

# Selection and the economic value of education: A barrier to reducing the SES achievement gap?

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## Abstract

Due to the role that schools play in determining the status of the future occupations of their children (i.e., the selection function of education), high socioeconomic status (SES) parents may not always be supportive of interventions that would reduce the SES achievement gap. In four experiments, we measured the support of parents ( $N_{total} = 1966$ ) for implementing an equalizing (and, in Experiments 2 and 3, an inequality-maintaining) intervention. In Experiments 1 and 2, a negative association between subjective SES and support for the equalizing intervention was found when the selection function was made salient, an effect that was also observed in Experiment 4 but only for Right-leaning participants. In Experiment 3, where the salience of selection was held constant, we found a negative association between subjective SES and support for the equalizing intervention, but not the inequality-maintaining intervention.

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely assumed that school success reflects the ability and effort of students (Kuppens et al., 2018), yet there is a persistent socioeconomic status (SES) achievement gap whereby low-SES children perform less well than their high-SES counterparts, even when controlling for ability (e.g., Kraus & Park, 2017). For example, recent data show that on average, in all OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, low SES teenagers are seven times more likely than their higher SES counterparts not to achieve basic mathematics proficiency. The SES achievement gap is especially marked in France. Indeed, for more than 10 years, France has been one of the OECD countries where the link between pupils' SES and performance is among the strongest (OECD, 2023a).

In such a context, educators and parents should be supportive of interventions that reduce this SES achievement gap. However, there are reasons to anticipate that those who benefit from the status quo, namely parents who have a relatively high-SES, may not always support such interventions. In the current research, we examine whether this is the case, and the factors that give rise to this support or lack of support.

### When education serves selection

Most western societies are characterized by status and economic disparities between social groups. Higher status groups possess disproportionate amounts of positively valued attributes (e.g., power, health care, food, homes; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In such a system, higher status occupations are valued but limited in number, creating a competition for status (Butera et al., 2024). Research shows that this is where the school system plays a crucial role (Batruch et al., 2019; Darnon et al., 2009). Indeed, many pupils enter school each year, but only a fraction of them attain grades sufficient for them to move into the most valued tracks and attain the associated diplomas. In turn, indicators of school success (e.g., diplomas, grades, ranks) strongly determine one's future occupational opportunities and consequently, one's future socioeconomic status (OECD, 2014, 2023b; see also Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). In other words, the educational system serves a "selection function" that involves sorting and ranking individuals, a process that ultimately assigns them to differentially valued occupational roles in society.

### Selection and social reproduction

Because of the importance of school selection in acquiring socioeconomic status, it is argued that this selection function should be based purely on individual merit (Batruch et al., 2023; Croizet et al., 2017; Mijis, 2016). In reality, as initially developed in Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu et al., 1990), this selection is also highly "reproductive." Lower SES pupils typically have fewer resources to begin with, and are more likely than their upper SES counterparts to experience disruptive processes in the school environment (for a review, see Goudeau et al., 2017, 2024; see also Buzan & Sheehy-Skeffington, 2024). A frequently replicated finding in educational research is that children from underprivileged backgrounds enjoy poorer academic success than do children from higher SES families (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982). Supporting the idea that the selection process usually favors higher SES groups, some research has shown that the selection function

of education is associated with a range of practices that eventually increase the SES achievement gap (Autin et al., 2015; Batruch et al., 2019; Jury et al., 2015; Smeding et al., 2013).

It is worth noting that the educational system, through its function of selection, also helps to legitimize the existing SES hierarchy (Sheehy-Skeffington et al., 2024). Indeed, inequalities between social groups are more likely to be regarded as legitimate if they are based on school achievement and therefore, in theory, on merit (Batruch et al., 2023; Kuppens et al., 2018). In line with this idea, the more that individuals believe that school grades and college degrees reward ability and effort, the lower is their willingness to support equalizing pedagogical interventions in their children's school (Darnon, Smeding, et al., 2018).

## What if the existing hierarchy was no longer supported?

We argue that because of the function of the school system in reproducing and legitimizing the existing SES hierarchy, pedagogical interventions that serve to equalize this hierarchy are likely to encounter some resistance. There is a long tradition of social psychological research showing that invisible forces act to maintain and legitimize the status quo (e.g., Costa-Lopes et al., 2013; Pratto, 1999; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and present obstacles to hierarchy-attenuating practices (e.g., redistributive policies, affirmative action, Crosby & Franco, 2003; Kay et al., 2009). This is particularly true for higher status individuals (Crosby et al., 2006; Pratto et al., 1997). Indeed, such individuals usually see the political system as fairer than do lower status individuals (Brown-Lanuzi et al., 2017; Jost & Burgess, 2000). They are less opposed to group-based hierarchy (Lee et al., 2011) and less inclined to support affirmative action and redistribution than are lower status groups (Crosby et al., 2006; Karadja et al., 2016; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). Applying this to the school system suggests that parents who perceive themselves as higher in SES should be less likely to support equalizing pedagogical interventions than parents who see themselves as lower in SES.

## Overview and hypotheses

The purpose of the four experiments reported below was to examine the determinants of parental support for the implementation of an intervention in their children's school. In Experiments 1, 2, and 4, we tested the hypothesis that subjective SES negatively predicts support for an equalizing intervention when the selection function of education is made salient; in Experiments 2 and 3, we also examined support for an intervention that improves students' performance while maintaining existing inequalities. More precisely, in Experiments 1, 2, and 4, participants read a text that either was or was not (neutral condition) about the selection function of the educational system and the related economic value of educational success. They were then told about a pedagogical intervention that reduced (or maintained, in Experiments 2 and 3) the SES achievement gap (see [Supporting Information, SM](#)). We argue that when parents are reminded of the importance of education in determining future socioeconomic position (i.e., the selection function of education), the higher their SES, the less they will support the implementation of an equalizing intervention at their children's school (Hypothesis 1). In Experiment 3, all participants were reminded about the selection function of education. SES should negatively be associated with support for the equalizing intervention, but not the inequality-maintaining intervention (Hypothesis 2).

## EXPERIMENT 1

### Method

#### Study pre-registration and power analysis

Experiments 1 and 2 were pre-registered (materials, hypotheses, and data analysis plans, <https://osf.io/z6h5m/registrations>). Because Experiment 1 involved a previously untested experimental manipulation of the selection function of education, the power analysis relied on previous research using a different manipulation that yielded medium-sized interaction effects (i.e.,  $\eta_p^2$ s  $\in$  [.06, .16]; Jury et al., 2015, 2017). We conducted a pre-registered power analysis (with .80 power) to estimate the sample size required to detect an interaction effect of a similar size ( $\eta_p^2$ s = .08). The target sample size was 93 and we therefore planned to recruit 100 participants.

