SUCCESS FOR ALL CHILDREN IN FRANCE: EXTRAPOLATING LESSONS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Success for All Students in France: Extrapolating Lessons from the International Experience

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Student **declaration to accompany the submission of written work**
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ABSTRACT

Equity in education is a key to fostering integration, enhance social mobility and enable every child to fulfil her potential both in her studies and her adult life. While France is a country attached to egalitarian principles, it delivers one of the less equitable education system among OECD member-states. An urgent need to address this issue requires the French government to learn, possibly from its neighbors. The extrapolation methodology suggests a path for cross-national learning and infers that inspiration can be drawn from the international experience. The analysis of context and design factors in Finland, England and Germany reveals the activation of certain mechanisms in the causal chain toward equity. France could benefit from accountability, trustworthiness and positive incentives but the interaction of such mechanisms with context factors would determine their relevance in triggering equity. This thesis concludes that accountability and positive incentives are more likely to take effect in France than trustworthiness.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CNESCO National council for the evaluation of the school system [*Conseil National d'Évaluation du Système Scolaire*]

DfE Department for Education (ENGLAND)

EP Priority Education [*Éducation prioritaire*]

IEA International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

INSEE National institut for statistics and economic studies [*Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques]*

ISC Independent School Council

KMK Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the States in the Federal Republic of Germany [*Kultusministerkonferenz*]

LA Local Authority (ENGLAND)

MAT Multiple Academy Trust

MENJS National Ministry of education, youth and sports [*Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports]*

OECD Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

ONS Office for National Statistics (ENGLAND)

QTS Qualified Teacher Status

SES Socio-Economic Status

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Education has the capacity to either perpetuate or mitigate social inequality. Indeed, it gives children more or less opportunities to change their Socio-Economic Status (SES) through their hard work. Since better education outcomes correlate with higher SES in adulthood (OECD, 2018a), the education system acts as a door to social mobility. The extent to which this door is open depends on the schools' success at ensuring that students can achieve their potential regardless of their socio-economic background. On the one hand, the education system can perpetuate pre-existing inequalities among generations by favoring children from the elite and excluding disadvantaged pupils. On the other hand, equitable education systems ensure that the achievements of students do not depend on variables that are out of their control such as their gender or SES (Perry, 2009). Therefore, the implementation of equitable policies is crucial for building a society that encourages social mobility and provides equitable opportunities to all. Despite a common understanding of their value, governments face challenges in designing adequate policies that foster educational equity. The question of how to learn is important for the successful implementation of lessons that lead to progress. This thesis combines the topic of educational equity with the field of learning to address the following research question: To what extent could France improve equity in its education system by learning from international experiences?

France is an interesting case because its egalitarian norms contrast with its poor standing on educational equity. International studies report that the influence of SES on pupils' educational outcomes is larger in France than in other OECD countries. France's persisting lack of improvement is both a contradiction to its "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" motto and a challenge for its policy-makers. Further research on how to reduce inequity is urgently needed and highly relevant for the French society. While the literature is already vast, little progress has been observed on the ground. Learning from international experiences has been explored through various theoretical frameworks but insights based on extrapolation remain to be produced. Considering that each country achieves different levels of equity, foreign education policies

represent valuable inspirations for low-performing nations such as France. Furthermore, cross-national learning is nowadays facilitated by the development of transnational governance. Both the EU and the OECD have encouraged their member-states to share best practices and to put equity at the center of their education systems. This soft governance is legitimized by the production of quantitative data that allow for comparisons and rankings. Cross-boundary networks also enable communication between actors acting in various countries and facilitate the spread of knowledge (Grek, 2020). France could therefore extrapolate lessons from its neighbors.

This thesis explores the possibility for France to learn from international experiences by applying a qualitative analysis based on extrapolative case-studies. Following such methodology, it examines the causal patterns that are present in three source-cases, -namely Finland, England and Germany- and discusses whether these causal mechanisms could be relevant to generate greater equity outcomes in France, while carefully considering the difference of context. This paper comes to the conclusion that the activation of three social mechanisms –accountability, trustworthiness and positive incentives- could lead to improvement regarding the equity of the French education system. While trustworthiness is unlikely to take effect in the French context, positive incentives could be implemented without major obstacles, and a few changes to the accountability framework appear feasible.

This thesis is organized as follow: Chapter 2 provides a brief conceptual framework and reviews the literature on equity and the French paradox. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of extrapolation as applied in this thesis. Chapter 4 includes an analysis of context factors and education designs for each source-case. Chapter 5 presents the social mechanisms identified and discusses their possible activation in France. Chapter 6 concludes this thesis with final remarks.

Chapter 2 - Conceptual framework and literature review

2. 1 Conceptual framework

Education is a major tool in the fight against social inequality, as it acts as a door on the path toward integration into society and the labor market. Every child needs a good quality training that addresses her needs and fits her learning pattern (Eurydice, 2020). However, all pupils come from different backgrounds and develop different ways of learning. While studying assistance in the home environment is a significant factor in strengthening educational outcomes, low-SES students generally receive less financial and educational support from their family (IEA, 2015). Consequently, they begin their studies already disadvantaged compared to their peers. To compensate for such a drawback and keep-up with the learning pace of their counterparts, these children might need additional support from their schools. Without an appropriate policy of educational equity, they are likely to be left-behind from an early age.

Educational equity can be defined and measured in different ways (Perry, 2009). For the purpose of this thesis, it refers to the delivery of equal learning opportunities to all students (OECD, 2018a), which implies that various learning needs are answered without discrimination. While equality of educational outcomes is impossible to achieve due to the diversification of individual capacities and motivation, equity is about minimizing disparities that are due to SES backgrounds (Perry, 2009). These disparities can be measured through the socio-economic achievement gap, which refers to the difference of academic achievements between students from high and low SES backgrounds as visualized through scores obtained on standardized tests (Chmielewski, 2019). International assessments have revealed that all countries present SES achievement gaps but that the width of the gap varies. This difference is in part explained by contextual factors such as the diversity of the student population or the level of income inequality within a nation (Chmielewski, 2019). However, education policy and the organization of the school system also play an important role in determining the width of such a gap.

In 2000, the OECD introduced its first Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) to measure 15-year-olds' abilities in reading, mathematics and science. Based on the data collected, an index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) was established to identify students from low-SES backgrounds compared to students from high-SES background. This index combines three variables: parental education, parental occupational status, and home possessions. Students who are valued within the bottom 25% of their country are considered to be low-SES students (OECD, 2019b). This thesis follows such measurement when referring to low-SES students.

2. 3 Literature review

France has long lagged behind when it comes to educational equity and has still not found the right path for improvement. In PISA 2018, the SES achievement gap in reading was of 107 points compared to an OECD average of 88. Furthermore, the OECD estimated that 20.1% of the variation in science performance was explained by ESCS, which was much higher than the OECD average of 12.8% (OECD, 2018a). These poor results are not new and despite the fact that France is highly attached to egalitarian values, no progress has been achieved in recent years. More alarming, the performance of low-SES students declines continuously (OECD, 2019c).

France has adopted one main policy for the inclusion and support of low-SES students in primary and secondary schools. Under the name of priority education (EP), it has encompassed many reforms and adjustments throughout the years. Introduced in the 1980s, this policy of positive discrimination aims at allocating additional resources to schools in which low-SES students are overrepresented. From the start, its purpose has been to reduce the SES achievement gap by raising the educational outcomes of disadvantaged pupils (Courtioux & Maury, 2021). Around 20% of lower-secondary students attend a school benefiting from EP nowadays. The most recent updates of the policy focus on decreasing the student-teacher ratio, cooperating with parents, hiring additional supporting staff, encouraging peer-to-peer learning among teachers, and increasing teachers' salaries (MENJSP, 2022a). These measures are exclusive to EP and their relevance is questioned by scholars who continue to debate the pros and cons of the policy. Significant issues notably arise from the fact that the labelling of schools as EP leads to a reduction in social diversity,

with high-SES parents deliberately avoiding to enroll their children in EP schools (CNESCO, 2016). Despite frequent reforms, equity scores have not increased in France (OECD, 2019c).

Scholars have argued that certain structures and policies should generate equity in every country. The issue of tracking has been widely discussed (Triventi et al, 2016), along with the need to concentrate efforts on early-childhood-education (Eurydice, 2020). However, such general recommendations are dismissive of national contexts and their implementation would remain challenging without a deeper understanding of the causal mechanisms leading to successful equity outcomes. For instance, while the French government considers OECD's recommendations in the design of new policies, skepticism, egalitarian norms and public opposition have restricted their successful application in the French system.

