

Immigrant optimism? Educational decision-making processes in immigrant families in Italy

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It seems to be a frequent pattern, found in many national contexts, that children of immigrants choose more “ambitious” educational trajectories than might be expected either from their school results or from their family’s social background. This article asks whether similar patterns can be seen in a “new immigration country” like Italy, where very tight family budgets might not seem to encourage long educational trajectories. At first sight, the choices of high school track made by students and their families (with more families choosing vocational or technical schools than the generalist *liceo*) might seem evidence of slight ambition. I argue, however, that this interpretation is incorrect and that children of immigrants do have relatively high aspirations, especially considering family background and school results – in other words, results not dissimilar to elsewhere. The article uses qualitative interviews with children of immigrants and their parents in Piedmont (north-west Italy) to explore how choices of school and university are made, by whom they are made, using what criteria; and the reasons for “persistence” in relatively long educational careers, even in spite of difficulties. I suggest this Italian evidence throws light on educational decision-making more generally, and on the meaning to be given to “immigrant optimism” or “resilience”.

Some paradoxes of the educational trajectories of children of immigrants

International evidence on the educational ambitions immigrant families and on the actual decisions and attainment of their children raises the question of whether decision-making follows exactly the same logic as in the general population. Research has, of course, noted a wide variety of both attainment and of aspirations and expectations in the various migrant streams of the various countries of the world, with some national/ethnic groups easily outperforming the local majority population, and others having problems, and relatively low ambitions¹. The distance between groups is explained in substantial part simply by class and parents’ educational level (e.g. Marks 2005; Heath, Rothon and Kilpi 2008, Dustmann, Frattini and Lanzara 2012, but also Borgna and Contini 2014). However, even when controlling for such standard social variables, and independently of performance, some not entirely intuitive results emerge. Kao and Tienda’s 1995 article on children of immigrants’ “optimism” was influential because it showed that not only groups like Asians, known in the USA (even outside academic discussion) for high educational ambitions, but also Latinos - who have a very different general reputation (and attainment) - tended to have aspirations higher than one would expect given parents’ education and socio-economic status. Kao and Tienda (1998) subsequently showed that such aspirations were less stable in some ethnic groups than others, with Asian young people being more likely than Latinos to reaffirm high aspirations and expectations when they were a couple of years older (evidently, many Latinos were persuaded by poor school results to lower their sights). And other research has shown that the picture varies between ethnic/national groups². For example, Bohon, Johnson and

¹ In this article, as is conventional, I use “aspirations” to refer to what students or their families would like, “expectations” to what they more realistically predict. “Ambitions” and “plans” are used as more general terms. To make the distinction between aspirations and expectations especially clear to respondents, questionnaires generally present two questions together, one after the other. However, it should be noted that the student questionnaire of the Italian education evaluation agency, which I use below, contains only one question (on expectations). This may make the distinction less clear-cut.

² Nonetheless, even in this second analysis, having immigrant parents still comes out as a factor associated with high aspirations net of other factors such as previous school performance or ethnicity (Kao and Tienda 1998, Table 3). For further evidence of high aspirations see Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001.

Gorman (2006) found that although it was true that aspirations were high among Latinos in general, there were large differences between various national migration streams. So while they found the aspirations of Cubans high even when controlling for socio-economic status, they found those of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans lower than those of non-Hispanic whites, and no higher than the latter, even when controlling for socioeconomic status.

I am certainly not suggesting there is any universal tendency for ambitions to be higher than in native families of similar social standing. However, the research record does frequently throw up evidence of divergences from what one “would normally expect” in terms of the usual predictors of social background and previous school performance; and this raises interesting questions about how educational plans and decisions are formed, and about the winding trajectories many children of immigrants may follow.

In the United States, apart from their role as predictors of future attainment³, the findings on aspirations have tended to be seen as interesting mainly in the context of the debates over assimilation. If most children of immigrants (even in groups known for particularly poor educational attainment, such as Mexicans in Southern California: St.-Hilaire 2002) have quite high aspirations, this can be seen as moderating evidence of downward assimilation as a widespread pattern. Evidently, even where actual achievement is not very high, this is not the result of any general rejection of education as a desirable aim. More in general, the evidence has implications for notions of we think of assimilation: Kao and Tienda (1995) see their results - showing that children of immigrants tend to have higher aspirations than third-plus generations - goes against the notion of assimilation as a linear process. These debates are of course fundamental, but they are not my prime interest here (also because the evidence I present has a limited amount to say on these issues of progress between generations). As Kao and Tienda (1998: 350) point out, their results are also interesting for “the relative disjunction between educational aspirations and attainment”. I believe this disjunction is worth exploring for the questions it raises about how educational plans are formed (and then perhaps revised).

So I am especially interested in cases where school difficulties among children of immigrants co-exist with plans (not necessarily realized) to stay in education and try for university – plans which are relatively “ambitious”, in terms of the family’s resources and in terms of previous school results. After a description of results of this type in some north European research, I ask whether similar patterns can be seen in a “new immigration country” – Italy – where migrants are concentrated heavily at the bottom of the labour market, with low incomes. At first sight, in fact, the pattern seems different. For children from immigrant families tend to choose high school types which are not the obvious route to university (they tend to go to technical and vocational institutes rather than the more academic *licei*). But I present results from qualitative interviews and from a national questionnaire with high school students, to argue that the situation in Italy is not so dissimilar. Even though many immigrant students and their families make a choice of high school which objectively tends to lower their chances of entering (and completing) university, I argue that this should not be seen as evidence of “low ambitions” coming from the family, but rather as a dynamic created to a large extent in schools. Italy is thus an interesting case comparatively because although its education system is quite flexible, and allows substantial scope for “choice”, it nonetheless produces results where substantial disadvantages are created.

But first, let us look at some of the evidence from northern Europe, which add important details to the “aspirations-achievement paradox” which Kao and Tienda point to.

Some European cases of weak performance countered by persistence

If we shift from aspirations to actual behaviour, there is similar evidence of “ambitious” plans among children of immigrants. Using data for England and Wales, Jackson (2012) compares the probability of students of various ethnic backgrounds in England and Wales to stay on after the end of compulsory education and to continue on to university. She finds that, when we look at exam results (GCSE and A-level grades), students from all minorities are more likely to continue on with their education than are white majority students with the same grades. These results do not change when we control for class.

Jackson uses Boudon’s (1974) distinction between “primary” and “secondary effects” to illuminate her data (primary effects being those which are reflected in students’ performance, secondary effects being those which act on top of performance, inducing some students to continue their education and others to leave,

³ As Kao and Tienda (1998: 380) show, and as much of the evidence cited in this article indicates, the predictive power of aspirations is somewhat less strong for children of immigrants than for the general population – precisely because of the “aspirations-achievement paradox”. But it remains, of course, an important predictor.

even when they have the same school results). Boudon's distinction is usually used to explain why middle class pupils tend to have longer education trajectories than working class students, even when we compare students with the same school performance at a previous level (Jackson et al. 2007): middle-class parents tend to push their children to stay on and succeed even when their results are mediocre. As Jackson points out, secondary effects have thus usually been considered "a bad thing" in that they tend to exacerbate inequalities between classes. However, when we turn to ethnic minorities, secondary effects may sometimes attenuate them. For some groups, like the Chinese and Indians in Jackson's English data, they increase the gap from the majority population: the exam results of Chinese and Indian students are already better than those of the majority, but secondary effects increase the numbers of students who continue their education even more than could be expected on the basis of these results. But for disadvantaged groups like children of Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants⁴, whose exam results are poor, secondary effects mitigate the disadvantage: even with middling results, students from these origins may continue their studies.

Rather similarly, Jonsson and Rudolphi (2011) show that, notwithstanding lower educational performance, children of non-European immigrants in Sweden are much more likely to choose the academic track of upper secondary school than children of Swedish parents with similar school grades. As the authors put it (2010: 500), it is as though "new immigrant"⁵ families, notwithstanding their lower income, were less risk-averse - willing to invest in long educational tracks even when grades are mediocre. Like Jackson therefore, Jonsson and Rudolphi see "choice effects" as having an important role in the trajectories of these second generation students, such that "ethnic disadvantage in performance" is mitigated by "ethnic advantage in choice" (2010: 495-6)⁶. They note that the pattern constitutes a challenge for conventional theories of decision-making.

