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Unequal homework: The hidden forces of social class contexts and parental self-efficacy in shaping educational outcomes

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Abstract

The Covid-19 outbreak forced families and teachers to use digital technology to support students to engage in distance learning at home. According to their social class, families' digital equipment, competences and uses vary markedly, which in turn, impacts children's academic achievement. Social class has also a great influence on cultural and parental practices at home, as well as on parental self-efficacy regarding supporting children's academic achievement. The present study investigated whether, within a single model, structural factors, including home environment, cultural capital, and digital capital, contribute both directly and indirectly (via parental self-efficacy) to the development of academic inequalities during homework. As predicted, analyses showed that families from working-class backgrounds are less equipped and feel less competent in digital technology as compared to families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Our findings also showed that families' social class is a significant predictor of cultural capital and parental self-efficacy which in turn contributes to educational inequalities in achievement.

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Future studies should delve deeper into the role of parental practices and their involvement, during homework, to educational inequalities.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Mrs. Johnson, a preschool teacher, was determined to maintain academic activities despite the school closures. To do so, she began communicating with parents via email, sending daily tasks for the children. One day, she asked the parents to help their children with an art project, providing detailed instructions that included both artistic and practical guidelines. Afterward, she requested that parents take a photo of their child's artwork and upload it to the class digital platform. At that time, the use of digital tools in education was even less widespread than it is today, but the goal was to share the children's creations with the entire class community. When the submission deadline was reached, Mrs. Johnson was surprised to receive only a handful of submissions, which, she noted, were mainly from parents of more affluent backgrounds. She expressed disappointment at what she perceived as a "lack of educational engagement" from parents of working-class backgrounds.

This anecdote stems from a verbal exchange between one of the authors and a teacher during the preliminary phase of a study conducted by members of our research team during the COVID-19 crisis (Sanrey et al., 2021). It struck us as important because it reflects a widespread belief that working-class families are perceived to be disengaged from their children's education (see Miller et al., 2024). This "myth of parental resignation" (Lahire, 1995) reflects a long-established tradition in psychology's study of social class disparities in education, much of which is shaped by what has been called a deficit perspective (e.g., Menchaca, 1997; Miller et al., 2024; Sheehy-Skeffington et al., 2024; Valencia, 2010). Central to this perspective is the belief that the academic underperformance of students from working-class backgrounds is due to deficits in individual traits, such as intelligence, motivation, or self-control. Some scholars attribute these differences to genetic factors (e.g., Harden, 2021; Marks, 2020), while others point to the deprivation students from working-class backgrounds experience in their families (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003). The teacher's reaction, in the quote above, in line with the deficit perspective, in fact contradicts existing research. While it is true that families from working-class backgrounds faced greater difficulties during lockdowns and distance learning compared to families from more affluent backgrounds (Easterbrook et al., 2023; Goudeau et al., 2021), research reveals that parents from working-class backgrounds are as equally engaged as those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds in their children's education (Delès, 2021a; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Sanrey et al., 2021). These findings challenge common assumptions about the disengagement of parents from working-class backgrounds and suggests that factors other than time commitment may better account for educational disparities. And this raises an important question: if lower parental involvement during homework is not responsible for the academic underachievement of students from working-class contexts, what is?

Several variables are at stake in the construction of academic inequalities during homework. First, the material conditions at home for completing homework can play a role in the construction of academic inequalities (e.g., having a desk, a quiet room to work, Bradley et al., 2001; Clark & Hawkins, 2010; Sammons et al., 2015). A second factor is the mismatch in terms of cultural

capital, which refers to the discrepancy between the forms of knowledge and skills valued in academic contexts (i.e., cultural capital, defined by Bourdieu as the “familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society”, 1970) and the forms of knowledge and skills developed through socialization in working-class contexts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Goudeau et al., in press; Stephens et al., 2012). Indeed, school is based on a specific set of knowledge and skills that are closer to those encountered in the socialization of families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds rather than in the socialization of families from working-class backgrounds (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Stephens et al., 2012). A third factor is the digital divide, that is, the social class variations in access to digital tools and resources, competences and use of digital tools. The digital divide is a key factor in the construction of academic inequalities during homework (Cruz-Jesus et al., 2016; Yates et al., 2015). Indeed, since the pandemic, homework is increasingly assigned through digital tools and requires more and more digital resources and skills to be completed. Research has shown that parents from working-class backgrounds are less likely to possess digital tools, are less familiarized with the digital tools and competences required to support their children for homework, and are less likely to use digital technology for education purposes (Brown, 2020; Harris et al., 2017).

Although these factors have been identified as important in past research, assessing their role in academic inequalities presents two major challenges. First, these factors have been often studied separately, leaving their respective contribution to academic achievement unclear (e.g. Kim & Kim, 2009; Lythreatis et al., 2022; OECD, 2021; Stephens et al., 2019; Villegas, 1988, but see Müller et al., 2023 for the joint contribution of cultural mismatch and digital divide to academic achievement). Second, they have been rarely studied in relation to parental self-efficacy, which we consider to be a crucial explanatory variable in this context. In the introductory example, it may be that the teacher’s instructions have inadvertently led working-class parents to be confronted with structural barriers and to consequently feel poorly equipped to help their children. Specifically, the complexity of the task criteria, the implicit requirement for available digital tools and skills, and the public sharing of their child’s work likely contributed to a wavering sense of self-efficacy. The judgment of teachers and the effects of symbolic violence related to school culture contribute to labeling working-class parents as “incapable” of supporting their children’s academic success (Millet & Croizet, 2016), leading to performative consequences on these parents’ low sense of self-efficacy. The role of parental self-efficacy in the construction of academic inequalities during homework remains under-explored (Liu & Leighton, 2021; Tazouti & Jarlégan, 2016). The innovative aspect of our study lies in its focus on parental self-efficacy as a key mediating factor of the effect of traditional structural factors on academic success.

Conducted in France just after the first wave of the pandemic, our research has been implemented in a context with three notable characteristics. First, in France, compared to other countries, homework plays a prominent role in the relationship between families and schools, requiring families to invest considerable time (Gouyon, 2004; Lahire, 1995; Kakpo, 2012). French students spend more time on homework, averaging 5 h per week, compared to other countries (e.g., Finland, Sweden), which prioritize in-class work (IFÉ, 2017; INSEE, 2017; OCDE, 2012). Second, in the post-pandemic era, homework is increasingly provided via digital channels, which implies that parents’ digital skills are, more than ever, required to support their child’s homework (Hutchison et al., 2020). Third, in France, because there is a lot of pressure to perform well in school, high levels of school-related anxiety have been reported in both parents and children (OCDE, 2023). For example, 49% of French teenagers report high levels of anxiety when attending school and 47% of parents declare themselves as “very stressed” (Pham, 2017, 2024).

In this context, we propose that structural factors, including home environment, cultural capital, and digital capital, contribute both directly and indirectly (via parental self-efficacy) to the development of academic inequalities during homework. The direct path refers to the fact that these structural factors represent less favorable contexts to support children and their academic achievement in families from working-class backgrounds. The indirect path refers to the fact that these variations of structural factors are positively associated with social class variations of self-efficacy among parents. These differences in sense of self-efficacy predict, in turn, perceived academic achievement. This diminished sense of self-efficacy could be related with less effective support for children's homework, which, in turn, could further compound academic inequalities.

