The educational choices of working class adolescents: opportunities and constraints

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Abstract: The choice made at the end of compulsory school is a crucial moment in the life of individuals, which will shape both their working career and quality of life. In service-based societies, long-term education has spread throughout the social spectrum more than before. But the school choice of the different social classes is not easy to foresee. On the one hand, working class children are expected to be much more involved in the high school experience than in the past. On the other hand, especially where the transition from a manufacturing to a service economy has lagged behind, families could continue to have good reason not to keep their children in school beyond the legalminimum. For its part, the middle class could maintain or even accentuate its strategy of counteracting status decline through a longer education. Then, the choices of the two classes are as likely to become more similar as they are to remain at variance. This study explores the micro-level conditions that reduce or maintain the gap between the educational choices of working and middle class adolescents. Data are provided by a survey based on CATI interviews conducted in 2007 concerning the school choices and initial secondary school careers of 1127 children belonging to working and middle class families living in Turin.

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Premise and research questions

The analysis proposed here deals with the old problem of social segregation in education. The literature of the past ten years on the inequalities in educational opportunities, studied from the micro-level perspective, has confirmed the role that ascribed characteristics play in choosing educational paths after compulsory schooling (Ballarino, Bernardi, Requena, Schadee, 2009; Pfeffer, 2008; Schizzerotto, Barone, 2006; Ballarino & Checchi, 2006; Schizzerotto, 2002; Pisati, 2000; Shavit, & Blossfeld, 1993). Back in the 70's, Boudon emphasized that disparities in the opportunities to acquire education were the most impervious to change in advanced industrial societies (Boudon, 1973). Even today, the family of origin influences both the duration and quality of education. These findings are at odds with two basic principles:

- Everyone should have equal opportunities to participate in the education system, and
- Everyone should be evaluated and promoted taking into account the merit, because merit is the main tool of social selection and the main resource of social mobility (Roemer, 1998; Crompton, 1996, 1999; Checchi, 2000; Checchi *et al.*, 2006).

In Italy, reforms and legislative measures have been introduced throughout the century to permit formally equal access to education by all: a goal that has been pursued through the reform of lower secondary school in 1962 and the 1969 decision to open up access to all university faculties with any kind of high school diploma (Checchi, Fiorio, Leonardi, 2006).

There can be no doubt that these changes have contributed to raising overall participation in the education system and the average level of the education, not least because of National Law n. 9/1999, which raised the age at which students may leave compulsory school.

Almost 99% of adolescents in the most recent cohorts decide to continue after middle school by enrolling in a high school course (IRES, 2008; ISTAT, 2007; Shavit & Westerbeek, 1998). A major cleavage thus splits the cohorts of children and their less educated parents.

Nevertheless, Italian data show that educational inequalities based on social class of origin did not change substantially in the last decades

(Schizzerotto, 2002; Stocké, 2007; Ballarino *et al*., 2008; Goldthorpe, 2006).

Since the year 2000, somewhat more progress has been made in reducing educational inequalities between social groups than in the preceding century (Becker, 2003; Schizzerotto, 2002; Checchi *et al.,* 2008, Gabriele, Raitano, 2008; Ballarino *et al*., 2008), though the pace of change is still slow and the effects are clear only if we look at the samples of great size (Barone, Luijks, Schizzerotto, 2010).

Thus, the egalitarian goals of school reforms have been only partially successful in limiting the impact of social class on educational opportunities. In addition, the reforms have eased admissions requirements rather than addressing the effect of social origin directly (Pisati, 2000; Schizzerotto, 2002; Becker, 2003).

With regard to the different curriculum tracks offered in secondary school, the literature indicates that differences across classes are less pronounced than those between school levels. Nevertheless, despite the democratization of secondary education all over Europe and the weakening of ascribed factors, the most recent studies on this topic in Italy clearly show that the family of origin still has a major influence on children's educational choices and the type of school they select[3] (Schizzerotto, 2002).

Naturally, the strategies of the working and middle classes can be expected to differ, as higher education is a means of achieving social mobility for the former, and of maintaining status for the latter (Erlich, 1998; Fave-Bonnet & Clerc, 2001).

Now, however, reasons may have emerged to make the working class change strategy: on the one hand, working class children are expected to be much more involved in the high school experience than in the past, partly because of the democratization of educational opportunities, and partly because of the increased social credentials now needed to enter the labor market. On the other hand, especially in times of uncertainty and crisis, there may be good reasons to not run the risk of acquiring educational qualifications that, however high, offer no guarantee of finding a suitable job.

