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Abstract

While education is one of the most important determinants of social position, it remains largely influenced by parental education. Considering the key role of education in the socioeconomic attainment process, this paper explores patterns of intergenerational educational mobility in Romania. Analysing survey data collected from a sample of upper secondary education students regarding their intentions of enrolling in higher education, we highlight the influence of background factors and educational trajectories on the chances to display upward or downward educational mobility. The obtained results show the important role played by the selection of students in general and vocational tracks for their prospects of educational mobility. Our findings are relevant to inform education policy aiming to increase overall educational attainment, while reducing educational inequalities.

Keywords: education, mobility, social reproduction, selection

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Introduction

Intergenerational educational mobility refers to whether individuals achieve, do not achieve, or exceed their parents' education. Societies with high mobility offer better chances for individuals to attain higher positions, regardless of their socio-economic background. On the other hand, low mobility is related to educational inequalities and could be conducive to human capital underutilisation and misallocation. Various sociological theories have described and analysed the educational mobility between generations. They provide multiple insights by explaining how the mechanism of family background (parents' educational and occupational statuses) and social structures influence children's intentions to pursue further education and a specific career path across the generations.

Even if the links between education and social mobility are not as straightforward as expected, educational attainment remains one of the most important drivers of upward mobility. Education provides the qualifications, knowledge, and skills needed to access better employment opportunities increasing the probability to reach out to higher income and social status. Not least, education is one important mechanism for overcoming structural barriers such as family background, social or economic inequalities. Previous studies on social mobility in Romania evidenced the complexity of societal changes after the transition to a market economy, with previous social homogeneity being replaced by downward mobility and increasing levels of income inequalities and intergenerational mobility (Nunn, 2011). Gender, ethnicity, and area of residence are among the most analysed sources of inequalities in access to education and higher education by studies addressing Romania, while higher education seems to still contribute to reducing social reproduction (Hatos, 2012, 2014), even if the topic must be further investigated.

According to Hossler and Gallagher's 3-phase college-going model, the first stage is the predisposition phase dedicated to the exploration of students' aspirations of pursuing, or not, higher education. Such aspirations are shaped by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, academic performances, parental education, area of residence, as well as high school quality and educational track (Hossler, & Gallagher, 1987).

The objective of this paper is to analyse the intentions of upper secondary education students to enrol in higher education and to identify factors that influence their aspirations of reaching, not reaching or exceeding the education of their parents. By analysing one cohort of students enrolled in the final year of compulsory education, this study aims to uncover the way in which intergenerational educational mobility is shaped by factors related to family background or educational context and to discuss the extent to which mobility is favoured in the current education system. Focusing the study on the key educational decision of enrolling in higher education, we highlight how the interplay between family background and the secondary education context influence the intentions of pursuing higher education.

In order to address this objective, we perform an empirical analysis for the Romanian context that registers high educational inequalities (Zamfir, Aldea, & Molea, 2024).

Status attainment theory (Blau, & Duncan, 1967) provides a primary perspective on how socioeconomic family background influences the individual's educational and occupational path. Based on this theory, individuals' socioeconomic status (SES) is significantly influenced by family background – especially parental occupation and education - which provides resources and establishes expectations that facilitate the achievement of educational goals. Families with higher socioeconomic status typically provide greater financial resources, educational support (tutoring or extracurricular activities), social networks and stability, which are linked to positive educational and occupational outcomes.

Moreover, Blau, & Duncan (1967) consider that education serves as the main mechanism through which parental SES impacts occupational status, creating both direct and indirect effects on status attainment. For example, parental SES and occupation can directly impact an individual's occupational attainment through family connections or wealth by creating job opportunities for their children. Additionally, parental SES frequently has an indirect impact by initially encouraging educational progress, which subsequently leads to high-status jobs. By using path analysis to quantify the extent to which parental SES and educational attainment impact occupational status, Blau, & Duncan (1967) demonstrated that educational success mainly mediates the influence of family background. While Status Attainment Theory (1967) emphasized the importance of social background and education, it also acknowledged that individual traits such as ability and personal effort play a part in status achievement. However, this theory prioritises social origins over personal characteristics.

Although Blau & Duncan (1967) strongly emphasise individual characteristics (such as education and family history), they also take into account larger structural contexts that influence occupational outcomes, such as social policies, labour market needs, and economic situations. These structural elements have the potential to either increase or decrease people's chances, which could affect mobility rates and the importance of education as a mean of achieving higher occupational status.

Thus, individuals born into lower-SES families face more significant barriers to upward mobility. Blau and Duncan's (1967) findings suggest that while education can improve social mobility, the influence of family background remains a strong determinant of an individual's SES, especially in societies with limited social support or educational access for disadvantaged groups.