#### Participants

Parents were recruited in public spaces by one of two female experimenters. They were offered a children's book in exchange for their participation. Participants were 102 French parents with at least one child enrolled in a French school at the time of the study. Six participants were excluded due to missing data on the political orientation measure or the outcome variables, and data from a further six participants were removed because they failed to answer one of the two open-ended manipulation check questions (see SM), resulting in a final sample size of 90 (56 women, 34 men,  $M_{\text{age}} = 44.20$ ,  $SD = 6.62$ ).

#### Procedure and material

All parents read a text headed "Why do we study the perceptions parents have of their children's school?" In the *selection condition* ( $n = 47$ ), the value of education in acquiring future status was highlighted. Indeed, the text explained that school success predicts later success in life and that recent studies had demonstrated that the higher a child's academic achievement, the greater are his or her chances of occupying a high socioeconomic status position. In the *control condition* ( $n = 43$ ), the text mentioned various determinants of parents' perceptions of their children's schools (e.g., location) without any mention of social status or future social position. To ensure participants had read the text, they were asked to summarize it in one sentence (first manipulation check question).

Participants were then presented with a (fictional) equalizing intervention (see Darnon, Jury, et al., 2018, Darnon et al., 2022; see also SM). This was framed as a "new pedagogical intervention" that was based on a previous study. Results from this study supposedly indicated that the SES achievement gap was reduced following the intervention. The equalizing impact of the intervention was visualized in a bar plot depicting the pre- and post-intervention SES achievement gap, expressed as the mean GPA difference between low and high SES children's mean grades, with no difference post-intervention. To ensure that participants had attended to the bar plot, they were asked to report low versus high SES children's mean grades before and after the intervention (second manipulation check question). Participants then reported their interest in the intervention, as

well as their behavioral support.<sup>1</sup> Next, they reported the academic achievement of their children, their subjective SES, and their political orientation. Finally, they read a debriefing text.

## Variables

Correlations between variables for all four studies are presented in the Supporting Information (Table S1).

### *Behavioral support for the equalizing intervention*

Participants read that a group of teachers, educators, experts, and parents was being assembled to consider how the intervention could be implemented in schools. Participants' willingness to support the intervention in their children's school was assessed using four ordinal categories: (i) "I am not interested," (ii) "I would like to receive more information about this group"; (iii) "I would like to participate in the first meeting of this group," and (iv) "I would like to be part of the group (one meeting per week for two months)." To make these options appear real, participants who said they were interested were told they would have to provide their email address in a separate file at the end of the experiment, enabling them to be contacted by the group.

### *Subjective SES*

Participants' subjective SES was assessed using the McArthur 10-rung ladder (Adler et al., 2000). We opted for this measure because we wanted to assess parents' perceptions of their socioeconomic position (i.e., their relative rank) within society (Adler et al., 2000; Kraus et al., 2012; Tan et al., 2020), rather than their absolute level of material resources. Participants were asked to indicate which rung they thought represented their family position in society. The higher parents' perception of their SES, the closer their responses approached rung 10 ( $M = 5.59$ ;  $SD = 1.51$ ).

### *Covariates (Political orientation and achievement level of the child)*

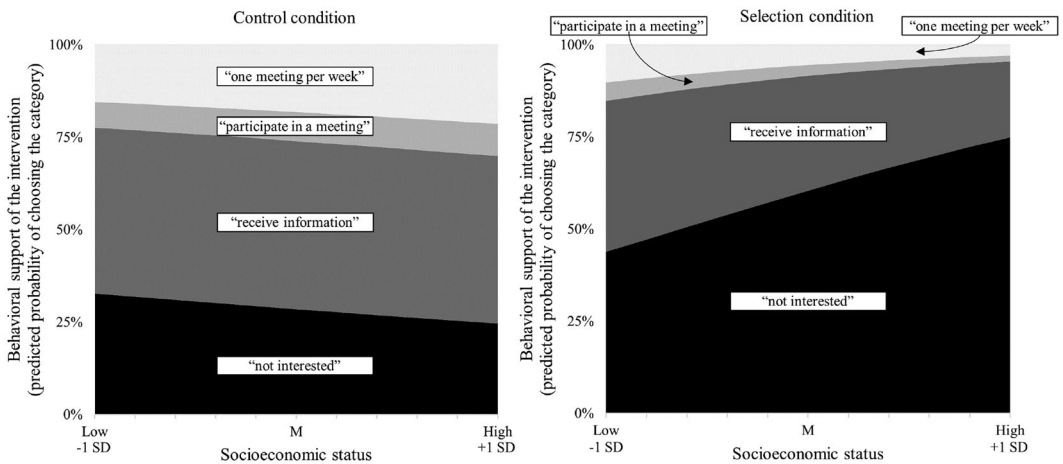
Parents reported their political orientation on a scale ranging from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right,  $M = 4.86$ ;  $SD = 1.23$ ). They estimated the achievement level of their child using three items: in general, in Math, and in French. Ratings were made on a 7-point scale (1 = low level, 7 = high level;  $\alpha = .83$ ;  $M = 5.99$ ;  $SD = 1.01$ ).

## Results

### Analytic strategy and preliminary analyses

Because the outcome variable consisted of ordinal categories rather than continuous scores, we used ordered logistic regression. The pre-registered ordered logistic regression model included three predictors: selection condition (control vs. selection, coded  $-0.5$  and  $0.5$ , respectively), subjective SES (mean-centered), and the interaction term. In the present experiment (as in the other two), we used an alpha level of .05. Marginal effects ( $p < .10$ ) will be discussed but only if they

<sup>1</sup>In previous research, effects were observed mainly on behavioral support (Darnon, Smeding, et al., 2018; Darnon et al., 2022), but were less consistent on self-report interest (perhaps reflecting the influence of social desirability), so the present study focuses on the behavioral support measure. Results for self-report interest can be found in the SM.



**FIGURE 1** Experiment 1: Interaction between the condition (control condition, left panel vs. selection condition, right panel) and subjective SES (*x*-axes) in predicting behavioral support of the intervention (four ordered categories: “I am not interested,” “I wct about this group,” “I would like to participate in the first meeting of this group,” “I would like to be part of the group (one meeting per week for two months).”)

were predicted (and therefore pre-registered). As per the pre-registration, we initially regressed political orientation on condition, SES, and the interaction; because we observed an effect of SES ( $p < .001$ ), the interaction term between political orientation and condition was retained in the analysis (see Yzerbyt et al., 2004). In another set of pre-registered preliminary analyses, we tested the effect of perceived child achievement level and its interaction with our independent variables in predicting the behavioral support. No significant effects were observed, so these terms were discarded.