In the face of such paralysis, France urgently needs new sources of inspiration to overcome its obstacles to change and redress equity in its education system. Vicarious learning and the experiences of its neighbors is a possible source of ideas. According to PISA rankings, only a few countries in the OECD score behind France in educational equity, which theoretically implies that France could learn from any of its neighbors. The question of how to learn from the experience of others has been widely covered in the literature. According to Barzelay (2007), "under vicarious learning, actors take advantage of experience with undertakings in which they do not directly participate" (p. 521). A few theoretical frameworks of learning can be identified, notably benchmarking, legal transplantation, policy convergence, diffusion, imitation, policy transfer and lesson-drawing (Jong, 2009). However, given the high interference of context factors in French education reforms, this thesis applies an alternative methodology based on extrapolative case-studies.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Cross-national learning

The choice of learning methodology influences the likeliness that lessons drawn from abroad could be successfully implemented at home. Frameworks based on replication hold an important place in the literature. However, due to situational and contextual differences among countries, such learning methods have often led to failure. In 2004, Bardach offered a new approach to the issue of vicarious learning by raising what he called the "extrapolation problem". He argues that variations in the environment of a target relatively to a source-case can undermine the external validity of a policy, which then becomes neither generalized nor applicable. Therefore, the best way to learn from existing practices in a source-case is to draw inspiration and extract ideas on causal mechanisms that could be adapted to the context of the target-case (Bardach, 2004). In 2007, Barzelay built on Bardach's work to further develop "extrapolation-oriented case studies". His methodology relies on two presumptions. Firstly, different factors can activate the same configuration of causal mechanisms. Secondly, this configuration will tend to cause similar outcomes in different contexts (Barzelay, 2007). The types of factors involved are categorized as design features or context factors. Di Mascio et al (2017) describe design features as the elements of a reform that can be shaped by actors' choice while context factors are political and institutional factors that constrain the range of choices available to the actors. Taken together, these interacting components activate social mechanisms expected to lead to a certain outcome. Barzelay thus introduces the concept of social mechanism in extrapolation-studies.

3.2 Social mechanisms

The literature on social mechanisms is large and has expanded from the field of sociology, to behavioral economics, public administration and political science (Bardach, 2004; Busetti & Dente, 2018; Hedstrom, 2005). While the definition of such concept remains vague and contested (Coletti, 2013), this thesis builds on Renate Mayntz's words (2004): "mechanisms state how, by what intermediate steps, a certain outcome follows from a set of initial conditions" (p. 241). Social

mechanisms conceptualize a causal chain that is portable and can be detached from the variables observed in the source-cases (Di Mascio et al., 2017). The list of social mechanisms available in the literature is rather short and has not evolved in recent years (Busetti & Dente, 2021). It nevertheless provides sufficient inspiration for applying the extrapolation-oriented approach. A few examples include:

- *Actor certification* refers to the validation of actors as agents in charge of certain responsibilities (Barzelay, 2007).
- *Attribution of opportunity* relates to the expectation that an effort will produce positive outcomes for oneself (Barzelay, 2007).
- *Performance feedback* provides and monitors information on outcomes and progress (Barzelay, 2007).
- *Blame avoidance* motivates a behavior out of concerns for the harmful consequences that defection could have for oneself (Busetti & Dente, 2018).
- *Earning brownie points* links subsequent processes and associates behaviors related to one process to expectations emerging in the other (Busetti & Dente, 2018).
- *Repeated interactions* raise the value of relationships and the costs of defection (Busetti & Dente, 2018).
- *Focusing event* activates behaviors associated with an emergency event and favors outstanding rapidity and cooperation (Busetti & Dente, 2018).
- *Naming and shaming* relies on the capacity to trigger emotions in order to enforce actions (Coletti, 2013).
- *Rewards* boosts commitment by linking a goal to a certain prize (Coletti, 2013).
- *Exercising leadership* refers to the role played by leaders in managing, implementing and supporting change (Coletti, 2013).
- *Exerting pressure* is activated when resources are used by one actor to influence and pressure another actor into adopting a certain behavior (Coletti, 2013).
- *Accountability* refers to the obligation to inform, explain, justify and face consequences for one's conduct (Bovens, 2010).

3.3 Extrapolation

In sum, the extrapolation-oriented approach is a methodology allowing the researcher to envision the adaptation of best practices from one case to another. It aims to facilitate the transposition of a causal process by reflecting on the way locally feasible features (a design adapted to a context) could activate that causal chain in a new environment. The first step is to observe context factors and design features in source-cases in order to identify social mechanisms leading to success. The second step implies to draw inspiration from these mechanisms and discuss how they could apply in the context of the target-case.

When it comes to education policies, vicarious learning takes place across national education systems that are diverse. According to Barzelay (2007), extrapolation is adequate when differences of situational and contextual variables lead the researcher to believe that replication will not trigger similar outcomes. Since education systems are different in each country and their functioning is highly intertwined with divergent context factors, extrapolation appears well-suited for vicarious learning across borders. Furthermore, the degree of divergence among countries is stronger in secondary education. Primary schools are organized in similar ways across developed societies but diverging paths emerge in secondary schools (Triventi et al, 2016). To narrow its scope, this thesis therefore focuses mostly on secondary education and on current outcomes driven by policies implemented in the 21st century.

3.4 Research design

This thesis examines three source-cases –Finland, Germany and England- that show a degree of similarity in cultural, economic and social development with the target-case. Until Brexit, all these countries were EU and OECD members with high-income societies, for which education systems have demonstrated high performance levels. In themselves, these similarities reduce the number of context factors that need to be incorporated in the analysis. Given the constraints of this thesis, the number of source-cases had to remain small but this selection displays countries with interesting differences in their context, education systems and equity levels. Finland is a typical

model of education success and is run by a state centered on welfare provision (Sahlberg, 2015). In contrast, England is driven by market-oriented incentives and liberalism, but has achieved equity levels similar to the OECD average (Doyle, 2021). Germany is the closest to France in terms of context factors, and although its equity scores are still low and provide lessons on failing mechanisms, the country has improved significantly in the 21st century (Berwick, 2015).

The analysis is built on data mostly drawn from secondary literature either produced by governments, academic scholars, the OECD, or by national research institutes. Reports and media coverage will also be occasionally used to add to the analysis. At last, quantitative data taken from the OECD and governmental databases will support quantitative comparisons. While national primary sources might have been relevant for such work, language and time constraints have motivated the search in pre-existing literature.

Moreover, this thesis narrows the scope of the context factors that need to be considered in the extrapolation analysis by classifying them in four categories. The identification of such categories results from the analysis of the case-studies that demonstrated the frequent intervention of such context factors in the causal chain toward equity. *Social norms and attitudes* refer to the role and value attributed to education in a society and the norms that shape attitudes and expectations. *Structure of authority* includes the degree of centralization, the hierarchy of education actors and their overall coordination. *Demographic and economic features* apply to the size and diversity of the secondary education sector, and indicators of public spending, unemployment-rate and income equality. Lastly, *learning capacity and motivation* refers to the constraints that a state faces, the general willingness to learn and the resources deployed.

In short, the analysis starts by identifying context factors found in France. It then looks at both context and design features in Finland, England and Germany. It identifies key concepts that are relevant for the causal chain in each case and connects them to the literature on social mechanisms. After distinguishing the mechanisms that appear most frequently, this thesis singles-out three key mechanisms including two crafted originally based on inspirations from the literature. The last section details how each mechanism is relevant for the source-cases and infers whether they could work in France, based on the context-factors already described.