Partially similar results also come from France, where a longitudinal survey of French young people recruited at middle school and then contacted, along with their parents, three years and seven years later show that children of immigrants are more likely to "persevere" notwithstanding difficulties (Brinbaum and Kieffer 2005, 2009). Brinbaum and Kieffer concentrate their attention on the groups for whom numbers are greatest – children of (two) Portuguese immigrants, of North African (*Maghrébin*) parents, and of French parents. They found that children of immigrants had lower school marks, were much more likely to repeat years, were less likely to obtain a *baccalauréat* rather than a less prestigious certificate, and more likely to leave without any qualification. With regard to the different types of *baccalauréat*, moreover, they tended to obtain the less prestigious kind. At the end of middle school, they were more likely than children of French parents to be oriented into a vocational or technical high school, rather than into the more academic, general track. Boys have much greater difficulties than girls, and North Africans somewhat more than Portuguese, but the tendency to have greater difficulties than children of French parents is general.

Much of this gap in attainment is due to class. However, some important differences emerge even controlling for class, for parents' education (generally low or very low), and students' school record. In the context of this article, it is particularly interesting that aspirations of both immigrant parents and their children were much higher than those of French working-class families. The gap was particularly striking for North African families.

Whereas North African parents tended to express a preference for the generalist, more academic high school track, poor school results persuaded many of their children to prefer a technical, or maybe vocational, track (i.e. slightly lower aims than their parents would have preferred). Others were oriented into such tracks against their will. In the French system, the school and a psychologist decide tracks, in consultation with students and parents (who also have a right of appeal if they do not agree with the decision). Nonetheless, many parents and students feel they have been treated unjustly – especially when they are oriented towards a

⁴ Jackson's data are cast in terms of ethnic groups, not in terms of immigrant background, but given the timing of immigration waves to Britain, the great majority of Jackson's Indian, Chinese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and African respondents, who were born in the early 1980s, are children of immigrants; it is only the Black Caribbean group that is likely to contain many young people of the third generation (emigration from the Caribbean being significant already in the 1950s and early '60s). It is interesting in this context to note that secondary effects have a much less prominent positive effect in the Black Caribbean group. With respect to the White group, it should be noted that migration from Eastern Europe has been too recent for it to affect the composition of this group, very few of whom will have a migration background.

⁵ Jonsson and Rudolphi's data also contain many young people of previous waves of migration from European countries – above all from Finland. Their choices trajectories are more similar to those of Swedes.

⁶ Jonsson and Rudolphi's data do not permit them to tell how the story ends, and see whether this tendency to reject the more vocational tracks (chosen by many children of Swedish and Nordic parents) paid off, with foreign-origin students actually attaining high qualifications (and then obtaining qualified jobs). Although in general, the authors see the pattern as beneficial, at a couple of points the article seems to express doubts on this issue; but from the point of view of my argument what is interesting is that the trajectory is distinctive from that of students of Swedish parentage.

vocational high school. In the survey analysed by Brinbaum and Kieffer no less than 42% of North African students in vocational high schools said they felt the decision of the *conseil d'orientation* had been unjust. That so many should disagree with their school's decision and feel it as unfair (cf. Brinbaum and Primon 2013 on feelings of discrimination and unfairness; also Beaud 2002) indicates the extent to which pupils' (and often, parents') perspectives may diverge from those of the school.

Italy as a context for immigrant families' educational decision-making

Can similar patterns be seen in Italy? Research has only recently started to emerge on educational plans in the (relatively) new immigration countries of Southern Europe (see Portes et al. 2010 for Spain; for Italy, see Minello and Barban 2012; Mantovani, Albertini and Gasperoni 2014). Yet it is not obvious that results should be the same as in North America or Northern Europe. And in fact Portes and his colleagues found aspirations and expectations much lower in Madrid than those found in the CILS research in San Diego and Miami (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), although not necessarily lower than among students of non-immigrant parents in Spain⁷.

Before turning to the question of educational ambitions in Italy, it may be useful to provide some context. There have not been the flows to relatively skilled positions which have been important for some migration streams in North America. Immigrants in Italy tend to be slightly less educated than natives of similar age⁸. And above all, even educated migrants have tended to obtain relatively unskilled work: 78% of immigrants were in manual jobs in 2012 according to Labour Force Survey data, and another 10% were self-employed, often in low-status jobs with unstable income (Ministero del lavoro 2014; cf. also Blangiardo 2013; 2014 for data from a regular survey limited to Lombardy but especially designed to collect data for immigrant households, with interesting data on low levels of job stability). Even before the crisis (in 2008), a government survey on the income of migrant households found half of such households earning less than a thousand euro a month (net median annual income of 12 400 euro - 56% of the figure for Italian households) (ISTAT 2011). Over half of migrant households were classed as "at risk of poverty or social exclusion". In the last few years unemployment has increased and in 2013, unemployment among foreigners stood at 17% (Ministero del lavoro 2014). It seems justifiable to see Italy as a country where - due to the relatively recent nature of migration⁹ and to the nature of labour demand, heavily concentrated at the bottom of the labour market - immigrants have particularly low income. According to data from the European survey of income and living conditions (EU-SILC), along with Greece and Austria, Italy is the country where the gap between equalized household income of immigrants (i.e. foreign-born) and natives is largest among the 27 countries of the European Union (Eurostat 2011, Tab. 18, p. 164). Proportions of immigrant individuals (rather than households) classified (on the basis of a threshold of 60% national income) as being at risk of poverty or social exclusion is also one of the highest rates in the EU (ibid., Tab. 21, p.178 and Tab 22, p.186 for pre-transfer and post-transfer data). To use another indicator of economic condition, Italy is also one of the EU countries where property ownership is lowest (ibid., Tab. 26, p. 238). On both absolute and relative measures, immigrants in Italy tend to come off badly.

Such data are worth citing because income naturally has a role in educational decisions. Models of educational decision-making (Boudon 1974; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; or also Becker 1975) assume that family income will have a major effect on families' willingness to support, or "invest" in, long educational careers. Empirical research on aspirations and expectations quite often has data on income - which, of course, has a positive effect - but few studies seem to ask whether this effect is of the same strength for migrant and non-migrant households in the various migration streams. An exception is Bohon, Johnson and Gorman (2006), who find the income effect is weaker for immigrant families.

Qualitative studies also raise the question of how sensitive migrant households are to income. Here I draw on interviews conducted recently in Piedmont in northern Italy, in a 2011-2014 project called

⁷ The Spanish research (ILSEG) was modelled on CILS, so comparisons are natural. ILSEG does not have data on students of (two) Spanish parents, so strict comparisons are not possible, but Portes et al. (2010) cite a Spanish study by Lopez Blasco (2008) which found relatively modest educational ambitions.

⁸ According to figures on the ISTAT website (I.stat: Popolazione 15 anni e oltre per titolo di studio - italiani e stranieri), in the 25-34 age band, 25% of Italians have a university degree, but only 9% of foreigners. For the 35-64 age band the gap is smaller (15% as against 11.5%) and the percentage of those with a high school diploma is slightly higher than it is for Italians.

⁹ Income does increase with length of residence, albeit relatively modestly (ISTAT 2011).

“Secondgen”¹⁰. Among its other activities (see <http://secondgen.rs.unipmn.it>), the research conducted 160 semi-structured interviews with 18-30 year-olds with two foreign-born parents. To be eligible, the young people had to have lived in Italy for at least 7 years and to have done a significant part of their schooling in Italy. Interviewees were contacted through schools, workplaces, leisure centres, labour agencies and internet cafés. The project also collected 20 interviews with parents and 23 with teachers, members of associations and various experts. The corpus of interviews with young people is balanced in terms of gender. The most numerous national origins are those most numerous in the relevant age band in Piedmont – Romanian, Moroccan, Albanian, Peruvian, Chinese, with small numbers from a variety of other African, East European, Latin American and Asian countries.

Obviously, caution needs to be exercised in generalizing from the experience of interviewees selected on a non-random basis (unfortunately, we did not obtain access to lists from population registries). However, I do not believe there is bias with regard to dimensions central to the issues discussed in this paper. With regard to the crucial question of education, the research team made strenuous efforts to avoid over-representation of young people with a more successful school career (who are, of course, often more willing to accept an interview); and the final corpus of interviews seems very similar to official statistics in terms of educational attainment, repeated years, type of secondary school attended. Our information on parental income is only indirect, but that which is available gives no reason to think there is a bias in favour of better off parents. The level of parents’ education is also similar to that available in official sources.