## Main analysis

The key results of the logistic regressions are shown in Table 1 (left-hand column).

## Behavioral support for the equalizing intervention

The null hypothesis of proportional odds (the core assumption of ordered logistic regression) was not rejected, Likelihood-ratio  $\chi^2(10) = 12.01$ ,  $p = .284$ . There was a negative effect of condition,  $B = -1.34$ , 95% CI  $[-2.21, -0.47]$ ,  $Z = -3.02$ ,  $p = .003$ , OR = 0.26. In the selection condition, parents were less likely to support the intervention than were parents in the control condition (40.88% vs. 70.03%) and more likely to declare that they were “not interested” (59.12% vs. 29.72%). More importantly, and congruent with Hypothesis 1, the interaction between condition and subjective SES approached significance,  $B = -0.59$   $[-1.23, 0.05]$ ,  $Z = -1.79$ ,  $p = .073$ , OR = 0.55. Simple slope analysis indicated that SES was a negative predictor of behavioral support in the selection condition,  $B = -0.45$   $[-0.90, -0.01]$ ,  $Z = -2.01$ ,  $p = .044$ , OR = 0.64, but not in the control condition,  $B = 0.14$   $[-0.33, 0.60]$ ,  $Z < 1$ ,  $p = .5679$  (see Figure 1).

**TABLE 1** Experiments 1, 2, 3, and 4: Odds ratios (with 95% CIs) of ordered logistic regression models testing the effects of subjective SES and condition (Experiment 1 and 4); subjective SES, condition, and intervention (Experiment 2) and subjective SES, intervention, and perceived inequalities (Experiment 3) on behavioral support. Odds ratios capture the statistical effect of a predictor on the odds of being in a higher, rather than a lower, category of the behavioral outcome.

	Experiment 1		Experiment 2		Experiment 3		Experiment 4	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
SES	0.85	[0.62, 1.17]	0.92	[0.77, 1.09]	0.98	[0.89, 1.07]	0.99	0.91, 1.07
Condition (-0.5 = control; +0.5 = selection)	0.26**	[0.11, 0.62]	0.81	[0.49, 1.33]			1.03	[0.80, 1.32]
SES × Condition	0.55 <sup>†</sup>	[0.29, 1.06]	0.74 <sup>†</sup>	[0.52, 1.04]			1.12	[0.95, 1.32]
Intervention (-0.5 = equalizing; +0.5 = inequality-maintaining)			0.87	[0.53, 1.43]	0.82	[0.63, 1.08]		
SES × Intervention			0.79	[0.56, 1.11]	1.21*	[1.00, 1.45]		
Condition × Intervention			0.93	[0.35, 2.52]				
SES × Condition × Intervention			1.13	[0.58, 2.22]				
Perceived inequalities					1.11	[0.997, 1.24]		
SES × Inequalities					0.92*	[0.85, 0.99]		
Intervention × Inequalities					1.18	[0.95, 1.47]		
SES × Intervention × Inequalities					0.92	[0.79, 1.08]		

*Note:* Control variables (political orientation and child achievement level) and their interactions with the predictor variables were entered in the model when necessary (see “Analytic strategy and preliminary analyses”) but are not reported here.

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; OR, odds ratio; SES, socioeconomic status.

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; <sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

## EXPERIMENT 1 DISCUSSION

Parents often tell children that being successful at school is the key to a successful future. These parents are not lying. One of the most powerful determinants of adult income is level of education (OECD, 2014, 2023b). This is such a common claim that it is hard to imagine that making it salient could, paradoxically, be a barrier to school change. The results show that reminding parents about the way the school system helps to determine social status tended to reduce their support for implementing an equalizing intervention at their children's school. Although the predicted interaction between selection and SES (Hypothesis 1) did not exceed the conventional significance threshold, the effect of SES was more apparent in the selection condition.

It is worth noting that these results do not preclude the possibility that higher SES parents may simply be happier with the current school system and that making the selection function salient might have reduced their support for any intervention, not only an equalizing one. In Experiments 2 and 3, we therefore manipulated the extent to which the proposed intervention reduced the SES gap: The intervention was said to either reduce (the “equalizing intervention,” as used in Experiment 1) or maintain the SES gap (the “inequality-maintaining” intervention). We expected subjective SES to negatively predict support for the equalizing intervention to a greater extent than their support for the inequality-maintaining intervention (Hypothesis 2).

## EXPERIMENT 2

### Method

#### Participants

In Experiment 1, the predicted interaction effect was small in size. We conducted a power analysis (with .80 power) to estimate the sample size required to detect an interaction effect of a similar size ( $\eta^2_p \approx .03$ ). The target sample size was 272. We oversampled to ensure that we could achieve this number after excluding missing data. Participants were 305 French parents who had at least one child enrolled in a school at the time of the study. They were recruited online using the Qualtrics participant pool and received remuneration in exchange for their participation. Fifteen participants were excluded due to missing data on the political orientation measure or the outcome variables, and a further 69 because they failed to answer one of the two open-ended manipulation check questions, resulting in a final sample of 221 participants (92 men, 127 women, 2 unspecified,  $M_{\text{age}} = 42.06$ ,  $SD = 7.69$ ).

#### Procedure and material

As in Experiment 1, the selection function of schools was manipulated: Participants were assigned to either the selection condition ( $n = 108$ ) or the control condition ( $n = 113$ ). They were then either presented with an “equalizing intervention” (as in Experiment 1,  $n = 110$ ), or an “inequality-maintaining intervention” ( $n = 111$ ), which was presented as increasing overall school achievement while maintaining the SES achievement gap (see SM). In both conditions, the mean GPA attained by pupils before the intervention was lower than after its implementation, and both higher and lower SES students' scores improved. The difference between the two conditions was that in the “equalizing intervention condition,” the increase for lower SES students was such that it allowed them to achieve the same mean GPA as higher SES students. This was not the case in



the inequality-maintaining intervention. Participants completed the same measures as those used in Experiment 1. Finally, they read a debriefing text and an email address was provided, in case they had questions or wanted to receive the full results of the study.