To explore this, we tested two competitive models diverging on the status of parental self-efficacy using structural equation modeling. In both models, social class was the main predictor and perceived academic achievement was the main outcome. In the first model, we tested for a potential mediation where homework environment, cultural capital, digital capital, (stage-1 mediators) predict parental self-efficacy (stage-2 mediator), whereas in the second model we tested a parallel mediation where all of these variables were stage-1 mediators. Comparing the two models enabled us to directly gauge the status of parental self-efficacy as a mediator between structural factors and academic achievement.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Inequalities in homework

Homework can be defined as “tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours” (Cooper, 1989a, p. 7). In many countries, in the vast majority of schools, homework does exist, albeit in very different forms (OCDE, 2014). Homework plays a big part in the learning process and academic achievement (Trautwein, 2007). Although homework is positively perceived by a majority of teachers, homework is still a polarizing topic in education (Bempechat, 2004). While its positive effect on achievement remains unclear (e.g., Cooper et al., 2006; Magalhães et al., 2020), research shows that homework is a way of helping children to learn more effectively, to gain autonomy, and to develop their academic skills (Bembenuddy, 2009; Fan et al., 2017; Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009).

Among these skills, homework has been shown to help develop effective and good study habits (Bempechat, 2004). Additionally, homework fosters the development of personal responsibility in schoolwork (Xu & Yuan, 2003) and desirable self-regulatory strategies, such as effective time management (Corno & Xu, 2004). However, some research highlighted the lack of strong evidence for an association between homework and academic achievement (Cooper et al., 2006; Magalhães et al., 2020). Some studies suggest that homework has an overall positive effect on academic achievement by encouraging students to learn during their leisure time or improving their study habits and skills (Warton, 2001; Xu & Corno, 1998). However, studies have also reported that homework might trigger a loss of interest in academic material and could also worsen the gap between high and low achievers (Cooper, 1989a, Cooper et al., 2006).

Research in sociology and psychology suggests that homework could contribute to educational inequalities (Daw, 2012; Calarco et al., 2022; Rønning, 2011). However, the processes by which homework could widen inequalities remains unclear as the widespread idea that parents from the working-class are less involved is contradicted by recent data (Delès, 2021b; Sanrey et al., 2021).

Social class variations in parental practices in homework

Recent research has focused on parental involvement during homework, and how it may differ according to families' social class (Delès, 2021b). Contrasting with deficit theories, which portray parents from working-class families as lacking the motivation to make their children succeed and as providing a deleterious context to developing their children's intellectual abilities (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995), research in sociology and psychology has provided evidence that working-class parents are equally engaged in their children's success (Lahire, 1995). For instance, Kakpo (2012) showed that the ritual of homework is extremely well established in families from working-class backgrounds. Indeed, she demonstrated that there is a specific time after school, consistently dedicated to homework, which is presented as something that must be completed before engaging in more relaxing or entertaining activities. This status of homework as a non-negotiable task, integrated into the daily schedule, clearly reflects the strong academic concern of parents from working-class backgrounds. Similarly, data collected during lockdown showed that families from working-class backgrounds spent as much, if not more, time homeschooling as compared to families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Delès et al., 2021; Sanrey et al., 2021).

The disparity between social classes may lie in the different ways parents engage with their children's homework (Fernández Alonso et al., 2022). In a study conducted during the spring 2020 lockdown in France, Delès (2021a) showed that parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds use various and alternative means to foster their children's school work. In particular, these parents demonstrate valuable skills in the use of digital tools and in the combination of educational methods. The time dedicated to homework in families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds was not significantly greater, but rather dispersed among a variety of non-academic activities (e.g., crafting, cooking, artistic activities, sports) that served as supports for the children's academic learning, leading to it being less formally acknowledged.

These studies clearly suggest that parental support for homework needs a more fine-grained analysis: measuring the time parents spend helping their children does not necessarily equate with the actual assistance provided. Here we propose that structural factors, including home environment, cultural capital, and the digital capital, contribute to academic inequalities during homework both directly, by creating less favorable conditions for supporting children's learning, and indirectly, by altering parents' sense of self-efficacy.

Social class variations in home environment

First, the home environment seems to contribute to the social class achievement gap via its effect on homework (e.g., Van Steensel, 2006). Students from working-class contexts tend to face more challenges with homework. They often lack access to resources such as a quiet study space and books, which are more readily available to students from middle and upper-class contexts (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007; Cooper et al., 2006; Lehl et al., 2020). In their literacy report, Clark and Hawkins (2010) state that children's literacy levels and reading attainment were related to having a desk of one's own. Moreover, students from working-class contexts tend to live among more cramped and noisy environments that are responsible for less suitable homework environments (Andrew et al., 2020; Shield & Dockrell, 2008). While home environments can create a more or less favorable context for homework that varies according to social class (Lurie et al., 2021), studies suggest that families from working-class backgrounds still engage in school-related activities (Van Steensel, 2006). However, since completing homework requires specific cultural

knowledge and skills not all families are equally equipped to support their children in this task (Dumais, 2002).

Social class variations in cultural capital

In contrast to the deficit perspective on social class disparities which assumes that the underachievement of students from working-class backgrounds is due to individual or parental deficits (e.g., Harden, 2021; Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003), the cultural mismatch perspective (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Gaddis, 2013; Goudeau et al., 2024; Stephens et al., 2012) posits that academic contexts tend to prioritize cultural knowledge, skills and perspectives (i.e., cultural capital) that tend to match with the socialization of families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, but that mismatch with the socialization of families from working-class backgrounds (Bernstein, 1959; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Gaddis, 2013; Goudeau et al., 2024; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Stephens et al., 2012). For example, parents from middle- and upper-class families tend to have a higher number of books and cultural artifacts in their households, and are more likely to engage in activities such as reading stories to their children or visiting museums and libraries (e.g., Gaddis, 2013; Lahire, 2019; Lareau, 2015). Parents from middle- and upper-class families are also more inclined to offer resources like games and books that support the development and reinforcement of school-related skills, such as acquiring knowledge about numbers, letters, colors, and shapes (Bradley et al., 2001; Lareau, 1989).

In contrast, socialization within working-class families fosters the development of knowledge and skills that are less valued or relevant in academic contexts. For instance, children from working-class families are more likely to acquire practical and manual skills (Hoggart, 1957; Nunes et al., 1993; Segall, 1999) which are often well-suited for the challenges they may face (Ellis et al., 2022; Frankenhuys & Nettle, 2020). However, these forms of knowledge and skills tend to mismatch the cultural capital expected and valued in academic contexts, creating a first contribution to unequal academic achievement (see Yilmaz et al., 2024).

