

BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND BARRIERS: MIGRANT-BACKGROUND STUDENTS NAVIGATING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN ITALY

Valentina Pagani, & Federica Ines Palladini

Department of Human Sciences for Education “Riccardo Massa”, University of Milano Bicocca (Italy)

Abstract

In the context of growing social and cultural diversity, promoting equitable access to higher education represents a key challenge for contemporary education systems. Despite formal commitments to educational equality (UNESCO, 2018), students with a migratory background continue to experience persistent disparities in their educational trajectories across Europe. In Italy, these inequalities are particularly visible in the stratified structure of upper secondary education: students with a migratory background are overrepresented in vocational and technical pathways and are significantly less likely to pursue university studies than their native peers (Bertozzi, 2018; Carlana et al., 2022). Existing research has extensively highlighted structural constraints affecting these students' educational opportunities, including socioeconomic disadvantage, linguistic barriers, and limited familiarity with the education system. However, comparatively less attention has been devoted to how students themselves perceive and interpret the opportunities and limitations they encounter while imagining their post-secondary futures. Examining these perspectives is crucial for understanding how educational aspirations take shape within institutional contexts and how school practices may influence students' expectations and choices. This paper presents preliminary results from an ongoing qualitative study conducted within the research project FINE (*Fighting INequalities in Education. Promoting Access to Universities for Students with Migratory Backgrounds*). The study adopts a participatory design informed by a Student Voice perspective (Cook-Sather, 2020), which recognises students as knowledgeable actors in interpreting their own educational experiences. The research is currently being carried out in six upper secondary schools in the Lombardy region, selected to reflect the main tracks of the Italian education system (academic, technical, and vocational) and characterised by a significant presence of students with a migratory background. Data collection combines focus groups with teachers responsible for career guidance and 26 focus groups involving 278 fourth-year students, both with and without a migratory background, aimed at exploring their aspirations, perceptions of post-secondary opportunities, and perceived barriers to university access. In addition, a group of students with a migratory background (N = 30) are participating in a four-month digital diary, documenting the evolution of their reflections and expectations regarding their educational futures. By foregrounding students' narratives, the study highlights the interplay between cultural expectations, school guidance practices, institutional norms, linguistic experiences, and socio-economic conditions in shaping educational aspirations. Preliminary findings reveal the complexity of students' decision-making processes and underline the importance of school environments that foster dialogue, guidance, and recognition of students' perspectives in order to support more equitable transitions to higher education.

Keywords: *Migrant-background student, student voice, educational inequalities, access to higher education.*

1. Introduction

Equitable access to tertiary education constitutes a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2024; UNESCO, 2018). Despite the fact that international regulatory frameworks and policy agendas have formally established the principle of educational equality (UNESCO, 2018), significant disparities in educational trajectories persist, particularly among students with migratory backgrounds. Numerous studies conducted across different European contexts have shown that these students continue to face structural and systemic barriers that shape and constrain their educational pathways (Anas, 2025; Mantovani et al., 2018).

Focusing on the Italian context, upper secondary education is highly stratified and organized into three main types of schools: *licei* (academic high schools), technical institutes, and vocational institutes. *Licei* are five-year academic schools offering curricula oriented toward the humanities, sciences, languages, or pedagogy. Technical institutes provide technically oriented education with different specializations, whereas vocational institutes emphasize practical learning and rapid entry into the labor market.

Although all forms of upper secondary education formally grant access to university upon completion of the five-year program, substantial differences emerge in terms of access to tertiary education and labor market outcomes depending on the type of upper secondary school attended (Barban & White, 2018).

The transition to upper secondary education represents a crucial turning point that may contribute to the reproduction of educational inequalities. Empirical evidence indicates that students with migratory backgrounds are disproportionately tracked into technical and vocational pathways, which are generally associated with fewer opportunities for continuing to higher education (Barban & White, 2011). Consequently, these students are significantly less likely to access and complete university education compared to their native peers (Bertozzi, 2018; Carlana et al., 2022).

Although Italian universities have recently experienced a growing presence of students with migratory backgrounds, their numbers remain comparatively low in relation to their potential participation (Ferrara et al., 2024; Trappolini et al., 2025).

