

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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# The educational supports of parents and siblings in immigrant families

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## Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the type of help, from parents to children and among siblings, in order to understand the educational involvement and strategies of large immigrant families. The first point consist in asking whether parental involvement is the same for all the children regardless of their birth rank and gender, the second point is about the help from siblings which remains a neglected dimension in the researches on family involvement in education. We used the "Trajectories and Origins" statistical survey and 42 follow-up interviews. We focus on children of immigrants from working classes who were either born in metropolitan France or who arrived there before age seven. Aged between 25 and 40 in 2008, the respondents had at least one immigrant parent from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, sub-Saharan Africa or Turkey; and a large majority has at least two siblings. The article highlights that parents invest more on eldest children in immigrant families as well as in French-origin ones; yet contrary to French-origin parents, immigrant parents from North Africa invest on their daughter's school career even more than in their sons' one. Siblings' help is especially important in immigrant families; they manage to compensate, at least partially, for the lack of parental help in school matters.

**Keywords:** Children of immigrants; Educational involvement of parents; School careers; Siblings; Large families; Gender; Educational support from siblings

## Article

Research based on panels of students who started secondary school in 1989 and 1995 constructed by the French Education Ministry's Department of Evaluation, Prospective Research and Performance (DEPP) (Vallet and Caille, 1996; Brinbaum and Kieffer, 2009) found that, on average, children of immigrants had lower academic performance, a higher dropout rate, and were more frequently put into the least prestigious secondary-school tracks. However, when social class and family background were controlled for, the same studies demonstrated that children of immigrants outperformed their French-origin peers at secondary school. The hypothesis proposed to explain this relative higher success rate, inspired by qualitative research (Zeroulou 1988, Santelli 2001), is the high educational aspirations of immigrant families (specifically Maghrebi families), who see education as a means to integration and social mobility. These aspirations have also been analysed as forms of resistance against school decisions, or even as resulting from an anticipation of future discrimination on the labour market (Lorcerie 2011, Zirotti 2006).

Quantitative studies subsequently sought to demonstrate that among working-class families, immigrant parents had much higher educational aspirations for their children than non-immigrant parents (Caille and O'Prey 2003, Brinbaum and Kieffer 2005). Caille and O'Prey's study (2003) finds that more working-class immigrant parents, compared with working-class French-born parents, want their child to obtain an academic rather than a vocational secondary leaving certificate and to continue their education until age 20, and believe in the employment benefits of higher education. They have also more frequently specified that they want their child to enter the academic track in upper secondary school. Those results are stable "all other things being equal"<sup>1</sup> and are particularly true of families from the Maghreb, but also of families from sub-Saharan Africa and Turkey. These working-class immigrant families thus express more ambitious choices than working-class families where both parents are French-born.

These aspirations are not accompanied by a higher level of involvement in supervising their children's education, however (Caille and O'Prey 2003). Based on the data from the survey conducted in 1998 of the families of students who started secondary school in 1995, the authors distinguish between indicators of *explicit involvement* (believing it is useful to meet teachers, requesting a meeting with a teacher, attending meetings at the beginning of the school year, helping the child with his/her homework, paying for private tutoring, belonging to a parents' association, being aware they can appeal a tracking decision) and indicators of *implicit involvement* (restricting television during school time, setting a bedtime during school time, a parent being home when the child returns from school, frequency of conversations about school, enrolling the child at a library, enrolling the child in an artistic discipline or a sport). They show that, regardless of the indicators used, for comparable social class, and even taking family size into account, immigrant parents (particularly those from Turkey) are less involved in their children's education and supervise homework less than parents from the majority population. Those results were recently confirmed by an analysis of the TeO survey (INED-INSEE, 2008) (Mogu rou 2013): working-class immigrant parents help their children with their homework less often than parents from the majority population. This study also shows that parental help with education (whether immigrant parents or not) decreases as family size increases.

The aim of this paper is first to test the hypothesis that, unable to satisfy the needs of all, immigrant parents of large families may give priority to the educational pathways of some of their children over others, specifically the eldest children and boys. This would correspond to the pattern found in the mainstream population (Desplanques 1981, Chaudron 1985, Barnet-Verzat and Wolff 2003). Chaudron (1985, p. 59) observed that, "even if every child embodies the continuation of the family, boys more than girls and elder children more than younger children have a more immediate responsibility for the family's economic and social future". Therefore we wonder if parent involvement is the same whatever the birth rate and sex of the children?