Secondgen interviews do not suggest that migrant families are shortening education for reasons of income. Several of the families of the young people we interviewed had particularly acute money problems – and yet insisted their children should continue their education. In one extreme case, the parents (Romanians who, before the fall of the regime, were a party functionary and an office worker) resolutely forbade their daughter from getting a part-time job, saying she needed to concentrate fully on her studies – even at a time when the father was unemployed, the mother not working because of health problems, and the rent had not been paid for some time. The family was in fact evicted, and had to spend a couple of months in an emergency shelter run by a charity. But the young woman did finish high school and then a university degree, and at the time of the interview was doing a Master's degree, although this time alongside an administrative job. A Moroccan father, who supported his wife and four children on a warehouseman’s wage – and, at the time of interview, on unemployment pay from this job – took it for granted that his eldest two (both daughters) would go to university, and was disappointed that one of them thought she would only take a three year bachelor’s degree (rather than also a master’s): “*I push her to do more*”. A father from Senegal, supporting his family of five on a wage working at a supermarket, sighed when recounting his daughter’s decision to register for a degree at a university in another town rather than in the town where they lived, but was resigned to the extra expense. Apart from striking cases of this kind, young people and their parents made surprisingly few references to budget constraints as a factor in educational choices. In our interview corpus, the most significant references to the relevance of the family’s financial straits on educational decisions came from interviews with some young people who, explaining their decision not to continue at university, mentioned not wanting to be a “*burden*” to their parents. However, further questioning revealed that parents themselves would have preferred children to continue. They did not succeed in convincing them because the children were unenthusiastic about studying and anxious to become “*independent*”. In other words, the financial constraint seemed to enter into the picture primarily as a question of the limits to the young person¹¹’s activities and, perhaps even more crucially, their relationship to their parents. Interviewees said they “*did not want to ask*” their parents for money, that they felt they were “*too old*” for this position of “*dependence*”, and wanted to be “*free*”. This gives a rather different perspective on how money considerations enter into educational calculations.

In any case, the number of young people who mentioned the family’s budget was small. And again and again, the interviews emphasize the pro-education position of parents. This emerges both in general attempts to convince children of the importance of studying “*for a better life*”, often adding the dreadful warning, “*otherwise you’ll end up in a dead-end job like me*”; and in moral pressure and sanctions at moments where students looked as though they might give up their studies.

¹⁰ The “Secondgen” project (Second generations: migration processes and mechanisms of integration among foreigners and Italians (1950-2010), was funded by the Region of Piedmont, as part of its support for university research (*Bando scienze umane e sociali*); their support is gratefully acknowledged.

¹¹ Although not absent among young women, the desires for independence, freedom, etc. were expressed more frequently by male interviewees. This dynamic of money and “independence” seems to have been one of the various reasons why more women than men decided to continue at university.

[discussing a difficult period at high school] *Did you ever think of giving up really?*

I did, definitely! At first it was more for her than for me that I kept on. And then later, especially at university, it was me, too. But it was for my mother, and to show the people who didn't think I could do it.

How did your parents react when you failed the year?

They took it badly, especially my mum. My mum was really upset, she cried. My parents never want me to work, not even now, they'd like me to study, but I... Then [after failing a second year] my parents didn't want me to go out, I could only go out with my best girlfriends, then in the end I got through the exam, and they softened up...

These two young women (Romanian and Peruvian) are typical: it is clear from the interviews in general that parents did not only encourage children who did well at school but also those who had major difficulties. As in the north European research I have described, support seems to be surprisingly insensitive to school success. Whereas Boudon (1974) and Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) see parents with low incomes being cautious about investing limited resources in the education of children who have not done well at school, this is not what seems to come out of interviews. Pressure to finish high school is almost universal, and strong encouragement and support for university extremely general. Nearly always where education was cut short, this was on the initiative of students and had to do with students' de-motivation, or with a wish for "independence". In general, therefore, to understand the logic of leaving education (and thus also the logic of staying on), it seems necessary in the first instance to analyse students' interactions with school, not family budgets.

Data on the school results of children of immigrants in Italy make it clear that many immigrant parents and students have to take their decisions against a background of weak performance. Foreign¹² pupils are more likely than Italians to be forced to repeat a year, or at least re-do some exams, in primary, middle, and high school. In primary school, of course, repeating a year is rare, but it is seven times more common for foreign pupils. In middle (junior high) schools in 2012/2013, only 90.9% of foreign pupils were promoted to the next highest grade, as against 97.0% of Italians. And in high school the percentages were 73.0% for non-Italians, as against 87.3% for Italians (MIUR-ISMU, 2014). Foreign pupils were also less likely to obtain the highest evaluations in the state exams at the end of middle school, and the end of high school (ibid.). Similar gaps appear in standardized tests. For example, in the mathematics evaluation of the 2009 PISA survey in Piedmont, 15-year-old children of immigrants scored 86 points less than Italian 15-year-olds – 420 on average as against 506 (Borrione, Abburrà and Trincherò, 2011) and nearly half of all immigrant children fell below the survey's "level 2", conventionally considered a minimum level of competence. Although these gaps (both in school results and in standardized tests) are of course reduced when we control for parents' education and occupation, they remain substantial (Barban and White, 2011; Azzolini, 2011; Azzolini and Barone 2013; Borgna and Contini 2014).

Foreign pupils are also much more likely to be in a class which does not correspond to their age. This is partly due to having repeated a year in the past, but also due to the widespread practice of inserting pupils who have recently arrived in Italy and have little Italian, in a year below their age. 16% of non-Italian

¹² Ministry of Education data are presented by citizenship, not by parents' birthplace. Italy does not collect data on ethnicity or national origin, and thus there are very few official statistics on the numbers of Italian citizens who are children of foreign immigrants and have acquired Italian citizenship either through their parents or on their own when they attained adulthood. This will obviously become an increasing problem for research in the future as numbers of naturalizations increase. Since the numbers of persons acquiring citizenship through naturalization rather than descent or adoption has been quite small until recently, due to a rather restrictive citizenship law essentially based on descent (Zincone 2006), statistics based on citizenship are usually seen as acceptable. The 2011 census recorded 81480 0-17 year-olds who had acquired Italian citizenship – 1.3% of Italians of that age band (ISTAT 2013). However, this does not include those who were born Italian because their parents had already acquired Italian citizenship. See Bonifazi et al. (2008) and Conti et al. (2013) for some of the complications involved in identifying children of immigrants who have Italian citizenship in available data. Data from the 2001 census (Conti et al. 2013) show that 2.66% of under-18s who were born with Italian citizenship had at least one parent born abroad and foreign or naturalized-Italian, and another 0.15% had foreign nationality at birth but acquired Italian citizenship later (presumably when one of their parents naturalized). Unfortunately, more recent data do not seem to be available at present.

It should be added that the problem is much reduced if the second generation is defined by the criterion of two foreign-origin parents rather than just one: as Conti et al.'s data show, at least in 2001 it was overwhelmingly "mixed" couples (i.e. Italian-foreign) who had Italian children – citizenship being passed on by descent from the Italian parent.

primary school pupils, 44% of middle school pupils and 67% of those at high school (as against 24% of Italians at high school) were thus older than the “normal” age for their class (MIUR-ISMU 2014).

Ambitious or non-ambitious choices?

The distribution of foreigners and Italians in the various types of high school is also very different: over-representation in vocational education and under-representation in the generalist *licei* (singular: *liceo*) is in fact one of the most prominent features of the situation of children of immigrants in Italian schools. In the 2012/2013 school year, 39% of foreign students were in vocational schools, 39% in technical schools and only 20% in *licei*. In contrast, just 19% of Italian students were in vocational schools, whereas *licei* were the most popular choice, taking 44% of all native students (see Table 1 below). The over-representation of foreigners in vocational education becomes even more accentuated if shorter vocational courses not leading to a state diploma (not included in the Ministerial data in the table) are included in the picture¹³. *Licei* themselves are far from undifferentiated, and even those foreign students who are in a *liceo* are much less likely to be in one of the more prestigious sub-types (foreign students form a mere 2.4% of students in the *liceo classico*, the school favoured by much of the Italian bourgeoisie (MIUR/ISMU 2014, tab. 3.4).

