

Meritocratic competition and institutional sponsorship in traditional and new forms of access to elite institutions

Agnès van Zanten

Observatoire Sociologique du Changement

Sciences Po/CNRS

Paris, France

A formal meritocratic system

- Elite education in France is frequently perceived as highly meritocratic in comparison to other countries because selection is based on :
 - Success at competitive examinations for access to the top *Grandes Ecoles*
 - Grades, class rank, and “potential for future development” for access to the *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles* (CPGE) after the *baccalauréat*
- However research studies have shown that these formal meritocratic selection processes recreate and have reinforced in the last forty years a « class meritocracy » (Thélot & Euriat,- 1995, Albouy & Waneck, 2003)

Individual merit and institutional sponsorship in traditional selection procedures (1)

- This phenomenon is related to the growing importance of informal processes of ‘institutional sponsorship’ (Turner 1960)
 - A detailed quantitative and qualitative study (Draelants & van Zanten, 2012a) of the admission process of one of the most selective public CPGE and related data from other selective CPGE show that these institutions
 - Examine individual applications on a meritocratic basis without taking into account SES or other personal variables
 - But evaluate merit by giving different weight to grades according to the *lycée* the students come from
 - Although these institutions have not made until recently any efforts to encourage students from all or selected *lycées* to apply, the professors involved in the selection process rely on informal knowledge of *lycées*’ reputations thus giving considerable advantage to students coming from well-known *lycées*.
-

Individual merit and institutional sponsorship in traditional selection procedures (2)

- Institutional sponsorship has always existed as it is related to normative and organizational features of the French educational system
 - Its importance has increased and become more detrimental to lower-class students because:
 - Widening participation in secondary education has developed alongside increasing academic, social and ethnic segregation between *lycées* due to a combination of the effects of urban segregation, schools' selection procedures and parental choice (van Zanten 2009, 2011)
 - Segregation has had in turn important effects on “chartering” processes within schools (Meyer 1970), i.e. teachers and school personnel have adapted their teaching, evaluation and career orientation practices to the characteristics of the student body creating strong differences between *lycées* that prepare their students to succeed the *baccalauréat* and those that prepare students to integrate selective CPGE
-

Individual merit and institutional sponsorship in traditional selection procedures (3)

- Once students have undergone the double selection process necessary to be admitted in selective CPGE (merit + institutional sponsorship) meritocratic competition is the main factor involved in access to the top GE
 - However, a second study (Draelants & van Zanten, 2012b) has shown that institutional sponsorship still plays a role through:
 - The fact that 'star classes' preparing to these specific examinations are located in a small number of CPGE
 - The fact that students in these classes receive more information from their professors, who are or have been in some cases members of juries correcting the written examinations or conducting the oral examinations, about their content and about examiners' expectations.
-

Merit and institutional sponsorship in new selection procedures for widening participation (1)

- Although it is not these forms of institutional sponsorship as such that came into attack in the 1990s but, more generally, the increasing social selectiveness of elite higher education institutions as symbolic of a more general social closure' (Parkin 1974) of the educational system, these institutions started in the 2000's to develop new widening participation policies
 - Ten years after the pioneering and largely publicized initiatives of Sciences Po in 2001 and Essec in 2002, these policies are now institutionalized (Pierson 2004). Through informal processes of mimetism and dissemination and formal processes of labelling and funding by the State, they have become part of the script of what it means to be a legitimate elite higher education institution
 - These programmes can be seen as involving the extension of meritocratic competition to a larger and more diverse group of students but also the development of new institutional forms of 'compensatory sponsorship' (Grodsky, 2007)
-

Merit and institutional sponsorship in new selection procedures for widening participation (2)