Chapter 4 – Analysis

4.1 FRANCE

4.1.2 Context factors

a. <u>Social norms and attitudes</u>

In France, conflicting norms and values underlie the fundamentals of the education system. Republican values based on equality and meritocracy co-exist with elitist norms and influence the delivery of education. Admission policies provide a clear example of such dynamics. Indeed, these norms sustain the belief that competitive entrance exams guarantee the admission of students based on their aptitudes rather than their SES. The commitment to meritocracy is depicted as a dedication to social justice but perpetuates elitism by justifying the use of competitive exams as a means of selection (Van Zanten & Maxwell, 2015). The impact of these normative principles is felt all the way to the classroom, where every child is expected to reach elitist capacities on the claim that all students receive equal means to become part of the elite and therefore must act on these opportunities. An elitist ideal continues to drive educational content even when the majority of pupils find themselves excluded from such practices and begin to demonstrate a worrisome drop of confidence and motivation (Dubet, 2016). A general pessimism regarding public authority has developed in France (OpinionWay, 2021), and applies to the education. Only 6.6% of teachers report that their profession is valued in society, which is considerably lower than the OECD average of 25% (OECD, 2019a). However, opposition to change is also significant and is driven by both meritocratic values and ingrained elitism. Opposition groups have the tendency to legitimize their objection to reforms by claiming to defend egalitarianism, regardless of the group or the reform (Van Zanten & Maxwell, 2015).

b. <u>Structure of authority</u>

France is a highly centralized country. The education sector falls almost exclusively under the authority of the National Ministry of Education (MENJS). The Ministry decides on educational

content, funds most schools, employs all teachers, ensures that standardized curricula are applied and even assigns students to schools based on geographical districts (Dobbins & Martens, 2011). Since the 1980s, France has delegated some authority to local municipalities but they remain mostly in charge of infrastructure management (MENJSP, 2022b).

c. Demographic and economic features

67.6 million people currently live in France and 10.3% are considered migrants on the criteria that they did not have the French citizenship at birth and were born elsewhere (INSEE, 2022). These numbers suggest a rather heterogenous population with a high diversity among school students. Out of the 5.6 million students attending secondary schools, a fifth of them benefit from EP (MENJSP, 2020). Only 0.62% of pupils enrolled in primary and secondary schools do not speak French (MENJSP, 2019). France is a country that spends a lot on welfare. Indeed, public spending is higher than the OECD average with 55.6% of the national GDP dedicated to general government expenditure in 2019, before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt. However, the share of total public expenditure dedicated to education is lower than the OECD average, with 8.5% for France compared to 10.7% in the OECD (OECD, 2021a). 1.2 million people work for the education sector (MENJSP, 2019). The unemployment rate is higher than the OECD average and reached 8% of the labor force in 2020 (OECD, 2021b). However, the GINI index[1] of 0.292 reveals moderate income inequality (OECD, 2021c).

d. Learning capacity and motivation

High public opposition to educational reforms represents a constraint for change and improvement. More than one policy in the field of education has been withdrawn only a few months after its introduction due to significant public opposition (Doyle, 2021). As demonstrated regularly throughout the last decade, the tendency of the French citizens to strike makes education policy costly for politicians and reduces their possibility for action (Dobbins & Martens, 2011). Prestigious institutions oppose reforms that would imply the loss of their privileges and do not hesitate to mobilize their powerful network of alumni to safeguard their interest. Teachers

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[1] This paper refers to the Gini Index of disposable income, post taxes and transfers.

themselves are fearful that a change would deteriorate their position and often strike (Dubet, 2016). Furthermore, France is well-known for its skepticism vis-à-vis international comparison studies (Dobbins & Martens, 2011). Political manipulation and a general mistrust in public authorities (OpinionWay, 2021) have created doubts and concerns regarding the value of PISA's methodology. Moreover, France is nearly paralyzed by partisan divides, with political parties seeking different goals and constantly undermining the efforts of each other (Pons, 2016). As a result of these major political and societal constraints, the space to learn and to improve on equity is rather tight.

4.2 FINLAND

4.2.1 Context factors

a. Social norms and attitudes

The Finns perceive education as a key to positive change, development of sustainable leadership and societal progress (Simola et al., 2002). Therefore, there is a general concern for both quality and equity in education and a public willingness to invest the resources necessary for their optimization. This benevolence is demonstrated by the fact that teachers are twice as likely to feel that their profession is valued in society compared to the OECD average (OECD, 2019a).

b. Structure of authority

The Ministry of Education produces education policies but works in close collaboration with local municipalities, schools and teachers who remain in charge of implementation (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019).

c. Demographic and economic features

Finland is a rather homogenous and small country in terms of demographics, with only 5.5 million inhabitants. Around 540,000 pupils are currently enrolled in primary and secondary schools

(StatFin, 2022), and 4% had a migrant background in 2015. This percentage has grown in recent years and suggests an increasing social diversity among pupils (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019). Although Finland has embraced globalization and liberalization, the delivery of welfare remains an important responsibility of the state. Public spending is higher than the OECD average with 53.2% of the national GDP dedicated to general government expenditure in 2019. However, the share going to education is slightly below the OECD average and represented 9.7% of total public expenditure in 2018 (OECD, 2021a). The unemployment rate reached 7.77% of the labor force in 2020, which is close to OECD average (OECD, 2021b). Lastly, the GINI index of 0.269 revealed moderate income inequality in 2018 (OECD, 2021c).

        d. <u>Learning capacity and motivation</u>

Equity is one of the top priorities when it comes to education policy and the government works with relevant stakeholders to design reforms that gather large-scale support among education actors and citizens. Furthermore, the commitment to equity is shared by actors along the political spectrum and enables political players to overcome their partisan divides to produce consistent education policy (Chong, 2018). Learning and improvement are thus facilitated by these societal and political dynamics that create a consensus toward the achievement of greater equity outcomes.

4.2.2 The school system

The Finnish education system is often depicted as a model of success. Not only do students perform very well on average, but the SES achievement gap is also narrow. This observation has led the Finns to combine both their aims of high-quality and equity (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019). In PISA 2018, 10.5% of the variation in science scores was explained by SES, which was lower than the OECD average of 12.8% (OECD, 2019b).

The Finnish education system grants high autonomy to all education actors in order to create sufficient flexibility to adapt to specific needs. At the school level, the softly centralized steering coming from the National Ministry leaves implementation power almost entirely to the schools. At the teacher level, all teachers are expected to adapt the curriculum to the needs of their students,

choose their teaching methods and design assessments accordingly. At the student level, children are mixed together in comprehensive schools but pupils of upper-secondary schools can choose the courses they take and decide on the pace of their studies (Sahlberg, 2015). This high degree of autonomy encourages innovative school organization, creative teaching practices and new learning methods. It contributes to the adequate adaptation of education delivery to the needs of specific schools, classrooms and individual students. The space for experimentation goes hand in hand with peer-to-peer learning and the collective achievement of best outcomes (Sahlberg, 2015). Sharing responsibility and authority empowers all actors of the education system and fosters a culture of trust among them (Chong, 2018).

In Finland, nation-wide standardized tests are almost non-existing, except for the matriculation examination taken during the final year of secondary school. To monitor students' progress, a flexible method of evaluation is adopted instead and relies on classroom assessments directly designed by the teachers and meant to reduce the level of formality and stress induced by national testing (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019). When national tests take place, they involve only a sample of the school population, which is sufficient to enable the National Ministry to monitor the evolution of students' learning (Sahlberg, 2015). Moreover, trust and confidence-building are reflected in the flexible framework for accountability that is established in Finland (Chong, 2018). Instead of sending inspectors, the National Ministry publishes core curriculum guidelines to ensure a degree of harmonization in the competences acquired, and relies on the sampled national tests' results to assess their application (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019). The healthy environment produced is important for motivating all education actors and developing their self-confidence regardless of students' SES.

This remarkable level of autonomy and trust makes the teaching profession highly desirable for young Finns. All teachers receive a standardized training that involves research activities and pedagogical approaches. They get prepared to reflect on their work and adapt it to the needs of their students (Sahlberg, 2015). Reflection is essential as opposed to a basic application of directives received from above. Teachers are thus motivated, well-trained and ready to manage an heterogenous classroom that requires their attentive reflection and tailor-made teaching methods (Sahlberg, 2015). Once graduated, they continue to be expected to reflect and learn. The time spent

in the classroom by both students and teachers is limited. Indeed, the Finns reduce the amount of classes and homework given to children so that they can join extra-curricular activities and learn from their peers. As a result, teachers have more time to reflect on their curriculum, assessments and teaching methods. They share their experience with their colleagues and learn from this collaboration. They also prepare their lessons more thoroughly and adapt them to the needs of their specific students (Sahlberg, 2015). While on average OECD-members' teachers spend 696 hours of annual teaching at the lower-secondary level, Finnish teachers only teach 589 hours (OECD, 2019a).

