

Competing cosmopolitan capitals? A comparative sociology of international certification in French secondary education

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The internationalisation of elite and upper middle class educational trajectories has been described as a major driver of the expansion of international curricula and credentials in the twenty-first century. The ‘cosmopolitan capital’ provided by these educational careers would constitute a new type of resource, which could be deployed in a wide range of social contexts. Alongside the internationalisation of higher education pathways and degrees, international school certificates have gained prominence as initiatives promising to combine academic rigour with the development of intercultural dispositions and competences through foreign language instruction, a culturally diverse curriculum and service learning.

At the high school level, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma has received the most attention among international certificates. However, in some contexts, it must compete with other forms of cosmopolitan capital. This is the case in France, where an international specialisation *within* the national secondary certificate exists since 1981. In this paper, I use country-wide administrative data on schools and students enrolled in IB Diploma schools and in schools offering the ‘international option’ (IO) French baccalaureate to examine the appropriation of international certificates by different social groups. The analysis reveals that international certification is a composite category, yet one that is transversally associated with upper-class education and academic distinction. Although both the IB and the IO are concentrated in France’s major cities and adopted in local school markets dominated by private schools, the IO is significantly more widespread than the IB. The positions of IB Diploma and IO schools in local contexts are also markedly different: while all IB Diploma schools are private institutions, most IO schools are public ones.

I seek to explain these findings and their implications for the analysis of the social logics of investment in internationalised school certificates in France. I argue that the articulation of international options with established instruments of educational distinction is decisive to understand their class appropriation. In the French context, private schools’ generalised dependence on state funding and, most importantly, the existence of the IO and its more seamless embedding with established pathways to selective higher education, have been major causes of the limited diffusion of the IB Diploma. At the same time, the centrality of the science curriculum in upper- and upper middle-class strategies of academic distinction, within a hierarchical high school certification system, makes even the IO a rather marginal instrument of educational advantage in the French context.