We argue that this cultural mismatch is likely to constitute a structural barrier for the completion of homework for families from working-class backgrounds. As the typical work assigned for homework often requires cultural knowledge and skills that are closer to the cultural capital developed in families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, cultural mismatch can directly affect the support that parents from working-class backgrounds can offer to their children. Cultural mismatch can also affect them indirectly by altering their sense of parental self-efficacy. Our argument is supported by evidence reported during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Research has shown that parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds were more likely to take advantage of homeschooling by implementing activities that were “educationally profitable” (e.g., reading books, playing board games, encouraging artistic activities); they also experienced a lower sense of self-efficacy to organize homeschooling (Sanrey et al., 2021).

Social class variations in digital capital

Since the pandemic, another key factor that likely played a role in educational inequalities during homework is the digital capital (Lembani et al., 2020; Soomro et al., 2020; Van De Werfhorst et al., 2022). Indeed, since the pandemic, homework is increasingly assigned through digital platforms (Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin, 2022). While access to digital technology has overall increased

over the years (World Bank, 2018, 2019), access to digital equipment (e.g., computers, smartphones, Internet connection, tablet) is nevertheless still greatly determined by an individual's social class (González-Betancor et al., 2021). In France, significant socioeconomic disparities exist in digital access. According to Lutz (2019), around 10% of the poorest households do not have Internet access, compared to 99% connectivity among the wealthiest households. Additionally, 17% of low-income households do not have a computer at home, compared to just 2% of high-income households (INSEE, 2022).

Digital skills also reflect this trend, exacerbating inequalities in the context of homework, where digital proficiency is increasingly required. Indeed, parents' level of education is a significant predictor of how competent they are in using technology, which in turn predicts how much they can help their children with online activities (e.g., knowing how to download and upload a document via email, mastering word processing software, knowing how to search for relevant information on the internet, Hargittai, 2010; Legleye & Rolland, 2019; Pons-Salvador et al., 2022). In France, 50% of individuals with low or no qualifications report lacking basic digital skills, compared to only 10% of those with higher education degrees (Baromètre du Numérique, 2021). In addition to inequalities in digital access and competences, there is also a social class divide in digital uses: compared to families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, families from working-class backgrounds are more likely to use digital technology for recreational activities rather than for educational ones (Drabowicz, 2017; Harris et al., 2017). In sum, these differences in terms of equipment, skills and uses could further amplify inequalities in the context of homework (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023; Auxier & Anderson, 2020; Chen et al., 2022).

Although home environment, cultural capital, and digital capital are likely to be associated with academic inequalities by creating less favorable contexts for families from working-class backgrounds during homework, we argue that they can also lead parents from working-class backgrounds to experience lower levels of parental self-efficacy compared to their middle- and upper-class counterparts. Indeed, even if these structural factors represent objective extrinsic barriers to support effectively their children, they are likely to be experienced and explained as reflecting a lack of individual abilities (Goudeau & Cimpian, 2021). To sum up, in this contribution we thus aim to demystify the impact of structural (dis)advantages (or factors) by highlighting their psychological underpinnings, that is, a negative (vs. positive) self-evaluation and confidence, which may well produce a vicious cycle likely to reinforce initial inequalities.

Parental self-efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy stems from Bandura's (1986) theory, originally defined as the individual's beliefs in their ability to successfully accomplish a task. The influence of self-efficacy on academic achievement has been fairly well documented (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016). Specifically, feeling incompetent during task performance consumes attentional resources allocated to the task, thereby disrupting performance (Autin & Croizet, 2012; Schmader et al., 2008). Self-efficacy also plays a key role in engagement in learning and perseverance in the face of difficulty (Bandura et al., 1996, 2001). In the literature of academic inequalities, research has shown that children from middle- and upper-class backgrounds tend to report a higher sense of self-efficacy than their peers from working-class backgrounds (e.g., Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Although self-efficacy has primarily been studied in learners, it has also been examined in parents.

Parental self-efficacy refers both to parents' beliefs about the positive influence they can have on their children's behavior and development (Coleman & Karraker, 1998) and to parents' satisfaction regarding their role as parents (Johnston & Mash, 1989). In their paper, Coleman and Karraker

(1998) noted that low levels of parental self-efficacy were linked to greater stress and more negative parental practices (e.g., being less patient during homework). They also described parental self-efficacy as a crucial mediator to parents' and children's well-being. Parental self-efficacy refers to a parent's ability to use their resources, cognitive and behavioral, to take control over life events (Cervone, 2000; Jones & Prinz, 2005). More precisely, when related to school and academic success, parental self-efficacy reflects parents' beliefs regarding their ability to positively influence their children's learning, and appears as a strong determinant of parents' involvement in education (Coleman & Karraker, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). In their study, Ardel and Eccles (2001) showed that a high level of parental self-efficacy was a strong predictor of children's sense of self-efficacy. They also found that parental self-efficacy was indirectly related to children's academic achievement – primarily mediated by children's self-efficacy.

While parents' concern for their children's academic success is ubiquitous, and has been growing over the last few years (Gouyon & Guérin, 2006), they may differ in terms of perceived efficacy when helping their children with their school work. Research indicates that parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds generally feel more confident when helping their children with homework and are able to offer greater support. In contrast, parents from working-class backgrounds often find this more challenging, which is associated with lower levels of incompetence in students from working-class backgrounds (Sanrey et al., 2021; Tazouti & Jarlégan, 2016, 2019). These results have also been documented in other countries like Korea and Japan. For instance, Yamamoto (2015) demonstrated in Japan that mothers from middle- and upper-class backgrounds report a higher sense of self-efficacy than those from working-class backgrounds, and they are more likely to stay attuned to school's activities (Yamamoto et al., 2006). In their study, Holloway et al. (2016) demonstrated that parental self-efficacy mediated the relation social class and academic achievement. Reduced parental self-efficacy in working-class families could hamper their involvement, leading to less effective support for their children's homework.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Up until now, the contribution of structural factors on academic achievement has been studied separately in the literature. Here, we go a step further by gauging these relationships in a single model (see Figure 1 for an overview of the model). In this pre-registered study, our aim was to examine whether structural factors, including home environment, cultural capital, and the digital capital, are linked to the development of academic inequalities related to homework both directly and indirectly. Directly, they are associated with less favorable contexts for supporting children. Indirectly, these variations in structural factors positively predict social class differences in levels of parental self-efficacy (see Figure 1). More precisely, we hypothesized that social class should be positively associated with parental practices, homework environment, cultural capital, digital capital, explaining its influence on parental self-efficacy, which drives the achievement gap.

METHOD

Ethics approval

This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Tours-Poitiers University (2021-11-01) and the data collection has been approved by the data protection officer (DPO).

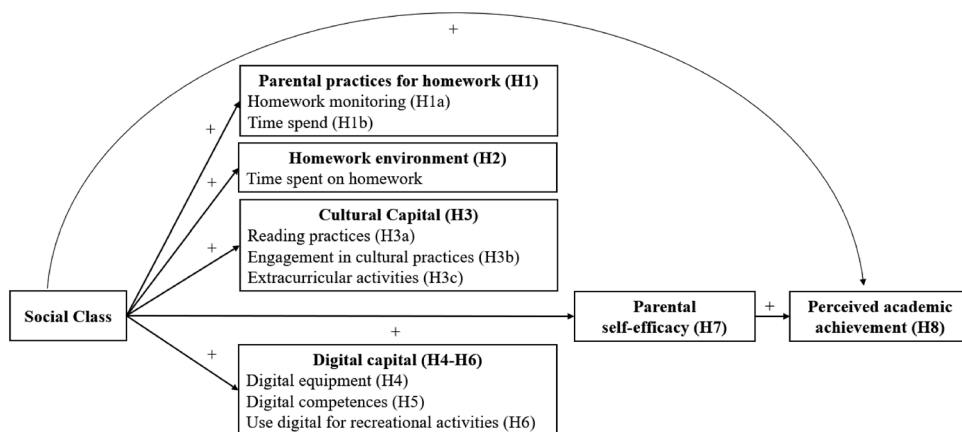


FIGURE 1 Statistical model testing the contribution of each variable to academic achievement.