The Finnish education system works around the idea that every child has different needs and aptitudes. Such mindset enables a high degree of inclusion in comprehensive institutions and the end of grade's repetition. The level of difference in achievement between schools is low so parents usually feel confident sending their child to the local school where students from different SES are mixed together (Chong, 2018). Therefore, all students attend the same schools and receive either general, intensified or special assistance when needed (Chong, 2018). The Finns believe that every child might one day require additional support. As a result, educational assistance is addressed to everyone regardless of SES and every school is equipped with a classroom assistant trained in special needs. General support is given directly by the regular teacher and consists mostly of greater differentiation and adaptation of the teaching methods to the needs of a specific student. The school is also involved in coping with diversity and making sure that no child is left-behind. Intensified support is co-provided by the regular teacher and a special education professional, and is offered to children who need individual or small group extra learning time (Sahlberg, 2015). Moreover, when tracking occurs in upper-secondary schools, the share of students entering vocational training is equal to the share of students enrolling in academic studies. The permeability between the tracks remains high and all pupils can access higher education regardless of their previous orientation (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019). Overall, such dynamics of inclusion mitigate the likeliness of pre-determination and social segregation that undermine the success of low-SES students.

In recent years, concerns have been raised regarding the tendency toward greater liberalization of the school system and a deviation from the goal of equity. In fact, both equity and quality have

decreased in PISA studies, but Finland scores remain significantly higher than the OECD average (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019).

4.3 ENGLAND

4.3.1 Context factors

a. <u>Social norms and attitudes</u>

In England, the teaching profession receives similar societal appraisal than the OECD average: 28.8% of teachers feel that their profession is valued in society (OECD, 2019a). Liberalism is the key ideology that drives education policy (Doyle, 2021). Furthermore, persisting norms of social hierarchy are responsible for the current fragmentation of the English school system, with 7% of secondary pupils attending independent schools (ISC, 2022), 4% going to selective grammar schools (Shu & Lin, 2018) and the rest enrolled in academies or local schools. Protection from powerful alumni and elite's resistance have led to the maintenance of independent schools, which are accessible only to the most privileged because of their high tuition fees. Selective grammar schools[2] have also persisted and their pupils include only 2.5% of low-SES students (Andrews et al., 2016). Both types of schools remain a considerable obstacle to equity but their tenacity demonstrates the influence that norms of elitism still hold on the English society.

b. <u>Structure of authority</u>

Since 1999, the four nations constituting the United Kingdom have designed their education policies independently (Sibieta & Jerrim, 2021). Due to divergences resulting from devolution, this case-study focuses exclusively on the English education system. In England, education is centralized, with the National Ministry (DfE) making policies but granting significant autonomy for implementation to Local Authorities (LA) or Academy Trusts. However, all actors remain

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[2] Historically, grammar schools were the upper-level schools that led to higher education. Today, they are accessible for those who succeed an entry exam at the age of 11. Because the SES achievement gap is already large at this age, low-SES students are less likely to succeed the exam and access these selective institutions (Andrews et al., 2016).

highly accountable to the national government, especially within the state-funded education system (Andrews et al., 2017).

c. Demographic and economic features

55 million people currently live in England and 17% are considered migrants on the criteria that they were born abroad (House of Commons, 2021). Out of the 3.4 million students in state-funded secondary schools, around 17.2% are non-native speakers (DfE, 2022a), which suggests diversity in the school population and heterogenous needs. The workforce in state-funded schools includes 963.000 people (DfE, 2022b) and public spending on education is higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2021a). However, privatization is a driving force in England and public spending overall is lower than the OECD average with only 41% of the national GDP dedicated to government expenditure (OECD, 2021a). The unemployment rate of 4.55% is low (OECD, 2021b) but the GINI index of 0.366 reveals high income inequality (OECD, 2021c).

d. Learning capacity and motivation

Education has been a central element of the political debate for years and considerable resources have been invested in research. The government works closely with private research institutes to monitor equity and to suggest possible improvement paths. However, prestigious educational institutions continue to undermine real progress by seeking to maintain their privileges (Andrews et al., 2017).

4.3.2 The school system

In the last decade, the English government has launched major reforms to raise performance and equity standards across the secondary school sector. Most notable, the academization policy boomed in the 2010s and triggered major transformations. Academization refers to the transfer of a school's control from the LA to an Academy Trust, the latter being a private actor holding a charitable status and funded by the government to deliver education. Initially, academization was designed to reduce the performance gap between schools, and targeted institutions considered to

be "failing". Underperforming LA-maintained schools were associated with sponsors from the private sector who could provide organizational expertise and additional funding to help redress performance (Martindale, 2019). Under the Education and Adoption Bill of 2015, academization has intensified. All underperforming schools are now forcefully taken-over by Academy Trusts and other schools are also encouraged to convert. Furthermore, single Academy Trusts often take responsibility for multiple schools and become Multiple-Academy Trusts (MAT)s, holding a centralized control over their affiliated schools (Shu & Lin, 2018). Nowadays, approximately 87% of secondary school pupils attend academies including the majority of low-SES students (Sibieta & Jerrim, 2021). Despite some important limitation to this reform, the SES achievement gap has decreased between 2011 and 2019. Only 10.7% of the variation in science scores is now explained by SES, which is lower than the OECD average (OECD, 2019b). Although progress is slow, England has found a path for relative improvement (Hutchinson et al., 2020).

Academization has induced a degree of local autonomy that schools never experienced before. Indeed, academies make quasi-independent decisions regarding their curricula, admission policies, staffing, and working conditions (Andrews & Perera, 2017). With such flexibility, the educational offer in England has greatly diversified. Transparent and frequent school-evaluations guide parental choice regarding their children's enrollment (Greany & Higham, 2018). Therefore, families have a wide range of possibilities for the education of their children, especially in urban areas where schools are concentrated. Furthermore, flexibility in curricula and teaching hours enable schools to adapt to their local needs. In places where disadvantaged students are overrepresented and require alternative teaching methods, academies are able to take the appropriate measures to answer these needs (Hutchinson & Dunford, 2016).

Schools remain nevertheless accountable to the Academy Trust that runs them. Under MATs, this accountability can turn out to be problematic. Indeed, MATs follow a business model guided by market-driven incentives and their governance-through-data leaves little space for local adaptation. Teachers find themselves pressured into achieving overall benchmarks rather than individualizing their work to answer students' needs (Sibieta & Jerrim, 2021). Overall, the autonomy granted to academies has transformed the accountability framework and introduced issues of democratic governance. While LA-maintained schools are run by a board of governors formed by parents,

teacher representatives and school leaders, academies are run by trustees. These private actors are guided by market-driven incentives and can dissolve the traditional board of governors (Martindale, 2019). From a bottom-up accountability to students and parents, schools are now subject to a top-down accountability dominated by private actors and government's inspectors (Global Justice Now, 2019).

In 2012, the government allowed schools to employ teachers who did not possess the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) certification, which had so far been the pre-condition to enter the teaching workforce. This policy contributed to avoiding teachers' shortages and facilitated the entry of experts-in-their-field into the education sector (DfE, 2016). However, studies have revealed that non-qualified teachers tend to provide lower quality teaching and are hired predominantly by low-performing academies (Martindale, 2019). Since academies are driven by market incentives, they constantly seek to reduce their costs and are more likely to hire non-qualified staff that they can pay less. As a result, low-SES students who are overrepresented in low-performing academies, have greater chances to be taught by non-qualified teachers and to receive a teaching of lower quality.

Despite this autonomy, the National Ministry maintains control over the system by exercising continual monitoring and feedback delivery. It collects data through national assessments and regular schools' inspections. Results and reports are publicly published to increase transparency, inform every school of its ranking and incentivize toward further progress through a market logic of competitive stimulation (Greany & Higham, 2018). Such mechanisms are beneficial for equity purposes because they allow the Ministry to monitor disparities in achievement and to design targeted intervention when needed (Giannakaki et al., 2018). Cases of severe inequity demonstrated by an outstanding achievement gap or by the high concentration of same-SES students can be identified early-on and appropriate measures implemented.

In England, the attribution of sanctions and rewards typically follow nation-wide evaluations. With the academization policy, forced academization has become an ever-present threat for low-performing LA-maintained schools. In fact, it has induced some degree of fear among education actors and increased the stress-level of schools' governors (Greany & Higham, 2018). Efforts have

become directed at improving rankings and focus on the results of assessments rather than on teaching quality and the inclusion of disadvantaged students. School leaders might even alter their admission policy and discriminate in favor of high-performing students in order to raise their school's ranking (Rayner, 2017). At the teacher level, teachers benefit from performance feedback that enables them to understand the outcome of their work and improve their teaching. However, out of concern for the preparation of assessments, they tend to prioritize the application of the academic curriculum over other activities that are not evaluated but important to raise students' motivation. Test-centered teaching also undermines individualized teaching at the expense of low-SES students (Francis et al., 2017) and favors "teaching to the middle" techniques. Teachers are incentivize to teach for the average student and to leave behind those who cannot follow (Nusser & Gehrer, 2020). These dynamics are exacerbated when salaries depend on the results of students' assessments[3]. In fact, disadvantaged students are directly hurt by such salary policy because performance-related-pay motivates teachers to work with high-performing students rather than devote their time and energy to address the needs of low-SES learners (Global Justice Now, 2019).