Our second goal is to see if the low level of parental support is offset by the help from siblings. Researches show that help from parents is low mainly because of their difficulty in offering practical help and advice, because of their lack of knowledge of the French education system and their own low educational capital compared with non-immigrant parents from the same class (Caille and O'Prey 2003; Brinbaum and Kieffer 2005). Various studies suggest that siblings are a major source of educational support

in large families (Vanh e, Bois, Henri-Panabi re, Court, Bertrand, 2013), and more in immigrant families than in non-immigrant families (Mogu rou and Santelli 2012). In this case, what are the intensity and modalities of educational help from siblings?

### **Methodology: the TeO survey, the qualitative post-survey and family involvement in education**

In order to investigate whether parental involvement is the same for all the children regardless of their birth rank and gender and assess support from siblings, we used the “Trajectories and Origins” statistical survey (*Trajectoires et Origines* or TeO) and 42 post-survey interviews.

The TeO survey was conducted jointly by INED and INSEE in 2008 on a sample of 22,000 people in metropolitan France. The TeO deliberately over-represented “minority” populations in France (immigrants and their children) with the aim of assessing the impact of origin on living standards and social pathways (particularly educational pathways), taking into consideration individuals’ socio-demographic characteristics: social class, neighbourhood, age, birth cohort, gender and parents’ educational level.

Compared with the survey of families of students who started secondary school in 1995 conducted by the DEPP in 1998, the TeO survey only contains a few elements that can be used to assess family involvement in education. The respondents were asked to indicate: resource people for homework (parents, siblings, teachers from school or private tutors); whether the child had his/her own room to study in; and whether the child had attended a private school or a school outside the local area at primary or secondary level.

Unlike the surveys dedicated to educational involvement<sup>2</sup> that ask parents directly about their practices, the TeO survey approaches these through the responses of interviewees surveyed as adults. Moreover, the TeO questions cover the whole of primary and secondary schooling and therefore take as constants practices that in fact may have varied considerably over the different stages in the respondents’ educational pathways, as well as in response to the educational experiences of elder siblings and to the family’s circumstances, which may have been affected by numerous events<sup>3</sup>.

We also draw on 42 interviews conducted as part of the qualitative post-survey that followed the TeO. The sub-populations were selected before the response to the call for research projects by the French Family Allowance Fund (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales - CNAF), which funded these interviews. The original intention was to re-interview some of the individuals with successful educational pathways as well as children of immigrants who occupy an elite position in order to study the mechanisms of success. The qualitative section of the project submitted to the CNAF (entitled “Number of siblings and educational and socio-occupational destinies of the children of immigrants”) examines (i) the pathways of these successful individuals and (ii) also highlights the pathways of unsuccessful individuals (other siblings who did not attain the same educational level as the respondents) by focusing on the influence of family dynamics, specifically those between siblings. The children of immigrants (born or socialised in France) who were re-interviewed were selected on the basis of the geographical origin of their parents (Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa or Turkey), their social class (working class), their educational level (at least two years of higher education) and their age (25–40). The rationale for the last criterion was to analyse completed

educational pathways that took place in a comparable educational environment. The biographical interviews reveal changes in family involvement over time and provide more detail than the fairly basic indicators in the statistical survey.

For the sake of comparability of the two measures (quantitative and qualitative), we focus, in the quantitative analysis, on individuals aged between 25 and 40 in 2008, children from the majority population and children of immigrants from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa or Turkey, from working-class families<sup>4</sup>.

The following part consist in asking whether parental involvement is the same for all the children regardless of their birth rank and gender, the last part is about the help among siblings.

### Lower but more uniform parental involvement

In the introduction, we recalled that working-class immigrant parents help their children with their homework less often than parents from the majority population. According to the data from the TeO survey, fewer than 20 % of the children of immigrants report that their fathers helped them with their homework, compared with 36 % of individuals from the majority population. Mothers help much more than fathers, but again the level of help is much lower in immigrant families (21 %) than in families from the majority population (66 %) (Table 1).

However, we wonder whether some types of involvement are partly or completely overlooked by conventional quantitative indicators. For example, the interviews reveal that the respondents' childhoods were punctuated by constant reminders of the importance of educational success.