Transparency and openness

This study was preregistered. Study hypotheses, protocol, variables of interest, sample characteristics, exclusion criteria, analysis strategy, data, and materials are openly available at the project's Open Science Framework page (Project: https://osf.io/4zbvj/?view_only=7011c74047004eea8654efa6332b4e34)

Participants

Our participants were parents of children aged seven to thirteen from various social classes. To determine our sample, we used the 20:1 ratio rule (at least 20 cases for every estimated parameter); we needed a total of 400 participants (Kline, 2010)¹. We sampled a total of 400 French participants, 332 women and 68 men, 174 participants from working-class backgrounds and 226 participants from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Within our sample, we had participants that spoke French and other languages. Among our participants from working-class backgrounds, 30.46% spoke both French and another language whereas it concerned only 7.08% of our participants from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Regarding participants speaking only French within the household, we report 92.9% of families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and 66.6% of families from working-class backgrounds (see Table 1). Although well aware of the contribution of race, ethnicity or religion to social inequalities (see Valle & Covarrubias, 2024), we would like to stress that French regulations prevented us from collecting information about these variables². Our participants were partly recruited through elementary and middle schools that agreed to take part in our study, from all over the region of Nouvelle-Aquitaine (France). Once the families agreed

¹ Note: We downsized our expected sample from 800 to 400. A power analysis conducted post-registration revealed that a sample size of 400 participants would be enough to test our hypotheses. Although a larger sample would have provided greater power, we faced several difficulties while trying to recruit participants. More specifically, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic potential participants proved to be reluctant to sign up for a household interview. Given that the data collection had to be completed before the end of the civil year, we decided to reduce our sample to the minimum needed, that is, 400 participants

² The French constitutional law of information and freedom embraces equality as a founding principle and researchers have been prohibited from collecting this kind of information since 1978

TABLE 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

| Variables | Social class | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| | Working-class | Middle- and upper-class |
| 1. <i>N</i> | 174 | 226 |
| 2. Gender of the participant | | |
| Female | 89.08% | 78.31% |
| Male | 10.92% | 21.68% |
| 3. School year of the child | | |
| 2nd Grade | 7.47% | 9.29% |
| 3rd Grade | 17.24% | 13.27% |
| 4th Grade | 13.79% | 15.48% |
| 5th Grade | 16.09% | 16.81% |
| 6th Grade | 25.28% | 21.23% |
| 7th Grade | 16.66% | 17.25% |
| 8th Grade | 3.44% | 6.63% |
| 4. Spoken language in the household | | |
| French | 66.6% | 92.9% |
| French and another language | 30.46% | 7.08% |
| Another language | 2.87% | 0% |
| 5. Nationality | | |
| French | 76.43% | 96.01% |
| Other | 23.56% | 3.98% |
| 6. Type of housing | | |
| Detached house | 47.12% | 86.72% |
| Apartment (>1076 sq ft) | 3.44% | 6.19% |
| Apartment (1076 sq ft–645 sq ft) | 40.80% | 7.08% |
| Apartment (<645 sq ft) | 3.44% | 0% |
| Other | 5.17% | 0% |
| 7. Type of family | | |
| Bi-parental family | 53.44% | 76.99% |
| Single-parent family | 30.46% | 11.50% |
| Blended family | 12.06% | 10.17% |
| Other | 4.02% | 1.32% |

to take part in the study by signing a form (approved by the DPO), the interviewers made an appointment with each family and met at their house to complete the questionnaire. To ensure the standardization of the interview, a script was given to the interviewers (see [Supplementary Material](#)).

Measures

Since all of the scales we used were created for the study (except “Parental Self-Efficacy”, which is from Tazouti and Jarlégan, 2016), we checked the internal reliability of each scale, when

applicable, before analysis. More precisely, we used principal component and confirmatory analysis beforehand and we dropped items that had factor loadings of less than .3. As mentioned in our pre-registration, we also dropped some items because they had too many missing values or negatively impacted the internal consistency of the scale. For a detailed list of all scale items included in the analyses, please refer to the *Supplementary Materials*.

Filler items

The questionnaire began with seven questions about school in general (e.g., “How does your child go to school?”). These items were not meant to be analyzed later, but only served as “warm up” questions.

Social class

Social class was assessed using the social position index as a proxy (Rocher, 2016). To calculate the social position index, the only information needed is parental occupation so we asked parents to specify their profession during the questionnaire. Although this proxy is calculated only using parental occupation, it aims at capturing multiple dimensions linked to social class (e.g., parental education, material conditions, cultural capital, see Rocher, 2016). To develop this indicator, Rocher analyzed the data of 29,955 French students from the 6th grade. The indicator is a standardized continuous variable ($M = 100$; $SD = 30$). We assigned a social position index value to each of the two parents and computed a crossed social position index based on the parents (Rocher, 2016).

Parental practices and homework environment

Parental homework monitoring

Regarding parental practices during homework, we used 16 items that we adapted from Delès (2020). These items enabled us to cover the presence of an adult during children’s homework (e.g., “Does someone help your child with homework, even occasionally?”) and parental monitoring during homework (e.g., “In the evening, you ask your child if they have homework to do”). Participants had to respond using a frequency scale ranging from *never or very rarely* (1), to *every day* (5), ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 3.33$, $SD = .94$). For our analysis, we used the average score of 12 items (two items were reverse coded) and we dropped three items that were factor loading less than .3.

Homework environment and time spent on homework

Two items were used to measure the homework environment, adapted from Delès (2020). First item was; “Is there a place at home that is suitable for work, that is to say without noise and without passage where your child can do their homework?” and answers were (1) yes, (2) no. These answers were not included in the SEM analyses but can be found in the *Supplementary Materials* under the logistic regressions section. The second item was “When your child is doing their homework, where do they usually settle down?”. Answers to the second item were coded in seven numerical categories to be analyzed; in the kitchen (1), in a sibling’s bedroom (2), in their own bedroom on their bed or on the floor (3), in the living-room (4), in their bedroom at

their desk (5), in one of the parents' office (6), another place (7). Regarding the time spent on homework, answers were coded in five categories and analyzed as a continuous variable; 30 min or less (1), 30 min to 1 h (2), 1–2 h (3), 2–3 h (4), more than 3 h (5). For our analysis, we only used “time spent on homework” since it was a numerical variable, and we computed an average score ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .77$).

