracks	Females	268	138	15.79%	35.66%	12.255	<0.001***	28.36%	9.70%
	With distinction	146	123	27.27%	45.08%	7.563	0.006***	34.96%	17.07%
	Foreign parents	252	126	15.32%	33.61%	12.100	<0.001***	24.06%	7.16%

(1) Selected sample from national data, paired as comparable to programme data.

McNemar's test is a non-parametric test, an equivalent of Chi-square test within subjects.

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*  $p \leq 0.1$

**TABLE 3. Descriptive statistics and association tests**

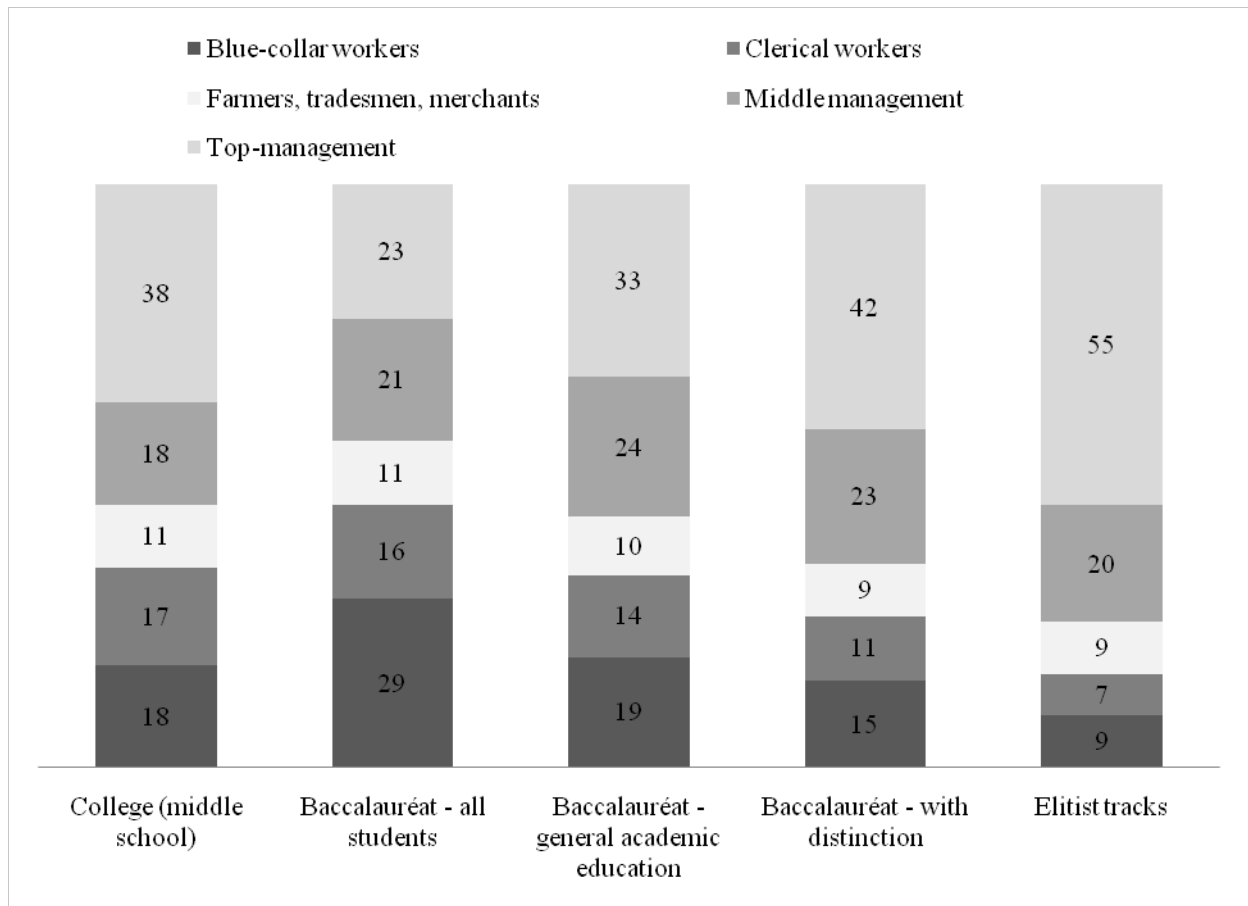
	Percent		Chi-square	
	Elitist track	Non-elitist track	Statistic	Probability
Self-acceptance	48.57%	47.06%	0.0378	0.8458

$N = 173$

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*  $p \leq 0.1$

**Figure 1. From end of primary school to elitist tracks: evolution of social origins**

(DEPP, 2008)



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