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Knowing when it's 'necessary'—academic parents' strategic intervention and involvement

How parents guide and support their teenage children in specific situations in upper secondary education

Elif Sari*

University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds support their teenage children in upper secondary education and how this influences their educational pathway. Based on 31 in-depth qualitative interviews with former participants of the BiKS-panel-study, this study combines qualitative insights with longitudinal data to examine mechanisms of educational inequality. While much research contrasts broader social groups, this paper also uncovers in-group-variation. The results reveal differences not only between non-academic and academic parents but also within the group of academic parents, especially between educational insiders (teachers) and outsiders (parents with university degrees in other subjects). Educational insider parents can better recognize educationally relevant opportunities, situations, and decisions and provide appropriate support because they have access to more relevant resources and field-specific knowledge. They do not intervene consistently but instead recognize when intervention is 'necessary' within the specific educational system, resulting in educational advantages for their children.

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1. Introduction

The parental home, as the primary institution of socialization, has long been a focus of sociological research on inequality. For example, it is well-known and researched that children of university-educated parents are much more likely to succeed in the educational system than children of non-university-educated parents. This has been confirmed many times; just lately with data from the current PISA study (European Commission 2024). However, many of the micro-level mechanisms of social reproduction that lead to this condition remain underexplored. Some of these mechanisms have already been intensively researched within families, for example, in Germany on the topic of aspirations (see, e.g.

*Present address: Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories (LIfBi), Bamberg, Germany
CONTACT Elif Sari elif.sari@uni-bamberg.de

Becker and Gresch 2016 or Bittmann 2022), but given the complexity of living environments, there remain effects of social background that cannot yet be fully explained (Becker and Lauterbach 2010).

US research in particular has shown that parental support and parental educational strategies function as mechanisms of inequality and can explain a considerable part of social inequality in the educational system for different educational stages (see, e.g. Calarco 2014; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018; Lareau 2015). Similar to extensive qualitative analyses from the United States, this article examines everyday conscious and unconscious parental practices as well as socially differentiated patterns of perception and action of parents.

This study examines the (upper) secondary school phase because research shows that inequality processes are still ongoing in this school phase (Horneber and Weinhardt 2018), even though most research focuses on primary school or the transition to secondary school. In addition, an increasing number of students in Germany are attending upper secondary school and earning a university entrance qualification known as the Abitur.[1] The number of university entrants has nearly doubled since the mid-1990s, reaching over 500,000. As a result, more than half of each cohort now starts a university degree (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2018, 339). The Abitur no longer functions as an exclusive marker that guarantees high social status. I argue that as these numbers rise, distinctions within the academic class itself become increasingly important.

Another consequence of the educational expansion is that the number of parents with university degrees is growing, while the lower middle class/working class is shrinking. Looking only at broad social categories, such as middle class and working class is no longer sufficient to adequately capture the educational advantages and mechanisms of inequality. Differences in educational outcomes may now be more nuanced and no longer centered on whether one obtains the Abitur or even a university degree, but rather on what school graduates study and the paths they took to reach their goals.

The theoretical basis of the work is the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in particular his theoretical considerations on the concept of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996). Following Lareau, Evans, and Yee (2016), I argue that specific resources are more valuable in certain fields and that field-specific knowledge in particular leads to educational advantages.

2. Theoretical considerations

Despite the popular role of the concept of field in Bourdieu's theoretical work, Bourdieu *describes* the concept of field in his publications rather than *defining* it precisely (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996). Bourdieu focuses on the aspect of relationality and analytically describes a field as 'a network or configuration of objective relations between positions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996, 127).

Each field follows its own logic, which also means that not every type of capital has the same 'value' in every field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996, 128). The value depends on the extent to which the type of capital '"sticks" as a trump card' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996, 128). In this case, this would mean, for example, that a large vocabulary as cultural capital would have a high value in the field of education (e.g. for writing essays, but also for making a good impression on teachers), but presumably a lower value in the field of sports. Based on this logic, it can be argued that children whose parents work in the educational system not only have a high capital endowment, but one that is particularly relevant in this field

and is an exclusive resource. Unlike other fields, Bourdieu attributes a comparatively high degree of autonomy to the educational field (Bourdieu 2018a). Success in this field is not primarily based on resources or forms of capital that can easily be transmitted, such as money or pieces of art, but on cultural capital that must be incorporated through a time-consuming process. This includes knowledge, linguistic competence, and specific behaviors that are valued within the school culture. Consequently, social background's influence on educational success operates almost exclusively through cultural capital (Bourdieu 2018b). Additionally, the educational system is highly formalized and standardized, ultimately manifesting itself in the significant relevance of institutionalized capital in the form of degrees (Bourdieu 1983). The field's relative autonomy and internal logic mean that there is specific knowledge that is most accessible to those who are deeply familiar with and actively involved in the field and its reproduction. In concrete, this could mean knowing how to optimize grades strategically or possessing pedagogical expertise to explain school content effectively.