“My father still tells my little brother that the reason he works like a dog is that it’s for our future. He never stops saying it, that it’s for our future, so we become decent people and – excuse the language—so we don’t end up with a shit life...[According to her father] the only thing that can open doors is education (...) [Once he got started], my brothers and I (...) knew we were in for a 2-hour lecture. (...) My brothers and I still laugh about it (...) He was like a broken record (...) [But] it really helped us.” (Chafika, 16-F-32-Morocco;<sup>5</sup> the eldest of five children).

These recurring talks remind children of their duty to remain loyal to their parents' wishes to “study hard”, to “succeed”, to leave the status of manual worker and harsh

**Table 1** Help with homework from father and mother by gender of children

	Majority population	Algeria	Morocco-Tunisia	Sub-Saharan Africa	Turkey	All children of immigrants
Help from father	36	17	21	20	5	18
Sons	37	15	18	22	4	16
Daughters	35	18	24	19	6	20
Help from mother	66	22	22	36	3	21
Sons	64	21	21	34	4	21
Daughters	68	22	23	36	2	22

Source: TeO Survey, INED-INSEE, 2008

Scope: Immigrants' children born or socialised in France and majority population, aged 25–40, from a working-class background

working conditions, and to achieve upward socio-occupational mobility, the guarantee of a better life.

“Both my parents left school without any real qualifications. My father did training later (...) He started as a labourer in the construction sector, then moved up. He became a team leader then a sales manager and now he’s a regional sales manager (...). He never really had specific goals for us. He always let us set our own goals, but he instilled ambition and achievement in us, always encouraging us to do better, to rise as high as we could in whatever we did. Yes, that’s something he passed on to us, to my sister, my brother and me.” (**Salima, 51-F-28-Morocco-France, the second of three children**).

These reminders are also a way of compensating for the lack of educational resources in the family. They are indeed one of the few levers that parents have. However, these talks correspond to *abstract and general aspirations* (Ichou 2013), which are only effective when accompanied by tangible actions, such as encouraging children to do their homework, enrolling them at a library, monitoring their marks, meeting their teachers, etc., i.e. when they are combined with *concrete and specific aspirations* (Ichou 2013). It is the latter that tend to be observed less frequently in working-class families (P rier 2005; Millet and Thin 2005).

### Girls and boys

The idea that girls should remain in education beyond the compulsory schooling age is now shared by the vast majority of parents, including immigrant parents (Gouyon and Gu rin 2006). Maghrebi parents in particular hope their daughters will spend an extended period in education, with these “hopes probably reinforced by their good marks: daughters fulfil their parents’ ambition for them more than their brothers” (Brinbaum and Kieffer 2005, p. 12). This tallies with a finding from other studies: the families with the least experience of education are particularly sensitive to assessments by the school, and considerably lower their tracking expectations or overall ambition as soon as their child shows “learning difficulties”. By contrast, the most educated families tend to maintain their high level of ambition even when their child experiences difficulties. But do these non-gender-differentiated educational expectations—or in some cases more ambitious for expectations for girls—coincide with an egalitarian involvement by parents in their sons’ and daughters’ education?

In families from the majority population, fathers’ help is slightly more focused on sons (37 %) than on daughters (35 %), while mothers’ help is more focused on daughters (68 %) than on sons (64 %) (Table 1). This tendency towards gender-differentiated involvement (fathers in sons, mothers in daughters) is also observed in sub-Saharan African families. By contrast, in Maghrebi families, daughters seem to receive equal or more attention than sons from both fathers and mothers. Delcroix (2004) has called this switch of expectations from sons to daughters “the diagonal of the generations”—when parents realise that daughters are likely to provide them with more support and succeed better socially than sons, and adapt their behaviour accordingly—and confirms the results of the studies on educational aspirations mentioned above.

Moreover, the interviews show that the specific attention paid to daughters was intended to ensure that they did not reproduce the role traditionally assigned to women; this project may be nurtured by both parents or by the mother alone (and sometimes by the father alone (Santelli 2001)). Mothers' involvement in the academic success of their daughters is linked to the fact that these women perceive immigration as an opportunity for their daughters to receive an education and be emancipated. Many interviews stress the importance of this process by describing how mothers accepted their role as wife and stay-at-home mother of many children but directed their resources towards ensuring that their daughters did not have the same life.