Under the new education policies, high-performing schools can become "school-leaders" and receive special rewards to encourage them to share their knowledge and best practices with other schools (Giannakaki et al, 2018). This local hierarchy drives both processes of collaboration and competition meant to incentivize school leaders into improving their ranking. Forms of support, influence and dependence have emerged from these dynamics. As characteristic of the English education system as a whole, such competition-driven mechanisms raise concerns over the prioritization of marketization rather than actual learning improvement and equity. Head teachers are constantly pressured into choosing between the interest of the school as an ensemble and the interest of minority groups such as low-SES students (Greany & Higham, 2018).

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[3] Not all academies apply performance-related-pay but they are free to choose such model if they want to.

4.4 GERMANY

4.4.1 Context factors

a. <u>Social norms and attitudes</u>

Historical legacies play an important role in understanding the evolution of the German education system. While its current tripartite education model was frequent across Europe in the 20th century, Germany is one of the few countries who has preserved it. This resistance to change is explained by the aftermath of the Second World War. To prevent manipulation of education as had happened during the Third Reich, the Allies re-established the old tripartite system and granted authority to the Länder rather than the federal government. Although the German Democratic Republic introduced a strong system of comprehensive schooling, the tripartite system of the Federal Republic took over after reunification (OECD, 2011). Ideological and social pluralism continue to characterize the German education system nowadays (Eurydice, 2019).

b. <u>Structure of authority</u>

Germany is a federal state in which education is decentralized under the jurisdiction of the 16 federal states referred to as Länder. The Federal Ministry can suggest national reforms but requires the Länder's approval before implementation (Kotthoff, 2011). The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the States in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) brings together education ministers from all 16 Länder with the aim of fostering joint views and cooperation on education reforms. Through its institutionalized organs, it acts as a platform for dialogue and consensus-building in order to foster harmonization among the Länder's education policies (KMK, 2022). Nonetheless, the Länder maintain full authority over education and only grant limited autonomy to the schools (Kotthoff, 2011).

c. <u>Demographic and economic features</u>

The German population is large and diverse with 83 million inhabitants and 12% considered migrants on the criteria that they were born abroad (Destatis, 2021). Around 10 million pupils are

enrolled in primary and secondary schools (Destatis, 2022). Public spending on education is lower than the OECD average and represented 9.2% of total government expenditure in 2018. Overall public spending is close to the OECD average as 45.17% of the national GDP (OECD, 2021a). The unemployment rate is remarkably low and constitutes only 3.87% of the labor force (OECD, 2021b). The GINI index of 0.289 revealed moderate income inequality in 2018 (OECD, 2021c).

    d.   <u>Learning capacity and motivation</u>

Since the initial results of PISA, Germany has shown an intense desire to improve. Learning has taken the form of visits to countries deemed successful and of frequent academic debates on fundamental questions related to education. Despite the initial shock, discussions on potential learning paths have flourished in the following years and empirical research continues to grow (Kotthoff, 2011). However, major structural reforms still face obstacles due to the decentralized nature of German politics. Reaching consensus among the 16 Länder for national reforms remains challenging.

4.4.2 The school system

Germany is lagging behind when it comes to equity in education. Students' achievements are highly correlated with their background and 18% of the variation in PISA science scores is still explained by SES (OECD, 2019b). Nevertheless, education reforms have triggered a remarkable improvement since 2001. Within a few years only, German general scores caught up with the OECD average and equity improved (OECD, 2011).

Secondary education is characterized by a tripartite system in which students are divided early into tracks and attend separate schools. In some Länder, teachers are responsible for making binding decisions regarding the tracking of students, while in other Länder parents have the final word (Triventi et al., 2016). Three main types of secondary schools exist in Germany: the lower track (*Hauptschule*), the middle track (*Realschule*), and the upper track (*Gymnasium*)[4]. They deliver

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[4] Some Länder have introduced comprehensive schools and other types of institutions, but they remain rare. A few Länder have also abolished the Hauptschule.

different levels of education with specific curricula that lead to various certificates. Such differentiation is meant to ensure that learning groups reach a certain level of homogeneity in terms of aptitudes (Nusser & Gehrer, 2020) and results from historical feudal dynamics. In most Länder, tracking takes place at the age of 10.

Before the turn of the 21st century, Germany was convinced of the quality and efficiency of its education system. In fact, the Germans believed that the value of education could not be measured and did not assess their system (OECD, 2011). Therefore, when the first PISA results were published in 2001, the whole nation was shaken to discover that it ranked at the bottom of the OECD with significant performance disparities between students from the different educational tracks. This general surprise became known as the PISA shock and triggered public outrage (Hartong, 2012). Demand for change pressured policy-makers into action and created a sudden convergence of interests that allowed them to swiftly overcome political obstacles. Right-wing and left-wing agendas merged together to create a common understanding of the reforms needed (OECD, 2011). Furthermore, the public demand for improvement provided the federal government with an unprecedented authority over education, which enabled it to oversee the adoption of the reforms (Rothman, 2017). The broad societal consensus regarding the urgent need for change united all relevant social groups. Large-scale support was mobilized and wide participation contributed to ensuring the success of the policies adopted (Ertl, 2006).

Since then, policy-makers have introduced output-oriented control and governance-through-data in order to monitor the situation (Eurydice, 2019). The federal government publishes a report on the state of the education system every two years (OECD, 2011). In 2004, national standards were introduced to describe the subject-specific competences that German students are expected to acquire at a certain age. In 2006, the KMK launched the implementation of national student assessments to evaluate compliance with the new standards (Ertl, 2006). The two-year gap between these monitoring policies gave sufficient time to schools and teachers to adjust to the new expectations. The adequate timing of the reforms has contributed to their success and to the establishment of relevant accountability mechanisms (Rothman, 2017). The monitoring system is ultimately used to draw comparisons with other countries but also between Länder and between individual schools within each Länder (OECD, 2019a). A general picture of the state of the

education system emerges from these comparisons. Nonetheless, school-level results are not publicly published and neither schools nor teachers are penalized for the level of their performance (Berwick, 2015). These dynamics have safeguarded the support of teachers for the reforms and ensured their collaboration (OECD, 2011). Furthermore, monitoring has allowed to collect data on students' demographics in order to monitor progress in the field of equity.

Overall, the extension of the school day, additional language support and the development of free Early Childhood Education have benefited many families from low-SES background (Kotthoff, 2011). Increased flexibility in tracking, notably with the opening of new paths to transfer from one type of school to another, has also mitigated the negative effects on equity of the tripartite system (Buchholz et al., 2016). Specific programs targeted at the disadvantaged population have provided children with additional opportunities. Since 2013 for instance, the federal program Education Alliances has financed the participation of disadvantaged students in extra-curricular activities in order to foster their sense of belonging to the local community and their motivation vis-à-vis their studies (OECD, 2018b). Ultimately, the share of low-SES students attending *Gymnasien* has gradually increased (Berwick, 2015), which suggests the attenuation of social reproduction's dynamics and ultimately the reduction of the SES achievement gap. This process is therefore driven by the progress made by disadvantaged students (Kotthoff, 2011).

Nonetheless, the tripartite system remains highly inequal and continues to favor high-SES children. The swift progress that followed the PISA shock can be in part explained by the width of the initial achievement gap that made a few reforms sufficient to reduce it (Berwick, 2015). Within the structural constraint of the tripartite system, it is however likely that progress can only reach a certain threshold of equity. Indeed, children from low-SES backgrounds are still overrepresented in the lower tracks while a majority of high-SES students attend a *Gymnasium*, which implies a high degree of social reproduction. A study by Buchholz et al (2016) reveals that the paths opened across schools and meant to enable re-adjustments after the initial tracking decision benefit primarily high-SES students. Indeed, pupils with educated parents are more likely to enter such atypical paths compared to low-SES students who do not have the guidance and financial capacity to re-orientate themselves (Buchholz et al, 2016). Mobility between the tracks occurs mostly downwardly and permeability remains high. Only a few children are changing tracks

and even fewer are able to reach higher-level secondary schools (Kotthoff, 2011). Overall, the tripartite system in itself promotes social reproduction by attributing educational opportunities according to SES, and therefore represents a significant obstacle to equity.