Bourdieu's concept of capital refers to 'accumulated labor' in its material and incorporated form (Bourdieu 1983, 183). This includes economic capital (e.g. money), cultural capital (e.g. educational qualifications), social capital (e.g. friends), and symbolic capital (especially prestige).

As 'permanent dispositions of the organism' (Bourdieu 1983, 185), the incorporated cultural capital is permanently transferred into the person's habitus; Bourdieu describes this as 'having' is becoming 'being' (Bourdieu 1983, 187). For Bourdieu, cultural capital is the key to social reproduction (Bourdieu 1983). To gain a more in-depth understanding of how cultural capital unfolds its impact, I would like to refer to Jæger (2009) here. Building on Bourdieu's work, he refines an empirical, theory-driven model of the three-part mechanism through which cultural capital influences educational success: 'Parents must possess cultural capital, invest time and effort in transmitting it to their children, and ensure that their children absorb and transform it into educational success' (Jæger 2009, 1944). So, equal levels of capital within the same social class do not necessarily imply an equal possibility of transmitting capital, nor an equal ability among children to effectively utilize the transmitted capital. Based on Jæger's (2022) understanding of cultural capital as a set of non-cognitive skills, most of the parental strategies described in this paper stem from the cultural capital of parents.

3. Literature review: social reproduction, cultural capital, and parental involvement

Numerous studies over the past several decades have shown that parental cultural capital has a positive influence on educational success (e.g. DiMaggio 1982; Lareau 2015; Sullivan 2001). To better understand this relationship, it is essential to examine the interactional level between parents and children, as this constitutes the central mechanism through which incorporated capital is transmitted within families. With regard to educationally relevant forms of parental involvement, a large body of research suggests that both quantity and quality of involvement vary notably by social status. Parents with a higher socioeconomic status tend to be more involved in their children's education and often use strategies that better align with institutional norms (Domina 2005; Jeynes 2010; Lareau 2015). The extent and form of this involvement, in turn, can have differentiated effects on children's

educational trajectories (Cheadle 2008; Sullivan 2001). Even though studies show that higher levels of parental involvement and intervention in most cases have a positive effect on educational attainment and achievement (see, e.g. the meta-analyses by Jeynes 2010; Tan, Lyu, and Peng 2020; Wilder 2023), there are more and more studies that paint a more nuanced picture. For example, Li, Cheng, and Vachon (2023) show that too much involvement can lead to diminishing educational returns. Koivuhovi et al. (2025) argue that the influence of home-based, school-related support declines as the child grows older, and that types of effective parental engagement can change—or even be replaced—across different life stages. In line with these findings, Robinson and Harris (2014) question the assumption that parental involvement is in general beneficial. They found that its impact varies depending on the nature and context of engagement. Building on this line of thought, the present study does more than provide an overview of parental practices depending on social background; it also helps identify practices that seem effective for the educational pathway and sheds light on the nature of these practices.

A fine-grained examination of how parents from different social backgrounds are involved in their children's lives, and the intended and unintended strategies they use to secure educational success or shape educational pathways, has been the subject of several qualitative studies. Calarco's (2014) research indicates that children from different social classes exhibit distinct behaviors in elementary school settings, due to differences in parental preparation for social interactions. This can be observed in the way they request assistance or communicate with teachers. Such behaviors can be advantageous in the educational system if they align with school expectations. Lareau (2015) also addresses this issue, using the term 'concerted cultivation' to describe how middle-class parents proactively shape their children's educational pathways. In contrast, the working class is characterized by a 'natural growth' parenting approach. Similarly, Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen (2018) demonstrate that social inequalities are perpetuated in higher education through strategies driven by parents, e.g. when choosing a university or coaching for admission interviews. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the educational practices of parents differ between the middles class and the working class. These practices are not only an expression of available resources, but are also deeply embedded in cultural practices and unconscious habitual dispositions. They have far-reaching consequences for educational inequalities. However, middle-class parents cannot always realize their educational aspirations for their children. Lareau, Evans, and Yee's (2016) study illustrates the situational power of family capital in educational settings, using kindergarten selection as an example. The authors demonstrate that the ability of middle-class parents to secure high-status kindergarten placements for their children and transmit advantages to them is shaped by complex and inconsistently applied institutional 'rules of the game.' Even well-resourced parents may fail if they misunderstand or misapply these rules, which highlights the uncertainty in the transmission of social advantages and the importance of field specific knowledge and opportunities. What these and similar studies have in common is that they often examine class differences without focusing enough on possible differences within social groups. However, with a growing academicization leading to a change in the social composition of societies, it is important to address the differences within these social groups. This research gap has not yet been sufficiently addressed. A small pilot study conducted in preparation for this project suggests that 'educational insiders' (defined as people who work

in the field of education) act more strategically in line with the child's goals and use their insider knowledge to secure benefits for their child (Sari 2025).