Effectively maintained inequality (EMI) theory (Lucas, 2001) *explains* of how social inequalities continue to exist, even when educational opportunities expand. This theory (Lucas, 2001) emphasizes the qualitative differences in educational opportunities across various levels of the educational system. Concretely, even though access to higher education has become more widespread, individuals from

higher socioeconomic backgrounds can maintain their social status by accessing more prestigious and higher-quality education. This perspective highlights how stratification persists through 'qualitative sorting' at each educational level, enabling families with higher SES to preserve their advantages despite the increased accessibility of education.

Lucas (2001) highlights the differentiated access to quality education, stressing the strategies that privileged groups adopt when the access to education expands. They tend to shift their focus from education access to securing a better-quality education. The differentiation means that students with fewer financial possibilities now have the opportunity to pursue educational levels that previously did not, for example, secondary or higher education, but also students with higher SES obtain new means for accessing higher-quality educational programs, schools, or courses. For example, high-SES students within higher education have a greater probability of attending elite universities, prestigious programs or student mobilities than lower-SES students who could only access public higher education universities.

Therefore, EMI theory emphasizes the institutional mechanism of educational systems that can either mitigate or reinforce social stratification. In many cases, educational and social policies fail to address qualitative inequalities (resource disparities between schools and unequal access to advanced courses), risking perpetuating inequalities further.

Bourdieu's *cultural capital theory* (1977) emphasizes how unequal access to cultural resources affects academic success and social mobility. In particular, Bourdieu argued that educational institutions are structured to favour students with high levels of cultural capital, which typically aligns with dominant social classes' tastes, behaviours, and knowledge. This advantage is usually intergenerational, meaning that children from high-SES families inherit cultural capital that aligns with the educational system's expectations. These children are privileged to navigate more easily through academic settings. This situation reinforces social inequality in educational mobility by reproducing class status across generations.

Rational choice theory (Bourdon, 1974; Breen, & Goldthorpe, 1977) developed a framework for understanding educational attainment and intergenerational mobility by concentrating on the individual decisions that shape educational pathways. Based on this theory, individuals make educational choices based on a rational evaluation of the costs and benefits of each option, determined by their desire to maximise personal outcomes. For example, students and usually their families weigh the financial costs, time efforts, risks, and potential rewards of further education when choosing whether to pursue their studies, obtain specific credentials, or enter the workforce. Thereby, educational choices are not entirely influenced by cultural or social factors but are also calculated responses to perceived opportunities and constraints, largely influenced by an individual's SES.

Within this theory, Breen and Goldthorpe (1977) coined the concept of 'relative risk aversion' to explain the variety of educational choices among people from

different social classes. According to Breen and Goldthorpe (1977), individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to prioritize avoiding downward mobility to the detriment of achieving upward mobility, meaning that they make educational decisions to preserve their existing social position or reduce the risk of socioeconomic decline, rather than pursuing education only for upward mobility. For example, working-class families might encourage children to enter stable, secure jobs with moderate pay rather than pursuing higher education, which involves greater financial risk and uncertainty. On the other hand, middle- and upper-class families with more resources may be more willing to invest in lengthy and costly education, as their risk of experiencing downward mobility is significantly lower. Boudon (1974) further clarifies the decision-making process through social background's primary and secondary effects. Primary effects refer to how family resources, neighbourhood, and school quality differences affect academic performance and inclination for further education. Secondary effects capture the decision-making aspect, where students from different social backgrounds weigh the benefits and costs of pursuing further education. Even when academically prepared, lower-income students may decide against continuing education due to financial constraints or family responsibilities.

Social reproduction theory (Bowles, & Gintis, 1976) examines how educational systems perpetuate social inequality across generations by reinforcing existing class structures. This theory views education as a mechanism that maintains and legitimizes the social and economic hierarchy rather than serving as an avenue for social mobility. Bowles and Gintis (1976) consider that schools are structured to reproduce the capitalist economy's needs, socializing students into roles that reflect and reinforce the labour market's class stratification. This theory argues that educational institutions cultivate attitudes, behaviours, and values that align with the expectations of different socioeconomic classes, ultimately perpetuating economic and social disparities. According to the 'correspondence principle', schools mirror the workplace by preparing working-class students for routine, compliance-based jobs by emphasizing obedience and task completion. In contrast, schools for higher-SES students foster leadership, independence, and critical thinking, grooming them for higher-status careers. This process is further reinforced by the "hidden curriculum," the implicit lessons that schools teach beyond academics. These unspoken norms encourage students to adopt behaviours aligned with their future class roles, such as conformity and respect for authority for working-class students and assertiveness and autonomy for middle- and upper-class students. This hidden curriculum strengthens the social hierarchy as students internalize values that match their likely future positions, thus perpetuating economic and social inequalities across generations.