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[3] See the ISTAT Italian National Institute of Statistics surveys, Percorsi di studio e di lavoro dei diplomati, ISTAT, 1998, 2001, 2004.

This paper explores these contrasting possibilities and their consequences on reducing or maintaining the distance from the middle class.

In doing so, it is necessary to consider the increasing heterogeneity of the working class brought about by labor market tertiarization.

The service economy has created new non-manual jobs in both the private and public sectors for people with a low or medium-low level of education. Even though these people can still be considered as belonging to the working class, some distinctions within this class emerge from the different job contexts and associated reference groups that could influence how non-manual but unskilled workers plan their daily life and their children's future[4].

Changing educational contexts: suggestions from secondary analysis

Over the last fifteen years the Italian educational scenario has changed to offer a wider range of provision to an increasing number of children, accommodating different family strategies and values. The democratization of school access has gone hand in hand with a near-artificial promotion of the prestige of technical schools, which, as in the case of those oriented towards technological studies, biology and so forth, have sometimes been renamed general high schools [5].

Data collected by ILFI (Indagine Longitudinale sulle Famiglie Italiane) provided the starting point for analyzing what we postulate as a new scenario challenging parents' and children's decisions regarding high school (see Table 1). The ILFI longitudinal survey (which investigated the educational levels of different age groups (in the table those born in the

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[4] This group consists both of working class families in the traditional sense (i.e., holders of blue collar jobs and manual work with medium-low levels of skill, and little or no independence in making decisions or performing their duties, which entail little creativity and confer low social standing) and families belonging to the lower layers of the white collar class (white collar workers with a low level of skill, whose duties, though non-manual, are repetitive and involve little independent decision-making capacity or creativity but nevertheless provide higher social standing).

[5] Upper secondary education in Italy is organized into three curriculum tracks: general high schools (classics- and science-oriented schools which are regarded as having higher social status and prestige), technical schools (a group in which we have also included other general schools such as social sciences high school, biological high school, etc., whose programs and standing are similar), and vocational schools

decades 1958-1967 and 1978-1987 respectively are selected, as similar to the categories of parents and children interviewed in our study) reveals a complex set of trends: the number of students opting for vocational education has dropped, while at the same time enrollments in technical schools have held firm and those in general high schools have increased (though the data refer to the population that has achieved an upper secondary school diploma, it should be borne in mind that some may have continued with higher education). Working class students do not follow this pattern, as the younger cohorts, like their elders, are still oriented towards technical and vocational education, though the youngest cohorts are slightly more likely to choose general high schools (especially the "new" types). Clearly, then, the working class continues to show a substantial preference for traditional educational paths.

Table 1. Italian population by type of education*, cohort and social class, 2005

	1978-1987 cohort	1978-1987 working class cohort	1958-1967 cohort	1958-1967 working class cohort
General high school	33.4	14.7	27.0	13.9
Other general school	12.0	12.5	13.5	10.7
Technical school	35.5	41.3	38.3	44.0
Vocational school	13.7	22.8	18.0	28.7
Other high school	5.4	8.7	3.2	2.7
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: ILFI, data as of wave No. 5, 2005. *General high school includes classics and science-oriented tracks. Other general school includes human sciences and social sciences tracks. Technical school includes five-year programs for technical professions such as draftsmen and surveyors, accountants, technicians, etc. Vocational school includes five-year programs but not the two- and three-year vocational courses. Other high school includes music and fine arts programs.

National data point also to a relationship between assessment at the end of lower secondary school and the choice of upper secondary school (see Table 2: the data do not include students who did not graduate from middle school or start the upper secondary track, who are thus are excluded from our survey). The relationship between the grades received at the end of lower secondary school and the type of school selected for further education shows the importance of earlier performance to later school orientation.

Accordingly, there is a link between the type of school attended and the final grade in middle school, taken here as a measure of educational attainment. Though indirectly, this confirms the relationship between attainment, social class, and selected educational paths.

Table 2. Choice of upper secondary school versus grades on final middle school examination

Grades on final middle school examination	General high school	Technical school	Vocational school	Other high School (or general school)	Total
Pass	8.0	49.7	28.6	13.7	100
Good	21.0	53.7	12.7	12.5	100
Very Good	40.0	44.8	5.0	9.2	100
Excellent	65.9	26.4	1.5	6.3	100
Total	29.1	45.4	14.3	11.0	100

Source: ISTAT, 1999. Percorsi di studio e di lavoro dei diplomati, Indagine 1998.