Cultural capital

Cultural capital was assessed with items representing three subdimensions, namely, reading practices, cultural practices, extracurricular practices. The first two were averaged whereas the factor loadings for the last one were not acceptable (more than .3), then was excluded for the analyses. To compute the score, the eight items were first transformed into a score between 0 and 1, then summed, as items have different response ranges, $\alpha = .64$, $M = 5.34$ $SD = 1.4$. All items can be found in the *Supplementary Material*.

Reading practices

To describe families' reading practices, we based our items on the ones used in Delès (2020). Five items questioned families' reading practices including the number of books at home, the number of books read in the past 6 months, and the extent to which parents engaged in shared reading activities with their child (e.g., “Approximately how many books (digital or not) do you have at home?”). For these items, answers ranged as follows; 10 books or less (1), 11–25 books (2), 26–100 books (3), 101–200 books (4), 201–500 books (5), more than 500 books (6).

Cultural practices

Regarding cultural practices, we noted a lot of missing data. Missing data was due to few participants going to the museum or the library on a daily basis, hence not answering these questions. As pre-registered, when a participant failed to answer at least seven questions across the whole questionnaire, they were excluded from our analyses. We had six items; three items concerned the frequency of cultural activities (e.g., “Approximately how many times have you/has another person of the household been to a public library during the past 6 months?”). Answers to the frequency items were coded and ranged from *never or very rarely* (1), to *every day* (5).

Extracurricular activities

To document children's extracurricular activities, we used eight items on sport, music and artistic activities (e.g., “Does your child practice an extracurricular sport?”, “Does your child play music outside of school?”). Participants also had to give an answer in terms of duration, “If so, how many hours per week?” and responses were coded 1–2 h (1), 2–3 h (2), 3 h and more (3). Although we pre-registered that “extracurricular activities” would be part of our cultural capital measure, we did not include this variable because the factor loading was not acceptable (more than .3).

Digital capital

Items used to measure the digital capital were adapted from Delès (2020) and from Ragnedda et al. (2020). Table 2 presents the zero-correlation order, the means and the standard deviations. We preregistered a “digital capital” variable that would include “digital equipment”, “digital

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

| Variable | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|----------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| 1. Social class (calculated with the Social Position Index) | 118.25 | 38.70 | | | | | | | |
| 2. Perceived academic achievement | 3.74 | 1.28 | .46** | | | | | | |
| 3. Home Environment | 1.22 | .77 | .12* | .07 | | | | | |
| 4. Parental self-efficacy | 4.60 | .68 | .50** | .38** | .17** | | | | |
| 5. Parental practices during homework | 3.33 | .94 | -.01 | -.15** | .00 | .18** | | | |
| 6. Cultural capital | 5.34 | 1.44 | .50** | .42** | .01 | .41** | .07 | | |
| 7. Digital competences | 4.72 | .68 | .43** | .26** | .30** | .65** | .09 | .36** | |
| 8. Digital equipment | 1.44 | .56 | .23** | .10 | .05 | .19** | -.14** | .04 | .15** |

Note: *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively.

* indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$.

competences” and “digital use”. However, we had to slightly deviate from our pre-registration by not aggregating digital equipment and competences together, since it was not statistically appropriate. Our scales were made for the study, hence note previously established, and we could not aggregate the scales all together because of the different range of responses.

Digital equipment

To document the digital divide, participants were asked to report the amount of equipment available at home. Participants were asked to indicate how many of each digital device they owned (e.g., a desktop computer, a portable computer/laptop/notebook). For our analysis, we used the ratio of sum per person in the household ($M = 1.4$, $SD = .56$). For each piece of equipment, participants were also asked to report if *their child had their own equipment* (1), *shared the access to it with other people* (2) or *did not use it at all* (3). Answers regarding the children were not included in the analysis.

Digital competences

Participants were asked to report their digital competencies regarding their ability to navigate digital technology (e.g., “I can use the Internet to keep up with my child’s homework” or “I can turn on a browser on a laptop/tablet/smartphone”). Responses ranged from *not my case at all* (1) to *absolutely my case* (5), and for our analysis, we used the average score of all eight items ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 4.72$, $SD = .68$).

Digital use

Participants were also asked about their digital use. Firstly, they had to report for themselves and for their child the duration of time spent in front of a screen; for homework/work in the evening, for homework/work during the weekends, to relax in the evening, to relax on weekends. There was one open question for each combination of purpose and point in time. We categorized the answers in five categories to create a continuous variable; *30 min or less* (1), *30 min to 1 h* (2), *1–2 h* (3), *2–3 h* (4), *more than 3 h* (5). Then, they were asked to report the frequency of their digital use for themselves and for their child to (1) communicate with other people (e.g., social media), (2) work, (3) relax, watch videos, movies or tv shows, from *never or very rarely* (1) to *every day* (5). The digital use variable was removed from our analysis since its factorial structure and the internal validity were not acceptable.

Parental self-efficacy

Parental self-efficacy was assessed with six items from Tazouti and Jarlégan (2016) referring to the self-reported ability of parents to manage their child's schoolwork (e.g., "You feel able to explain a lesson to your child"). Participants had to answer on a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored from *not my case at all* (1) to *totally my case* (5), we computed the average score ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 4.60$, $SD = .68$).

Perceived academic achievement

Perceived academic achievement was assessed using a single item. We asked parents "how do you think your child is currently doing at school?" and answers ranged from *they have a lot of difficulties* (1) to *they are doing very well* (5), ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.27$). This item is not an objective measure of the child's performance in school; this only reflects a subjective measure of parents' perception of their children's academic achievement.

PROCEDURE

Interviewers completed the questionnaire on a computer, a tablet or a smartphone and via a LimeSurvey link. To recruit participants, we collaborated with a total of 27 secondary schools to target parents who had at least one child aged 7–13. Once a target family agreed to take part in the study, interviewers contacted them to make an appointment directly at the parents' home. If the parents had several children aged 7–13, they were asked to choose for which child they wanted to provide answers. The interviewers read the questions out loud to only one of the parents and then marked their answers on LimeSurvey via a tablet or a smartphone. They were seated in such a way so as to enable the parent to monitor the administrator's note taking.

The interviewers followed standardized instructions that were given to them prior to visiting the parent's home: they were reminded to make sure that the parent answering the questionnaire understood the questions correctly, and if not, they rephrased it (see [Supplementary Material](#)). If the interviewer was facing both parents, they had to make sure to only mark the answers of the parent who signed the consent form and took part in the study. We chose to collect answers from only one of the parents for two main reasons. Sometimes, answers from both parents can be incongruent as they do not necessarily get involved in the same way in the children's education. The other reason was that since the interviews usually took place before work (e.g., from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.) or after (e.g., from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.), having one parent available was easier than two. For two-parent families, when the interviews took place during the day, it was mostly only one parent who was available. The interviewer had to make sure that the parent was not doing anything else while they were answering the questionnaire (e.g., cooking, doing chores...). The parent could not call upon their child to answer a question (even if some of the questions are directly concerning the child, we were only interested in collecting the parent's answer since we were measuring parental involvement and their perception). If a question led to a discussion with the parent, the administrator had to bear in mind that they had to stick to the questionnaire and not get involved in a lengthy conversation. If, and when that was the case, the administrator had to kindly remind the parent that they could discuss at the end of the questionnaire. If the parent

answering the questionnaire had any questions, they had to wait until the end of the questionnaire rather than asking the interviewer in the middle of the procedure. The formal aspect of the questionnaire enabled us to make sure every interview was standardized and it also helped us to collect data that was planned and supposed to be coded later on.