Another inherent issue arises from the standardization of teaching practices within each track. With curricula designed by the Länder and the little autonomy given to actors at the school-level, teachers are encouraged to "teach to the middle", based on the assumption that an average type of student exists. Such practice promotes students who meet the expectations of homogeneity and excludes all the pupils who do not fit this model of learning (Nusser & Gehrer, 2020). Low-SES students have less chances of belonging to this homogenous learning group because they lack adequate support at home. Therefore, low-SES pupils are more likely to be left-behind when "teaching to the middle" techniques are applied, especially in *Gymnasien* where the teaching staff assumes that the average student receives learning support at home. Therefore, the German system includes inherent obstacles to equity mostly resulting from its tripartite structure and the assumption that early tracking creates homogenous learning groups. While swift progress was made in recent years, these inherent constraints might undermine perspectives for future improvement.

Chapter 5 – Findings and discussion

5.1 Identification of mechanisms

Based on the previous analysis, this section identifies key concepts underlying the causal chain leading to equity in each source-case, and associates them with the list of social mechanisms found in the literature. Table 1 presents the results.

Table 1: Key concepts of the causal chain and social mechanisms in each source-case

Source-case	Key concepts	Social mechanisms
Finland	Trust	
	Empowerment	Actor certification
	Autonomy	Exercising leadership
	Reflection	Accountability
	Low-stake accountability	
England	Performance feedback	
	Threat	Performance feedback
	Rewards	Threat attribution
	Competition	Rewards
	Differentiation	Actor certification
	Autonomy	Accountability
	High-stake accountability	
Germany	Societal mobilization	Focusing events
	Lifted threat attribution	
	Rewards	Rewards
	Performance feedback	Performance feedback
	Low-stake accountability	Accountability

From such results, it becomes clear that actor-certification, performance feedback, rewards and accountability take effect in multiple source-cases. *Accountability* is selected as the first key mechanism for equity outcomes because it plays an important role in each case-study. Drawing inspirations from the literature and building on the key concepts observed, it becomes possible to craft two original mechanisms that are relevant for this examination, namely *trustworthiness* and

positive incentives. The next section describes these three mechanisms and justifies their activation in the source-cases.

5.2 Mechanisms in the source-cases

5.2.1 Accountability

Accountability mechanisms ensure that all actors play their part and meet the respective expectations of their education system. According to Bovens (2010), accountability mechanisms are meant to provide information, they require explanation and justification for one's conduct, and enable the account-holder to pass judgement and apply sanctions. Accountability is usually established between education actors following the hierarchical structure in place, often with a National Ministry at the top. However, it also involves a democratic element because the public can exert judgement and sanctions through the electoral process, based on the information collected (Bovens, 2010). Therefore, education actors are not only accountable to those placed above them in the hierarchical structure of authority, but also to citizens in a democracy.

In Finland, accountability is flexible and is mostly used to collect information and maintain coherence across schools. Democratic accountability is enabled by the direct involvement of civil society in the policy-making process. This low-stake accountability framework enhances trust, empowers schools and teachers by reducing the stress associated with external evaluation, and favors innovative teaching methods adapted to the needs of each student. 95.5% of Finnish students attend schools in which the principal conducts self-evaluation while only 56.6% attend schools in which inspections and national assessments occur (OECD, 2019a).

In England, the collection of information is followed by a judgement of performance leading to potential sanctions for both schools and teachers. Accountability mechanisms are established at all levels of education, with schools being accountable to the MATs/LAs, and MATs/LAs being accountable to the government. The high transparency of results ensures democratic accountability, although the exclusion of local actors from schools' boards limits bottom-up accountability at the school level. Both internal and external accountability is high with 100% of

students attending schools undertaking self-evaluation and 97% of pupils enrolled in schools where inspections and national tests take place (OECD, 2019a).

In Germany, a middle-ground is established and accountability is used as a monitoring tool that does not imply sanctions. Schools are accountable to the Länder but the Länder are not directly accountable to the federal government. Through the publication of national reports, civil society remains informed of country-wide performances and teachers' unions are involved in the policy-making process. Both self-evaluations and external accountability are lower than the OECD average (OECD, 2019a).

5.2.2 Trustworthiness

By combining trust with the existing mechanism of actor certification, a new social mechanism emerges from the analysis. Trustworthiness can be defined as the empowerment of an actor through autonomy of action under the presumption that this trust is deserved because the actor received an adequate preparation to uphold it. Such social mechanism is crucial for creating a teaching environment that boosts motivation, innovation and enables actors to tailor-made their educative action. Indeed, teachers must receive adequate training to be entrusted with the education of heterogenous learning groups in which students have different needs and abilities. Based on their training and their own reflections, teachers can develop innovative teaching methods and decide on the best pace for each of their students' learning.

The Finnish system activates trustworthiness the most. Indeed, because the teaching profession is valued and highly desirable, only the most competent individuals become teachers. They receive a demanding training that includes pedagogy and elements of research to help them develop their own reflection regarding a classroom's needs. Once on the job, they are given sufficient autonomy to apply their own teaching methods and show adequate capacity and opportunity to individualize their pedagogical approach and address different needs.

In England, trustworthiness is undermined by high-stake accountability. Despite autonomy given to academies, constant external evaluations are not conducive of trust. Furthermore, the possibility

for non-qualified individuals to become teachers deteriorates the preparation of the workforce and its capacity to teach and prepare individualized methods.

In Germany, trustworthiness is limited to the little autonomy that schools and teachers receive. Curricula and teaching methods are set by the Länder, and teachers are encouraged to "teach-to-the-middle", which does not benefit all pupils equally.

5.2.3 Positive incentives

Social mechanisms related to incentives are numerous and can be combined to center the causal chain of success on positive simulants. Positive incentives include (1) the lightening of threat attribution to create an empowering environment conducive of progress, (2) feedback to inform on performance outcomes, and (3) rewards to recompense good behaviors. All source-cases present some of these elements.

In Finland, feedback is limited but threat attribution is considerably lightened for schools, teachers and students. Indeed, alternative assessment methods are designed to reduce the level of stress experienced by the students and their fear of failure is reduced. Teachers are not sanctioned for the performance of their students and schools do not have to go through inspection and national ranking. Lifted threat attribution therefore creates a healthy environment to teach and learn. Rewards are also emphasized at the student level through the individualized approach adopted by the teachers.

In England, feedback is received continuously by all education actors, rewards are delivered but threat attribution remains heavy. For students, the possibility of a low grade remains a threat conducive of stress, while the possibility of a high grade represents a potential reward. For teachers, transparency on students' assessments provides them with feedback regarding the results of their work and performance-related pay is a mechanism for both threat and reward attribution. At the school level, feedback is provided through national ranking based on the grades delivered by inspectors. Threat of academization remains a significant source of stress while the "school-led" model of progress provides reputational rewards to high-performing institutions.

The German system delivers low-stake feedback, enabling schools and teachers to improve their performance without experiencing significant threat. For students, the tracking decision combined with the grading system represents a significant threat for young students because lower-grades might close the door to Gymnasien and force pupils into lower tracks. However, the inverse dynamic is also true and the possibility to access upper school tracks constitutes a reward.

5.3 Mechanisms in the target-case

According to the extrapolation-approach, the activation of these three social mechanisms would likely trigger further advance in the field of equity in France. However, context-factors might hinder or facilitate the stimulation of each mechanism. In fact, accountability appears feasible on the condition that a few challenging transformations need to take place. Trustworthiness is the least likely to overcome French contextual barriers. Lastly, positive incentives could fairly easily be enhanced in the French system.