## Variables

All variables (behavioral support, subjective SES, child achievement level, political orientation) were assessed using the same measures as those used in Experiment 1 (SES,  $M = 5.41$ ;  $SD = 1.48$ ; child achievement level,  $\alpha = .81$ ;  $M = 5.15$ ;  $SD = 1.09$ ; political orientation,  $M = 5.17$ ;  $SD = 1.91$ ).

## Results

The key results of the logistic regressions are shown in Table 1.

### Analytic strategy and preliminary analyses

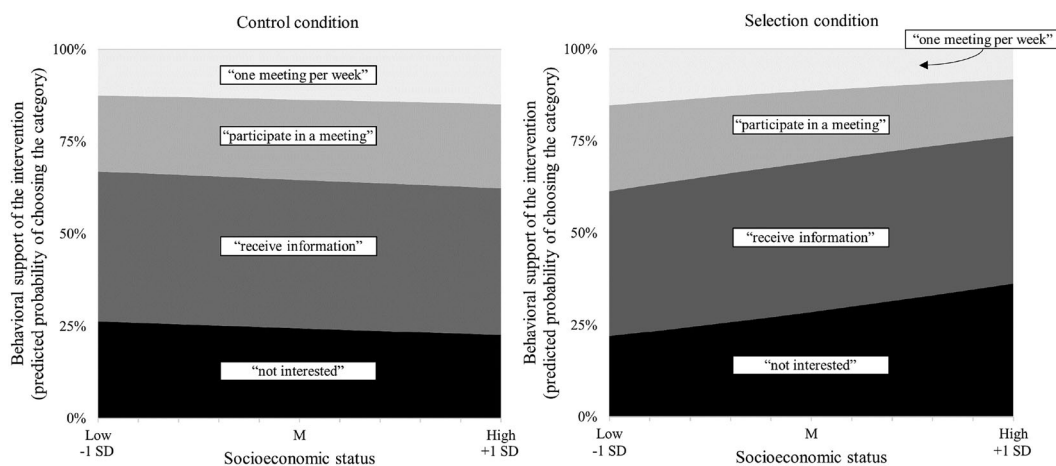
The pre-registered regression model included seven predictors: Selection condition (control vs. selection, coded  $-0.5$  and  $0.5$ , respectively), intervention (equalizing vs. inequality-maintaining, coded  $-0.5$  and  $0.5$ , respectively), subjective SES (mean-centered), and all possible interaction terms. As also pre-registered, we initially regressed political orientation on condition, intervention, SES, and the interactions; because we observed an effect of SES ( $p = .019$ ), the first-order interaction terms between political orientation and each independent variable were retained in the main analysis (see Yzerbyt et al., 2004). In another set of preliminary analyses, we tested for the main effect of perceived child achievement level and its interaction with the independent variables in predicting the outcomes. The interaction with the intervention was significant ( $p = .021$ ), so this term was also retained.

### Behavioral support for the equalizing intervention

The null hypothesis of proportional odds assumption was not rejected,  $LR\chi^2(24) = 30.33$ ,  $p = .174$ . The main effect of selection condition was not significant,  $B = -0.21$  [ $-0.71, 0.28$ ],  $Z < 1$ ,  $p = .397$ . More importantly, congruent with Hypothesis 1, the interaction between condition and SES approached significance,  $B = -0.31$  [ $-0.65, 0.04$ ],  $Z = -1.75$ ,  $p = .081$ ,  $OR = 0.74$ . Simple slopes analysis indicated that SES tended to negatively predict behavioral support in the selection condition,  $B = -0.24$  [ $-0.50, 0.02$ ],  $Z = -1.80$ ,  $p = .072$ ,  $OR = 0.79$ , but not in the control condition,  $B = 0.07$  [ $-0.16, 0.29$ ],  $Z < 1$ ,  $p = .554$  (see Figure 2). However, we did not observe the second-order interaction between condition, intervention, and SES,  $B = 0.12$  [ $-0.55, 0.80$ ],  $Z < 1$ ,  $p = .721$ , predicted by Hypothesis 2.

## EXPERIMENT 2 DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results of Experiments 1 and 2 provide partial support for the idea that when the selection function of education is made salient, the higher the parents' subjective



**FIGURE 2** Experiment 2: Interaction between the selection condition (control condition, left panel vs. selection condition, right panel) and subjective SES (x-axes) in predicting behavioral support of the intervention (four ordered categories: “I am not interested,” “I would like to receive an information document about this group,” “I would like to participate in the first meeting of this group,” “I would like to be part of the group (one meeting per week for two months).”

SES, the lower is their willingness to support the implementation of an intervention designed to improve students’ academic performance (Hypothesis 1). Contrary to Hypothesis 2, however, this effect was not moderated by type of intervention (equalizing vs. inequality-maintaining), leaving unanswered the question of what type of intervention higher SES parents do not want to see implemented at their children’s school. This is important because it raises questions about the mechanism underlying this association between subjective SES and behavioral support for the intervention. If, as argued earlier, this negative association arises from the negative attitudes of higher SES parents toward equality, the effect should have been stronger for the equalizing intervention than for the enhancing (i.e., inequality-maintaining) intervention. However, Experiment 2 may have been underpowered to provide an adequate test of the relevant three-way interaction. In Experiment 3, we address this issue and test this hypothesis in a better-powered study. To help achieve that, we used the data from another related experiment, in which the selection function was held constant, and the intervention type was manipulated. We therefore predicted a two-way interaction between subjective SES and intervention type (Hypothesis 2).

The data used in Experiment 3 also included a measure of perception of economic inequality in society (Jetten et al., 2017; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). Thus, for exploratory purposes, we tested whether this variable would moderate the link between subjective SES and support for the interventions. On the one hand, if the negative association between subjective SES and support for the intervention is due to higher SES participants’ concern to maintain their current advantages, this association should be stronger in those who perceive existing societal inequality to be high. On the other hand, those who perceive economic inequality to be low are usually people who endorse anti-egalitarian beliefs (e.g., high level of SDO, see Kteily et al., 2017; Waldfogel et al., 2021). Consequently, an alternative hypothesis is that the association will be stronger in those who perceive existing societal inequality to be low. These alternative hypotheses will be tested in Experiment 3.

## EXPERIMENT 3

### Method

Experiment 3 was originally conducted to test a hypothesis concerning parents' perceptions of their child achievement level. However, this research included measures of subjective SES, support for the two types of intervention, as well as political orientation and perception of existing societal inequality. We were therefore able to use this dataset to test the hypothesis of a two-way interaction between subjective SES and intervention type, despite this hypothesis not being pre-registered. Here, only the variables relevant to this hypothesis will be described but the full set of variables included in the experiment can be found at [https://osf.io/qhbxt/?view\\_only=f1a027fc5985482e870227983e79254b](https://osf.io/qhbxt/?view_only=f1a027fc5985482e870227983e79254b).