Table 1: Type of high school attended by Italian and non-Italian students in the school year 2012/2013

	Italians	Non-Italians
<i>Licei</i>	43.9	19.8
Technical Institutes	33.4	38.5
Vocational Institutes	18.9	38.6
Art Schools	3.9	3.1
	100%	100%

Source: Ministry of Education data, MIUR/ISMU, 2014

Now, this pattern has major relevance for any argument about educational ambitions, for in the Italian system, type of secondary school is a “choice”. In the final year of middle school (when most pupils are around 13) all pupils and their families receive formal advice as to which type of high school to go to, based on past performance and teachers’ judgment of potential, but this advice is not binding. So, at first sight, we might see this concentration of foreign students in the less academic tracks as evidence of relatively unambitious educational plans, a preference for early entry into the labour market.

Some researchers do see choice of high school as indicating lower aspirations. This is the way Minello and Barban (2012) interpret middle school students’ responses to the questionnaire distributed in 2005-2006 by the ITAGEN2 research project. They found that foreign-origin middle school pupils were less likely than Italians to indicate that they planned to go to a *liceo*, even controlling for parents’ education, occupational status, and number of siblings. They thus concluded that children of immigrants in Italy have lower aspirations than Italians. The question asking whether pupils expected to go to university showed no significant difference between Italians and foreigners, but Minello and Barban ignore this result because they interpret it as reflecting dreams rather than real plans (for students interviewed at middle school, university is still a long way off, whereas choice of high school is nearer). This interpretation might seem confirmed by the actual behaviour of young people when they finish high school: only 35% of foreign high school graduates graduating in 2011/2012 registered at university for the academic year 2012/2013, as against 51% of Italians (MIUR 2013)¹⁴.

However, as Minello and Barban themselves acknowledge, the difference between the responses to their two questions (with regard to high school and university) could also be interpreted as lack of awareness of the social and educational consequences of opting for one type of high school rather than another, or as a different strategy to reach university. Academics may consider choosing a technical or vocational school to be choice of a non-university track because the probability of continuing to university is objectively lower

¹³ Nationally, about 3% of students take up this alternative.

¹⁴ These are data for students graduating from one year’s high school cohort making the transition to university directly without a break. Surveys of high school graduates three years after their diploma (ISTAT 2012) show higher figures because they include students who register later, but the gap between Italians and non-Italians is similar.

(for vocational school students the chances of continuing to university are five times lower than for *liceo* students). But this is not necessarily how, in particular, foreign students and their families see it, since any high school diploma gives access to university. And significant proportions of students graduating from vocational and technical schools actually do go on to university: of high school students graduating in 2007, 24% of those from vocational schools and 51% of those from technical schools did in fact at least start university: less than the 94% of those graduating from *licei*, but by no means insignificant (ISTAT, 2012). And the Secondgen interviews (cf. also those of Santero 2012 and Romito 2013) suggest strongly that many families do not see choice of a technical or vocational schools as non-university tracks: indeed, several interviewees explicitly mention the fact that also a vocational or technical diploma gives access to university as one element *favouring* their choice of those tracks.

Evidence on university expectations at slightly older ages does show differences between Italian and non-Italian students, but these vary considerably with school type. Donato (2012) analysed the responses given to the student questionnaire attached to the 2009 round of PISA and found that in some types of schools 15-year old foreign students (especially girls) were slightly more likely than Italians to envisage continuing at university. A survey of students in the fifth year of high school in Piedmont also found university aspirations of foreigners higher in vocational and technical institutes, though lower in *licei* (Santero 2012).

Similar results emerge in Italy as a whole from the questionnaire distributed to second year high school students by the Italian educational evaluation agency INVALSI, and it is to these national data I now wish to turn. Every year, INVALSI conducts tests of reading comprehension and mathematics in all Italian schools. Apart from the tests, students fill in a questionnaire which asks for information on items of sociological and educational interest ($N = 420\ 532$). Since most students in the second year of high school are under 16, for them school is still compulsory, and the questionnaire should thus cover most of the population. However, some young people have already reached 16 and a few of these have left school, and there is also the larger problem of students who are registered at school but not present the day of the test. Thus the data should not be treated unreservedly as covering the entire population of the relevant age band, nor of all second-year high school students. Nonetheless, the obligatory nature of a classroom questionnaire obviously mostly avoids the non-response problems of voluntary surveys, and coverage of the relevant population, even if not total, is very good.

The question I focus on (and also use as the dependent variable in the regression below) is “What is the highest educational certificate you think you will attain?” (*Qual è il titolo di studio più alto che pensi di conseguire?*)¹⁵. Considered as a whole, non-Italians are far less likely to declare university intentions: 41.4% saw themselves with a university degree as against 56.5 % of Italians. However, as can be seen in Table 2, if we divide by school type, these results appear in a somewhat different light: in *licei*, non-Italians are less likely to say they will get a second degree (usually a two-year master’s following a three-year bachelor’s), but in technical institutes there are few differences, and in vocational institutes foreigners are slightly more likely to have university plans.

¹⁵ As mentioned in note 1, there is just one question, which may make less clear to respondents the distinction between ideal hopes and intentions on the one hand and realistic expectations on the other. Nonetheless, the question does not seem to lead to over-high declarations. Surveys of actual behavior (ISTAT 2012) find slightly higher rates of transition to university.

Table 2. University expectations of Italians and children of immigrants in different school types

	Italians	Non-Italians born abroad	Non-Italians born in Italy
<i>LICEI</i>			
First degree	26%	25%	25%
Second degree	53%	42%	45%
<i>N column totals for all responses (100%)</i>	200146	5514	5818
<i>TECHNICAL INSTITUTES</i>			
First degree	19%	18%	21%
Second degree	15%	16%	17%
<i>N column totals (100%)</i>	114622	7788	4830
<i>VOCATIONAL INSTITUTES</i>			
First degree	10%	11%	14%
Second degree	6%	9%	10%
<i>N column totals (100%)</i>	54158	6665	2847

Source: INVALSI student questionnaire (2012-2013), second year high school students.

A binary logistic regression (Table 3 below), with university expectations as the dependent variable, allows us to see some of the factors lying behind this pattern. I am indebted to my colleague Flavio Ceravolo for his indispensable contribution to this analysis.

Table 3. Binary logistic regression of university expectations of second year high school students

Expects univ. degree	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% confidence limits for Exp(B)	
							lower limit	upper limit
1.00 Intercept	-,808	,035	526,698	1	,000			
Male	-,635	,010	4293,024	1	,000	,530	,520	,540
Female	0			0				
no siblings	,178	,021	74,629	1	,000	1,195	1,148	1,245
1 or 2 siblings	,096	,018	30,233	1	,000	1,101	1,064	1,140
more than 2 siblings	0			0				
I GEN	,317	,024	169,860	1	,000	1,372	1,309	1,439
II GEN	,205	,027	56,283	1	,000	1,228	1,164	1,296
NATIVE	0			0				
father education low	-,671	,018	1459,962	1	,000	,511	,494	,529
father education medium	-,392	,016	586,827	1	,000	,676	,655	,698
father education high	0			0				
mother education low	-,469	,018	705,358	1	,000	,626	,604	,648
mother education medium	-,217	,016	187,210	1	,000	,805	,780	,830
mother education high	0			0				
mother: service classes	,160	,024	44,453	1	,000	1,174	1,120	1,230
mother: middle classes	,172	,013	179,463	1	,000	1,188	1,159	1,219
mother: self employed	,052	,017	9,157	1	,002	1,053	1,018	1,089
mother: working classes	,061	,013	21,183	1	,000	1,062	1,035	1,090
mother: not working	0			0				
father: service classes	,203	,021	90,907	1	,000	1,225	1,175	1,277
father: middle classes	,174	,019	83,303	1	,000	1,190	1,147	1,236
father: self employed]	,007	,019	,143	1	,705	1,007	,970	1,046
father: working classes	,050	,019	7,395	1	,007	1,052	1,014	1,091
father: not working	0			0				
books: less than 3 shelves	-,396	,010	1443,128	1	,000	,673	,659	,687
books: 3 shelves or more	0			0				
Right age for class	,448	,013	1247,388	1	,000	1,565	1,527	1,605
Behind	0			0				
Liceo	1,631	,010	25898,435	1	,000	5,110	5,009	5,212
Vocational institute	-,561	,015	1402,925	1	,000	,571	,554	,588
Technical institute	0			0				
North West	-,203	,017	139,134	1	,000	,816	,789	,844
North East	-,149	,018	67,336	1	,000	,862	,832	,893
Centre	-,147	,018	66,019	1	,000	,863	,833	,894
South	,125	,016	61,011	1	,000	1,133	1,098	1,170
Islands	0			0				
Maths score	,026	,000	7519,140	1	,000	1,026	1,026	1,027

Source: Italian educational evaluation agency (INVALSI), 2012-2013: second year high school student questionnaire (and INVALSI test for maths score).