The combination of these theories provides a comprehensive understanding of intergenerational educational mobility. Status attainment (Blau, & Duncan, 1967), human capital (Becker, 1964), and rational choice (Boudon, 1974; Breen, & Goldthorpe, 1997) theories highlight the importance of family background

and individual choices in achieving educational success. In contrast, effectively maintained inequality (Lucas, 2001), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), and social reproduction theory (Bowles, & Gintis, 1976) emphasize the structural constraints and institutional mechanisms that maintain class-based inequalities. By integrating these perspectives, we can better understand how both individual decisions and structural factors influence intergenerational mobility, revealing the intricate relationship between education and social inequality.

Building on this theoretical framework, this study explores patterns of intergenerational educational mobility in Romania, by analysing survey data collected from a sample of upper secondary education students concerning their intentions of enrolling in higher education. The remaining parts of this paper review the most relevant studies on this topic, present the data and methods employed by this study and the obtained results. In the discussion section, the article links these theories with the results of our study for a better understanding of the mechanisms that (re)produce intergenerational education mobility, by putting them within the Romanian context. The paper ends with conclusions and policy recommendations.

Literature review

Defining educational mobility

Education is a strong predictor of various positive outcomes. For example, it is seen as a resource for income mobility and occupational success (Stuhler, 2018). Specifically, individuals with higher education are more likely to have higher overall earnings and to be employed in jobs that have higher levels of occupational prestige. In this sense, education is an important determinant of social stratification, shaping how individuals and groups move within societal hierarchies. Besides labour market and social status-related outcomes, previous research showed that higher educational attainment has been associated with positive outcomes in terms of health, well-being, crime reduction, and political participation (Eide, & Showalter, 2011; Kristoffersen, 2018; Machin *et al.*, 2011; Mayer, 2011). As education is an important resource, researchers are more interested in understanding how educational attainment persists across generations. One important concept used when studying this intergenerational transmission is educational mobility.

Educational mobility can be described as the association between parents' education and children's education. A high educational mobility means that the parents' level of education does not influence the child's education and low educational mobility indicates that a child's education is strongly connected to the parents' education. In other words, a strong association between the two implies that the child may benefit or be adversely affected because of their family's educational background, while a weak association may indicate that individuals, regardless of

their family educational backgrounds, have similar opportunities of acquiring a low or higher education (Torche, 2021). A perfect association is when the individual has the same level of education as their parents, where we have an intergenerational dependence on education or immobility. Upward educational mobility happens when individuals attain higher levels of education than their parents, whereas downward educational mobility occurs when individuals achieve lower levels of education than their parents. Other definitional nuances of educational mobility pertain to its measurement.

One aspect depicted from the literature is related to the distinction between absolute and relative mobility. Absolute mobility is the share of individuals that have a higher (upward mobility) or lower education (downward mobility) than their parents (Fletcher, & Han, 2019; Torche, 2021). Hence, it represents generational educational shifts, providing a measure of educational progress or regression across generations. Relative educational mobility, on the other hand, is the dependence or association of the individual's education and their parents' education, independent of any shifts in educational level across generations (Torche, 2021). A strong association in relative mobility indicates that family background significantly determines educational outcomes, thus violating the principles of equality of opportunity (Di Paolo, Raymond, & Calero, 2010). As education strongly correlates to social status and income, wealth and poverty can be generationally transmitted, implying that an intergenerational persistence of income inequality is perpetuated from generation to generation (Becker *et al.*, 2018; Lee, & Lee, 2021). Generally, while this is not always the case, educational mobility tends to be negatively correlated with educational inequality (Chevalier *et al.*, 2003; Chusseau *et al.*, 2013). This relationship implies that societies exhibiting lower educational mobility tend to share higher educational inequalities.

Another important aspect in measuring educational mobility is whether it is assessed based on the education of the mother, the father, or both parents. While research uses extensively fathers' education to explain children's educational attainment, some scholars argue that incorporating both parents' education provides a more accurate representation, as it accounts better for variance in educational outcomes (Tomescu-Dubrow, & Domański, 2010). The extent to which parental education contributes to the educational mobility of an individual varies across regions. Di Paolo, Raymond, and Calero (2010) showed that Nordic countries, Belgium and Greece show no difference between the contributions of father's and mother's education to educational mobility, while the Southern and Continental European countries (Austria, Netherlands, France, and Belgium) tend to be connected more to the father's education. But the role of mothers' education in their children's aspirations increased in modern times (Korupp *et al.*, 2002), and moreover, in Romania tends to better explain the graduation of their offspring from upper secondary education (Hatos, 2014), Nevertheless, the level of educational mobility related to each parent tends to converge to the same level over time in

all countries (Di Paolo *et al.*, 2010). Our research analyses the influence of both parents' education on educational mobility.