### Participants

Participants were 845 UK parents who had at least one child enrolled in secondary school at the time of the study. They were recruited using the Prolific Academic participant pool and received remuneration in exchange for their participation. One participant was excluded due to missing data on the political orientation measure, and a further 30 were excluded because they did not answer the manipulation check questions correctly, resulting in a final sample of 814 participants (189 men, 624 women, 1 unspecified;  $M_{\text{age}} = 42.51$ ,  $SD = 6.73$ ). According to INT×Power (Sommet et al., 2023), the analytical sample size was sufficient to detect a fully attenuated interaction of  $d \approx 0.20$  (i.e., involving a null simple slope and a medium-sized simple slope of  $d \approx 0.40$ ) with a power of .80 and an  $\alpha$  of .05.

### Procedure and material

All participants read the text making the selection function salient (the text was the same as that used in the selection conditions of Experiments 1 and 2). They were then presented with either the “equalizing intervention” ( $n = 407$ ), or the “inequality-maintaining intervention” ( $n = 407$ ), as in Experiment 2, the only difference being that the mean grades allegedly attained before and after the intervention ranged from 0 to 100, rather than from 0 to 20, to be more consistent with grading systems used in the United Kingdom. Participants then answered the various measures (see below). Finally, they were presented with a short debrief text, and an email address was provided so that they could contact the research team if they had questions or wanted to receive the full results of the study.

### Variables

Behavioral support, child achievement level, and political orientation were assessed using the same measures as in Experiments 1 and 2 (child achievement level,  $\alpha = .86$ ;  $M = 4.99$ ;  $SD = 1.13$ ; political orientation,  $M = 4.82$ ;  $SD = 1.54$ ). The subjective SES scale was initially reversed such that higher values corresponded to lower subjective SES and lower values to higher subjective SES. For analysis purposes, responses were reverse-coded, such that higher scores reflect a higher SES ( $M = 5.65$ ;  $SD = 1.60$ ).

As noted above, the study also included a measure of perceived societal inequality, drawing on work by Rodríguez-Bailón et al. (2017, see also, Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Participants were presented with seven figures representing differing degrees of inequality of wealth between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% in society, with other intermediate quintiles. In the lowest inequality figure, the richest 20% is shown to have approximately 1.3 times the wealth of the poorest 20%; in the highest inequality figure, the richest 20% is shown to have approximately 28 times the wealth of the poorest 20%. Participants were asked to choose the figure that, according to them, most accurately represented the economic structure of contemporary UK society ( $M = 5.78$ ;  $SD = 1.29$ ).

## Results

The key results of the logistic regressions are shown in Table 1.

### Analytic strategy and preliminary analyses

The regression model included 31 predictors: Intervention (equalizing vs. inequality-maintaining, coded  $-0.5$  and  $0.5$ , respectively), subjective SES, perceived economic inequalities, child achievement level, political orientation (all mean-centered), and all possible interactions.

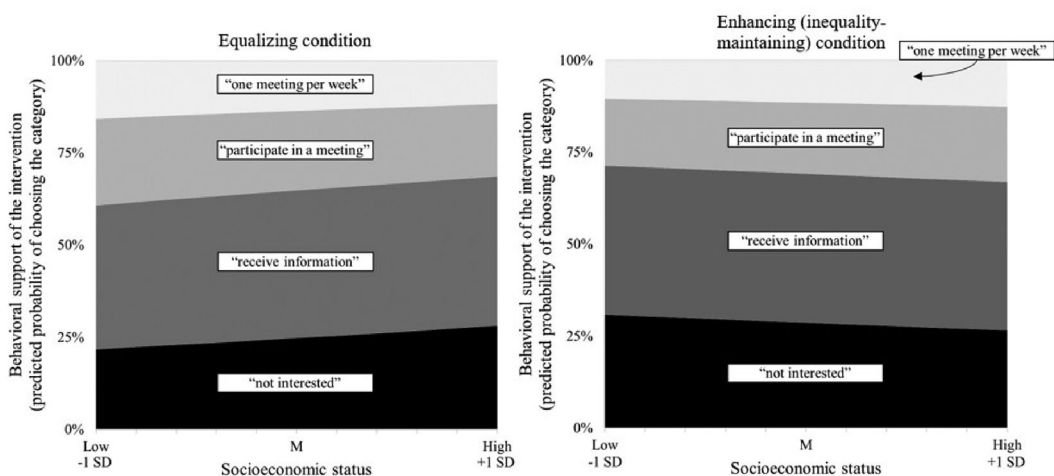
### Behavioral support for the equalizing intervention

The null hypothesis of proportional odds was not rejected,  $LR \chi^2(62) = 53.92$ ,  $p = .758$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the interaction between SES and intervention type was significant,  $B = 0.19$  [ $0.002, 0.37$ ],  $Z = 1.98$ ,  $p = .048$ ,  $OR = 1.21$ . Simple slope analysis indicated that subjective SES was negatively related to support in the equalizing condition,  $B = -0.12$  [ $-0.24, 0.02$ ],  $Z = -1.71$ ,  $p = .087$ ,  $OR = 0.89$ , but not in the inequality-maintaining condition,  $B = 0.07$  [ $-0.06, 0.20$ ],  $Z = 1.08$ ,  $p = .279$ ,  $OR = 1.07$  (see Figure 3).

Supplementary exploratory analyses revealed that the two-way interaction between SES and perceived inequality was also significant,  $B = -0.09$  [ $-0.16, -0.01$ ],  $Z = -2.11$ ,  $p = .035$ ,  $OR = 1.18$ . The higher the level of perceived inequality, the stronger was the negative relation between SES and support for the intervention. Simple slopes analysis indicated that subjective SES was a negative predictor of support at a high level of perceived inequality,  $B = -0.13$  [ $-0.25, 0.01$ ],  $Z = -2.19$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $OR = 0.88$ , but not at a low level of perceived inequality,  $B = 0.08$  [ $-0.07, 0.24$ ],  $Z = -1.10$ ,  $p = .270$ ,  $OR = 1.09$ . The three-way interaction between SES, intervention, and perceived inequalities was not significant,  $B = -0.08$  [ $-0.23, 0.08$ ],  $Z = -1.00$ ,  $p = .318$ ,  $OR = 0.92$ .