The decision to pursue university studies represents a fundamental stage in students' lives and may deeply influence both their educational success and their future professional trajectories. Italy is among the countries characterized by the lowest levels of intergenerational mobility, with strong intergenerational persistence in both occupational class and educational attainment (Barban & White, 2011). Students who choose to pursue tertiary education must rely on the economic, cultural, and social capital of their families of origin, and this may constitute a significant barrier to university access for students with migratory backgrounds (Bertozzi & Lagomarsino, 2019).

Research on social mobility has highlighted how migratory background, alongside factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and citizenship, represents a significant variable influencing individuals' social trajectories and life chances (Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006).

Issues related to access to higher education for students with migratory backgrounds have received increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly in light of the significant growth in the number of students with migratory backgrounds enrolled in upper secondary schools and universities. Current research has largely focused on the structural obstacles and barriers shaping these students' educational opportunities. However, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the perspectives of students with migratory backgrounds themselves and to their perceptions of the opportunities and barriers encountered during decision-making processes concerning their post-secondary futures.

This contribution aims to address this gap by exploring and shedding light on students' own perceptions regarding their aspirations and the barriers they encounter while navigating choices about their future after upper secondary education.

2. Aims and objectives of the research

This contribution presents the preliminary findings of an ongoing study conducted within the interdisciplinary research project FINE – Fighting INequalities in Education: Promoting Access to Universities for Students with Migratory Backgrounds (<https://fineproject.it/>), funded by Fondazione Cariplo. The project aims to investigate the social, economic, and cultural factors shaping the educational aspirations, educational trajectories, and decision-making processes of students with migratory backgrounds.

More specifically, this paper presents the qualitative component of the study currently being conducted in six upper secondary schools in Lombardy (two *licei*, two technical institutes, and two vocational institutes) characterized by a significant presence of students with migratory backgrounds.

The qualitative study seeks to explore students' perspectives on their higher education pathways in order to understand how educational aspirations are constructed within institutional contexts and how school practices may shape students' expectations, opportunities, and choices.

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- to examine how students with migratory backgrounds identify and interpret the personal and social factors associated with educational success;
- to analyse the aspirations and barriers encountered throughout their educational trajectories;
- to explore the nature, content, and accessibility of the information provided through school guidance processes concerning higher education opportunities;

- to investigate the factors influencing students' decision-making processes regarding access to university education.

The following sections outline the research methodology and data collection process, while the final section discusses some preliminary findings emerging from the ongoing research project.

3. Research methodology and data collection

The present study adopts a qualitative research paradigm aimed at exploring and critically examining the experiences and perceptions of students with migratory backgrounds regarding their post-secondary choices and access to higher education. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of the subjective meanings students attribute to their educational trajectories, with particular attention to the structural, cultural, and relational dimensions shaping their decision-making processes. The study is grounded in a participatory research design informed by the Student Voice perspective (Cook-Sather, 2020), which recognizes students as knowledgeable social actors capable of interpreting and critically reflecting on their own educational experiences. Within this framework, students are positioned not merely as respondents, but as active contributors to knowledge production and to the investigation of the social issues affecting their lives (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). By foregrounding students' perspectives and experiences, the Student Voice approach contributes both to informing educators, researchers, school leaders, and policy makers more effectively and to fostering students' sense of agency, participation, and empowerment within processes of educational and social change.

The study involved a total of 278 fourth-year upper secondary students, both with and without migratory backgrounds, as well as 23 teachers, including class coordinators and school guidance counsellors responsible for post-secondary orientation activities. Among the participating students, 46% have a migratory background. Drawing on the classification proposed by Rubén G. Rumbaut (2004), this subgroup includes students who arrived in Italy during early childhood (generation 1.75), those who migrated during school age (generation 1.5), those who arrived during adolescence (generation 1.25), students born in Italy to foreign-born parents (generation 2.0), and students with one native-born and one foreign-born parent (generation 2.5).

Data were collected through qualitative methods. In particular, a total of 33 focus groups were conducted, including 26 with fourth-year upper secondary students and 7 with teachers working as class coordinators or post-secondary guidance counsellors. All focus groups were fully audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to preserve fidelity to participants' meanings and to capture the nuances of their perspectives as they emerged during the research process. The focus groups explored participants' representations and perceptions regarding post-secondary futures, with particular attention to the personal and social drivers of educational success, the barriers encountered throughout educational trajectories, the role of school guidance and orientation processes, and the factors influencing decisions concerning access to university education. In the teacher focus groups, additional attention was devoted to teachers' representations of students with migratory backgrounds and to the criteria and rationales underpinning guidance practices and recommendations.