Drivers of educational mobility – individual, community and systemic factors

While the concept has become increasingly relevant in empirical studies examining social mobility, some researchers argue that literature has mainly focused on income, class, or occupational mobility, overlooking the educational dimension (Torche, 2021; Di Paolo *et al.*, 2010). This oversight is particularly noticeable in the context of Romania when reviewing the available literature. Methodologically, previous findings suggest that using education as an indicator of social status offers several advantages. These include high validity, stability of information, comparability, ease of collection, and standardization (as it is not a sensitive subject for respondents, in contrast to income reporting) (Torche, 2021). These methodological advantages highlight the importance of further research on educational mobility, especially in countries such as Romania, where the topic remains underexplored.

Previous research identified specific patterns in educational mobility across different countries and regions. For example, Northern European countries have the highest levels of educational mobility out of all regions (Di Paolo *et al.*, 2010; Chevalier *et al.*, 2003; Hertz *et al.*, 2008; Hertz *et al.*, 2007). In Northern European countries, parental education tends to have a lower influence on children's educational outcomes, and in turn it results in a lower level of educational persistence and a higher equality of opportunity across generations. At the opposite pole, low educational mobility is more prevalent among countries from Latin America and Southern Europe (Di Paolo *et al.*, 2010; Hertz *et al.*, 2007; Hertz *et al.*, 2008). In these countries, parental education has a stronger effect on the offspring's educational attainment. In Romania, intergenerational mobility improved from the 1930's due to the expansion of education and the reforms introduced in the education system following changes in political regimes. From 1940-1944 to the 1980s, Romania underwent a growth in educational mobility rates (Torul, & Öztunalı, 2017). However, this progress was not linear because of the fluctuations in educational mobility throughout this period due to various educational reforms. For instance, another study focused on two cohorts showed that upward educational mobility was higher for individuals born between 1955 and 1966 than those born between 1977 and 1985, and the reproduction of their parents' education was more common among the second group (Roșu, 2016). Research based on 2011 data suggests that the rate of individuals experiencing upward educational mobility is significantly higher than that of those experiencing downward mobility when compared to other countries (Zelinsky, Mysikova, & Vecernik, 2016). However, despite better access to education, significant educational inequalities based on socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity still prevail (Hatos, 2012; Papp,

& Zsigmond, 2021; Robayo-Abril, & Rude, 2023). Nonetheless, recent reports indicate that on an international scale, Romania continues to rank among the countries with a low level of intergenerational educational mobility (OECD, 2024). Given that existing research on educational track selection and its effects on educational mobility remains limited in Romania, our analysis addresses this gap by offering up-to-date empirical insights specific to the Romanian context.

The literature on economics and sociology distinguishes two broad types of factors. On one hand, individual factors such as personal characteristics, family background and community-level influences play an important role in explaining variations in educational mobility. On the other hand, macro-level factors identified through cross-country analyses, revealed how national policies and structural conditions shape educational mobility.

Numerous research papers have tackled the effect of individual background factors, often using well-known sociological and economic theories. Among these frameworks are status attainment theory (Blau, & Duncan, 1967), effectively maintained inequality (EMI) theory (Lucas, 2001), cultural capital theory (1977), and rational choice theory (Bourdon, 1974; Breen, & Goldthorpe, 1977). An important factor examined frequently in this context is parental education, which has been found to influence children's educational attainment. For instance, a mother's education has a stronger influence on daughters' education, and the father's education has a higher effect on sons' education (Lillard, & Willis, 1994).

Another predictor for educational mobility, also related to family background, is the family's financial resources. Financial resources affect children's access to educational materials, educational opportunities and experiences, leading to higher levels of educational attainment. Studies showed that family income and family's financial resources are positively associated with higher educational mobility (Jacobs, & Van der Velden, 2021; Acemoglu, & Pischke, 2001; Ben-Halima *et al.*, 2013; Chusseau *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, financial struggles and credit constraints negatively affect educational mobility (Di Paolo *et al.*, 2010; Hai, & Heckman, 2017). Financial problems put barriers in a family's ability to provide adequate support, access to educational resources and opportunities, which impacts children's educational outcomes.

Furthermore, family income often correlates closely with parents' educational level and skill sets, both of which independently influence educational mobility. Parents with higher education levels are more likely to possess skills and knowledge that can enable them to navigate the challenges of the educational system, and effectively support their children's academic pathways. Jacobs and Van der Velden (2021) and Rustichini, Iacono, and McGue (2017) indicate that a higher level of key skills positively impacts children's educational mobility. Skilled parents are more likely to recognize the importance of these skills and how to strategically use these resources to support their children in achieving the best possible outcomes.