Rachida's mother, who was present during her interview, said, "It wasn't my choice [not to work]; it was imposed on me [by her husband] (...) I saw how my mother lived and how I lived. That's what influenced me (...). You shouldn't repeat bad ways (...) I was forced to give up [my education] and I didn't want the same for my daughters. I wanted them to go to school and rise as high as they could (...) I fought hard for Rachida to go to America. It was hard, nothing was easy, it was a long battle. (...) Also fighting so my eldest could get her driver's licence (...) Driving is freedom." (**Rachida, 46-F-32-Algeria, the eldest of five children**).

However, not all mothers combine that involvement with a non-gender-differentiated household organisation. The gender division of household chores compels girls to help their mothers and perform chores that their brothers are not required to do. Although housework leaves less time for schoolwork, it enables girls to develop useful skills, such as authority, organization and conscientiousness. In addition, since daughters are strictly supervised and often not allowed to go out unaccompanied, they spend more time at home and are less distracted from their schoolwork.

Zohra (the only daughter) was the only one of her siblings to have gone on to higher education and is now a primary-school teacher. She attributes this to the behaviour expected of her at home and her "quiet, hard-working" nature. "I didn't really have any leisure activities, so I focused on work. (...) My rule was work first (...). It comes from my fairly strict upbringing (...) I had less leisure time and more responsibilities than my brothers." (**Zohra, 62-F-36-Morocco, the second of five children**).

This experience can also have an emancipating effect on girls, who do not wish to repeat their mother's way of life. The unequal division of domestic chores and lack of personal freedom may fuel anger and rebellion which, when they do not have a negative impact on girls' educational success, can be a powerful stimulant for them to perform well at school and acquire the means to make their own life choices.

#### **Elder and younger siblings**

While help with homework from parents seems little gender-differentiated, birth rank induces bigger disparities, from both mother and father, in both immigrant and majority-population families (Table 2). Regardless of the parents' origin, they supervise the education of their eldest children in priority over their other children.



**Table 2** Help with homework from father and mother by birth rank of child

	Majority population	Algeria	Morocco-Tunisia	Sub-Saharan Africa	Turkey	All children of immigrants
Help from father						
Eldest child	43	24	24	24	6	22
Other birth rank	32	15	20	18	5	16
Help from mother						
Eldest child	71	40	30	38	2	32
Other birth rank	63	18	19	35	3	18

Source: TeO Survey, INED-INSEE, 2008

Scope: Immigrants' children born or socialised in France and majority population, aged 25–40, from a working-class background

Only children are considered as eldest children here

These disparities can be attributed to several factors, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Firstly, we can see the effect of the maintenance of status norms, more common in the working class (Le Pape 2009), whereby the eldest child has the status of the leader and broad responsibilities (Oris, Brunet, Widmer and Bideau, 2007). He/she thus holds a symbolic place for his/her parents (Attias-Donfut, Lapierre and Segalen, 2002, Buisson, 2003). In immigrant families, the eldest child is the first heir of his/her parents' aspirations and dreams and will be responsible for fulfilling the expectations of their migration (Santelli 2001). With that outlook, parents thus focus their attention on the eldest.

The eldest also has a special role as the child who assists his/her parents. Eldest children are often called on to help their parents with paperwork and dealings with officialdom, so develop a wide range of skills from an early age. These skills can be applied at school and help these children cope with heavy workloads, concentrate on their studies, and behave obediently.

Boran's experience is of course extreme because he lost his father when he was six. The eldest of three children, he took his role as big brother very seriously "in connection with their education, their friends [I kept an eye on everything] and everything official, accompanying my mother to the doctor's (...), dealing with official papers. From a very young age, I knew how to write a cheque, pay the rent, go to the doctor's. At the age of 10 I did all these official things for my mother, all her dealings with officialdom" (Boran, 12-H-28-Turkey, the eldest of three children).

The interviews highlight the special attention that eldest children receive from their parents. In return, these children feel responsible toward their parents and that they should live up to their expectations. This means working hard at school, being obedient, obtaining qualifications and aiming for a "good job". However, because these families lack the characteristics that favour educational success, it takes a lot of effort and perseverance for these eldest children to go on to higher education and lead their siblings on the same path.