This paper makes a contribution to the existing literature by shifting the focus from broad, class-based patterns to the differences within a larger social group. It illustrates how parental strategies can differ even among families with similar social backgrounds, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of educational inequality and social reproduction.

4. Methods and sample

For this project, 31 in-depth interviews were conducted, involving 22 families.[2] In every family, a young adult aged 26 was interviewed. In nine cases, one parent was additionally interviewed (six mothers and three fathers). Each interview lasted between 1½ and 2½ h. All of the young adults except one finished upper secondary education (*Gymnasium*) with a diploma (*Abitur*) in 2015.

The young adults and their parents were former participants in the BiKS-panel-study (Homuth, Schmitt, and Pfost 2024). All participants consented to link their qualitative interview data to the quantitative data collected over 10 years (from age 8 to 18) during the BiKS-study. This enriches the data about the family in terms of socio-demographical data like parental income, but also in terms of information about everyday life at that time (for example about how often the parents attended parent-teacher conferences or students' grades), which allows not only validation of the qualitative data but also a more multi-layered and longitudinal picture of parental practices over the life course.

Given the focus on upper secondary school, only students who had attended the two last years of the Gymnasium were contacted. The former leaders of the BiKS-study contacted the individuals and introduced them to the project. All those who were still in the panel and had parents with a low level of education were contacted, the others were selected randomly, but the aim was to achieve a balanced distribution according to migration background, gender, and parental education. The response rate was around 30%. At the end of the project, two more academic families were recruited in order to reach theoretical saturation.

The sample only includes families whose children attended a Gymnasium for methodological, practical, and conceptual reasons. In Germany, some students complete general schooling before reaching the late teenage years relevant to this study. Although some comprehensive schools offer this level, they are far less attended than a Gymnasium (18 *vs.* 80%; Destatis 2025). Moreover, few students from comprehensive schools participated in the BiKS-study, and eligible ones did not respond during sampling. While focusing on one school type may limit the scope of the findings regarding school-type-specific parental practices, it may strengthen the comparability since structural and procedural conditions are similar across cases.

For this study, an outcome-oriented design (educational success) was chosen. That means that the interviewees should have already completed school and be in their mid-20s in order to find out how parental support has affected their actual educational path. This also means that the respondents were interviewed retrospectively, and therefore, there may be possible recall bias, which had to be taken into account in the analysis.

The research method used in this study to collect the data is the problem-centered interview, according to Witzel (2000). The interviews focused on everyday life and parental

support and advice practices in the last two years of Gymnasium and the career exploration phase that followed. Out of these 22 families, 14 had at least one parent with a university degree, categorizing them as academic families. The rationale behind this classification is that what matters is the presence of higher education experience in the household, rather than the number of degrees. Such experiences provide insights into the academic world that can be shared within the family. The remaining eight families were classified as non-academic due to their educational background.[3]

The interviews were analyzed using different techniques, for example, analytical memos, case summaries, extensive coding with software, and comparison tables (Lareau 2021). After transcribing the audio files, all interviews were coded in MAXQDA (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019). The coding scheme combined (1) predefined categories that had been part of the interview guidelines (e.g. concrete support practices, such as 'everyday advice' or 'contact with teachers'), and (2) categories that emerged inductively from a more in-depth case analysis and cross-case comparison (see Kelle and Kluge 2010, 56–82; Kuckartz 2010, 60–63). Examples of inductive categories include accompanying children through situations and decisions rather than telling them exactly what to do or providing a safety net. These were then systematically reviewed and compared across the interviews.

5. Results

First, consistent with previous work in this area, I found strong differences in parental intervention and involvement between the non-academic and the academic parents. I found that non-academic parents do not show far-reaching forms of school-related support for their children or rarely do; advice often remains very superficial and vague. Also, the life realities of those teenage children are very different, for example, they often have a job besides school, or their parents have precarious jobs. In terms of school content, those parents cannot help at all; they have also little or only very basic knowledge of the educational system and lack educationally relevant capital. How differently the children themselves define parental support can be seen in Luis' case. Luis has a migration background on his father's side, and both his parents are non-academics. In the interview, he describes that support means that his mother spoke to the school so that he could go on vacation to his relatives a week early:[4]

> Luis: "So, on a subject-specific level, they couldn't support me. In school-related questions of an organizational nature, then of course my mother was the contact person, like when we visited family my mother took care of it. So that it would work out even though it was actually still during school time (amused)."