The closest association is between students with "Excellent" grades and enrollment in a classics or science-oriented general high school. At the opposite extreme, the vocational tracks chiefly attract students who have shown low or medium-low performance. Technical schools are somewhere in the middle, and are thus of interest: though a "Passing" grade is sufficient for admission, students enrolling in these institutions more frequently have received medium-high grades ("Good" and "Very Good").

Technical school students are thus fairly heterogeneous in terms of the success achieved in previous schooling, suggesting that they may also have a wide range of expectations regarding their future education and careers.

We will now see whether these trends are also at work among the younger cohorts in Turin, and will determine how and to what extent previous school performance is, with all other conditions remaining equal, the determining factor in choosing the type of school that will be attended.

Theoretical framework and explaining factors

The study adopted the theoretical approach suggested by rational choice theory. From this perspective, school choices are "rational

decisions between institutionally defined educational careers" (Breen, Goldthorpe, quoted in Stocké, p. 505).

According to this approach, educational choices can be explained by means of the "individual decision making processes that may sustain the reproductive forces of class" (Gambetta, 1987). In the model proposed by Gambetta (1990), and in the Italian literature referred to in this study (Checchi, 2000; Ballarino, Checchi, 2006), measurable elements that cause the differences in the quantity and quality of education are called factors. The micro-processes leading from factors to the final effects are called mechanisms (opportunity, preferences, values, norms, as well as moods and emotions) (Barone 2006; Bianco & Ceravolo, 2008; Manzo, 2007; Micheli, 2008).

Our survey is based on classical cross-sectional analysis of variables of micro-level. As it is focused on a specific local context, it provides a snapshot of a situation as significant as that of a major city in the industrial north, where expectations center on rising levels of education and increasingly specialized educational programs.

The risk of overlooking the complexity of social causation has been stressed by analytical sociology (Goldthorpe, 2000; Hedström, Swedberg 1996, 1998; Coleman 1990), which holds that identifying a high correlation between social factors and choices (for example, between high social classes and further education) does not automatically mean that these factors are the causes behind the choices.

Consequently, it is essential to interpret the correlation between explaining factors and school choice if we want to make a few assumptions about the underlying mechanisms that could have actually produced a given effect (in our case, social "segregation" by type of school).

Two main mechanisms could enlighten the effect of social origin on educational choices beyond the availability of economic resources: children's level of performance and success at school and the family opportunity to invest in schooling (Tolsma, Need and De Jong, 2010). Both these mechanisms are fuelled and supported by the parents' human and cultural capital.

The parents' human and cultural capital

Family economic and social background is expected to predict differences in the resources available for learning and differences in the

subjective investment in schooling as a qualification for entering the labor market.

Italian families are known to provide extensive, prolonged support for their children's school-to-school and school-to-work transitions. Italian parents have a particularly important role in school transitions, not least because the upper secondary track is chosen earlier than in other European school systems (all students follow the same program until they are 14, at which time they choose between three main tracks, all lasting five years: general high schools, technical schools and vocational schools.

In this setting, the role of such variables as parents' human capital and the family's economic and demographic status must be carefully weighed (Kohli & Albertini, 2008; Saraceno, 2008).

Parents' human capital is a crucial resource: it operates not only by providing the physical means for assisting children in their learning process, but also by producing strategic knowledge of the determinants of ability and related success at school and of the consequences that educational decisions will have later on. This enables parents to organize their children's learning processes and provide emotional support, helping them navigate their educational career successfully. The mother's level of education is more important than the father's (Useem, 1992, quoted in Pfeffer, 2008, p. 546; Barg, 2010). Children with more educated parents have a higher likelihood of continuing in the school system for a longer time (Davies *et al.,* 2002). A further variable was inserted: cultural consumption, as a proxy for the family's cultural capital, whose role in reproducing social inequalities in education is quite controversial (Barone, 2005). Cultural capital is here considered as a crucial resource made of accumulated cultural knowledge that confers power and status (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1970).

Family investment in children's education

Family size has been traditionally regarded as one of the factors explaining the children's school choices. However, investigations of these choices, focusing on the number of children, underestimated the role of siblings. At most, brothers and sisters have been seen as constituting as numerical constraint, reducing the economic resources available for each family member and thus also affecting long-term investments, such as those in further education (Duru Bellat, 2006). For older cohorts, gender and birth order were central factors, either reducing

or increasing the chance of being educated. Today, it cannot be claimed that birth order directly affects access to education (Zarca, 1995; Kramer & Radey, 1997; Dunn, 1986; Dunn & Plomin, 1986, 1997; Dunn, Plomin, Daniels, 1986; Dunn, Plomin, Nettles, 1985). Unlike in the past, moreover, being a girl increases the probability of opting for further education, finishing earlier and achieving good grades (Barone, 2009; ISTAT, 2004, 2007).