The attention that the eldest child receives also has to do with the specific family environment with which it is associated. For a period, the eldest child is an only child, and then a child in a small family. When he refers to "the luck of the eldest", Desplanques (1981) implies the dilution of parents' involvement as the number of children increases. While parents manage, despite their low cultural capital, to supervise their children's

education in the early years of primary school, they cannot offer all their children the same amount of help, especially when there are (very) many of them.

Samia's mother devoted a lot of energy to supervising her first two children: "She was very strict about school (...). (She) was able to help us (...) until we started secondary school [but after that] it was more [complicated]... When we were in primary school, it was fairly easy for her to help us (...). It was fairly straightforward; we just had to learn things by heart. And when I say 'by heart', I mean for her 'the' was not the same thing as 'a'. She would say, "You don't know it" and tell us to start over from the beginning. She also taught us to count at an early age. This way of doing things (...) was so much effort for her and took up so much of her time that when there were more of us, it got harder and harder. We took over from her, of course, with the younger ones, but we were studying ourselves and had more and more of our own homework the older we got" (**Samia, 55-F-30-Morocco, the eldest of six children**).

Parents make a bigger symbolic and material investment in the eldest child. But this is not only a cultural phenomenon reflecting a traditional family system where the eldest child has a special status, especially if he is a son. It is also because, as time passes, parents are described as increasingly tired (fathers, because they have particularly tiring work, and mothers because they are overwhelmed with household chores stemming from the large number of children) and "giving up" on the youngest children, especially if their intensive involvement in their elder children's education has not paid off. It has been shown before that "lesser mobilization of older parents [with younger children] is linked to worsening living conditions, themselves due to unemployment or illness, a less favourable local context due to suburban decay (...). This lesser mobilization is not a sign of disinterest, but rather an effect of the life cycle" (Santelli 2001, p. 165). Thus, the position in the family reflects changes that have affected the family's circumstances and the social environment in which the family lives. Major changes—whether place of residence, educational environment, conditions on the local labour market—may have occurred between the birth of the eldest and the youngest children from the same family. Santelli's research (2001, 2007, 2014), based on a life course approach, has highlighted the importance of these contexts for understanding the plurality of pathways between children of immigrants from the same cohort and from different cohorts.

Samia thinks that, in relation to her two youngest siblings, her mother, although very involved, was more tired, had less energy and supervised them less. They were also more spoilt than the elder children and "were more distracted by mobile phones". Moreover, the school system had changed: "When they introduced English at primary school, she couldn't keep up anymore". Although Samia does not link it directly to the educational pathways of the three youngest children, she mentions that her father, a "workaholic" "was made redundant in 1996 when his plant closed and [it was] a big blow for him". (**Samia, 55-F-30-Morocco, the eldest of six children**).

While some eldest children benefited from more advantageous family and social circumstances, some also suffered from a lack of information and support in making



choices about their education. In some cases, it takes several years for immigrant parents to decide to settle long-term in France. During this period, “families sacrifice the education of the older children with the aim of earning money quickly and returning back home” (Rygiel, cited by Oris et al. 2007, p. 13). Therefore, the position of youngest children might be more advantageous, because they also benefit from the educational experience of their elder siblings, and sometimes from their help on a daily basis.

### Help from siblings: a neglected dimension of family involvement in education

The statistical analysis shows that there is more help between siblings in large immigrant families than in non-immigrant families (Table 3). Moreover, in immigrant families, regardless of the parents’ country of origin, siblings consistently provide more help than parents. Elder siblings are particularly active in Maghrebi families, especially Algerian families: more than 50 % of the respondents who grew up in an Algerian family said their elder siblings helped them with their homework. The frequency of help is lower in other families, but still higher in immigrant families than in majority-population families. In the latter, siblings provide less help than parents.

In terms of education, elder siblings offer their younger brothers and sisters various types of help, including setting an example by doing their own homework; helping them with exercises; helping them learn lessons by heart; motivating and encouraging them; and monitoring their marks.<sup>6</sup>

Aida, the seventh of nine children (the two eldest children have different mothers: one died and the other has almost always lived in Algeria), was helped and influenced a lot by her elder sister (her parents’ eldest daughter): “She supervised our homework and managed dealings with officialdom (...). She had a big influence. When she went to university, she lent us books and we talked a lot about school (...). Whenever I had an essay to write, I went to see her. Even now, we discuss ideas and lend each other books”. (**Aida, 08-F-38 Algeria, the seventh of nine children**).