## EXPERIMENT 3 DISCUSSION

We proposed that one of the reasons underlying higher SES parents' lesser support for educational interventions that reduce the SES achievement gap is that higher SES parents are particularly concerned to preserve existing inequality. However, in Experiment 2, the three-way interaction involving intervention type was not significant, raising questions about our argument. A primary



**FIGURE 3** Experiment 3: Interaction between the intervention (equalizing condition, left panel vs. inequality-maintaining condition, right panel) and subjective SES (*x*-axes) in predicting behavioral support of the intervention (four ordered categories: “I am not interested,” “I would like to receive an information document about this group,” “I would like to participate in the first meeting of this group,” “I would like to be part of the group (one meeting per week for two months).” SES, socioeconomic status.

aim of the analyses conducted in Experiment 3 was to retest the prediction that the effect of subjective SES on support for educational interventions would be moderated by intervention type, using a better-powered study. In line with Hypothesis 2, this significant interaction indicated that the negative association between SES and support for the intervention was apparent for the equalizing intervention, but not for the enhancing (inequality-maintaining) one.

Interestingly, supplementary analyses revealed that the negative association between subjective SES and support for the intervention was stronger among parents who perceived a high level of societal inequality. Although this was not a pre-registered hypothesis and thus, more research is needed to draw firm conclusions, this moderation suggests that the lower support for educational interventions on the part of higher SES parents might be due at least in part to a fear of losing a privileged position. In unequal societies, higher positions confer more relative advantages than they do in less unequal societies.

Together, the three experiments reported so far provide tentative support for the idea that higher SES parents may not always support the implementation of an equalizing intervention in their children’s school, particularly when they are reminded of the function of school in determining future socioeconomic positions (Experiments 1 and 2). The results are reasonably consistent across the three experiments, although the effects are small in size and not always significant. This is particularly true for Experiment 1, which used a relatively small sample. A replication study would increase confidence in the findings. That was the purpose of Experiment 4. More precisely, using the exact same material as in Experiment 1, Experiment 4 was designed to examine, 4 years later, whether selection would increase the negative association between SES and behavioral support for the equalizing intervention. The only difference with Experiment 1 was that it was conducted using online participants. It is worth noting that this replication study was conducted in spring 2022, during the 2022 French presidential elections, which took place after two major crises: the French Yellow Vest movement (2019) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021).



## EXPERIMENT 4

### Method

Experiment 4 was pre-registered (materials, hypotheses and data analysis plans: <https://osf.io/x97sf/registrations>).

### Participants

As already mentioned, the purpose of Experiment 4 was to replicate Experiment 1 using a larger sample. A simulation with  $N = 10,000$  simulated samples revealed that a sample size of about  $N = 1000$  participants could detect the predicted attenuated interaction with a small-to-medium critical effect size of  $d = .35$  with a power of .80 (see the pre-registration materials for the Stata script used to perform the simulation). To ensure that we would have sufficient power, we planned to recruit 1500 participants. As in Experiment 1, participants were all French parents who had at least one child enrolled in primary or secondary school at the time of the study. They were recruited using a crowdsourcing platform (Bilendi) and received remuneration in exchange for their participation. A total sample of 1416 participants completed the study. As pre-registered, 16 participants were excluded due to missing data on the political orientation measure or the outcome variables, and a further 575 because they failed to answer the attention check or manipulation checks (see SM for details), resulting in a final sample of 825 participants (430 men, 394 women, 1 unspecified,  $M_{\text{age}} = 44.74$ ,  $SD = 13.95$ ).

### Procedure and material

Participants were randomly assigned to the *selection condition* ( $n = 439$ ) or the *control condition* ( $n = 386$ ), which were similar to Experiment 1. They were then presented with the “equalizing intervention” and answered the same battery of measures as those used in Experiment 1, before reading a debriefing text.

### Variables

Subjective socioeconomic status, behavioral support, child achievement level, and political orientation were assessed using the same measures as in Experiment 1 (child achievement level,  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 5.43$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ; political orientation,  $M = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ). Again, higher scores on SES reflect higher subjective SES ( $M = 5.99$ ;  $SD = 1.56$ ).

### Results

The key results of the logistic regressions are shown in Table 1.

## Analytic strategy and preliminary analyses

As pre-registered, the regression model included the following predictors: Selection condition (control, coded  $-0.5$  vs. selection coded  $+0.5$ ), subjective SES (mean-centered), the interaction term between these two variables as well as mean-centered political orientation and its interactions with the IVs. In preliminary analyses, child academic achievement was entered in the analysis. It significantly predicted the outcome ( $p < .001$ ). However, inclusion of this variable did not significantly affect the results. Thus, as pre-registered, achievement level, as well as its interaction with the IV were not retained in the main analyses.

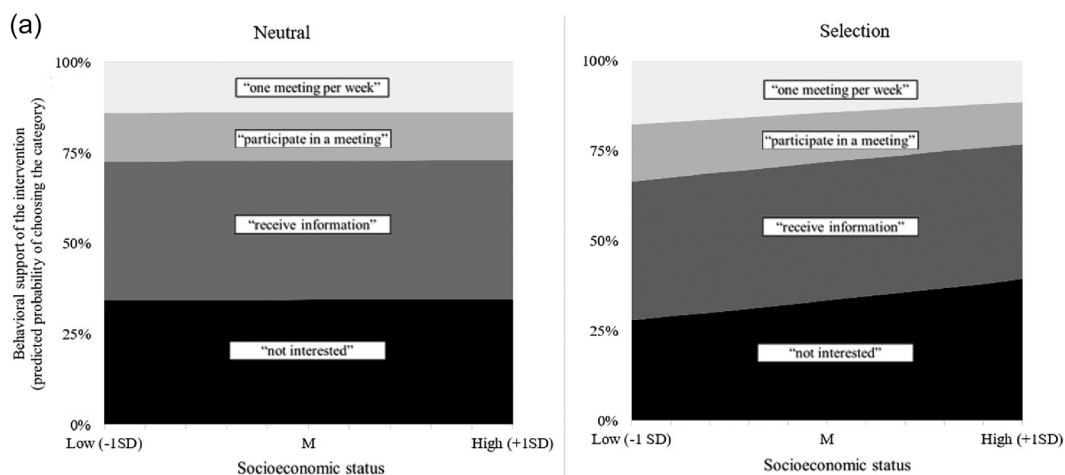
## Behavioral support for the equalizing intervention