According to some research-studies on this topic, siblings are often considered to be a constraint on educational choices, as they necessarily increase the costs of education to the family. Family income, if high, increases the likelihood of starting and completing college, because siblings are competitors for the family's resources (when funds are limited; Arum, 1998; White, 2001; Duru Bellat, 2006).

The importance of this economic constraint for siblings depends on the characteristics of the families observed. In our case we are dealing with dual-income families where both parents have permanent jobs, own the family home and have no more than two children on average. They thus have job security and can afford the risk of investing in further education. In such a situation we can expect that the family's economic resources will not necessarily affect educational outcomes (Light, Strayer, 2000; Peraita, Pastor, 2000). As in our previous work, having siblings who have not yet completed their education (especially if they are enrolled in long or post-diploma programs) is thus regarded as an indicator of the stability of the family's investment in schooling over time (Cavaletto 2010; Cavaletto & Olagnero, 2010).

The hypothesis is that, with other constraints and resources remaining equal, prior educational experience will influence families to make the same educational choices as in the past.

Children's performance

It is well known (Ballarino & Checchi, 2006) that good school performance increases the likelihood of enrolling in a general high school track rather than a technical or vocational school.

Additionally, individuals who have good learning skills and are capable of making the most of them are more likely to be able to gain further knowledge at a cost to themselves that is outweighed by the benefits: in other words, they will have good grades and no failure (Hrysko, Luengo-Prado, Sorensen, 2009; Checchi, Fiorio, Leonardi, 2006; Ballarino, Bernardi, Requena, Schadee, 2009; Pfeffer, 2008; Schizzerotto & Barone, 2008).

In turn, however, school performance is affected by social origin. Thus, children's performance in their past school career, and specifically in lower secondary school, can be considered as an output of social class but also as an input of the transition to the next step, upper secondary school[6].

Of course, this variable cannot be considered exclusively as acquired. It is partly ascribed, and is also shaped by the context in which children live: family (Duru-Bellat, 2006) and educational system[7]. Performance is thus a complex outcome, involving a set of individual and family skills, both natural and learned (Checchi, 1997).

At the moment, whether the observed effects must be regarded as tests of strategic orientation or sensitivity/proximity to specific values or social norms remains untested (Erikson et al. 2005; Stocké, 2007, Morgan, 2010).

With these premises we investigated the role that these factors play in specific contexts, such as Turin.

Research design

The survey was carried out in Turin in Autumn 2007-Spring 2008, during a period in which enrollment in upper secondary school and the number of working class children in general high schools had already begun to rise as a result of the 2007 law which raised the age at which

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[6] The Italian educational system includes three main five-year tracks: general high school, technical school and vocational school. While there are also one-, two- and three-year vocational schools, they were not considered in our study as they issue certificates that are entirely work-related qualifications and do not provide access to higher education, and are thus not comparable to the five-year programs (Cavaletto, Dagnes, Molino, 2010).

[7] National (ISTAT, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2007) and regional data (IRES, Osservatorio Istruzione, 2002-2008) indicate that secondary school student failure rates have been trending down lately, except in the 2008-2009 school year.

students may leave compulsory school to 16 (Regione Piemonte: School Registers 2008; IRES, 2008, 2009; Cavaletto 2010; Cavaletto, Olagnero, 2010).

Our investigation thus took place in a time of ambivalent signs, when the opportunities for professional success and social mobility offered by education were expanding in some respects, and being called into question in others.

In the local contest (see Table 3), the situation seems to some extent consistent with that observed at the national level, if we look at the school enrollment data. The younger cohort of students enrolled in Turin in 2006-2007 (whose age is comparable to that of the children selected in our survey) is quite close to the Italian sample as regards the growing importance of general high school, but stands out for the sharp drop in enrollments in technical school and for the fact that interest in vocational education continued to hold firm and even increased slightly.

Table 3. Students enrolled by type of high school in Turin (Comparison 2007/2008 and 1996/1997)

	Year 2006-2007	Year 1996-1997
General high schools	29.4	17.9
Other general schools	10.1	7.5
Technical school*	29.9	48.3
Vocational school**	30.6	26.1
Other high school****	0.04	0.2
Total	100	100

Source: Regione Piemonte Data base, 2008, School Registers. *General high school includes classics- and science-oriented tracks. Other general school includes human sciences and social sciences tracks. Technical school includes five-year programs for technical professions such as draftsmen and surveyors, accountants, technicians, etc. Vocational school includes five-year programs but not the two- and three-year vocational courses. Other high school includes music and fine arts programs.

