

Recent literature demonstrated that in modern societies, education is one of the most important tools to pursue social insertion and economic placement of migrant-origin offspring (Phillips 2010). At the same time, migrants are more willing to pursue social and economic upward mobility than non-migrants (Heath and Brinbaum 2014) and are conscious that education in the host country can allow their descendants to reach this goal (Esser 2006).

As a result, scholars have depicted migrants' aspiration–achievement paradox by demonstrating that first- and second-generation youths have, on average, higher educational aspirations than their autochthonous counterparts (Kao and Tienda 1995; Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011; Salikutluk 2016; Gil-Hernández and Gracia 2018; Hadjar and Scharf 2019), although they suffer a number of negatives at school: more school dropouts, lower academic performances, and higher concentrations in vocational secondary schools (Azzolini and Barone 2013; Heath and Brinbaum 2014).

Using data from the Italian Integration of the Second Generation (ISG) survey, which involved migrant and non-migrant students in Italian lower and upper secondary state schools, we aim to analyze vocational and academic aspiration and to answer the following questions: Do vocational and academic aspirations differ among different ethnic minority groups? Do vocational and academic aspirations provide a similar picture in the gap between the migratory generation and its non-migrant counterpart? What is the role of individual and familial characteristics and behaviors in understanding the gaps of vocational and academic aspirations among ethnic minority groups and among migratory generations?

Our descriptive findings provide an original contribution to the international literature in at least four ways. First, we focus on the Italian context that has previously shown interesting results on students enrolled in lower secondary schools in contrast to the international literature (Mussino and Strozza 2011; Minello and Barban 2012). Second, used data allow us, for the first time, to analyze educational aspirations of students enrolled in Italian upper secondary schools. Third, we systematically provide empirical evidence on theoretical approaches and related factors that are associated to educational

aspirations in the literature. Fourth, migrant-origin students (since now on only migrant students) are analyzed as a heterogeneous and stratified group by ethnic origin and by migratory generation.

Analyses firstly focus on outlining differences in educational aspirations between migrant students by country/area of origin and the majority group. A lower percentage of migrant students has, on average, aspiration of attending a Lyceum (high vocational aspiration) compared to their non-migrant counterparts. However, regression analyses show that, when considering individual characteristics, family socio-economic background, and educational performances, most of the differences in vocational aspiration among non-migrants and ethnic origins became statistically insignificant. The lowest vocational aspiration persists only among students of Chinese and Moroccan origins and, in addition, Moldovan and Romanian origins.

These findings only partially support the migrant optimism theory (Kao and Tienda 1998; Gil-Hernández and Gracia 2018), which, conversely, is fully confirmed when considering academic aspiration. Migrant students have, on average, lower percentages of aspiration of attending academic studies than non-migrants. However, in this case, when performing logistic regressions and a number of factors are controlled for, students coming from most of the ethnic origins show (with the exception of the Moldovans and the Filipinos) significant and positive AMEs in having high aspiration compared to the non-migrant referent group.

Moreover, our findings indicate that second generation migrants has higher educational aspirations than fractional first generations. Thus, acculturation in Italy is associated with higher aspirations among migrants. When considering the gap between migrants and non-migrants, results on vocational aspiration support information bias theory (Kao and Tienda 1998; Lareau 2015; Tjaden and Hunkler 2017) because students arriving in Italy at older ages have larger disparities in their aspiration with the non-migrant group compared to those born in Italy or arriving at younger ages. These differences among migratory generations reduce once controlling for the other factors, and the second generation shows no significant difference in high aspiration with the referent group. Conversely, academic aspiration is not biased, because students arriving in Italy at older ages have lower (positive) marginal

effects in respect to the migrant referent group than those born in Italy or arriving at younger ages, mostly after controlling for the other factors.

Our analyses deepened the role of the so-called “significant others” in influencing migrant students’ educational aspirations. According to our results, “significant others” are more related to the vocational aspiration of migrants than that of non-migrants: marginal effects of regression analyses are systematically higher for the former student group than for the latter.

Results confirm the negative association between number of siblings and high educational aspirations, net to other factors (Downey 2001). In addition, they outline that this relation is particularly significant for academic aspiration and among migrants.

Our findings are in line with the Wisconsin model that considers the psychological influences in decision-making (Sewell et al. 1970). Supporting beliefs from the origin family are positively associated with both vocational and academic aspirations. In addition, supportive advice in educational choices from peers and teachers has a similar (even less significant) positive association on vocational aspiration. In our analysis, we also considered the good quality of relationships (Cheng and Starks 2002; Cebolla-Boado 2020) and confirm their positive association with high academic aspiration.

The composition of the peer group affects vocational and academic aspirations among migrant students (Roth and Salikutluk 2012). In particular, the selection behavior in favor of migrant peers is negatively associated with high aspirations.

Our results show that migrants (more than non-migrants) who attribute greater importance to study to overcome future discrimination in the labor market are more frequently associated with high academic aspiration. The same is less evident when considering this association with vocational aspiration.

Our descriptive findings support the importance of conducting separate and in-depth analyses of different ethnic sub-groups and migratory generations. The current approaches associated with educational aspirations are not fully confirmed when looking at different educational aspirations.