While the disparity between social classes is immense and presumably exceeds any variation within groups, one of the main findings of this study is that remarkable differences nonetheless exist *within* the group of academic parents. The qualitative data reveals notable differences in the parental practices of the academic group between (a) academic educational insider parents (all teachers) and (b) academic educational outsider parents (highly educated parents but with a degree in another field). So, while both academic parent groups share the same level of education but differ in occupation, the non-academic group differs from both by having a lower level of education and working in less qualified occupations. Since

many inequality researchers have already shed light on class-based disparities, this paper will further explore the mechanisms and variations within the academic parent group as part of the (upper) middle class, and the role that field-specific knowledge plays in effectively mobilizing family capital.

Both academic groups have a very similar social status, the quantitative dataset (see Table 1), for example, indicates a median ISEI for the educational insider families of 68, while the academic educational outsiders have a 71.[5] Also, they have a very similar household income, while non-academic families only have around half the amount. So, only looking at demographic variables and the resources of the parents, those parents seem relatively similar. Nevertheless, educational insider parents are better able to recognize educationally relevant opportunities, situations, and decisions and can provide appropriate and more in-depth support. It might be that both groups of parents have similar amounts of cultural capital (for example, tertiary degree diplomas), but the quality varies, which leads to the condition that within the specific field (here, the educational system), educational insider parents can better maneuver their children because they have access to more educationally relevant resources. They do not intervene consistently but recognize when intervention is 'necessary' within the educational system (of which they are also a part). This leads to educational advantages for their children.

5.1. The interplay between perception, resources, and action

The interviews reveal that the practices of academic parents, in general, primarily encompass being available when their children reach out to them and then draw upon their relatively extensive social/cultural/financial capital (for instance, when helping with school-related content). However, especially academic educational insiders use their expertise or guidance in a targeted manner when they, as parents, perceive it as necessary. In doing so, they benefit from their own knowledge and experience within the educational system, allowing them to identify situations where interventions would be beneficial. This means that interventions are not used continuously, or in fact, in some cases, only very rarely—but are used specifically when they are considered 'necessary' (this also means that parents can act very differently toward each sibling). Assessing this need is a skill acquired through experience in the educational system. Parental practice in this context does not mean giving top-down instructions but rather entails offering support and providing guidance. In this context, parents often emphasize how autonomous the child seems to be. Since most of the academic educational outsider parents attended the Gymnasium themselves, they have some experience and are (in contrast to non-academic parents) not completely foreigners, but they only know the student perspective.

Table 1. Sample overview.

Social background of the families	Number of families	GPA average of the child (1.0 being the best, 4.0 worst)	Highest ISEI (median) of one of the parents	Household income (median) during the upper secondary school years of the child
Non-academic parents	8	2.7	42	2350 Euro
Academic educational insider parents	7	1.8	68	4600 Euro
Academic educational outsider parents	7	1.6	71	4650 Euro

5.2. The process of getting involved

The process of parents getting involved happens in two steps:

In step 1, parents rather perceive parental intervention or advice as necessary, or children reach out to their parents. In step 2, parents take action and intervene with the resources available to the different types of parents. For both steps 1 and 2, children of educational insiders have advantages: In step 1, parents, being occupied in the educational field, have a different perception of what is 'necessary' or even possible, allowing them to think and act more strategically. Additionally, especially during the teenage years, children may not reach out to their parents if they know that their parents can't help them. In step 2, when parents decide to take action, educational insiders tend to have more educationally relevant capital (for example, knowing how to design an interesting presentation).

Especially two patterns emerge within this specific parental behavior:

- Pattern 1—Strategic intervention when parents think the child 'needs' it—(pattern about the strategic perception and consideration)
- Pattern 2—Having (job)-related contacts and skills/knowledge (capital)—(pattern about the actual resources parents have, for example, when their children reach out to them)

5.3. Strategic perception and consideration

To illustrate how academic educational insider parents become involved in specific situations without necessarily intervening often, there is the following example of Lotte. Lotte's parents are divorced, she lives with her mother and has generally very good grades (she finished school with a GPA of 1.3). Lotte's mother, Renate, who is a Gymnasium teacher, typically assists Lotte with schoolwork only when requested. But in the following specific situation, it was different. In the last two years of Gymnasium, there was an important scientific assignment (called *Seminararbeit*). When Lotte's mother realized that the deadline was approaching and that Lotte hadn't written much up until one week before the deadline, Lotte's father, who visited monthly, suddenly became very involved in this scientific assignment; Lotte thought it was because her mother 'vented and complained':

> Lotte: "He always saw it coming because he knew [I] had to write this scientific assignment, and nothing was happening. Then I had to submit the scientific assignment in a week, and he'd ask 'How far along is she? Ah, she has two out of fifteen pages.' I believe that was the only time, to the best of my recollection, that he really got involved. He was there every day, and he would stay from midday until evening, and then he'd drive back again."