Enhancing democratic accountability by involving civil society and local stakeholders in the decision-making process could be instrumental in overcoming political obstacles such as large-scale strikes and public opposition in France. Under the current centralized system of authority, the National Ministry would need to delegate additional powers to local officials and organize consultations with teachers' unions and other stakeholders. The Ministry is currently the main interlocutor of political and social forces (Pons, 2016) but additional space could be created to enable citizens and relevant stakeholders to participate at the local level. Such democratic framework would require the transfer of decision-making and implementation powers to the local units of government to enable them to apply the outcomes of public consultations. While France remains highly centralized, efforts at delegating power to sub-units of governments have already been made and could be enhanced in the education sector. Such outcome would require to adapt the accountability framework between education actors to keep sub-units accountable to the Ministry for their delegated powers. Considering that France already has strong external evaluations in place, with frequent inspections and national assessments, this adaptation could take place rather smoothly.
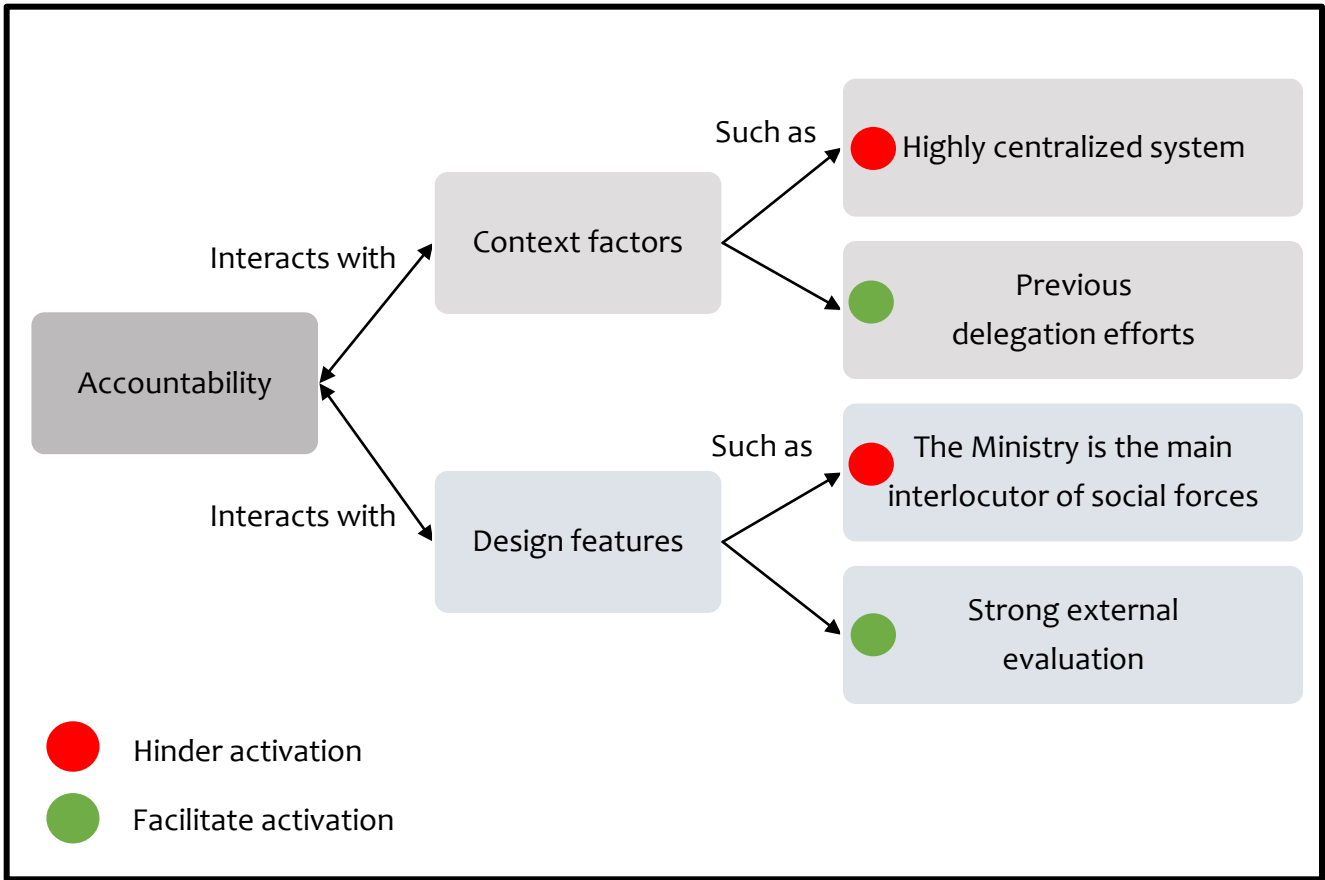
<u>Figure 1</u>: Activation of accountability in France

The activation of trustworthiness would be rather difficult in the French society. The level of skepticism vis-à-vis public authority is not conducive of a trust-based environment (OpinionWay, 2021). Considering the emphasis on standardization that results from egalitarian norms, autonomy of action for teachers and schools is limited. Furthermore, the teaching profession is so undervalued and underpaid that shortages become problematic (Morin, 2022). While governmental action is unlikely to change such an ingrained mindset, significantly raising teachers' salaries could be a first step toward making the profession more appealing. Teachers' training also need to be re-centered on pedagogical capabilities to prepare for the reflection required in the education of heterogenous learning groups. French teachers are currently unprepared to teach in mixed-ability settings and underprepared to teach overall (OECD, 2018c). Furthermore, the tendency to send young graduates and inexperienced teachers in EP schools must reverse so that the best instructors focus on low-SES students whose education might be more

challenging. Once again, the meritocratic norms that drive education in France sustain this subject-centered training and allocation-system based on merit and experience.
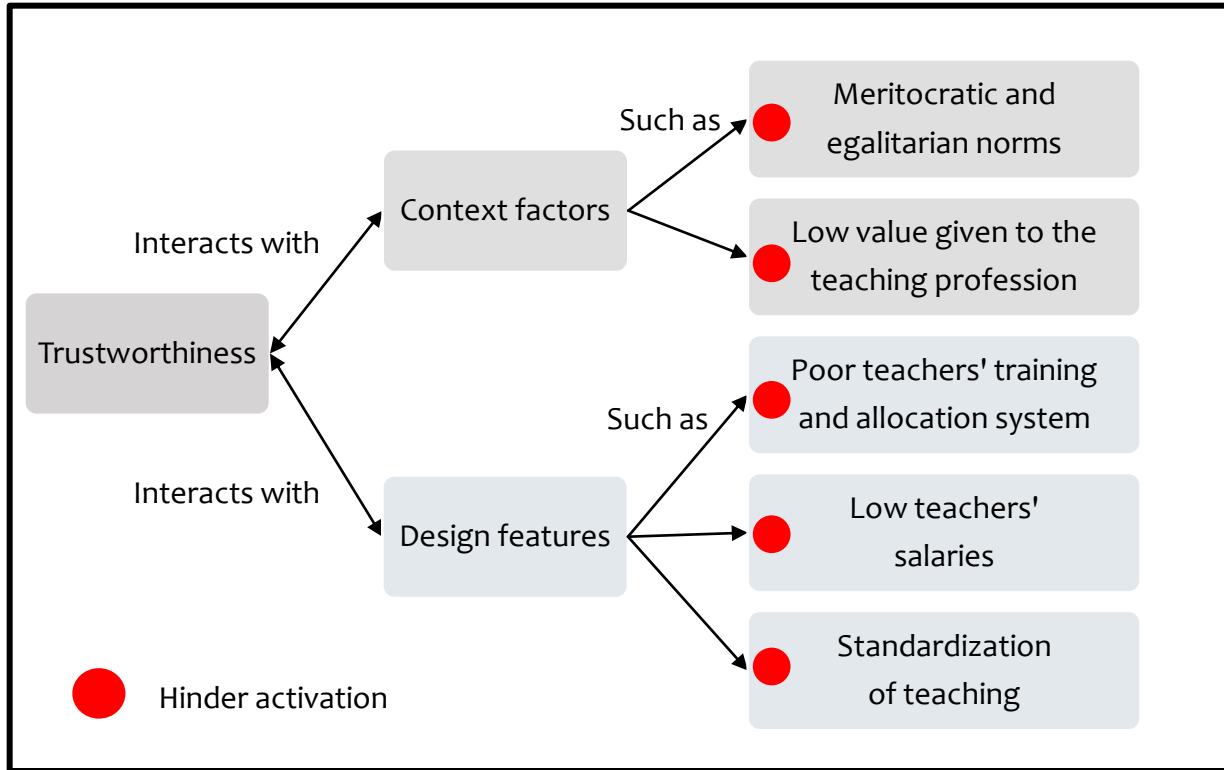
Figure 2: Activation of trustworthiness in France