Halim’s mother was able to supervise his homework (and explain lessons to her children) in primary school, but once he started secondary school, his elder siblings took over: “the older ones helped the younger ones” according to their abilities: “Abdel (the eldest brother) with maths, Samia (the eldest sister) with spelling (...)”. (**Halim, 34-H-36-Algeria, the fifth of six children**).

The influence of siblings is by no means limited to help with everyday life and homework, however. When the elder siblings enter the labour market, they provide

**Table 3** Help with homework from siblings

	Majority population	Algeria	Morocco-Tunisia	Sub-Saharan Africa	Turkey	All children of immigrants
Help from siblings (families with two or more children)	30	56	45	36	42	50
Help from siblings (families with four or more children)	34	59	48	40	46	53

Source: TeO Survey, INED-INSEE, 2008

Scope: Immigrants’ children born or socialised in France and majority population, aged 25–40, from a working-class background

additional income, which can be used to enable younger siblings to continue their education. It is not unusual for elder siblings to support their parents financially, either by contributing to household expenses if they still live in the family home, by providing regular or occasional support to their parents and/or by paying some or all of their younger siblings' educational expenses. The family's financial situation may also force them to give up their education and get a job to support their younger brothers and sisters.

Aydin, the fifth of six children, is the second and last son. His father wanted his eldest son to become a doctor, but Aydin describes his brother as "smart and a good talker, but not academic". So Aydin took up his father's ambition. The family's financial circumstances had improved considerably, enabling them to pay for private tuition for Aydin. When his elder brother went into business, this undeniably contributed, since Aydin benefited from his brother's help to cover the cost of his education. (**Aydin, 3-H-27-Turkey, the fifth of six children**).

We saw that mothers can strongly support their daughters to emancipate them from the roles traditionally assigned to women. This type of solidarity also operates between sisters: elder sisters mobilize to give their younger sisters the benefit of their experience and stay in education for longer and, more broadly, to emancipate them from the values inherited from the family.

Rachida, aged 30, is the eldest of five sisters (she was born in 1978, and her youngest sister in 1996). She was a role model for her sisters who all think she set a good example for them to follow. She was also the first to battle with her father to win her independence (get her driver's licence and attend university in another city, which meant moving into student accommodation), achievements that subsequently benefited all her sisters. She paved the way for their emancipation too. (**Rachida, 46-F-32-Algeria, the eldest of five children, all girls**).

Nedjma is the seventh of ten children. She reports that her parents were always more lenient on the boys than on the girls. The girls' outings were more closely supervised, and they also had to do household chores. "When my mother comes to my place, she doesn't understand. She tells me, 'Go and make some coffee; he'll be home from work soon and I tell her, 'It's fine. He can make his own coffee' (...) My younger brother is 28 and still doesn't clean up his own room! (...) My mother does it for him and she thinks that's normal". Nedjma says she had a strict upbringing, but acknowledges that it was nothing compared to what her two elder sisters experienced. As soon as they finished lower-secondary school, they both left home "to live their lives" because they "didn't want to sacrifice themselves for their parents" (the eldest went to live alone and the second-eldest to live with her boyfriend). When the two eldest moved out, it was hard for their parents, especially their father: "It was a double shock". Nedjma says she is close to her sisters, who "blazed the trail toward independence" and always supported her: they always helped her with her homework; they took her out with them when she was a teenager; they spoiled her when she was studying for her final secondary exams; and when she enrolled at university, her sisters were

already working and “helped our parents pay the bills”. Nedjma was also supported by her brother Majid. When she wanted “to give up studying and be independent and earn a living like her older siblings”, he encouraged her to keep going and helped her with her studies. “He got me interested in reading and influenced my choice of degree”. Benefiting from a lot of attention, Nedjma is now a teacher in a vocational secondary school. She is the only one of her siblings to have followed this type of pathway. (**Nedjma, 45-F-36-Algeria, the seventh of ten children**).

Younger siblings benefit from the knowledge acquired by their elder brothers and sisters, especially about which tracks to choose. They show them the path to follow. Younger brothers and sisters can also learn from their elders’ mistakes. Since immigrant parents have limited knowledge of how the French school system works, the educational experience of elder siblings is determinant. Chaib (1998) stresses the educational responsibility of elder siblings and its specific effects on the educational choices of younger siblings. “Calculation and social imitation are important among siblings as familiarity with the education system grows. Siblings thus play an active role in educational destinies because over time they tend to favour a better understanding and return-on-investment of tracks and qualifications”. Many of the interviewees use the word “role model”,<sup>7</sup> either in reference to themselves or to one of their elder siblings in the household.