So, her mother played a critical role. Although this kind of intervention hardly ever happened in the two years of upper secondary school, it did happen at this relevant point. Lotte finally passed the assignment with a good grade.

In another case, Kristin's mother Sonja, who is the principal of an elementary and middle school, helped Kristin with one of her final exams:

> Sonja: "During the final high school exams, I voluntarily did something. I have to admit, I convinced our daughter that she could improve her grade by half a grade if she took the retest in German. I supported her, you see, they only have two days. So, I compiled this folder, and then for another two days, I quizzed her, and we went through it all again quite quickly. I don't

know if she mentioned it, but she's a bit slow at reading. She doesn't really enjoy reading, and it would have taken her quite a while to reread and summarize everything. That is where my strength lies, I created a script quickly. We did it for our daughter's sake, and I have to admit we kind of pushed her a little to take that retest—not really forced, but we talked her into it, you know, encouraged her to give it a try."

By successfully passing the test herself, Kristin is credited with the success, and in the end, it doesn't matter whether or how this would have been possible at all without the help of her parents. In contrast, one of the academic educational outsiders, Katharina narrates that some classmates were very strategic, but that her own parents never encouraged such behavior and instead found it rather strange. She finished Gymnasium with slightly lower grades than Kristin did, but was not able to start her initial choice of university degree because her GPA was too low (2.6):

Katharina: "I wasn't strategic enough like others who repeated eleventh, twelfth grade in order to get good grades. I told my parents that someone had done that, and they were rather shocked that there were people who did that. I didn't think enough about it in the long term, I should have done much more."

5.4. Intervening with the resources available

Academic parents, in general, can intervene with various resources at their disposal—they possess economic, cultural, social, and sometimes symbolic capital. As Bourdieu describes, the educational system predominantly values cultural capital. However, especially concerning this form, educational insiders have qualitatively different educationally relevant cultural capital. They not only comprehend the content of the subjects they teach but also possess the skill to effectively convey this knowledge to their children. For instance, in the case of Maria's mother, a mathematics and physics teacher, she not only knows the subject matter but also understands how to explain it. This situation exemplifies how intervention can have a lasting impact, as Maria's mother provided this suggestion during middle school, and Maria continued to apply it until the completion of her secondary schooling:

Maria: "I remember a math problem where the task was to calculate a certain length, involving an unknown variable 'x'. It was a typical math problem, you don't know one length, and the other length is fifteen meters longer. My mother then sketched it for me and wrote down the lengths, which helped me find the solutions. I learned that drawing it out made it easier to solve math problems, and it proved useful for subsequent math assignments because I would always start by sketching it, making the calculations much simpler."

Aside from content-related help, educational insider parents tend to provide very strategic advice, utilizing their knowledge about the educational system strategically.

In the following passage, Kristin's mother explains how she advised her daughter to keep the learning effort manageable. By doing this, she effectively narrowed down the possibilities Kristin had, even though Kristin ultimately made the decision about course selection 'on her own.'

Sonja: "Well, we just looked at it together with her and tried to explain how we felt about it back then. But she actually made the choices herself. We just shared our experiences, so that she has the opportunity to know roughly which combination might make sense. But she made the choices entirely on her own."

Her mother guided her with her insider knowledge about the different subjects regarding the upper secondary course choice:

> Sonja: "She wanted to take biology, so we advised her, like 'biology is purely a learning subject so maybe you should take something as a second subject for the final exams that might not require as much studying'. Because if you understand a little bit in math or any other subject, those are the kinds of subjects where you don't have to learn as much content all over again. So, it's more like advising what's manageable."

Parents, as well as their children, often emphasize the children's independence in decision-making, even if the narratives clearly indicate that the parents have a strong influence on how they get there.

Often, parental educational insider practices are linked to (oral) presentations. For example, in Antonia's case, this involved 'stopping the time and then indicating if it was too long and which part could perhaps be omitted.'

Sometimes, different forms of capital are interlinked, as seen in this very practical kind of support that Lotte's mother, who teaches English and French, provided:

> Lotte: "So, where mom paid attention, she always got me additional textbooks for English and French, and she also established that my cousins always got them too, so she always got them cheap as a teacher and distributed them nicely to everyone."