The interviewers were encouraged to add any comment at the end of the questionnaire to note additional information (e.g., if they were interrupted at some point by the other parent, if the child or the parent started to do something else while answering the questions...). Since this study was taking place just after lockdowns and during the height of the pandemic, the interviewers were encouraged to wear a mask and keep appropriate social distance at all times, even if the parents did not wear a mask themselves. We reminded the interviewers that the families were taking part in this study voluntarily after signing an informed consent; this meant that if a family agreed to complete the questionnaire, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, interviewers were instructed to avoid being invasive and to always react correctly and politely, regardless of circumstances.

Our motivations for and approaches to our research project were necessarily informed by the diverse positionalities of our research team. Johanne Mzidabi is a 3rd year PhD student supervised by Sébastien Goudeau and Jean-François Rouet. She is a French mixed-race woman. She is a psychologist, and has been raised by two teachers who always emphasized the importance of equity and equality in the education system. Coming from this middle-class background, she has always been eager to find ways to reduce educational inequalities and wished to engage in conversations with parents and teachers, both witnessing these inequalities on a daily basis. Sébastien Goudeau is professor of social psychology at the University of Poitiers, France. He has been a primary school teacher for 6 years before starting his PhD. His experience as a primary school teacher has been influential in his research that is mostly conducted in real classrooms where he studies the role of academic context in the construction of academic inequalities related to social class. He is a White French male who grew up in a rural village and raised in a middle-class family. His training in social psychology, cognitive psychology and sociology led him to use mostly experiments and quantitative surveys to test insights drawn from sociology. Finally, his experience as a father of two daughters has undeniably led him to be interested in the question of homework completion. Jean-François Rouet was trained as a developmental and cognitive psychologist. He is a senior research scientist with the French National Centre for Research. His research focuses on the acquisition of literacy skills (both traditional and digital) in children, adolescents, and young adults. Born to parents who were primary school teachers in a rural area, he directly witnessed the academic difficulties of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and was always interested in connecting behavioral science and education. He is currently involved in the codesign of effective intervention programs with a network of middle and vocational high school teachers. Nele Claes is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Clermont-Auvergne, France. Her research focuses on social class inequalities in mental health and academic achievement. She comes from an educated family in Belgium. She identifies themselves as upper class, although she has not a permanent academic position. Romain Delès is an associate professor in sociology at the Emile Durkheim Center – University of Bordeaux, France. He works on issues of access to higher education and on inequalities of achievement at school through comparative analysis. His research focuses on educational inequalities, particularly on the forms and effects of parental involvement in schooling. At the same time, in order to identify the mechanisms responsible for gender inequalities, he works on issues related to the integration of men into the domestic sphere. His goal is to contribute to more inclusive and equitable social, family, and educational policies. Theodore Alexopoulos is a full professor of social psychology at the University of Bordeaux, France. His research explores

how people navigate effectively through their social environments dealing with potential threats and chances. He is currently involved in a project funded by the French National Research Agency that examines the cognitive processes driving responses to social exclusion in school contexts. He comes from a Belgian/Greek binational background. He uses quantitative methods to study the interplay between affect, cognition and behavior in various settings, including educational contexts. Matthew Easterbrook is a reader in social psychology at the University of Sussex, England. His research investigates how social, cultural, and psychological factors contribute to, and can be harnessed to reduce, educational inequalities, particularly inequalities based on socioeconomic status and social class. He is a White man who grew up in a fairly working-class rural area in southwest England.

RESULTS

We preregistered that we would conduct linear and logistic regressions, however, for brevity reasons, the regressions are only reported in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

Structural equation modeling

As pre-registered, we ran a SEM with R software (3.5.2 version), using the lavaan 0.6.5 package (Rosseel, 2012). We used the model generalization approach proposed by Jöreskog and Sörbom (1993, cited by Gana & Broc, 2018). This approach is used when the fit estimators of the theoretical model are not acceptable, and the model is modified and retested (Gana & Broc, 2018). At each step, we tested the contribution of the modification with model comparisons. If the comparison was non-significant, we retained the most parsimonious model. Based on both theoretical and empirical grounds, we made reasonable model modifications. More precisely, we added the direct effects of digital skills, homework environment, and cultural practices on parental self-efficacy and academic achievement (see Figure 2 for the final model).

As we mentioned in the introduction: we tested two competitive models diverging on the status of parental self-efficacy. In both models, social class was the main predictor and perceived academic achievement was the main outcome. In the first model, we tested a serial mediation where homework environment, cultural capital, digital capital, (stage-1 mediators) predict parental self-efficacy (stage-2 mediator), whereas in the second model we tested a parallel mediation where all of these variables were stage-1 mediators. The model comparison has shown that the first model fits better than the second model, $\chi^2(5) = 115, p < .001$, which means that considering the serial mediation model seems more appropriate to represent the data.

First, the serial mediation model provided good to excellent fit indices, $CFI = .980, TLI = .930, RMSEA = .034, SRMR = .034$, see Figure 2 for the final model. Regarding the results, social class (as measured with the social position index) positively predicted perceived academic achievement, $B = .21, p < .001$; three stage-1 mediators: cultural capital, $B = .52, p < .001$, digital competences, $B = .37, p < .001$, and digital equipment, $B = .13, p = .033$; the stage-2 mediator: parental self-efficacy, $B = .18, p < .001$. This first result shows a positive link between social and perceived academic achievement, meaning that parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds report a higher perception of their children's academic achievement. Also, regarding the mediators, cultural capital, $B = .12, p = .001$, digital competences, $B = .49, p < .001$, digital equipment, $B = .10, p = .035$, and parental practices during homework, $B = .14, p = .001$, predicted parental

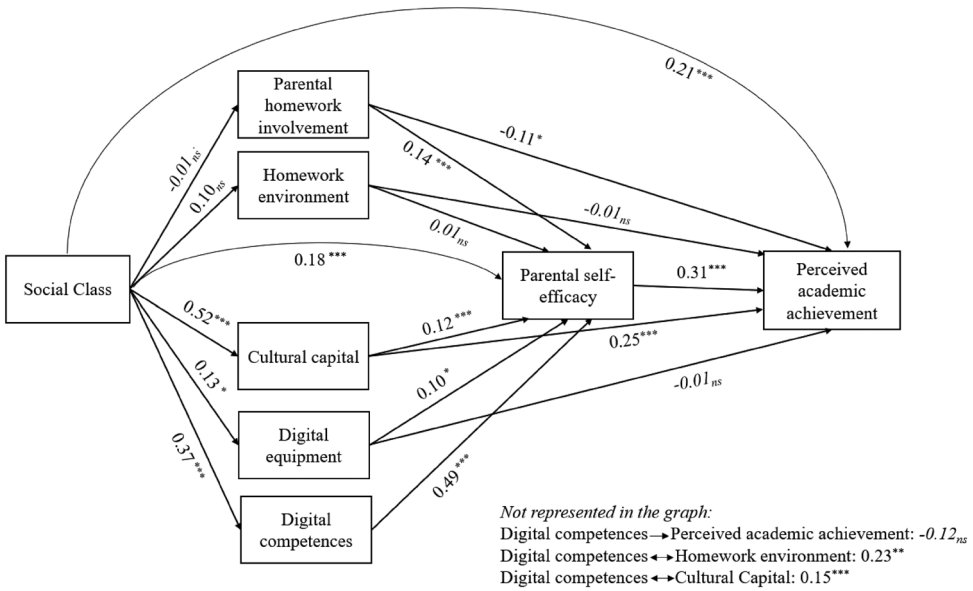


FIGURE 2 Results for the SEM analyses. *Note.* The figure presents only the estimated paths from the final model. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; $_{ns}$ $p > .05$.