Another factor pertaining to the individual and his background is the family structure. In this case, the number of siblings in a family can impact educational mobility because it directly influences the availability of family resources (Di Paolo *et al.*, 2010). Heineck and Riphahn (2009) and Roșu (2016) showed that individuals with few siblings have the highest chance of having upward educational mobility. These results may indicate that greater availability of parental resources, support, attention and resources in smaller families positively influences children's access to better educational opportunities, increasing their likelihood of surpassing their parents' educational achievements.

Gender is another individual factor that influences educational mobility. Studies have shown that there are differences between males and females in educational mobility. According to earlier research, educational mobility tends to be higher for males than females (Chevalier *et al.*, 2003). Although in recent years, investment and access have become more balanced between boys and girls, disparities persist. For example, some studies showed that there is a parental preference for investing primarily in the education of sons, limiting the educational opportunities and mobility of the daughters (Borgerhoff Mulder *et al.*, 2019; Torche, 2021; Kevane, & Levine, 2003).

Educational mobility can also be influenced by community-level factors. For instance, residing in urban areas also increases the chances of having upward educational mobility because the cities provide better access to educational resources and opportunities (Lillard, & Willis, 1994; Choudhary, & Singh, 2019; Roșu, 2016; Heineck, & Riphahn, 2009). Additionally, neighbours and community interactions have been found to impact children's educational attainment. However, findings generally indicate that the effects of neighbours are secondary, as the influence of siblings is much stronger in educational attainment (Raaum *et al.*, 2006; Solon *et al.*, 2000). The differences likely appear because siblings' influence is linked to the socio-economic conditions and resources of the family. Other authors observed that educational mobility might be influenced by housing quality and school availability. Community influence on educational mobility can also be exerted through normative gendered pressures. For instance, Siddiqui and Shokeen (2024) observed that the norms or values of the community, combined with poor economic conditions, health issues, as well as occupational gendered burdens, negatively impact the educational mobility of girls in India (Siddiqui, & Shokeen, 2024). In addition to the individual, family, and community-related factors discussed above, macro-level determinants are another category of factors that can influence educational mobility. Previous studies showed that favourable economic conditions are associated with higher levels of educational mobility. For instance, higher per-worker GDP, higher income per capita, and well-developed financial markets positively correlate with higher rates of educational mobility (Dahan, & Gaviria, 2001; Neidhöfer *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, higher levels of income inequality negatively impact educational mobility by reinforcing existing socio-economic disparities (Lee, & Lee, 2021; Dahan, & Gaviria, 2001).

High inequality impedes lower-income families from investing sufficiently in their children's education, perpetuating families' intergenerational disadvantage in this way. Consequently, in highly unequal-income societies, parents from privileged families will invest more in their children's education, and parents from disadvantaged families will face more challenges in providing resources for their children's education.

In addition to economic conditions, characteristics of the national educational systems play a significant role in influencing educational mobility. Research indicates that a higher average number of years of schooling and increased public investments in primary and secondary education are associated with higher level of educational mobility (Neidhöfer *et al.*, 2018; Lee, & Lee, 2021). Furthermore, the structural design of education systems (particularly the distinction between general and vocational tracks), also plays an important role in educational mobility. The selection by educational track is strongly linked to the students' family socio-economic background. According to Holm *et al.* (2013), vocational tracks facilitate educational access for students from families with low socio-economic backgrounds, while decreasing their chances of pursuing higher education. Despite the importance of educational track in educational outcomes, the existing literature offers limited evidence and insights on how educational track choices impact intergenerational educational mobility. The present study aims to address this gap in the literature by examining how the educational track selection relates with upward and downward mobility, or immobility.

Data and methods

The current study analyses survey data collected in 2023 from 490 upper-secondary education students from Romania. At the moment of the data collection, the students included in the survey were enrolled in their final year of high school. A mix of CAPI – Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing and CAWI – Computer Assisted Web Interviewing approaches has been used to collect the data. The questionnaire explored students' intentions regarding the enrolment in higher education. In addition, data about their socioeconomic family background and educational profile have been collected.

We employed a quota sample design that took into consideration the region, educational track and public or private status of the high school. The projected sample included 200 students in public general education, 150 students in private general education and 150 students in public vocational education. From a regional perspective, the projected sample comprises 125 students from each of the four major regions (NUTS 1). The final sample included 287 male students and 203 female students. The sample covered all Romanian regions, with the highest number of students from the Bucharest-Ilfov region (82) and the lowest from the North-West region (34). Students from the sample were enrolled in both public

(339) and private (151) educational institutions. On the other hand, the sample included 344 students from the theoretical educational track and 146 students enrolled in the vocational track.

Table 1. Distribution of the students by their parents' education

	Education of the father	Education of the mother
No school	2	2
Primary and lower secondary education	30	27
Vocational and apprenticeship education	57	43
High school	191	173
Post-secondary non-tertiary and foremen's education	58	55
Tertiary education	152	190

Source: Own calculation on survey data.