In addition, 30 students with migratory backgrounds are currently participating in a four-month digital diary project in which they document their reflections, experiences, and perceptions concerning their post-diploma futures. Conceived as a personal and private space that also enables direct interaction with researchers, the digital diary functions as a multimodal research tool incorporating written texts, audio recordings, videos, and images. This approach supports participants' individual modes of self-expression while fostering creativity and reflexivity, enabling students to highlight the complex interplay of personal, relational, institutional, and structural factors shaping their future educational and professional trajectories.

4. Preliminary findings and discussion

Preliminary analysis of the data collected through the focus groups with students and teachers and the digital diaries completed by students with migratory backgrounds reveals the presence of multiple interconnected factors shaping students' aspirations, perceptions, and post-secondary educational choices. Students' narratives appear highly articulated and highlight the complex interplay of personal aspirations, socio-cultural expectations, linguistic experiences, school guidance practices, and the socio-economic conditions of their families of origin in influencing reflections and decision-making processes concerning their futures after upper secondary education.

Among the barriers affecting access to higher education, linguistic barriers emerge as particularly significant. Students who recently migrated to Italy, especially those belonging to generation 1.25 according to Rumbaut's (2004) classification, frequently describe limited proficiency in Italian as a source of insecurity and as a potential obstacle to university access. As one student explained:

“I want to become a pharmacist, but I don’t know if I can do it because I still have many difficulties speaking Italian.”

In some cases, linguistic difficulties appear to operate as structural barriers that contribute to educational tracking processes, leading students with migratory backgrounds to enrol more frequently in technical and vocational pathways or to change school tracks during their upper secondary education, as highlighted by previous studies (Barban & White, 2011). Teachers participating in the focus groups, particularly those working in *licei*, also emphasized this issue, observing a significant reduction in the number of students with migratory backgrounds in the final years of schooling due to processes of reorientation toward other educational tracks linked to difficulties with the Italian language.

Another recurrent theme concerns the role of social and family expectations. Several students described experiencing strong pressure to achieve educational success and social mobility, often connected to migration trajectories and to the sacrifices made by their families. In these narratives, educational achievement is frequently perceived not only as a personal goal, but also as a form of responsibility toward the family and as a means of “redeeming” the migratory experience. This dimension emerged particularly strongly among female students attending academic high schools, many of whom expressed clear aspirations toward university education despite the pressures and uncertainties associated with their future choices, as can be read from the statements of some of these students:

“I have always felt that my mother somehow imposed the idea of studying medicine on me. In fact, for a certain period, I completely ruled it out among my options. I did not want to pursue it because I felt that it was not truly my own choice, but rather something that someone else expected from me. Then, after reflecting on it, I realized that it is actually something I would like to do. However, at the beginning, I had completely excluded it as a possibility.”

“I would be the first person in my family to attend university, so I think this also represents a burden that I carry with me: proving to my parents that I will go to university. They have always told me and my sister, ‘If you do not go to university, you will have to start working immediately, because we will not support you at home.’”

Preliminary findings also appear to confirm trends identified in previous research: students with migratory backgrounds attending *licei* more frequently express the intention to pursue university studies, whereas aspirations toward tertiary education tend to decrease among students enrolled in technical and vocational institutes. In this respect, the role of teachers and school guidance practices emerges as particularly relevant. Participants’ narratives suggest that guidance processes may either support students’ aspirations and educational agency or, conversely, contribute to the reproduction of educational inequalities through implicit expectations, differential recommendations, and limited access to information concerning higher education opportunities, as emerges from the students’ statements reported below:

“I think that if we asked teachers to dedicate even just two hours during the school year to explaining university programmes to us, they would probably refuse. In my opinion, first of all, many teachers are not really familiar with the wide range of university courses that now exist. Secondly, they would say that they need to focus on grading, completing the curriculum, and covering the required programme, and therefore they cannot devote time to additional activities outside the syllabus.”

“I arrived in Italy not long ago and I started studying here during the second year of upper secondary school. At that time, I could not even speak a single word of Italian; in fact, I learned even how to say ‘hello’ here. All my teachers helped me a great deal — with studying, with adapting, and also with feeling included and involved.”

Overall, these preliminary findings underline the importance of adopting a multidimensional perspective capable of accounting for the complex interaction between individual aspirations, institutional practices, and structural inequalities in shaping students’ educational trajectories and access to higher education.

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