Help between siblings may result from an explicit parental strategy. Parents are mostly involved in the eldest child’s education. The eldest child—and sometimes the next-eldest children – are then expected or asked to act as a role model for their younger siblings so they can benefit from their experience, and to take over from their parents in assisting and supervising their education.

There are five boys and four girls in Raja’s family. Apart from those still at school (one in the science track of second-last year of secondary school, the other in the third year of secondary school, and the youngest in the third year of primary school), all the boys and the three eldest girls have five-year university degrees (the fourth girl is second-year law). The parents gave their eldest children guidance so they could take responsibility for their own education fairly early. Help between siblings was a strong family practice: “They harped on every day that they couldn’t help with homework and organization and that we had to help our younger siblings (...) When I had problems, I went to my older brothers and sisters, and when my youngest siblings have a problem, they come to see us”. Help is divided up according to the abilities of each sibling, it’s “like a small business”. While the eldest children were left relatively “free” to make their own educational choices, where the younger children are concerned, “we [the eldest] talk about it with them, we talk to our parents, and our parents ask our opinion.” (**Raja, 47-F-27-Morocco, the fourth of nine children**).

In light of the above, younger siblings should be more likely to succeed in education. That is the conclusion reached by Crul (1999), one of the few sociologists to look at the effects of help from siblings in immigrant families (of Turkish and Moroccan origin in the Netherlands). He describes in detail the role of elder siblings and identifies various practices that we have also observed (supervising younger siblings’ homework,

role-modelling for which parents socialise the eldest children, the transmission from eldest to youngest siblings of information that the eldest did not always have at their disposal when making their own educational choices, etc.).

In France, the few studies devoted to the impact of birth rank on educational success have shown that, regardless of how many children in the family or of the social class of origin, eldest children succeed the most (Wolff 2012). This is also the conclusion we reached when we used the data from the TeO survey to cross birth rank with various indicators of educational success (not having repeated a year, an academic track in upper secondary, having obtained the upper secondary-leaving certificate and entry into higher education).<sup>8</sup> The outperformance of eldest children can be attributed to their special place in the family, which is accentuated by migration: they benefit from their parents' full attention and their aspiration "to make a success of their migration". They thus acquire personality traits that they can apply to their education (a competitive spirit, a willingness to work hard, maturity, etc.). Furthermore, the environment of each child differs for reasons related to the family structure and to socio-economic conditions. We saw above that these family and social circumstances might also be more advantageous to the eldest children. Particularly in large families, when there is a big age gap between the eldest and the youngest, different siblings are exposed to different inter-generational dynamics that give them access to different experiences, which may be positive or negative for their educational pathways. The impact of birth rank thus varies according to specific intra-familial dynamics, the gender of the child and interactions with the local environment. It is these "relational configurations" that produce the educational destinies studied here.

## Conclusion

The lower socio-cultural capital of working-class families in general and immigrant families in particular mediates their relationship with school and frequently keeps them "at a distance" (Millet and Thin 2005, P rier 2005). The quantitative analysis shows that the parents are not very involved in helping their children with their homework (fathers even less than mothers).

One of the contributions of the TeO survey is that it highlights disparities in parental involvement according to the children's characteristics. Gender gaps were found to be fairly small, but the gaps between elder and younger siblings are bigger. Help from parents to the eldest child is always more important than to the other children (except in the Turkish families) and in the case of Algerian mothers it is more than double. Aside from status norms that might guide these differentiated behaviours, the interviews reveal the importance of taking into account the change in parental practices over time, because not every child benefits from the same social and family circumstances. As Langevin (1990) summed it up, "being siblings in the same family does not mean growing up in the same family". Santelli (2001) showed that the lower parental involvement on youngest children is not a sign of disinterest but an effect of the life-cycle –indeed, when parents age, they suffer more precarious living conditions, unemployment, disease while at the same time their residential environment is deteriorating<sup>9</sup>.