The sample comprises students from families with various educational backgrounds (Table 1). We use the question on students' intentions to enrol in higher education in the next school year, and we compare students' educational aspirations with their parents' education. We took into consideration the highest level of education attained by the father or by the mother of students and recoded according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011). By comparing students' educational aspirations with the highest level of parents' education, we constructed a measure for projected intergenerational educational mobility with three categories: downward mobility, immobility and upward mobility. Downward mobility is assigned to students with no intention of enrolling in higher education and having at least one parent with higher education. Immobility is displayed by students whose aspired level of education is similar to the highest educational level of their parents, while students aspiring to a level of education exceeding their parents' education have the potential to display upward mobility.

Our approach to exploring intergenerational educational mobility has several limitations. On the one hand, we use students' intentions to enrol in higher education as a proxy for identifying those who aspire to attain a higher education level. On the other hand, our research fails to observe those who did not reach the final year of high school, meaning that early leavers from education represent a blind spot in this study.

In order to explore the profile of students in relation to the type of intergenerational educational mobility, we employ decision tree models that perform predictive analysis on data with any probability distribution. The results consist of tree-based classification models on the group students based on their likelihood of displaying one type of mobility, constructing groups and sub-groups of similar students that represent tree nodes. The method predicts the most common mobility type for each node of the tree (sub-group of students). The nodes are constructed based on the relation of association between independent variables and the dependent variable. The model was constructed based on the CHAID growing method (chi-squared automatic interaction detection), which finds the strongest predictor for the dependent variable at each step of the model. The significance level is 0.05. Parent nodes have been established to a minimum of 50 cases, and the child ones to a minimum of 20 cases. The method merges categories of independent variables, displaying a similar relation of association with the dependent variable. The resulting decision tree has 3 levels and 12 nodes, including 7 terminal nodes. Based on the literature presented above, the independent variables used in the analysis are presented in Table 2. From the list of independent variables included in the analysis, four variables have been retained by the model as significant: educational profile (general or vocational), public or private status of the high school, education of the father, and education of the mother.

Table 2. Variables included in the model

Dependent variable	Independents variables proposed in the model	Retained variables in the final model
Intergenerational educational mobility with three categories: – upward mobility – immobility – downward mobility	Type of high school: privately financed and publicly financed; Highschool profile: general and vocational; Gender: male and female; Area of residence: urban and rural; Household income meets the needs: Likert scale with 6 points varying from easily to hardly; Average grade at the end of the previous academic year; Father's level of education: ISCED 0-2, ISCED 3-4, ISCED 5; Mother's level of education: ISCED 0-2, ISCED 3-4, ISCED 5.	Type of high school: privately financed and publicly financed; Highschool profile: general and vocational; Father's level of education: ISCED 0-2, ISCED 3-4, ISCED 5; Mother's level of education: ISCED 0-2, ISCED 3-4, ISCED 5.

Results

Intentions to pursue higher education among upper-secondary students

Investigating students' intentions to continue their education at the university, we find that almost half of them intend to continue to college immediately after high school graduation. Also, another third of students intend to do so in the years to come. Around 20% of young people have no intentions, at least at the time of the survey, to continue their studies at the next educational level.

Analysing youth intentions by their parents' level of education, we find that those with a mother or father with higher education had the highest intentions to continue at university. At the same time, students with a mother or father with a low education level displayed a lack of plans to continue their educational careers. However, for them, the medium education level, reached by graduating high school already represents upward educational mobility (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of the students' intentions to continue their education at university by parents' education (%)

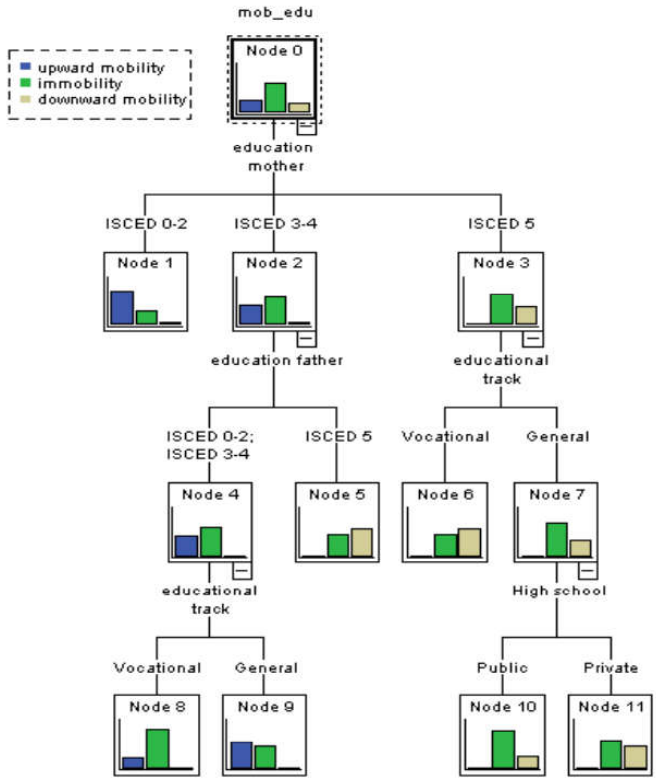
		Yes, after graduating high school	Yes, at a later moment	No plans to continue at the university
mother's level of education	ISCED 0-2	48.3	20.7	31.0
	ISCED 3-4	41.7	33.6	24.7
	ISCED 5	64.7	26.8	8.4
father's level of education	ISCED 0-2	43.8	21.9	34.4
	ISCED 3-4	44.4	32.0	23.5
	ISCED 5	65.8	28.3	5.9
Total		51.0	30.2	18.8