The model shows, as expected, a substantial gender effect, with girls having higher expectations than boys. Parents' education and class have (smaller) effects in the expected direction¹⁶. The number of books (taken as an indication of cultural capital) has a positive effect. Being an only child has a modest positive effect, but otherwise the number of siblings does not seem to change things. In other models (not shown), restricted to students who had a manual worker father, there was no significant effect for family size (not even for being an only child). There are small effects for the region the school is located in: students in the South (especially outside the main islands of Sicily and Sardinia) are slightly more likely to say they will go to university.

As can be seen, in the model of Table 3, net of other factors, the 1.5 generation seems to have a slight edge over the second generation in the strict sense (born in Italy). So the somewhat lower expectations seen in the bivariate results of Table 2 reverse when we introduce family background, and above all, school variables. However, differences between the first generation (defined here as born abroad) and the second are difficult to interpret without having data on national origin, which INVALSI does not provide¹⁷. For the national composition of the second generation tends to be different from that of the 1.5 generation, due to the timing of migration waves and family reunion from different countries. And the situation is different in different regions within Italy. It is worth noting, therefore, that when the model was run only for Piedmont, it was the second generation (2.0 generation) which had slightly higher expectations.

In any case, what I wish to stress in my data is the fact that – net of other effects – foreign students as a whole (whether 2.0 or 1.5 generation) do not seem to have lower, but rather somewhat higher, university expectations than Italians.

Among the results of Table 3, some of the most interesting concern the school. Being “the right age” for the second year of high school rather than “too old” has a positive effect. It is worth noting that the Madrid ILSEG research (Portes et al. 2010) also found a marked effect for students' age. The finding also fits in with the fact that many Secondgen interviewees who decided not to continue their studies after high school explicitly evoked the fact of feeling “too old” in order to explain their decision.

Table 3 also shows the large effect of type of high school. Taking students in a technical institute as the reference category, *liceo* students are over five times as likely to say they will get a university degree, while students in a vocational institute are much less likely to say so.

It should be noted that these results are net of students' academic capacities as measured by standardized tests. In fact the model in Table 3 includes the normalized score (0-100) for the INVALSI test in mathematics (I also tried with the reading comprehension test score, with no significant change in the results). Inclusion of this variable did not change the other coefficients radically (the model without the maths score is available on request). As expected, the test score does have a positive effect on expectations; but the inclusion of this variable by no means eliminates the effects mentioned above. In other words, the large effect of school type, and the effect of being “too old” or “the right age”, do not simply reflect students' capacities. One might have imagined that, since being “too old” is partly (though, for foreign students especially, not exclusively) the result of being forced to repeat a year or two, this variable was just reflecting how well a student was doing in school. And similarly, since mean INVALSI test scores are sharply distinguished by school type, one might have imagined that school type was simply covering academic ability, so imagine that school type was doing nothing more than select academically good students who already had high ambitions. Evidently this is not the case.

My conclusion is that being in a type of school where most students assume they will go on to university, and where teachers tend to make the same assumption, has a substantial effect on university plans. It seems plausible that this is due to a combined effect of the school itself and of friends. School is an important locus for forming friendship, of course, and previous research has often found that individuals' aspirations tend to go in a similar direction to those of their friends. The INVALSI questionnaire does not have a question on friends, but much research has demonstrated the importance of friendship intentions and of school-based friendships (cf. Portes et al. 2010 on friends intentions in Madrid, Minello and Barban 2012 on school-based friendships in Italy). As is well known, it is often difficult to disentangle the effects of

¹⁶ It should be remembered that information on parents' education and occupation come from the student questionnaire. Adolescents may have imprecise ideas about their parents' education and occupation, and for children of immigrants there is the added difficulty of fitting foreign educational qualifications into the set of Italian levels of education which the INVALSI questionnaire gives as options. However, in the model “high” education means a university certificate; “medium” means high school diploma; “low” means less than high school.

¹⁷ We know, of course, that in Italy, as elsewhere, ethnic/national origins do have effects on educational ambitions. Minello and Barban (2012), for example, show that Chinese middle school students have lower, and South Americans higher, educational expectations net of other effects.

individuals selecting friends with similar ambitions from the direct influences friends have on the formation of ambitions. Difficult, also, to disentangle the effects of friends *in se* from the effects of being in a stable class context (perhaps over several years) where friends tend to be made, not to mention the effects of teachers on the content of education, and directly on students' aspirations (Sørensen 1970 is still worth reading on the issues in play). However, whatever the exact mechanisms in play, there is little doubt that either friends-in-school, or school type, or a combination, are important predictors of aspirations and expectations. Buchmann and Dalton (2002) suggest that in school systems which are very strongly differentiated (such as Germany's), peer effects are less important – being swamped out by school effects. Italy may fall into the middle category proposed by Buchmann and Dalton. I make no attempt to sort these issues out: I merely want to suggest that whether mediated by friends, by teachers, or by institutional context, high school type does seem to have an important effect on plans to go to university.

Given their resources and school record, therefore, children of immigrants do seem to be somewhat more educationally “ambitious” than their Italian classmates. However, their ambitions are reduced by being in less academic tracks.

Making the choice of high school

But if it can be argued that – given their circumstances – children of immigrants do tend to have relatively high university ambitions, how is it that so many end up in tracks where the statistical chances of getting to university are lower? As I have mentioned, families can make any choice they want once the pupil has passed the state exam at the end of middle school: independent of marks in this exam or grade averages, they can register at a *liceo*, a technical or vocational school. From a comparative point of view, the Italian case is therefore interesting in order to see the mechanisms of social selection operating in a system which, from some points of view, is only moderately stratified, and gives considerable role to choice. So although the system ceases to be comprehensive at around the age of 13 (the end of middle school) and splits into school types which have differing academic prestige and partially different curricula, it is not particularly directive.

What is well-established in the literature on educational inequality in Italy is that the type of high school where students end up is only very partially determined by performance: studies which compare grades, or marks in the state examination at the end of middle school, with choice of high school find very low correspondence between the two (Checchi 2010a, 2010b; Contini, Scagni and Riehl 2008).

One reason for this is that many educated middle class parents tend to send their children to a *liceo* whatever their marks are, and whatever advice is given by the middle school (Ballarino and Checchi 2006; Olagnero and Cavaletto 2011). In many cases, in other words, it seems to be families which are at work, overriding schools' advice where they have the confidence to do so. In other cases, however, as the same research shows, it seems to be the advice given by the middle school which directs some pupils – especially from working class families – away from the *liceo* even when their school results are quite good, while directing some middle class pupils with less good marks to this more academic track. Unfortunately most of these studies have little data specifically for children of immigrants. However, Conte (2012) analyses data provided by six middle schools in Milan and shows that foreign-origin pupils are more likely to be directed away from *licei* and towards vocational education than are Italian pupils with the same mark. For example, among Italian pupils who got a mark of 7 (out of 10) in the school leaving exam, 35% had been advised to go to a *liceo*, as against 18% of non-Italian students with the same mark. For those who got an 8 in the exam, 77% of Italians were advised to go to a *liceo* as against 44% of non-Italians. Conte does not give data on the family background of pupils, so it is difficult to know how much of this is a class effect rather than an effect of being a child of migrants, or an effect of having arrived recently in Italy; but the results confirm those of qualitative studies (Romito 2013; Santero 2012) which document numerous individual cases of foreign-origin students being oriented “downwards”. One of our “Secondgen” interviewees, who felt that going to a vocational school had severely damaged his whole career, still felt bitter about this: *I got a great mark in the middle school leaving exam [he got *distinto*, the second highest out of four pass grades at the time], I don't understand why they said Go and do a vocational school.* In some cases, as Romito (2013, 2014; Bonizzoni, Romito and Cavallo 2014) finds in his conversations with teachers, advising a vocational track may have been due to incorrect and stereotyped ideas of how many years education an immigrant family could afford, or to an idea that going to a *liceo* was somehow socially inappropriate. One young man remembers a teacher suggesting he should go to a vocational school so that he could get a job early and “*give your family a hand*”