- It is however important to distinguish between two models of 'widening participation' in the French case.
 - The most common and the most consensual one comprises programmes that can be analyzed as 'weak forms' of meritocratic extension and institutional 'compensatory sponsorship' because they:
 - Do not introduce any changes in the admission procedures of the institutions involved and only minor ones concerning the selection of participants into various kinds of outreach programmes (a more extensive view of merit estimated on the basis of less demanding conceptions of achievement and potential and a strong focus on disadvantaged students' motivation and in Bourdieu's (1979) terms 'petit bourgeois good will')
 - Only provide 'generic' forms of sponsorship. Although each institution has developed new partnerships with a limited number of disadvantaged *lycées*, some of which involve extensive and intensive managerial and pedagogical intervention, they do not target students to apply directly to them.
-

Merit and institutional sponsorship in new selection procedures for widening participation (3)

- ❑ The second model is the one adopted by Sciences Po which proposes a 'stronger form' of meritocratic extension and of institutional 'compensatory sponsorship'
 - ❑ The opening up of the meritocratic competition has been introduced through :
 - ❑ A new admission procedure added to the two main former ones (competitive examinations, examination of school reports for students who obtained their *baccalauréat* with the highest honours) based on the preparation of a press report and its oral presentation in front first of a school then of a Sciences Po jury
 - ❑ A more extensive view of merit including achievement, potential, motivation but also boldness, strategic adaptation, communication skills, a 'player' rather than a 'purist' behaviour (Brown & Hesketh 2003)
 - ❑ It is important to note that this radical move is not consensual within the institution and that proponents of a weaker form of meritocratic extension are having more voice as the number of students accepted through this procedure increases.
-

Merit and institutional sponsorship in new selection procedures for widening participation (4)

- The institutional sponsorship is characterized by
 - Its extensiveness as partnerships have been established with more than 80 *lycées*, located in different regions although a large proportion are located in the Parisian periphery
 - Its degree of formalization through contracts stipulating the goals, funding and roles of the parties involved
 - Its « engaging » character:
 - On the one hand, Sciences Po, who is targeting specific students want partner *lycées* to be able to select and to a certain extent train students that can later be integrated without serious difficulties in the institution
 - On the other hand, headteachers and teachers in the *lycées* want their students to succeed in order to enhance their image and to rise the aspirations and provide role models for their student body
-

Conclusion

Unexpected and expected consequences (1)

Who is benefiting from these programmes?

- Both in the case of Sciences Po and in that of the Essec policy the group of beneficiaries comprises between 40 to 50% of students who belong to the intermediate middle classes
 - As the result of targeting *lycées* and not students, the former, especially in the Parisian periphery, not being as socially segregated as in the UK or US
 - But also as a result of the qualities (good will...) that are privileged in the selection process
 - In spite of the fact that the initiators of both types programmes deny that they are explicit targeting minority students, the latter represent a large proportion of beneficiaries
 - As a result of the urban, Parisian geography of the new partner schools
 - But also as a result of the qualities that are explicitly or implicitly privileged and because, in spite of important differences between the two countries, in France as in the US for political and moral reasons elites are not seeking out the 'white' socioeconomically disadvantaged to join their ranks in the same way that they are looking for disadvantaged members of racial and ethnic minority groups.
-

Unexpected and expected consequences (2) – Diversifying elite institutions or reducing inequalities in secondary education?

- The degree of social and ethnic diversification remain nevertheless small
 - The direct effect of ‘weak forms’ of widening participation on the aspirations and strategic skills of its beneficiaries and, even more, their hypothesized ‘halo’ effect in families and partner schools, is difficult to assess but appears quite small.
 - The diversification of Sciences Po is real but remains limited by the desire to maintain a constant proportion of around 10% of students entering through the new procedure and might become demagogic or problematic if no strong action is taken to support the students within the institution.
 - At the same time, both programmes have also been perceived by decision-makers and administrators in the secondary education system and by a small proportion of secondary school teachers as substitutes for what are perceived as ‘failing’ compensatory territorial programmes such as ZEP, providing new models for individual, ‘customized’ intervention for disadvantaged *lycée* students.
-