Source: Own calculation on survey data.

Our results show that one-quarter of the students have the potential to register upward mobility as they exceed or intend to surpass the highest level of education reached by their parents. At the same time, 58% of students will potentially display educational immobility by reaching the education of their parents, while 17% of students could be subject to downward mobility by not achieving the highest level of education reached by their parents.

Drivers of intergenerational educational mobility

Figure 1 displays the output of the tree-based model, which has the projected intergenerational educational mobility as a dependent variable with the three constructed categories. It presents a hierarchical tree structure, which consists of parent and child nodes representing groups of similar students based on the interactions of the predictors. For every node, students' likelihoods for different types of projected mobility are displayed. According to the results of the tree-based model, the most important factor influencing students' potential for intergenerational educational mobility is the mother's level of education, confirming previous findings of Hatos (2014). The first level of the decision tree indicates that each category of the mother's level of education is associated with a different probability of mobility.



Source: Own calculation on survey data.

Figure 1. Decision tree with predictors of projected intergenerational educational mobility

Students with higher educated mothers display the highest probability of immobility – intending to continue their education, but also the highest prospects for downward mobility. For this group of students, we find that the educational track further predicts mobility as those in the vocational/technological track have a higher probability of leaving education after graduating from high school and registering downward mobility, while students in the general track are more likely to display immobility. For students in the general track, the type of the high school financing further explains the differences in downward mobility, with those enrolled in private high schools having a higher probability for downward mobility. Private high schools seem to enter the market on the niche created in between theoretical public high schools pursuing academic success, and public vocational/technological high schools providing lower-quality education.

Students with medium-educated mothers are most likely to preserve their parents' education. For this group of students, we find that the father's level of education further explains the educational mobility. In families where the father did not reach the tertiary level, we find a higher probability for students to pursue higher education. For students with parents without tertiary education, the educational track further predicts the mobility. Students enrolled in the general track register higher prospects of pursuing higher education than students in vocational education.

Discussion

The theoretical framework we rely on emphasizes the implications of our findings. The most salient pieces of evidence consistent with the theories we presented are the results that indicate students who came from families with higher educational backgrounds desire to achieve the same higher level of education, whereas the ones who came from families with lower educational backgrounds manifest little or no intention to continue further education. These results are consistent with the status attainment theory (Blau, & Duncan, 1967), which considers the socio-economic status of the students' parents; in this case, the educational background is the most important predictor for the educational mobility of the child. In this context, students from a higher socio-economic background are raised in families that recognize the importance of higher education. These families support their children in pursuing better educational prospects through various means, including financial resources, educational support and social networks. Also, students from lower socio-economic families do not have the same opportunities as students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. They face many challenges in their educational mobility that risk, in many cases to remain just immobility, conceptualised as relative educational mobility by Torche (2021).

Through the lens of effectively maintained inequality theory (Lucas, 2001), we can further interpret the challenges faced by students from low socio-economic

families, especially those with low levels of education. According to Lucas (2001), individuals from families with low educational backgrounds struggle to access a qualitative education, even if the general problem regarding access to education is partially solved. There is a distinction between accessing education in general which provides basic knowledge and accessing qualitative education, in terms of enrolment in some of the top educational institutions, which provides extensive knowledge, taught by well-trained professors, that offer a variety of courses and activities. In this case, students are divided into two groups: students who now have the opportunity to access education more easily, and those students who use their families' resources (economic capital, social capital) to access more prestigious education opportunities (qualitative). This generates a situation where privileged students maintain their advantages to the detriment of those students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Although students from disadvantaged families may have the opportunity to enrol in education, they often end up in educational contexts that provide lower chances of reaching higher education such as the vocational track. Our results show that the selection of students into educational tracks interplays with family background when shaping the enrolment in higher education and is conducive for maintaining inequalities.