On the other hand the labor market in this period began to send signals of stagnation, while efforts to promote a number of the local area's strong points (Turin as a hub for health care, art, knowledge and creativity, for instance) slowed or ground to a halt. Even in periods of crisis, however, Turin can continue to boast many centers of excellence in engineering and scientific research, and numerous professional education facilities.

In Turin, students appear to have narrowed down their options to two: general high school on the one hand, and vocational school on the other.

This polarity could point to different ways of attempting to maintain or reach a given social status, in a period when technical schools seem unable to guarantee either mobility or a suitable job. At the same time, technical schools could be a "middle of the road" choice for the working classes who aspire to upward mobility but go for a more cautious educational investment, and, for the middle classes, a choice that is less appropriate to their social standing but in some respects more appealing to the job market, particularly in a city like Turin where several technical schools enjoy an excellent reputation and traditionally guarantee high levels of employment after graduation. The technical schools hybrid position also stems from the mismatch between the different tracks' social standing (general high schools are thought of as conferring distinction, vocational schools as the best place to attain professional skills, and technical schools as standing midway between the other two) and the actual needs of the labor market, which put a premium on technical skills, as shown by OECD data (2001).

The target population

The survey collected information concerning family conditions and school careers of 1127 working and middle class students.

The target population was a sample of parents living in Turin that had at least one 15 to 18[8] year old child at the time of the survey (September 2007). They were selected from the urban working class.[9] The control group was made up of a smaller sample[10] of households consisting of

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[8] This 15-18 age group enabled us to observe the school situation between the end of compulsory and the first years of upper secondary school. Our study refers only to what we call "Child 1", i.e., the child who has no sibling belonging to the same age group in the household, or the eldest child in cases where there are two or more children in the same age group.

[9] In the classification developed by Pisati and Schizzerotto (2000, 2002), the urban working class is defined as the social class including lower-level office workers, manual workers employed in industry, services, construction and trade, i.e., unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled workers. The white collar middle class includes middle and high-level employees such as specialized technicians, teachers, higher-level white collar workers, skilled office workers, nurses, etc. Lastly, the self-employed middle class includes freelance workers, trades people and small business owners. In this study, the control group consisted of white collar middle class and self-employed middle class families.

[10] The sample of 1127 families was selected using data from the Studio Longitudinale Torinese (SLT), which contains individual and ecological records of the resident population of Turin dating back to 1971 and obtained by cross-referencing 2001 census

middle class office workers, trades people and small business owners. The upper class was excluded from our analysis, as our hypothesis posited fuzzy boundaries between the middle and working classes as regards educational investment. In both these groups (working and middle class) the children's school experience (and costs) differed substantially from that of typical upper class children. One parent was contacted in a CATI telephone interview using a closed questionnaire. Households were selected by census zone. Each zone was associated with an index of working class density in that area. This working class density index was created in order to link each census zone with a certain probability of finding a working class family at the time of contact was made for the interview. As interviews were carried out at least one year after the start of secondary school, the choice can be considered stable and final.[11]

From the economic standpoint, white collar and blue collar working class families can be considered very close to each other. In terms of lifestyles, social capital and social expectations, white collar working class parents are probably more similar to the middle class.

It is chiefly in the work environment that the white collar working class has opportunities for contact with the social class above it. Sharing the same workplace, and similar white collar assignments, can help build relatively wide social networks and bridge the lifestyle gap between this portion of the working class and the middle class.

The distribution of parents' level of education confirms the heterogeneity of the working class.

Thus, Table 4 illustrates the intermediate position gained by the white collar working class as regards parents' human capital.

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data with data from the City of Turin civil registry office. The SLT is a system of longitudinal retrospective and prospective records which combine civil registry, census and healthcare system databases. Though the SLT was designed primarily for use in healthcare, the database also lends itself to other types of exploratory analysis in which individual characteristics are of interest that are not necessarily health-related, but may also concern demographic and social fields, as in the case of this study.

[11]The sample does not include families whose children dropped out of upper secondary school (less than 2%). Sampling was performed by quotas (two-thirds consisting of urban working class families and the remaining one third of middle class families). The non-response rate was less than 5%.