As a teacher, Lotte's mother a) was aware of additional textbooks and at the same time, b) had better access to them. Lotte added to this statement that her mother never did this for other subjects, only for those she taught. This illustrates the limits of parental action: she only acted in an informed and proactive manner in the specific subjects in which she was an expert.

Another important characteristic of the practice of educational insiders is that support is highly tailored to the child and can vary significantly based on the perception of what the specific child needs. This was exemplified by Maria's mother, who also utilized her social capital as a teacher:

> Maria: "Parent-teacher meetings were less of a topic because she would occasionally run into the teachers and have conversations. The mother of one of my friends was a teacher at our school, so everything was somewhat managed by the parents who worked at the school. I think my mother was usually only there when she didn't know a teacher and wanted to know what he was like. This is partly because I didn't have any issues at school. However, my sister did have some problems in school, and in her case, my mother did attend a parent-teacher meeting because my sister didn't get along with one of her teachers."

It has to be highlighted that even when academic educational outsiders lack strategic knowledge when it comes to navigating the field and miss situations where intervention might have been beneficial, they are in charge of more cultural, social, and financial capital than non-academic parents and use, for example, their content-related skills or social capital to support their children. For example, in the case of Karla, whose father was a senior doctor and head of the department of a hospital unit, he asked one of his patients, who was a former high school principal, to help his daughter out with schoolwork when she struggled with math and physics:

> Karla: "My dad, I believe, initiated it because he became his patient. And then he was like, 'Hey, would you be interested in giving my child tutoring?' And he's just a super nice, very patient old man."

Often, when the academic educational outsider parents cannot help but are aware of the situation, someone else is involved (due to their greater social capital and also due to their higher position in the social structure). As with Karla's father, who, as a doctor, has a large and diverse social network and is well-respected for his profession. Similarly, Katharina's father also used his social network to organize a medical internship for her after she expressed interest in the field, as he already had connections there. Academic outsiders can also draw on other resources. For example, Tobias's parents bought new schoolbooks instead of borrowing used ones from the school for free, as is usually the case. Additionally, a common form of support in these households is at least some help with schoolwork, as the parents themselves attended upper secondary schools and universities. This stands in sharp contrast to socially less privileged, non-academic families.

5.5. The situational power of capital and blocked pathways

Especially when examining immigrant parents who are academic educational outsiders, it becomes clear how cultural capital and the field are interlinked and how capital only unfolds its power when it's applied in a field where it is valued. Being an academic educational outsider from another country, the pattern described above is even more pronounced compared to the expertise of parents who are academic educational insiders. Immigrant parents, even if highly educated, are foreigners to the particular educational system and may struggle to react to appropriate situations and perceive them as worth intervening in.

For example, Santé had dreamed of studying medicine for years. In Germany, normally a GPA of 1.0 is required, but he only achieved a 1.7. It was only after graduating high school that he and his family 'realized' this was not competitive enough, especially without other characteristics indicating suitability for this profession. Despite being a school paramedic for many years, which could have given him a competitive advantage, Santé left the role in his senior years to better focus on school, not realizing the strategic implications.

Santé's father, Alvaro (who, like his wife, has a university degree) who moved to Germany from Spain with his wife when Santé was a toddler, mentioned that he never felt his son needed special support, as he always got good grades. He didn't realize that, although Santé's grades were above average, they weren't sufficient for his specific career aspirations. Alvaro wasn't familiar with the rules of the game and therefore had no awareness that intervention might be necessary. In the major Alvaro himself had chosen to study, final grades were not crucial. Consequently, the whole family was not fully aware of the situation, and neither the parents nor Santé took any proactive action.

The logic of the educational field in the country the parents came from was different: It emphasized scoring good grades so that children have the opportunity to attend university. In the German educational context, for nearly all subjects, students must apply to each university separately, and even though the GPA is one of the most relevant factors, it is not the only one. Additionally, every university has its own deadlines. Although medicine is one of the few subjects with a centralized application procedure, every university can define additional requirements, making the process complex for interested high school graduates who don't have a top grade of 1.0.

Alvaro reflects on the situation in retrospect and still struggles to find words to describe it:

> Alvaro: "Well, about Santé, I still see him-, I don't know, because, maybe I did, maybe I would have, if I had been different or somehow supported differently. I might have – because he was always very intelligent and active, and I might have done something different in terms of medicine. I might have done something different; it was very, very difficult. I also believe that he could have achieved it in optimal conditions, and I could have contributed to those optimal conditions, but how exactly, I don't know."