Continuing this discussion, cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1977) provides a more nuanced perspective on how this uneven situation in terms of accessing quality education affects educational intergenerational mobility. Precisely, there is an intergenerational advantage for students who come from higher status families because they inherit the cultural capital of their parents that aligns with the expectations of prestigious educational systems, facilitating the enrolment and graduation of these students. Unfortunately, this situation strengthens the social inequality in educational mobility by reproducing class status across generations. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds will always be able to maintain their social position, acquiring the same high level of education as their parents, whereas students from lower socio-economic families probably will remain in the same position in the social hierarchy, due to the fact that their families will not be able to encourage them to pursue further education and will not possess the necessary resources to do so.

We can further explore the analysis of the social reproduction of inequality in terms of educational mobility by referring to the rational choice theory (Bourdon, 1974; Breen, & Goldthorpe, 1977). We can assume, based on our results regarding the vocational students' intentions to not follow the next educational level as a rational choice in the manner Bourdon (1974) and Breen, & Goldthorpe (1977) conceptualised it. From their point of view, students and their families make decisions about whether to aspire to a higher level of education or not based on a rational evaluation of the costs and benefits of each option. Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to prioritize avoiding downward mobility to the detriment of achieving upward mobility, meaning that they make educational decisions to preserve their existing social position or reduce the risk of

socioeconomic decline, rather than pursuing education only for upward mobility. On the other hand, middle- and upper-class families with more resources may be more willing to invest in lengthy and costly education, as their risk of experiencing downward mobility is significantly lower (Breen, & Goldthorpe, 1977).

Boudon (1974) further investigated the decision-making process through the primary and secondary effects of social background. Primary effects refer to how differences in family resources, neighbourhood, and school quality affect academic performance and inclination for further education. Secondary effects capture the decision-making aspect, where students from different social backgrounds weigh the benefits and costs of pursuing further education. Even when academically prepared, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may decide against continuing education due to financial constraints or family responsibilities. In the context of our study, we can presume that students of vocational education have the same rationale, thinking that it is riskier to pursue further education, which usually comes with some investments (time and money). It may be more appealing to them to enter directly on the labour market, being already trained in a specific qualification. There is also the possibility of postponing higher education for a period, in order to gain some independence and financial resources that will be later invested in acquiring a high level of education.

Conclusions

By analysing survey data collected from students enrolled in their final year of high school, this paper explores the prospects of students for intergenerational educational mobility. First, we find that most students are those who have the potential to achieve the same level of education as their parents did. So, the most typical trajectory that is displayed by more than half of the students is the one that contributes to the process of social reproduction.

Moreover, upward mobility is more likely for students from low-educated families than for families with medium education. Our results point to a mix of factors predicting intergenerational educational mobility among high school students. Parents' level of education is a very important predictor for students' intentions to achieve or exceed their parents' educational level and to improve their status in society, confirming both the status attainment theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital theory.

On the other hand, systemic factors such as the structure of the educational system, including the selection in general and vocational pathways and the quality of education delivered under each educational track also play a significant role in shaping the students' decision-making. Selection of students into general or vocational tracks has mixed influences on intergenerational educational mobility, favouring, in some cases, social reproduction and, in others, mobility. General education is conducive to the preservation of the education level across generations

for students with higher-educated parents and for upward mobility for students with medium-educated parents. Vocational education favours downward mobility for students with higher-educated parents and immobility for students with medium-educated parents. Overall, the vocational track is more conducive to educational immobility than the general track, suggesting that the selection of students into educational tracks favours more the social reproduction rather than the social mobility.

The article offers some practical contributions to the literature. While few studies have been explicitly dedicated to educational mobility in Romania, this research enriches the literature on the Romanian case. Second, while prior studies examining the influence of educational track on intergenerational educational mobility are scarce, our findings indicate that vocational educational track tends to reduce the likelihood of upward intergenerational educational mobility. Moreover, our study contributes to the literature by providing recent empirical evidence on educational mobility in Romania, using data from 2023, thereby addressing an existing gap in the scientific literature on the subject.

Our findings carry certain policy implications. First, providing additional support for students from families with low and medium levels of education in order to reduce their gap in terms of cultural and economic capital would be conducive for higher social mobility. In addition, increasing the access to higher education for students with lower socio-economic backgrounds, including through improving the quality of vocational education, represents a policy objective. Policymakers should consider both the access and quality within each educational level to generate more equitable educational results. Nevertheless, our findings evidence that the private financed high school institutions are developing as a background choice for adolescents and their families wishing to pursue general education, so monitoring and quality assurance actions in order to increase transparency is recommended.

As society changes and more and more risks affect adolescents' future prospects of life, we recommend the development of quality services for educational and career counselling in schools, irrespective of the level of education. Thus, the role of abilities and skills in high-school selection will increase and also adolescents' motivation to further continue their education. Support for families with low and medium education has to be both financial and in terms of access to services, in order to aim at increasing educational mobility at the lower layers of the social structure.

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