The null hypothesis of proportional odds was not rejected, LR  $\chi^2(14) = 15.87$ ,  $p = .321$ . As a reminder, in line with Experiment 1, we expected a *negative* interaction between SES and condition: The effect of SES should be more negative in the selection condition than in the neutral condition. The expected interaction between condition and SES (main hypothesis) was not significant,  $B = 0.12 [-0.05, 0.28]$ ,  $Z = 1.41$ ,  $p = .158$ , OR = 1.12. However, it was qualified by a three-way interaction with political orientation,  $B = -0.12 [-0.19, -0.04]$ ,  $Z = -2.92$ ,  $p = .003$ , OR = 0.89. In order to interpret this three-way interaction, we decomposed it at two levels of political orientation, which correspond to a left-leaning (3 on a scale ranging from 1 “extreme left” to 10 “extreme right”) and right-leaning (8) political orientation. Analyses of simple slopes and two-way interactions at these two levels of political orientation revealed that the expected interaction tended to be negative (i.e., in the expected direction) for right-leaning participants,  $B = -0.16 [-0.38, 0.07]$ ,  $Wald = 1.93$ ,  $p = .16$ , OR = 0.85, but positive for “left-leaning” participants,  $B = 0.42 [0.14, 0.69]$ ,  $Wald = 8.84$ ,  $p = .003$ , OR = 1.52. Thus, in Experiment 4, the interaction effect observed in Experiment 1 was present (albeit non-significant) amongst right-leaning participants but was reversed for left-leaning participants. Figure 4A,B illustrates the interaction between condition and SES for right-leaning (Figure 4A) and left-leaning (Figure 4B) participants.

## EXPERIMENT 4 DISCUSSION

Experiment 4 was a replication of Experiment 1, 4 years later, using online participants. The results obtained only partially replicated the findings observed in Experiment 1. Although the two-way interaction between SES and salience of the selection function of schooling was not significant, it was significantly moderated by political orientation: The negative association between SES and support for the equalizing intervention was stronger in the selection condition than in the neutral condition, but only among right-leaning participants. For left-leaning participants, this association was positive.

Although unpredicted, this interaction seems to be readily interpretable. Political orientation is a consistent predictor of preference for equalizing practices. For example, as compared to left-leaning participants, right-leaning participants are less likely to support affirmative action (Konrad & Spitz, 2003; Sidanius et al., 1996), or progressive (but not reactionary) social movements (Becker, 2020; Proch et al., 2019). Right-leaning participants are also less likely to support equalizing school interventions (Darnon et al., 2022). That could explain why in the context of



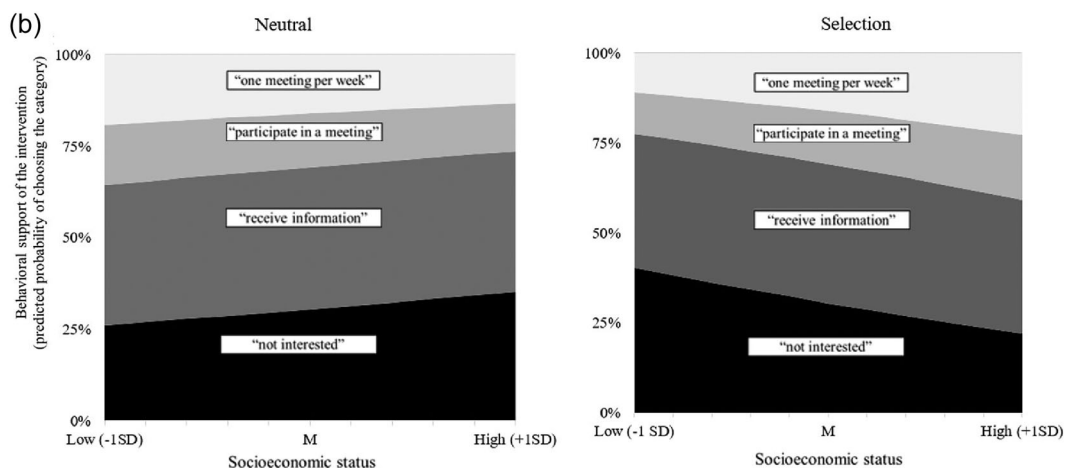
**FIGURE 4A** Experiment 4, right-leaning participants: Interaction between the selection condition (control condition, left panel vs. selection condition, right panel) and subjective SES (x-axes) in predicting behavioral support of the intervention (four ordered categories: “I am not interested,” “I would like to receive an information document about this group,” “I would like to participate in the first meeting of this group,” “I would like to be part of the group (one meeting per week for two months).” for right-leaning participants (value 8 on the political scale ranging from 1 “extreme left” to 10 “extreme right”).

salient political issues (i.e., presidential elections), political orientation moderated the effects of SES and selection condition.

Interestingly, left-leaning higher SES parents did not seem to behave in the same way as right-leaning participants or as participants in Experiments 1 to 3. Indeed, left-leaning higher SES parents were *more*, not less supportive of the equalizing intervention than were their lower SES counterparts. It is important to note that the results of Experiment 4 show that the effects of subjective SES are consistently more evident in the selection condition than in the control condition, whatever their direction (positive for left-leaning participants; negative for right-leaning participants). The selection condition presumably increases the economic value of education, namely, the stakes associated with school success and, by increasing these stakes, served to increase parents' concerns, whether in favor of or against inequality reduction.

The fact that political orientation moderated the effects in Experiment 4 but did not do so in previous experiments may be related to the sample size, but we believe it may also be related to the political context in which this experiment was conducted. The fact that Experiment 4 was conducted during the 2022 French presidential elections, in which the right-left divide was particularly salient, and in the aftermath of two crises (the Yellow Vest movement of 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–21), events that either protested existing social inequalities or increased such inequalities (see Jetten et al., 2020 for the Yellow Vest movement; and Wiwad et al., 2021 for the pandemic), issues that are of particular concern to left-leaning individuals. The COVID pandemic has had a marked effect on different types of inequality, including educational inequality (Betthäuser et al., 2023; Goudeau et al., 2021) and has also made existing educational disparities quite visible among the population (Fiske et al., 2022; Frohn, 2021). Indeed, the influence of the pandemic in exacerbating inequality has been widely covered in the media (e.g., Fisher & Bubola, 2020). In addition, it has been shown that epidemic contexts tend to encourage people to act more prosocially (Rychlowska et al., 2022) and the COVID pandemic has increased sup-





**FIGURE 4B** Experiment 4, left-leaning participants: Interaction between the selection condition (control condition, left panel vs. selection condition, right panel) and subjective SES (x-axes) in predicting behavioral support of the intervention (four ordered categories: “I am not interested,” “I would like to receive an information document about this group,” “I would like to participate in the first meeting of this group,” “I would like to be part of the group (one meeting per week for two months).” for left-leaning participants (value 3 on the political scale ranging from 1 “extreme left” to 10 “extreme right”).