After realizing that Santé had too poor grades, Alvaro researched alternative options for his son. Alvaro suggested that Santé could study medicine in the country they emigrated from, where he, as an educational native, better knew how the system works. Another option was to join the German military, which offers a study spot but requires a commitment to the army for 17 years (with the possibility of deployment to war zones). Santé declined both options. After a few challenging months and a voluntary year, he decided to start an apprenticeship in pediatric nursing, a pathway that required only a middle school diploma. After a few years of working, Santé is now studying nursing education part-time at the University of Applied Science while still working. Even though his father provided him with the options afterward, both alternatives seem to be associated with relatively high 'costs' for Santé, and it can be assumed that individuals are more likely to seek alternatives, as Santé did. Nevertheless, this behavior of Alvaro shows that he was not lacking any interest in supporting his son, but rather was only able to step in when he became aware of the situation.

Good grades may be important keys to gaining opportunities for higher education, but they don't guarantee the achievement of one's planned goals. The same applies to Tim. For a long time, he wanted to become a lawyer, but after watching a documentary about investment bankers, he suddenly wanted to become a banker. Despite his excellent high school diploma (1.1), he chose a business program that was neither prestigious nor required such high grades, which ultimately led to the fact that he 'had' to do another undergraduate degree to achieve his career goals. Initially, he completed a dual study program in business administration, and only after obtaining his bachelor's degree did he realize that those who aspire to become investment bankers, like he did, typically attend special prestigious private universities right from the start. Thus, he had no chance to become one. Consequently, he started studying law. Although his parents were very committed, when it came to this future decision, they weren't that helpful. Despite their intensive organizational efforts, they couldn't provide the kind of advice Tim would have needed to become an investment banker.

Tim describes the situation as follows:

> Tim: "Well, at least in my case, parenting was relatively guidance-free. So, the way you see it in movies, the classic father-son conversation, like 'it doesn't work out dad, do you have any advice for me', it never happened in such a way. My parents were more like facilitators. I say, 'I want to study law' for years but then the silly documentary comes on TV, I say 'I want to study business administration'. There was never any debate, like 'No you study law'. So, there were absolutely no specific guidelines."

'Mistakes' made by teenagers like Santé or Tim seem to carry more weight than those of children of educational insiders. Educational insider parents are more likely to intervene and 'catch' their children in critical situations.

This is also the reason why only examining educational outcomes, such as whether they obtained a tertiary degree, is not sufficient. Looking only at the GPA (see Table 1) and the current

educational/occupational status of the young adults (most of them, both educational insiders and outsiders, started a university degree at some point), there is almost no difference. However, this perspective is not detailed enough. Children not only put varying levels of effort into their educational careers, but they also encounter different trial-and-error phases and blocked pathways. The strategic parental guidance aligned with the child's needs, provided by educational insider parents, makes it easier for their children to pursue their individual goals.

5.6. Synthesis with the quantitative dataset

Since the available data includes both qualitative interview data and quantitative panel data for the same cases over a total of 18 years, it is possible to relate the different types of data to each other. For example, it can be examined whether parental practices, as described by children and parents, match the patterns evident in the quantitative data. The comparison of the data shows that the range of parental practices in the qualitative narratives appears to be much more diverse than the quantitative data might suggest. For example, when high school students are asked quantitatively how well they feel supported by their parents in shaping their future careers, no one in the sample answers 'not at all' or 'hardly at all'; instead, most answers fall at least into the 'partly' category. This shows in particular that the quantitative responses also depend heavily on how support is defined. And since children of non-academic parents in particular are often unaware of how much guidance and support other children receive, they may consider support to be quite substantial even if it is almost non-existent or limited to very few areas (e.g. socio-emotional support and paying for tutoring). The lived realities as portrayed in the narrations seem to vary considerably among the children who all claim to be 'well supported'. Tim, for example, is one of the adolescents who reported that he feels very well supported by his parents in shaping his future career, although his actual path didn't go that smoothly.

The quantitative data also shows almost no differences by group when parents are asked relatively broad questions about their ability to support their children's learning. However, when asked about more concrete, specific practices, such as whether they are able to explain incomprehensible assignments to their children, academically educated parents are more likely to agree. This suggests that parental support is defined differently depending on the group, and that it is primarily a fine-grained insight and a more concrete way of asking the questions that allows social differences (or disadvantages of less privileged children) to be uncovered.