(the young man in question indignantly rejected this advice and registered at a *liceo*). In other cases, among pupils who had arrived relatively recently, reference was made to language skills:

At that time I didn't know what the schools were like, what the difference was. The teachers were supposed to help us a bit and my teacher of Italian advised me saying "For you this would be right because your Italian isn't good and so you can't do a difficult school"

Teachers defend their advice on the grounds of discouraging “unrealistic” choices which may lead to students being failed and having to repeat a year (Romito 2013; Bonizzoni, Romito and Cavallo 2014), sometimes citing language subtleties (more important in a *liceo*) and intangible competences not always reflected in grades. But this is rather a static notion of students’ capacities, as though these did not change over time. This is especially clear in the case of language (foreign students’ language competence obviously does improve), but is also true more generally. Teachers do not always seem to credit foreign pupils with the same capacity for improvement and success-through-persistence that they may grant in students from middle class Italian families (Romito 2014). In the comments of teachers which Romito (2013) records, the word “ambitious” was negative, meaning in effect “unrealistic”. This has obvious implications for the kind of trajectories and strategies which many foreign-origin pupils seem to pursue: in describing the trajectories of foreign-origin students documented in the research literature, I have in fact often used the adjective “ambitious” and made reference to the non-correspondence with normal expectations both regarding social and academic characteristics.

So the judgments given by teachers at formal procedures of *orientamento* probably have a part in explaining the under-representation of foreign-origin pupils in *licei*. At the same time, however, it should also be remembered that pupils themselves have a part in the orientation process: in informal conversations with teachers, as well as in the formal orientation sessions, they express their tastes for study, and their plans. In our Secondgen interviews, many young people explain their choice of a vocational high school by referring to their own preferences, saying things like: *I wasn't keen on studying at the time*. I would argue, therefore, that the over-representation in vocational education and under-representation in the more academic *licei* (even when marks are taken into account) should not be thought of only as a question of teachers’ stereotypes: it is probably in large part a product of the more general difficulties encountered earlier (lowmarks, repeated years, etc.). It seems likely that this has effects on students’ self-image and hence on plans.

Although Secondgen interviewees stress the strength of parental support for education, they also stress their parents’ lack of knowledge as to how to intervene in particular choices, such as that regarding the most appropriate school to choose (see also Perino and Allasino 2014 for some extracts from the interviews which effectively illustrate parents’ difficulties). Although many parents were able to intervene decisively when they saw their children were neglecting their studies or when they wanted to leave them, they were often much less able to intervene in specific decisions. Comments of the following kind are among the most frequent in the whole interview corpus:

They let me choose; they left it to me.

They told me, 'You decide. It's you who has to study'.

My father said 'Do what you want to do, what you like, and you'll have a future'.

This relatively background role of parents perhaps explains why the criteria young people mentioned were – to a striking extent - prevalently school criteria. In accounts of decisions likes and dislikes for particular school subjects are often mentioned: fears of mathematics led several interviewees to exclude the *liceo scientifico* but also *ragioneria* (technical institute for accountancy), while the idea that Greek and Latin were particularly difficult led many to exclude the *liceo classico*. More in general, the idea of how “difficult” a school was, and how keen one was on studying, seems to have assumed a central place in the reasoning of most pupils.

I thought of going to [name of nearby liceo] but I wasn't sure I was up to it.

I've never been that keen on studying, so I didn't want anything too difficult or committing.

The prevalence of such school criteria in Secondgen interviews (but also in others: e.g. Bonizzoni, Romito and Cavallo 2014, Romito 2013) perhaps reflects the importance of discussions in school. Parents and families may have concerns more linked to a future job, but as I have said, relatively few parents¹⁸ had the detailed knowledge or authority to influence the terms of the discussion (although of course, their approval was required for the decision). Boudon's model of decision-making gives little role to the unequal social distribution of information.

In his ethnography of two classes in the last year of middle school, Marco Romito (2013; 2014) notes that in both classes the number of students who initially said they would like to go to a *liceo* was much larger at the beginning of the year than at the end. This change in plans seems to have been the result of discussions held in school during relaxed moments during lessons, in conversations between classmates during breaks and after school, in conversations with individual teachers outside lessons. It seems likely that these discussions have a role in setting the criteria of the decision-making process (essentially, school criteria) and in shaping the evaluation which pupils make of their own talents, possibilities and preferences. Teachers tend to stress how "difficult" a *liceo* is and how much work students have to do, and ask pupils to reflect on how keen they are on study, and whether they feel up to a difficult course. This puts a premium on students' confidence as to how good a student they feel they are. Whereas confident middle class families may provide an alternative context of evaluation and decision-making, as we have seen, few immigrant families seem to provide this counter-weight. Similar conclusions can be drawn from a survey of students in the last year of high school (Mantovani, Albertini and Gasperoni 2014) which shows that immigrant parents are more likely than Italian parents to attribute importance to their children going to university, but at the same time less able to provide useful advice or help.

Unorthodox routes as a common feature in second generation trajectories

What seems to emerge from examination of the decision-making process, then, is not so much lower educational or occupational ambitions, but rather inadequate information and lack of confidence in the ability to succeed, and a school system which does little to help keen students to catch up. Many young people says things like "*I didn't understand the difference between schools, I thought they were just specialized in different things*" [which is, indeed, the way they are presented e.g. in websites]: in spite of perceiving the difference in academic prestige in a general way, students often did not appreciate the long-term consequences of going to a school where many students were uninterested in schoolwork rather than in one where nearly all assumed they would continue on to university, and where teachers were more demanding. In other words, they underestimate the social differences between schools. In this way, immigrant families were rarely able to benefit from a system which gave ample room for choice (Perino and Allasino, 2014). The end-results for children of immigrants seem more similar to what one might have expected to those of a very different educational system like that of the Netherlands, where at the end of primary school pupils are allocated to more or less academic educational tracks directly by schools on the basis of marks. As Crul and Heering (2009; Crul 2013) note, poor performance at Dutch primary schools forces many children of migrants who are nonetheless motivated to take "the long route" to university, transferring to a more academic school track later. In Italy, we might talk of an "unorthodox route" to university. Instead of going via a *liceo*, the traditional route to university studies, many children of immigrants are going via less prestigious high schools, where fewer students continue their studies. This is certainly possible, since all high school diplomas give access to university, but many students find it is not easy to go down a route which is not the "normal" or "expected" one. One young Moroccan man, having graduated from a vocational institute, enrolled at Turin Polytechnic, a prestigious institution which is famous for being demanding (and for high drop-out rates):

¹⁸ I have only mentioned the role of parents in giving advice. As Schnell (2012) has noted, family influence cannot be reduced to parents, for older siblings may be important as models, in helping with homework and giving advice over choices. In our interviews, several interviewees mentioned older brothers or sisters as having influenced their choice, but not always "upwards": there were also two young men who discouraged their younger brothers from taking the more "ambitious" choices they themselves had made. In any case, their advice too seems to a large extent based on school criteria rather than more general social or occupational criteria.

...even though I got good marks at [my vocational] school, when I got there [Turin Polytechnic] it was another world. In chemistry, physics, analysis there were things I'd never done at all.. I remember the chemistry lecturer saying, "Well, these things you've done at your liceo"... in analysis they were way ahead, I had done very little physicsIn a year I managed to get through three exams, but none of the most important ones like maths or physics. So it was a psychological problem too, a problem in my family... because they don't understand, they've no idea; they'd say "If the others can do it, you can too", but the Polytechnic....! So anyway, I went through a really difficult year, and after that year I decided to look for a job.