Table 4. Mother's and father's level of education by social class

	Elementary school (Low)	Lower secondary school (Low)	2-3 year vocational school (Low)	High school (Medium)	Univ. degree (High)	Tot.
MOTHERS						
Blue collar working class	1.4	71.2	11.4	16.0	0	437
White collar working class	1.03	31.3	15.5	51.3	1.0	310
Middle class	0.8	16.8	9.5	54.1	18.8	357
Total	1.1.	42.4	12.0	38.2	6.3	1104
FATHERS						
Blue collar working class	9.8	67.0	9.1	13.4	0.7	429
White collar working class	9.4	42.6	10.3	36.1	1.6	310
Middle class	11.2	21.3	3.9	52.1	11.5	357
Total	10.1	45.4	7.8	32.3	4.4	1106

Source: Our survey "Educational choices of the working class". Turin, 2008.

Parents, especially mothers, of white collar working class children, had a medium level of education, considerably higher than that of parents of blue collar working class children.

The statistical relationships between social class, school performance and choice of upper secondary school demonstrate that the link between class and school choice hinges chiefly on performance.

Thus, Table 5.1 illustrates the correlation between social class and children's performance at lower secondary school. Here again, the white collar working class ranks midway between the two others.

Table 5.2 shows that in the transition to the upper secondary track, the highest grades at the end of lower secondary school are linked to enrollment in general high schools, whereas nearly poor or poor performance was more frequent among students choosing vocational schools.

If, then, social class affects performance, and the latter orients students to choose one track or the other, the end result is as shown in Table 6.

Table 5.1 Grades at the end of lower secondary school by students' class of origin

	Excellent	Very good	Good	Pass	Total
Blue collar working class	16.6	18.8	39.5	25.1	283
White collar working class	23.0	22.6	37.8	16.6	415
Middle class	32.4	27.1	29.4	11.1	343
Total	23.5	22.6	35.7	18.2	1041

Source: Our survey "Educational choices of the working class," Turin, 2008.

Table 5.2. High school choice by grades at the end of lower secondary school

	General high school	Technical school	Other high school	Vocational school	Total
Excellent	48.8	14.8	20.8	3.8	24.3
Very good	27.0	28.2	23.8	9.7	23.0
Good	20.9	41.5	38.6	48.5	36.1
Pass	3.2	15.4	16.8	38.0	16.6
Total	344	337	101	237	1022 (100)

Source: Our survey "Educational choices of the working class". Turin, 2008.

Table 6. Type of upper secondary track by students' class of origin – Turin 2007-2008

	General schools	Technical school	Vocational school	Other high school	Total
Blue collar working class	18.7	35.7	34.5	11.2	406
White collar working class	33.3	31.7	24.8	10.4	306
Middle class	48.6	29.2	11.5	11.3	356
Total	32.9	32.4	24.1	11.1	1068

Source: Our survey on "Educational choices of working class". Turin, 2008.

The more "attractive" types of school for the blue collar working class are the technical and vocational schools. The situation is very different for

the white collar working class students, who are more attracted by general high schools, without, however, abandoning the technical and vocational domains. The middle class is clearly attracted by general high schools and also showed a marked tendency to choose technical schools, while the vocational path is entirely residual.

Since the social class influences, directly or indirectly the choice of upper secondary school, we aim at exploring its causal effect.

Accordingly, we created a regression model in order to estimate the probability of attending a given track in relation to the ascribed and acquired characteristics of families in the two social classes we examined.

Which track for the working class students?

Analysis was carried out using linear regression models in which the dependent variable was the type of school attended. A multinomial regression model was estimated, indicating the working class's probability of enrolling in a general high school or a technical school rather than a vocation school, which is the reference category. General high schools and technical schools are clear alternatives: of investing in further education in the first case, and of learning a job in the second. In Italy, the general high school track is also an opportunity for working class families to climb the social ladder, while taking the technical track means staying in the class of origin. Three groups of variables were inserted in the model. The first group contains the variables concerning the family's social standing: social class, parents' level of education (detailed for both father and mother), and parent's cultural capital, measured by parents' cultural consumption. The second group uses the presence of siblings (measured by contrasting the condition of being an only child with that of having brothers or sisters) as an indicator of the family's demographic structure.

The third group includes previous children's school performance (measured through the grade obtained at the end of middle school and presence/absence of failures) and previous family experience in upper secondary school (measured through older siblings' attendance at a general high school).