self-efficacy. In addition, parental self-efficacy predicted perceived academic achievement, $B = .31$, $p < .001$. These results highlight the key role of parent self-efficacy, determined by structural factors and predicting perceived academic achievement. Surprisingly, parental practices during homework negatively predicted academic achievement, $B = -.11$, $p < .001$, whereas the effects of digital competences and equipment were not directly related to perceived academic achievement.

Second, regarding the indirect effects of the stage-1 mediators, only cultural capital mediated the effect of social class on perceived academic achievement, indirect effect = $.16$, $p < .001$. Similarly, cultural capital and digital competencies mediated the effect of social class on parental self-efficacy, indirect effects = $.06$ and $.18$, $p_s < .001$, respectively.

Third, regarding the indirect effect of the stage-2 mediator, parental self-efficacy mediated the effect of social class on perceived academic achievement, indirect effect = $.16$, $p < .001$. In addition, parental self-efficacy mediated the effect of cultural capital, digital competencies, and parental involvement in homework on perceived academic achievement, indirect effects = $.04$, $.15$, and $.04$, $p_s < .05$, respectively.

Finally, regarding the full serial mediation effects (i.e., social class stage-1 mediator parental academic achievement), the analyses showed that both cultural capital and digital competencies were significantly involved in the full model, serial indirect effects = $.02$ and $.06$, $p = .020$ and $p = .001$. See *Supplementary Materials* for the direct and indirect effects.

DISCUSSION

The critical tradition (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) provides a very useful demonstration of the link between social class and academic achievement. This connection has been attributed to cultural capital, which is strongly differentiated depending on the students'

social class. In this theoretical framework, family socialization acts, almost automatically, in such a way to create educational differences between students. However, the precise mechanisms that support the transmission of cultural capital remain poorly understood. For Bourdieu (1966), family socialization is supposed to act “osmotically”, that is, “without the specific and methodical intervention of parents” (p.330). The Bourdieusian tradition may have overshadowed the systematic study of parental practices and the specific learning elements at stake during parental support. The present study was designed to determine, within a single model, the contribution of different variables likely to play a role in the construction of academic inequalities during homework: parental practices during homework, homework environment, cultural capital, digital capital, and parental self-efficacy to parents’ perception of academic achievement.

As predicted, social class appears to positively predict perceived academic achievement; parents from working-class families reported perceiving their child to have lower levels of academic achievement compared to parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Liu et al., 2020; Sirin, 2005). This finding is consistent with the existing literature (Chmielewski, 2019; Croizet et al., 2017; Stephens et al., 2014). Interestingly, our results show that social class accounts for 20% of the perceived academic performance in children, which is consistent with the percentage reported by the OECD (21% of variance in performance in mathematics is explained by social class, in OCDE, 2023). The series of mediations tested in the model also revealed that as expected, parental practices during homework, cultural capital, digital competences and predicted parental self-efficacy which in return predicted perceived academic achievement. Moreover, the model explained around one third of the variance for perceived academic achievement ($R^2 = .32$) and one half for parental self-efficacy ($R^2 = .50$). Our results support the well-documented idea that cultural capital fosters skills that enhance and support academic achievement (Breinholt & Jæger, 2020; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Sullivan, 2001).

Overall, cultural capital and digital competences emerged as the most significant predictors in the full model, influencing both parental self-efficacy and perceived academic achievement. Regarding cultural capital, this finding is consistent with previous results in the literature stating that families’ cultural capital tends to be beneficial to children’s academic achievement within middle- and upper- classes (Gaddis, 2013; Jæger & Møllegaard, 2017; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). This result aligns with Garcia’s (2018) sociological research, which clearly demonstrates how everyday tasks in middle- and upper-class families are strategically used to reinforce children’s academic development skills. Regarding digital competencies, our results show that they mediated the link between social class and parental self-efficacy. Indeed, families from working-class backgrounds tend to report lower self-efficacy, as they exhibit fewer competencies compared to middle- and upper-class families, a finding consistent with previous research (Coleman & Karraker, 2000; Holloway et al., 2016).

Another interesting finding concerns the strong link between digital competences and parental self-efficacy ($B = .49, p < .001$). This result could be explained by the growing importance of digital technology in educational settings. The omnipresence of digital technology within most households has forced parents to rethink their role as educators, especially when it comes to protecting children from the dangers of the Internet (Livingstone et al., 2014). Since children get to use more and more digital technology at home, it only seems fair that parents may feel the need to be digitally competent to also feel competent in their role as a parent (Pons-Salvador et al., 2022). Our results also show that parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds feel more confident with their digital competences and in return, display a higher sense of self-efficacy. This finding is consistent with previous studies which demonstrated that social class is an important predictor of parents’ digital competences (Pons-Salvador et al., 2022). Rather than reinforcing a deficit

view of working-class families, these findings suggest that the integration of digital tools in education introduces new forms of arbitrary cultural norms and practices. These are less familiar to working-class families, who therefore face the challenge of adapting to them. These findings also raise the question of other relevant processes at play when discussing mediators between social class, parental homework involvement and academic achievement (e.g., motivational beliefs or autonomy, see Gonida & Cortina, 2014).

Unexpectedly, parental practices during involvement in homework seemed to negatively predict perceived academic achievement. This is at odds with the literature on parental involvement, which generally finds positive effects of involvement on outcomes (see, e.g., Wilder, 2014). The effects of involvement nevertheless depend on a number of factors. For instance, previous research has highlighted that homework is a stressful time both for parents and children and that it can also be linked to frustration, or anxiety (Cooper, 2015; Raccanello et al., 2019). In this case, strong parental involvement may have somewhat negative consequences for children (Balli et al., 1998; Moroni et al., 2015). Finally, this result can also be discussed in light of previous research showing similar results: Dumont et al. (2012) found very little support regarding parental involvement as a potential mediator between families' social class and children's academic achievement. A meta-analysis on parental involvement and academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001) also showed that parental home supervision (e.g. "time spent doing homework", "time spent watching TV", "home surroundings conducive to studying" see Yap and Enoki, 1995) had the weakest relationship to children's academic achievement.