6. Discussion and limitations

The goal of this study was to delve deeply into the everyday lives of seemingly similar families from the perspective of inequality. In terms of demographics alone, no significant differences between academic educational insider and academic educational outsider parents emerged. This also applies when it comes to the children's grades or types of degrees. However, looking at the qualitative data, crucial differences emerge as academic educational insider parents, who are better adapted to the field of education, recognize educational opportunities, situations, and decisions more effectively than other social groups. They can provide appropriate support for their children because they have access to more educationally relevant exclusive resources. Insiders act more quickly when they think it's

necessary, and when parents don't really recognize such situations, mistakes can be more severe. When insiders decide to act, they use their educationally relevant capital strategically. Their habitus enables confident navigation of the school system, strategic awareness of when to intervene, and pedagogically informed interaction styles. Their practices reflect an embodied understanding of the field's logic—what Bourdieu (1990, 66) terms a 'feel for the game'—that allows them to deploy their resources effectively and strategically within the specific educational system. This results in educational advantages for their children. The key factor is not the frequency of intervention or the 'total volume' of capital, but the strategic timing and quality of capital and support. Educational insiders provide strategic support and guidance tailored to the child's needs and interests, while academic educational outsiders may sometimes meet their children's needs and interests, but often lack strategic depth. As a result, their children often experience more trial-and-error phases. Referring back to Jæger's (2009) analytical distinction of the mechanisms involved in social reproduction regarding cultural capital: While most studies implicitly address these three processes as one unified process, this study highlights how differences within the academic middle class, especially between educational insiders and outsiders, may occur at each of these levels. For instance, insider parents may not only possess more field-specific cultural capital, but also recognize more precisely when and how to transmit it, and do so in effective ways that children can more easily convert into educational-relevant outcomes. This paper contributed to the literature as it focuses particularly on how field-specific knowledge and institutional familiarity shape not just how much, but how and when parents intervene.

In terms of limitations, the retrospective nature of the interviews must be emphasized. Memory bias may occur, and past events may be distorted by current experiences or categorized differently today. In addition, the subjective interpretation of memories affects the consistency of responses. However, the interviewees' narratives appeared to be consistent over the course of the interview, and the parent-child interviews were often similar in content, so although these factors must be taken into account in interpretation, the quality of the data remains high. Although incomplete responses to the quantitative surveys prevent systematic verification in every case, matching parental and child narrations of parental practices with standardized data remains an important strength of the study. Unlike most qualitative research, this mixed-methods approach allows for a unique integration of large-scale statistical patterns with in-depth qualitative insights, enhancing both the contextualization and validity of the findings. Additionally, as the data comes from families with teenagers attending the Gymnasium, some practices may be less relevant in other school types and life stages. For example, parents at intermediate schools might focus more on preparing their children for apprenticeships. Yet, many observed mechanisms—such as parents supporting their children by applying pedagogical skills (e.g. explaining a mathematical homework)—likely capture general processes of advantage transmission beyond the Gymnasium. Furthermore, all educational insider parents in the sample were teachers. Individuals working in education in non-teaching roles may exhibit similar patterns of perception and action, given their access to this exclusive field. Future studies should therefore include individuals in non-teaching roles within the educational system to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the influential factors involved.

Even though there are more and more parents who have a university education in countries like Germany, these results indicate that this will not necessarily lead to a decline in inequality

in the long run, but that social differences may become more nuanced, focusing less on whether one pursues higher education and more on what one studies and how smooth the path to it is. Based on these findings, it could be argued that it is easier for the children of educational insiders to realize their potential and achieve educational success than for the other groups, which is a hypothesis that could be tested, for example, through simulations with rich databases.

Notes

1. In the German context, *upper secondary education* usually refers to the final two to three years of *Gymnasium* (depending on the federal state), the successful completion of this period leads to the diploma *Abitur*. This is the most common, but not exclusive, pathway to the Abitur. With an Abitur, students are enabled to attend a university. The Gymnasium is the most advanced and highest type of secondary school. Gymnasium strongly emphasizes academic learning.
2. This project was approved by the Executive Board of the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories (LIfBi) and its Ethics Committee.
3. In contrast to many other countries, Germany also offers the opportunity to obtain a profession outside of university, usually as part of a dual training program. Nursing, for example, is a common vocational training occupation in Germany, whereas in the USA it usually requires a higher education degree. For this reason, comparable international studies (e.g. Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016) would define the groups differently—in this case probably working class *vs.* middle class. However, as the middle class in Germany also includes professions that are not part of higher education and the classification of the groups would then be inaccurate, this distinction is not used.
4. All first names and surnames in this paper are pseudonyms. All quotations were translated from the German transcripts into English and, as was proposed by Lareau (2021, 220–224), slightly edited and shortened for readability without changing the meaning.
5. ISEI is the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status. The lowest value of the index is 16 (e.g. cleaning staff), and the highest is 88 (e.g. judges). Values higher than 60 indicate a university degree. In this study, the highest ISEI within the family is reported (see Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996).

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