We proceeded in two steps to measure the causal weight of the social class variable. Level of education was not entered in the first step, but

appears in the second. It is assumed that level of education absorbs all or much of the social class effect, so that social class should have little or no significance when level of education is considered. Should this prove not to be true, it would mean that there is a social class effect that operates through other factors (disposable income, class culture, *etc.*)

Results

Results for the probability of choosing a general high school or a vocational school in accordance with the criteria established for the first step of the analysis are shown in Table 7.

Probability of choosing general high school. School performance shows the greatest explanatory weight: the final grades of middle school, only if very high (Excellent) increases the likelihood of enrolling in a general high school to an extent that is almost two or more times higher than that of the other variables found to be significant (siblings at general high school, social class and cultural consumption). However, it should be borne in mind that, as the table above (Table 5.1) shows, the likelihood of leaving middle school with excellent grades is related to the family's social class.

The direct and indirect effect of the social class differ for the two subgroups ("blue" and "white") of the working class. Only belonging to the blue collar working class has a negative influence on the likelihood of attending general high school, while belonging to the white collar working class was not found to be significant. This distinction points to mechanisms that will be clearer once the weight of educational level is estimated (see Table 8).

Other variables included in the model but not significant: female gender, failure (not significant only for general high schools), being an only child, age of father and mother, having siblings at university

As for the variable "siblings at general high school" (which increases the likelihood of following a general high school track more than the fact of belonging to the blue collar working class reduces it), it is confirmed that the presence of older siblings produces some effect on younger brothers and sisters. From a rational choice perspective, different mechanisms can be at stake: replicating the same school choice for more than one child could be an indicator of satisfaction of the previous school choice, of preference for a choice already experienced, or as a confirmation of a family unconditional investment in further education.

Table 7. Multinomial logistic regression model. Estimated probability of attending a general high school or a vocational school

	Coeff.	Std Err.	z	P > |z|	95% conf. interval	
general high school						
Parents' cultural capital (cultural consumption)	.6735271	.2656113	2.54	0.011	.1529386	1.194116
Grade at end of middle school: Excellent	1.693723	.2037865	8.31	0.000	1.294309	2.093137
Grade at end of middle school: Very Good	.5685219	.1992535	2.85	0.004	.1779922	.9590516
Grade at end of middle school: Pass	-.8590435	.3588616	-239	0.017	-.1562399	-.1556876
White collar working class	-.1189361	.2005936	-0.59	0.553	-.5120923	.2742201
Blue collar working class	-.798377	.2050114	-3.89	0.000	-1.200192	-3.96562
Siblings at general high school	.9678885	.386515	2.50	0.012	.210333	1.725444
Constant	-.9804943	.3564352	2.75	0.006	-1.679094	-.2818941
vocational school						
Parents' cultural capital (cultural consumption)	-1.630151	.7523913	-2.17	0.030	-3.104811	-.1554912
Grade at end of middle school: Excellent	-1.526	.3758576	-4.06	0.000	-2.262667	-.7893327
Grade at end of middle school: Very Good	-1.170992	.2586255	-4.53	0.000	-1.677888	-.6640949
Grade at end of middle school: Pass	.5002887	.2072766	2.41	0.016	.0940339	.9065434
White collar working class	.5122871	.2457448	2.08	0.037	.0306361	.9939381
Blue collar working class	.6988423	.2289481	3.05	0.002	.2501122	1.147572
Failures	.5407664	.189441	2.85	0.004	.1694689	.9120639
Siblings at general high school	.6007225	.501348	1.20	0.231	-.3819014	1.583346
Constant	-1.059154	.3800711	-2.79	0.005	-1.80408	-.3142286

Valid cases: 1061; LR chi2(26) = 416.00; Prob. > chi2 = 0.0000; Log likelihood = -931.05319 ; Pseudo R2 = 0.1826. Reference categories: middle class, male gender, medium-low cultural capital, "Good" grade at end of middle school, no failures, siblings not at general high school, only child, siblings not at university.

Probability of choosing vocational school. As the variables with the highest explanatory power show negative values, the factors which keep students away from other school-tracks (general or technical) count more than those that attract them to vocational school: not having received an excellent or at least a good grade at the end of middle school counts, as does having a family without cultural capital. Experiencing a failure, obtaining a low grade at the end of middle school and belonging to the working class (especially the blue collar working class) contribute to enrollment in a vocational school, albeit not to a particularly large extent.

Other variables included in the model but not significant: age of father and mother, female gender, siblings at university, being and only child, siblings at general high school.

The white collar working class thus does not have the same chance for mobility through its educational choices as the middle class.

Accordingly, previous educational experience, mediated by social class, is thus the key factor in choosing upper secondary school, especially for vocational schools. The family's economic condition and cultural consumption explain less.