The non-significant correlation between social class and homework environment contrasts with prior research suggesting that there is a positive link between social class and the home learning environment (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Although no firm conclusion can be drawn, our measurement of the homework environment needs to be questioned here. The survey included two items; "is there a place at home that is suitable for work, that is to say without noise and without passage where your child can do their homework?" (a simple yes-no question) and "when your child is doing their homework, where do they usually settle down?" (with a list of places, such as "in the kitchen", "in their own bedroom" and so forth). This is at odds with what the literature calls "home learning environment". Home learning environment surveys more typically include items referring to the parents' beliefs about education, about children's development or parents' aspirations regarding their children's academic path (Kluczniok et al., 2013; Murphy, 1992). Thus, our operationalization of the homework environment may have failed to capture the critical mechanisms evidenced by prior research.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. Regarding the way the data has been collected, the formal aspect of the procedure as well as face-to-face communication with the interviewer might have induced a social desirability bias and/or an interviewer bias, especially when asking about the parental practices during homework or about their sense of self-efficacy. Moreover, in order to keep the protocol manageable (especially with respect to interview time and household composition), the interviews were conducted according to a structured format and only one parent (and no other family member) was interviewed. These choices may have shaped the produced data by constraining the flexibility in the descriptions and the number of (insightful) details provided by the families (e.g., conveying a simplified picture regarding the parental practices and omitting

sibling practices). Taken together, these biases at play during the interviews may, to some extent, limit the generalization of our results (see Miller et al., 2024).

Another significant limitation regards our main outcome measure. We used perceived academic achievement, a subjective self-reported measure collected via a single item (“according to you, how is your child doing in school at the moment?”). This was because the conditions of the survey, which recruited families from a broad geographical area, made it practically impossible to access the children’s actual school records. Although our measure may constitute a reasonable proxy to academic achievement, research has documented the complex relationships between parents’ perceptions and children’s actual school achievement (e.g., Frome & Eccles, 1998). As a further limitation, some of our items were probably not precise enough for what they intended to measure, as already discussed above about our assessment of the homework environment. More generally, a series of choices in the operationalization of our variables may raise some validity or reliability issues that could hinder the examination of the links between them. For example, some scale anchors may not have been optimized to tap comprehensively into the relevant constructs (e.g., homework environment, see above) and responses may be subject to flawed recall or memory bias (e.g., with regard to the frequency of behaviors).

Another limitation lies in the recruiting method of participants. To recruit them, we asked teachers to hand out the information sheet and consent form to their pupils so they could ask their parents whether or not they wanted to take part in the study. This method of recruitment might have led to self-selection since parents who answered favorably might well be the ones who are somewhat more comfortable sharing their habits. Since this study was conducted at home, participants had to consent and voluntarily make an appointment with the interviewer, which raises the issue of self-selection. Indeed, families that took part in our study were self-selected and although we did our best to reach different profiles of families in our sample, we still have an underrepresentation of working-class families.

Finally, another limitation is that we did not account for the type of homework children and their parents were required to complete. Indeed, homework could exacerbate inequalities when it focuses on the learning of new material rather than being used to reinforce concepts or exercises that were completed in the classroom (Kakpo, 2012). In terms of homework that imply reading, Kakpo (2012) indeed shows that parents from working-class backgrounds often have misunderstandings about reading. While they effectively help children in repeating reading exercises done in class, where the meaning has already been established and the focus is on achieving fluency, they struggle with the nuances of teaching new texts that have not been covered in class. Specifically, they tend to believe that understanding comes solely from knowing the meaning of each word. Consequently, they adapt their support practices based on this belief, frequently interrupting their children’s reading to ensure they grasp the phonetic and semantic aspects of every word.

The effects highlighted in our study pertain to a diverse French sample in terms of social class. While our study focused on the connections between the social class of families and the conditions and parental practices for completing homework at home, other factors are likely to interact with the families’ social class and amplify the documented effects. This is particularly true for the ethnic background of the families (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Dekkers et al., 2000). Another important demographic information to take into account is gender; we did not have a priori hypotheses related to participants’ gender so we did not perform any analysis. However, it seems important to note that within our sample, we had a total of 332 mothers and 68 fathers answering the questionnaire. This large proportion of women respondents echoes some studies on the prevalent influence of mothers during childhood through adult life (Korupp et al., 2002)

Social policy implications

In terms of social policy implication, this study offers a reflection on homework since it has been a subject under discussion for the past decades (Chouinard et al., 2006; Fernández Alonso et al., 2022). In France, policy makers have been discussing the ban of homework in order to reduce educational inequalities, but one can question whether this would have a positive impact on all children. Since most middle- and upper-class families have been known to seize daily opportunities to solidify children's knowledge and not only during homework (Sanrey et al., 2021), will suppressing homework really have an impact on all children's performance? If homework is suppressed from daily school life, this can be deleterious for children from working-class families but less so or not at all for middle- and upper-class families. To reduce inequalities, rather than eliminating homework, it seems more promising to train and raise teachers' awareness about the existence of material and cultural conditions that vary according to the social background of the children. More specifically, it is crucial to help teachers recognize that not all students have the same conditions for completing homework and to emphasize the importance of not assigning tasks that have not been addressed in class. Another valuable approach could involve familiarizing parents with school expectations, particularly regarding the clarity of assignment instructions, which are not always easily understood by all families.

This study also aimed to contribute to an important debate on how to address the 'digital divide'. In this respect, inequalities in equipment are often put forward. Policies to introduce digital education into schools are primarily concerned with providing pupils with access to a computer. But it may be that part of what is known as the digital divide refers to material inequalities, as much as it refers to differences in the appropriation of school knowledge mediated by digital technology. Various studies question the difficulties for students from working-class backgrounds to learn through the digital medium (Warschauer, 2007; Zhang, 2015). In France, Delès (2021a) showed, for example, the "pedagogical traps" of a series of online courses in French for 6th grade students during the spring 2020 lockdown. In particular, the conceptual links to be worked out between the different online contents are not explicated as they are in a more usual in-person teaching situation. In this sense, digital-related school inequalities in fact refer to more fundamental inequality mechanisms, whose origin is found less in digital equipment than in the epistemic skills of pupils and their parents.

Conclusion

Our contribution extends sociological research dating back to the 1970s, which conceived school socialization in families as a spontaneous and obvious act. Our study contributes additional data regarding the relationship between social class contexts including home environment, parental practices, cultural capital and digital capital, but also parent self-efficacy. This work makes a noteworthy contribution to the existing literature on the academic achievement gap by questioning the respective implication of the focal variables. More specifically, our study was conducted after periods of school closures and it was administered directly at home, firsthand with the parents. Regarding the access to technology, we provide a more detailed picture and novel insights as we sought to assess the amount of digital equipment and parents' digital competences. Additional

research on the impact of homework on academic success is needed to establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We do not report any conflict of interest in the conduct or reporting of research.

ETHICAL APPROVAL STATEMENT

This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Tours-Poitiers University (2021-11-01) and the data collection has been approved by the data protection officer (DPO).

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

In our study, we conducted questionnaires to collect data from parents with children aged 7 to 13. We asked parents to give their consent to take part in their study beforehand, and they were also given an information sheet where the study was explained. Once the families agreed to take part in the study by signing the consent form (approved by the DPO), the interviewers made an appointment with each family and met at their house to complete the questionnaire.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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