Positive incentives could be fairly easy to implement in the French system of education. Indeed, the current emphasis on assessments and inspections provides the tools necessary for the delivery of feedback. Under protective public-sector employment contracts, the biggest threat most French teachers face is reallocation. At the student level however, the importance given to grades and the possibility for repetition represent significant threats that are conducive of stress and low confidence. A reform that would give a lesser importance to grades is very unlikely, as they are deeply ingrained at the chore of meritocratic evaluation methods and also provide a framework for rewards. High-performing students are rewarded with good grades that open the doors of future educational paths. To mitigate the stress induced by the grading system, personalized support should be provided to low-performing students to redress their marks and avoid repetition. Since teachers are unlikely to pursue individualized teaching in the classroom, additional staff should be hired to provide extra-help to the students who need it. However, the French would have to agree to spend more on their education system, which is improbable under the current government that

promised to cut public spending and reduce the number of civil servants (*Les Échos*, 2017). Lastly, rewards are the missing element in the positive incentives provided to teachers. Apart from personal fulfillment, they do not receive specific rewards, nor do the schools. Financial incentive for teachers who are allocated to EP schools have recently been introduced (MENJSP, 2022a) but the amount of this grant is small and many teachers do not have the choice whether or not to teach in such schools. Further steps are necessary but the current attempts at introducing rewards demonstrate a positive trend toward delivering greater positive incentives.
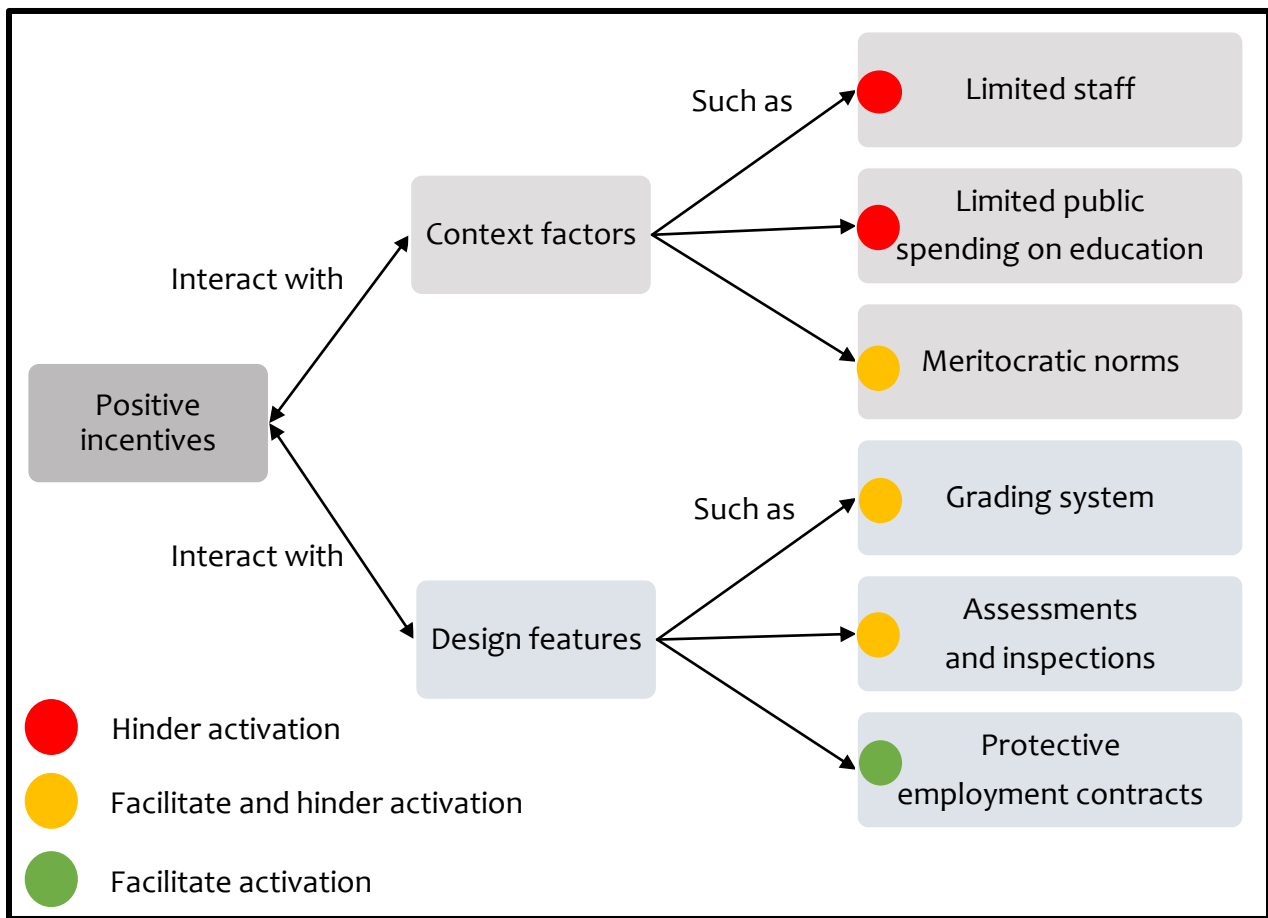
Figure 3: Activation of positive incentives in France

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The French system of education considerably lags behind when it comes to equity. In other words, it does not give all children the equal opportunity to achieve their potential. Teachers fail to address the needs of low-SES students, which becomes apparent in the disparity of scores achieved in international assessments and their correlation with SES. Extrapolating from international experiences provides inspiration on how France could learn and deliver more equitable educational opportunities.

The analysis of context factors and design features in Finland, England and Germany has uncovered the influence of certain social mechanisms on fostering equitable education. In the causal chain triggering equity, accountability, trustworthiness and positive incentives play a critical role. Accountability ensures that relevant stakeholders are involved in education policy and that they play their part thoroughly in reporting and delivering on equity issues. Both autonomy of action and adequate preparation are required for trustworthiness to empower actors to answer the needs of students regardless of their SES. Positive incentives imply (1) the creation of a healthy environment free from threats in which principals, teachers and pupils can thrive, (2) the attribution of feedback to ensure that everyone remains on track, and (3) the delivery of rewards to encourage teachers and students to achieve their potential.

This paper extrapolated that these social mechanisms should be relevant in improving educational equity in France, but that context factors would influence their possible activation. Firstly, democratic accountability would require additional decentralization in France and greater involvement of civil society at the local level. A change in the structure of authority would in turn entail an adaptation of the accountability framework between education actors, but external evaluation could easily be adapted. Secondly, the poor value that the teaching profession receives in the French society and the general skepticism vis-à-vis public authority are not conducive of trustworthiness. Teachers' training is not appropriate for pedagogical teaching in heterogenous groups. Ingrained norms of elitism sustain a subject-centered training and an allocation system that assigns the most inexperienced teachers to the most challenging institutions. Considering the limited public spending that France dedicates to its education sector, the salaries of teachers are

unlikely to increase as a first step toward revaluating the profession. With this budget, additional educators cannot be hired in sufficient numbers to provide support to all the students who need it. Furthermore, teachers are required to follow standardized curricula and teaching practices that do not issue autonomy of action. Social norms of meritocracy and equality strongly protect such standardization and prevent the introduction of individualized teaching. Thirdly, context and design factors could succeed in intensifying positive incentives. The grading system protected by conflicting norms of meritocracy, elitism and equality provides both rewards and threats to the students. While threats are unlikely to be lifted, they can however be mitigated through the delivery of additional support that enhances both the capacity and confidence of underperforming students. Good grades act as rewards by opening the door to selective paths and further resources. At the teacher level however, the advantageous employment contracts of the public sector create a teaching environment without significant threat, but also without significant rewards. Performance feedback is received by all education actors through regular national assessments and inspections. Without changing their monitoring network, the French could re-center their threat and rewards distribution to foster greater motivation and encourage progress among all students, regardless of the learning pace associated with SES.

A few caveats must be considered when reflecting on the validity of such findings. For the sake of this thesis, context factors have been limited to four broad categories. A deeper analysis of such features would be relevant to provide further insights on the possible activation of social mechanisms in France. Furthermore, field-works would enable a deeper understanding of the situation on the ground. The value of PISA data that have driven comparisons remains questionable due to an emphasis on quantitative indicators that do not reveal the full value of educational content. However, OECD's resources have been crossed with other national documents and scholarly literature to mitigate this limitation. Keeping in mind these caveats, this thesis has suggested an alternative learning path toward equity that could inspire scholars to pursue deeper extrapolation-based research on this issue and ultimately benefit the French government.

France needs to offer fair educational opportunities to all its students and must overcome its dilemma of an egalitarian but inequitable school system. Equitable education is a pre-condition to achieve greater social cohesion, successful integration and to enable a heterogenous population to

cohabit under the motto of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*". The school system is a key to perpetuating such French Republican values but it can only play its proper role if social injustice and inequity are addressed.

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