In spite of being very committed initially, this interviewee found the transition from his vocational school to a prestigious university institution too sharp. He bitterly blames his father, and his middle school, who had advised him to go to a vocational school, but also his own fear of failure: *my family was very keen I should succeed. In fact, that was one reason why I chose the vocational school, I wasn't sure I'd be able to cope at a liceo.* A number of factors which are evident in the trajectories of several other interviewees are present in this young man: poor information on the part of both parents and children of the social and academic consequences of choice of high school, inability to negotiate a change of school when the young man realized that in the vocational school he had chosen, standards were low and students poorly motivated (he tried to register at another school at the beginning of another year, but due to a mix-up in the application and the impression that the school was unwelcoming, he gave up and re-registered at his vocational school), inability to meet the standards required in his university course because of lack of adequate preparation at school, sense of failure and psychological pressure from the family. The combination of all these led to what seemed, at the time of interview, frustrated aspirations: the interviewee was working as a skilled worker in a factory.

Unorthodox routes tend to take more time, and one of the reasons they are difficult is that they may put students "out of synch" with the social time sequences of fellow students. In the interviews, it is common for students to say they feel older than other students, or that they feel too old to ask parents for money. Yet the attempt to resolve this by getting a job can lead to further difficulties. One young Albanian man who (overriding his parents' objections) took a part-time job in order to be independent and pay for his expenses felt that this job "*penalized me a lot*". For it meant that the organization of his day was different from that of other students, so that he was no longer able to participate in the group study which had been an essential element in coping with his engineering course: *At university it's almost impossible to study on your own, with all that maths, chemistry, physics. A group helps you a lot. But with my job, I couldn't be there.* At the time of interview this young man had given up his course and taken a full-time job, although he still hoped to go back to university eventually.

It is obviously not true that all those who go by the unorthodox route succumb to difficulties: in our interviews as in those of other studies, there are numerous cases of successful completion. But it seems worth considering unorthodox routes as a *characteristic* feature in the educational trajectories of many children of migrants. The difficulties of unorthodox routes are perhaps summed up by the use of the term "ambitious" which Romito (2013) documents among his teachers: unorthodox trajectories are not really foreseen; other parts of the educational system tend to presume students have taken more orthodox paths.

Theorising "immigrant optimism"

But if the Italian evidence I have discussed does add another piece of support to the idea of a specific pattern among migrant families, can we hypothesize a connection with migration?

Migrants are of course selected on various dimensions. Feliciano (2005a) has shown that nearly all migrant streams to the U.S. are positively selected by education, although the degree of such selectivity varies greatly, being minor in some cases and enormous in others. Feliciano (2005b) also shows that the degree of selectivity has significant effects on the attainment of children of migrants, net of the usual family background variables, including education as conventionally measured. There are also effects on aspirations (Feliciano 2006).

Feliciano (2005a, 2005b) cautioned that her findings were limited by the fact that she only had access to group-level data (she compared the average education of immigrants of a given nationality in the U.S. with

the average education for non-migrants of similar age back in the home country)¹⁹. However, Ichou (2013) has recently confirmed her findings with individual-level data on migrants and their children from the French survey TeO (*Trajectoires et Origines*). Like Feliciano, Ichou found considerable variety in the degree of educational selectivity of different immigrant streams into France, but he also found considerable variety within nationalities: so Algerian immigrants to France, for example, include many who were negatively selected, having a lower level of education than Algerians of similar age in Algeria, but also many whose level of education was high by Algerian standards. In any case, like Feliciano, Ichou found that the relative educational standing of parents had effects on the attainment of their children in France, net of education as conventionally measured and a series of other controls.

How can these results be seen as bearing on the kinds of patterns I have described? One way is to see them as contributing to the idea of migrants as selected for ambition or a desire for upward mobility – an idea often hypothesized (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Kao and Tienda 1995: 4-5) and plausible, though perhaps not systematically demonstrated. Brinbaum and Kieffer (2005: 60) hypothesize that such selection is translated into plans for children: “les populations migrantes entendent réussir leur migration dans le pays d’accueil, et cela se manifeste au niveau des projets autour de la scolarité des enfants et des aspirations à la mobilité sociale”. A very similar idea of migration projects is put forward by Heath, Rothon and Kilpi (2008: 223), who adopt Zérroulou’s (1988) term “family mobilization” and argue that “migration can be regarded as being, for many individuals, part of a social mobility project for their families”.

Some parents interviewed in the Secondgen project do refer to the “*sacrifices*” made “*for children*”; and a couple say explicitly that one reason for their emigration was to “*give a better life*” to their children, including a better education. This kind of statement is similar to those cited by scholars who hypothesize the existence of a migration project. However, other information in the same interviews show the need for caution. For example, such statements may be made by parents who hesitated for many years before deciding on permanent migration and family reunification – which does not give the impression of any coherent “project” of social mobility via geographical mobility. In other cases, the educational benefit to children of the move to Italy seems very dubious: in some cases, children would probably have achieved more occupational mobility at home. Given the difficulties that many children of migrants experience in school, emigration would seem a risky strategy for realizing it. What I am questioning is not the desire for family social mobility via children, which may be common, but rather how this should be conceptualized.

However, results like those of Feliciano and Ichou can also be interpreted in a slightly different (not necessarily contradictory) way – not so much as confirming the idea of migrants as being selected for particular drive and ambition, but rather as reacting to downward mobility. Downward mobility is a recurrent element in the migration experience. As data like that of Feliciano and Ichou show, many migrants may find themselves on a lower position on the scale of social status than they were in the emigration country – especially if they are unable to use their educational certificate in the labour market of the immigration country. Theorists of social mobility outside the migration context have often put forward the notion of “counter-mobility” (Bertaux 1974; Goldthorpe 1980), and documented its existence in various contexts. Recent work on social mobility over three generations (Hertel and Groh-Samberg 2014) seems to confirm its importance. It certainly makes sense, when interpreting the behaviour of migrants, as Nieswand (2013) stresses, to keep firmly in mind the different reference contexts migrants are in, and the status inconsistency often involved. Santelli’s (2001) qualitative research on socially mobile children of Algerian immigrants in France found that children who were socially mobile (usually through education) often had parents whose migration had involved a downward step compared to their family status in Algeria. In France parents might have unskilled manual jobs, and few years of education, but in Algeria, their families were respected and of relatively high status. According to Santelli, this sense of family’s “real” status remained, and motivated families to restore their social standing in the second generation.

Another, partly overlapping, possibility is that parents are reacting to their own position: they want their children to avoid the stressful insecurity, subaltern position at work and everyday experience of low status which is the lot of many labour migrants in “immigrant jobs”. Certainly many parents in Secondgen interviews told their children that they needed to study “*otherwise you will end up in jobs like us*”, and since phrases like this are so common in interviews with young people, they evidently make a certain impression

¹⁹ Feliciano (2006) hypothesized that group-level pre-migration status was important because of the development of a group organization and “culture” in the sense of information and support regarding education and its importance. Thus the relatively high group-level pre-migration educational status of Vietnamese in the U.S., for example, could have beneficial effects on educational plans even of families whose *individual-level* pre-migration status was not high. Evidence on the passing of information and support regarding educational opportunities in some groups of migrants does seem to support this idea (cf. Zhou and Bankston 1998).

on them. Downward mobility is certainly a question of status inconsistency, but also of acute awareness of the immediate disadvantages of work at the bottom of the labour market. Another thread in the literature I have referred to seeks to explain the “paradoxes” it finds by the discrimination which young people may anticipate when they enter the labour market. In the Swedish research mentioned earlier, Jonsson and Rudolphi (2011) attribute the “ambitious” choices of non-European families in Sweden to discrimination. It is plausible, as Jonsson and Rudolphi argue, that the reluctance to accept the vocational courses which are rather popular among Swedes (and among children of Finns and others who migrated in a previous wave) is due to lack of confidence that they will find jobs in well-paying niches in the manual labour market. But of course this could be also due to being less likely to have relatives and friends already working in such niches, and to network ties more generally. The discrimination and the network hypotheses obviously have rather different implications for policy as well as theory.

As I argue below, Secondgen interviews give few examples of social networks leading to solid career opportunities in jobs not requiring long education. However, social networks may, of course, also lead to opportunities in self-employment, perhaps via work in the family firm. It is significant that the only clear case among Secondgen interviewees of someone who had to assert their wish to continue at university against some *opposition* from the family was a young Chinese woman, whose parents would have preferred her to devote her time to the family restaurant (as her brother was doing), or to undertake an entrepreneurial path which would lead to high earnings. It is worth recalling here Minello and Barban’s (2012) finding that educational aspirations were low among Chinese middle school students, notwithstanding quite good school results. The pattern may be similar to that which Yiu (2013) describes in an article documenting “alternative ambitions” among young Chinese in Spain.