This paper also highlights the relationships between siblings which are still largely uncharted territory in sociological researches (Oris et al. 2007, Fine 2012). Quantitative

studies do conventionally take the number of siblings into account as a variable to describe educational outcomes (e.g. Caille and Rosenwald 2006) and do demonstrate that family size influences the educational destiny of children by disadvantaging children from large families. But it has been observed that children of immigrants are not as penalised by large family size than children from the majority population (Mogu rou, Santelli, Primon and Hamel, 2013). One of our explanatory hypotheses is that these differences reflect differences in practices of help between siblings. In large immigrant families, there can be a considerable gap between the parents' proclaimed aim (the educational success of their children) and the means at their disposal for achieving that aim. The elder siblings help to realize their parents' educational aspirations and to compensate for what the parents have not been able to provide, despite their ambition. It is important to stress that this particular resource is strongly present in immigrant families (more than in non-immigrant families from the same social class).

If immigrants parents invest less on younger children it is also because they count on elders to take over (Santelli 2001). But elders do not necessarily feel available to do so: they are studying, working, and more generally have their own life and problems. Therefore, help from siblings do not always compensate fewer involvements of parents and this can explain that youngest do not succeed as well as elders in school.

The present study shows that considering siblings and the dynamics between siblings is a productive, heuristic avenue of investigation for explaining the relative outperformance of children of immigrants in secondary school. This success can probably be attributed not only to parental aspirations, but also to strong practices of help between siblings. This particularly robust source of support in immigrant families of Maghrebi origin reflects these children's strong allegiance to their parents' project of upward mobility and transforms their abstract and general aspirations into concrete and specific aspirations.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The authors control not only for the social class of origin (social class of the reference person), but also for the highest educational level attained by the father and the mother, the mother's occupation, the number of siblings and the parental structure.

<sup>2</sup>Such as the DEPP's survey (1998) of the families of pupils who started secondary school in 1995, the Family Involvement in Education Survey by INED and INSEE (1992) or more recently the Education and Family Survey (2003) conducted as part of INSEE's Permanent Living Conditions Survey.

<sup>3</sup>The question about the help for doing homework is « During your schooling, were you helped with your homework by: your father, your mother, your brothers and sisters, friends or others family members, teachers. For each item, the interviewee could clarify whether this help was: often, sometimes or never. In our analysis we regroup items to work on a dichotomised variable.

<sup>4</sup>« From working-class families » reflects the work situation of the parents when Ego was 15 years old meaning whether one of them or both were working as a worker or an employee at that time.

<sup>5</sup>The first figure is the interview number, the letter (F or M) is the gender of the interviewee, and the second figure is the age of the interviewee, followed by the parents' country of origin.

<sup>6</sup>Schnell (2015) contribution to this issue also shows that help from elder siblings is important in some family environments. (à revoir et finaliser une fois la rédaction de ce numéro terminée).

<sup>7</sup>Elders are not always role models in the strict sense of the term. To quote Widmer (quoted by Oris et al. 2007) “interaction can also take the form of rejection or rebellion”. Some younger siblings thus construct their educational pathways as a reaction against their perception of their elder siblings. An elder sibling’s failure might encourage younger siblings not to repeat the same pattern. Conversely, in conditions of high unemployment, younger siblings are often affected by their elder siblings’ experiences of unemployment, job insecurity and over qualification. They might decide not to work hard at school as their elder siblings did, because they see it as “pointless”.

<sup>8</sup>These tabulations have not yet been published. They were produced for a journalist from the newspaper *Le Monde*, Anne Chemin, who wanted to make a summary of the specific place of eldest children in families. For more detail, read her article (in French): [http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2013/02/07/l-aîne-ce-champion\\_1828669\\_3246.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2013/02/07/l-aîne-ce-champion_1828669_3246.html).

<sup>9</sup>The deterioration of residential life was associated with the deterioration of school context, that is to say, for example, an increase of ethnical segregation in schools.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

#### Authors’ contributions

LM has made substantial contributions to conception and design of quantitative and qualitative data, and to analysis and interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data ; 2) has been involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content; 3) has given final approval of the version to be published; and 4) agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work. ES 1) has made substantial contributions to conception and design of quantitative and qualitative data, and to analysis and interpretation of qualitative data ; 2) has been involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content; 3) has given final approval of the version to be published; and 4) agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Received: 26 June 2014 Accepted: 23 December 2014

Published online: 03 October 2015

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