port for redistributive policies (Nettle et al., 2021). In a recent study, Wiwad et al. (2021) showed that, compared to before the pandemic, American participants made lower dispositional attributions and higher situational attributions for poverty during the pandemic. In turn, the belief that underprivileged families have been negatively impacted by the pandemic predicted greater support for intervention to reduce inequality (Wiwad et al., 2021). This might explain why parents who participated in Experiment 4 (after the pandemic) seemed, in general, to be more supportive of the equalizing intervention than parents who participated in Experiment 1 (before the pandemic). This could also explain why political orientation made a difference in Experiment 4 but not in Experiment 1. Left-leaning individuals usually attribute economic difficulties more to situational causes (including unfair treatment and inequality) than to personal responsibility (Morgan et al., 2010). As a result, they are probably the ones who were most sensitive to increased inequality during the pandemic and to the need to implement equalizing interventions. Future studies should examine more systematically whether the salience of existing inequality and the general political context predict or moderate parental reactions to school change and the promotion of educational equality. It is also important to keep in mind that this moderation was not predicted. Consequently, it should be replicated, preferably with a different measure of general orientation toward social inequality. For example, a measure of social dominance orientation might be a more relevant predictor than the single-item measure of political orientation.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Equality is a highly valued concept in education, and most people would readily agree that schools should implement practices that reduce SES inequalities in academic achievement, especially in France, where the SES achievement gap is particularly large (OECD, 2023a). However, as noted by



Khan and Jerolmack (2013), “saying meritocracy” does not stop people from “doing privileges.” These authors urge people to pay attention not only to their discourse but also to their decision making. In the current research, we argued that higher SES parents’ support for implementing educational interventions in their children’s schools would be weaker if the selection function of the school system were salient. The results of the first two experiments provide some support for the hypothesis, despite not always reaching conventional levels of significance. When the selection function was salient, subjective SES was negatively associated with willingness to support the implementation of a pedagogical intervention in their children’s school. In addition, the results of Experiment 3 show that the negative relation between SES and support for such an intervention was limited to the equalizing intervention, and also increased as a function of perceived societal inequality. Experiment 4 was a replication of Experiment 1, conducted 4 years later, in the context of the French presidential elections and after two major crises, the yellow-vest movement (2019) and the COVID pandemic (2020–21). This study showed that the interaction between SES and salience of the selection function of schooling was moderated by political orientation: In line with the results of Experiments 1 and 2, the negative association between SES and support for the intervention was stronger in the selection condition than in the neutral condition, but only among right-leaning participants. For left-leaning participants, this association was positive.

Taken together, the results of four experiments suggest that higher subjective SES parents’ support for implementing equalizing educational interventions in their children’s schools tends to be weaker if the selection function of the school system (i.e., its role in determining future SES) is made salient (Experiments 1, 2, and 4), particularly when they perceive economic inequality as being high (Experiment 3) and if they have a right-wing political orientation (Experiment 4).

To the extent that society is usually seen to be unequal, parents seem concerned to preserve the advantages conferred by their higher SES, particularly if they have a right-leaning political orientation. This result underscores the role of self-interest as a motivational force shaping support for equalizing school conditions (Mansbridge, 1990). Indeed, as argued in the introduction, higher SES families are those who benefit the most from the unequal school system. The present results support the view that higher status group members—at least right-leaning higher status group members—seem more motivated than lower status group members to maintain the current educational system, probably because it is a system that helps to maintain social inequality (see Brandt, 2013; Lee et al., 2011).

This has important practical implications. Higher SES parents are more engaged in school activities than lower SES parents (Lareau & Cox, 2011) and usually have higher expectations and aspirations for their children (Jamain et al., 2024; Park et al., 2024). Moreover, those whose occupational roles involve reforming the educational system (e.g., policy makers) also typically have higher-than-average SES. The current results suggest that those best placed to change school practices in ways that would reduce the SES achievement gap may be those who are less motivated to change them, especially if they have a right-leaning political orientation.

An important limitation of the present research is that many of the observed effects were small in size. This may be due to the fact that the predicted interactions are ones that involve an attenuation of the influence of SES, rather than a reversal (Blake & Gangestad, 2020; Sommet et al., 2023). We nevertheless acknowledge that more research is needed to confirm the present findings. In particular, the moderation by political orientation was only observed in Experiment 4. We argued that this could be due to the specific political and economic context in which the study was conducted. However, this is a post hoc interpretation and future research should examine in greater depth how political and economic contexts affect the conditions under which higher SES parents do (or do not) support the promotion of equality in their children’s school.

Improving the educational achievements of socially disadvantaged children is a major societal issue and has been given high priority in the politics of many countries around the world (UNESCO, 2015). In response, there has been an increase in the amount of research on interventions (e.g., growth mindset interventions, value-affirmation interventions; for reviews, see Dietrichson et al., 2017; Dittman & Stephens, 2017; Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021; Spitzer & Aronson, 2015) that could boost the performance of lower SES children and thereby narrow the SES achievement gap. However, researchers in this area agree that although such interventions have the potential to decrease the SES achievement gap, implementing them in schools is likely to encounter some barriers. The results reported here show that one of these barriers is the way that the school system functions in society. In particular, the selection function of the school system attaches a very high value to education. Paradoxically, this high value of education limits opportunities for educational change. Encouraging researchers to develop effective evidence-based pedagogical interventions is commendable, but may not be sufficient to convince teachers, policy makers, and parents to implement these interventions in the classroom. This, in turn, helps to explain why group-based inequalities are so stable across time despite recurrent discourse that champions the educational system as the path to social mobility.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This research was conducted in accordance with the principles embodied in the Declaration of Helsinki and in accordance with local statutory requirements. Ethical approval for conducting this research was obtained for French parents (2015-CE25) and UK parents (EC.19.10.08.5697). All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Pre-registration documents, materials, raw data, and syntax files can be accessed at <https://osf.io/z6h5m/> (Experiments 1 and 2); <https://osf.io/ck5fw/> (Experiment 3) and <https://osf.io/x97sf/> (Experiment 4).

## POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

The present research was conducted by white women and men living in France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, who are all parents. All the authors consider themselves as having a center to left-wing political orientation, and the first author is involved in a left-wing French association of parents. As university professors, assistant professors, or lecturers, all authors are highly educated and have a high SES. For this reason, they can all be considered to be “insiders” with respect to the effects reported in the present study.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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