In Italy, as in Spain, many first generation Chinese are self-employed or small employers, and there is an enormous wealth of little opportunities which effectively provide concrete opportunities of a “career”, as well as a firm ideology of the virtues of making it as a self-made entrepreneur (Blanchard 2011). Clearly, when alternative paths are feasible, these may easily compete with ideas of mobility via education. In making decisions as to whether or not to continue education, students and families clearly consider just these kinds of alternatives.

Images of “the future”, “trouble” and fears of downward mobility

When conceptualizing family strategies, it would be a mistake to imagine that parents only have in mind an image of the occupational hierarchy and of social mobility. They also have a series of (often more pressing) worries about their children’s “future”, ranging from risks caused by various forms of “trouble” to settling down, starting a family. Models of educational decision-making sometimes forget that work and school do not only have an economic but also a “moral” value. Parents do not feel that the kind of jobs which young people have access to without educational qualifications are signs of a reassuring integration into a career or a “future”. They may even be seen as threatening: the mother of one young Romanian man, in the last year of high school, is trying to persuade him to go to university even in spite of his very evident lack of enthusiasm for study. She presses him to register “*for any course, it doesn’t matter, as long as it’s university*”. She disapproves of his part-time job as a barman in a Romanian discothèque, which she associates with “*bad company*”, encouraging him to drink too much and getting him into fights and quarrels. He protests that he wants to work, but she objects that his bar job “*is not serious, it doesn’t have any future*”. His various bar jobs have in fact all been off the books, and marked by conflict between employers and employees. Even less than native parents, immigrant parents are probably unable to provide the kind of contacts which may provide even a young person without educational qualifications a job giving reasonable security.

In their model of educational decision-making, Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) imagine working-class parents as opting for short, vocationally-oriented education as providing better guarantees of security in a working-class job. In other words, a safer bet for a child who does not have a particularly good school record. However, in current labour market conditions, with the decline of many types of skilled working class jobs, for someone who does not have particularly good network ties, education may appear “safer”. This may be especially true in some countries. In some educational systems of northern Europe (Germany is a particularly well-known example, but Austria, Switzerland and some Nordic countries are also often cited), notwithstanding recent problems in finding places for all their students, vocational schools may still provide entries to firms which offer considerable security and a solid “career”. In some of these systems, it should be

remembered, graduates of vocational schools have a semi-monopolistic position in the labour market in that being recognized as a full member of the trade, able to start up a firm, depends on the diploma provided by the school. In Italy, vocational institutes do not have this Bismarckian-style legal framework. Graduates from vocational institutes are thus in competition with others in a more open, much less corporate market. It is significant in this context that of all the Secondgen interviewees who had graduated from a vocational institute, almost none were working in the sector for which they had formally been trained, and very few hoped to do so. In this context, there is obviously a risk of vocational education simply being perceived as a less rigorous type of generalist education – attractive as a choice at middle school, because seen as less demanding, but not able to provide strong ties with firms.

Conclusion

As data from the Ministry of Education show, children of immigrants in Italy are markedly less likely than Italians to register at university. However, this does not seem to be attributable to lower aspirations *in se*, but rather to their trajectory through the school system, and to families' inability to navigate the necessary choices. It is this which seems to lower ambitions and attainment. The Italian system is rather flexible, allowing considerable scope for "choice", and middle class Italian parents are often able to exploit this to their advantage. Migrant parents on the other hand rarely have these skills and they tend to remain in the background; it thus seems to be students themselves who are often the prime decision makers in the crucial step decision of choice of high school. Interacting with teachers, those responsible for orientation, and school-friends, they often make their decision on criteria connected with the supposed "difficulty" of a school type. Yet immigrant students and their families probably underestimate the consequences of this choice on the competencies and attitudes which are formed.

In spite of the limited amount of evidence available in a relatively "new" immigration country like Italy (especially on university completion and entry into qualified jobs²⁰), there seems to be sufficient provisional evidence on expectations and school careers to suggest patterns partially similar to those documented in other countries: notwithstanding the difficulties experienced in school, there does seem to be evidence of attempts at relatively "ambitious" and long educational trajectories, with parents supporting long educational careers even when signs sent by the school do not seem good. Evidence also of the considerable difficulties caused by following unorthodox trajectories. This adds to the weight of comparative evidence suggesting there are, indeed, specific patterns among immigrant families in the relationship to education.

How such specific patterns should be explained, however, remains less clear. It is not even clear whether immigrant "optimism" is an appropriate term, or whether the accent should rather be on "persistence" and determination, or on the unorthodox nature of the trajectories, or on lesser access to the channels to middling-level jobs which do not require tertiary education. No doubt a multi-causal approach is at present the only sensible one.

The existence of specificities among migrant families also provides challenging evidence for thinking about educational decision-making more generally, and the role family budgets and statistical chances of students' success in family's strategies. As in other areas, no doubt it would be useful if evidence on migrant families was more integrated into general social science rather than being an area for specialists.

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²⁰ There is at present little usable data on numbers of the second generation at university, or on dropping-out. The Ministry for Education has data for foreigners registered at universities, but this includes foreigners who arrive specifically for university study, without having done their schooling in Italy, while it excludes children of immigrants who have Italian citizenship, who as over-18s, are fairly numerous (the law permits application for citizenship at 18).

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Table 3. Binary logistic regression of university expectations of second year high school students

Expects univ. degree	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% confidence limits for Exp(B)	
							lower limit	upper limit
1.00 Intercept	-.808	,035	526,698	1	,000			
Male	-.635	,010	4293,024	1	,000	,530	,520	,540
Female	0			0				
no siblings	,178	,021	74,629	1	,000	1,195	1,148	1,245
1 or 2 siblings	,096	,018	30,233	1	,000	1,101	1,064	1,140
more than 2 siblings	0			0				
I GEN	,317	,024	169,860	1	,000	1,372	1,309	1,439
II GEN	,205	,027	56,283	1	,000	1,228	1,164	1,296
NATIVE	0			0				
father education low	-.671	,018	1459,962	1	,000	,511	,494	,529
father education medium	-.392	,016	586,827	1	,000	,676	,655	,698
father education high	0			0				
mother education low	-.469	,018	705,358	1	,000	,626	,604	,648
mother education medium	-.217	,016	187,210	1	,000	,805	,780	,830
mother education high	0			0				
mother: service classes	,160	,024	44,453	1	,000	1,174	1,120	1,230
mother: middle classes	,172	,013	179,463	1	,000	1,188	1,159	1,219
mother: self employed	,052	,017	9,157	1	,002	1,053	1,018	1,089
mother: working classes	,061	,013	21,183	1	,000	1,062	1,035	1,090
mother: not working	0			0				
father: service classes	,203	,021	90,907	1	,000	1,225	1,175	1,277
father: middle classes	,174	,019	83,303	1	,000	1,190	1,147	1,236
father: self employed]	,007	,019	,143	1	,705	1,007	,970	1,046
father: working classes	,050	,019	7,395	1	,007	1,052	1,014	1,091
father: not working	0			0				
books: less than 3 shelves	-.396	,010	1443,128	1	,000	,673	,659	,687
books: 3 shelves or more	0			0				
Right age for class	,448	,013	1247,388	1	,000	1,565	1,527	1,605
Behind	0			0				
<i>Liceo</i>	1,631	,010	25898,435	1	,000	5,110	5,009	5,212
Vocational institute	-.561	,015	1402,925	1	,000	,571	,554	,588
Technical institute	0			0				
North West	-.203	,017	139,134	1	,000	,816	,789	,844
North East	-.149	,018	67,336	1	,000	,862	,832	,893
Centre	-.147	,018	66,019	1	,000	,863	,833	,894
South	,125	,016	61,011	1	,000	1,133	1,098	1,170
Islands	0			0				
Maths score	,026	,000	7519,140	1	,000	1,026	1,026	1,027

Source: Italian educational evaluation agency (INVALSI), 2012-2013: second year high school student questionnaire (and INVALSI test for maths score).