We will now turn to the second model, where the level of education, detailed by father and mother, was added, in order to observe how it changes the effect of the social class (Table 8).

Probability of attending general high school. The dominant effect of school performance is confirmed (providing that the grade at the end of middle school is "Excellent").

Significantly, the weight of social class (which was considerable in the previous model) is no longer significant, absorbed by parents' level of education. The class effect is thus mediated by the family's human capital. The mother's level of education in particular affects the likelihood of attending a general high school. Unlike, cultural capital shows a weak explanatory power.

Probability of attending a vocational school. The major effect of the variables for performance (grade at the end of middle school other than Excellent or Very Good, and having failed and repeated a year) is confirmed. The level of education of the most highly educated parent, the mother, was not found to be significant and thus does not cancel out the effect of social class, which is an any case limited.

Table 8 - Multinomial logistic regression model. Estimated probability of attending a general high school or a vocational school (with variable: parents' level of education)

	Coeff.	Std Err.	Z	P > |z|	95% conf. interval	
general high school						
Parents' cultural capital	.3988902	.2737024	1.46	0.145	-.1375566	.9353371
Grade at end of middle school: Excellent	1.658225	.2063462	8.04	0.000	1.253794	2.062656
Grade at end of middle school: Very good	.5256572	.2020839	2.60	0.009	.12958	.9217344
Grade at end of middle school: Pass	-.8605022	.3622963	-2.38	0.018	-1.57059	-.1504145
White collar working class	.0208997	.2072651	0.10	0.920	-.3853324	.4271317
Blue collar working class	-.351486	.2315662	-1.52	0.129	-.8053473	.1023754
Failures	.2109975	.2316322	0.91	0.362	-.2429932	.6649883
Father's level of education high	.3509961	.1903163	1.84	0.065	-.022017	.7240092
Mother's level of education high	.6933313	.189383	3.66	0.000	.3221473	1.064515
Constant	-1.573764	.3985537	-3.95	0.000	-2.354915	-.7926127
vocational school						
Parents' cultural capital	-1.359099	.7614857	-1.78	0.074	-2.851583	.1333855
Grade at end of middle school: Excellent	-1.507178	.3767858	-4.00	0.000	-2.245665	-.7686916
Grade at end of middle school: Very good	-1.159803	.2599608	-4.46	0.000	-1.669316	-.6502886
Grade at end of middle school: Pass	.4941793	.2085486	2.37	0.018	.0854315	.9029271
White collar working class	.432401	.2503687	1.73	0.084	-.0583127	.9231146
Blue collar working class	.4682983	.2526313	1.85	0.064	-.0268499	.9634465
Failures	.5303648	.1905309	2.78	0.005	.1569311	.9037985
Father's level of education high	-.3770375	.2166646	-1.74	0.082	-.8016924	.0476173
Mother's level of education high	-.2398371	.2089193	-1.15	0.251	-.6493113	.1696372
Constant	-.7119037	.4065628	-1.75	0.080	-1.508752	.0849449

Valid cases = 1062; LR chi2(34) = 449.92; Prob > chi2 = 0.0000; Log likelihood = -914.09385; Pseudo R2 = 0.1975. Reference categories: middle class, male gender, medium-low cultural capital, "Good" grade at end of middle school, no failures, siblings not at general high school, only child, siblings not at university, father's level of education medium-low, mother's level of education medium-low.

Conclusions

In Turin there is still a wide gap separating the upper secondary school choices of the working class and middle classes. The white collar working class, though differing from the blue collar working class, does not have the same opportunities for further education as the middle class, as it is unable to overcome the objective and subjective difficulties associated with less-than-excellent grades. Just as under-performing blue collar working class students end up in vocational schools, so white collar working class students with fairly good performance tend to opt for technical schools. In this respect, there are significant disparities between the working and middle classes, and within the working class. For the blue collar working class, a high school diploma is a prerequisite for continuing with quality education, but is not a sufficient condition on its own. Not having an earlier experience of high school (together with the sensitivity to the challenge of staying on at school) could be the root of this classes' self-selection towards vocational schools.

The effect of the parents' social class is well observable through the role of their human capital in influencing the school career at both levels of the children's choice (a specific school track) and children's performance (a given grade obtained).

Thus school can be considered as a test bench for the classes' ability to shape different destinies for themselves from the earliest years of their children's education.

Compared to the past, when income (if high) and gender (if male) were strong predictors of the probability of continuing with further, high quality education, our data show the multi-faceted role of the family. Educational choices are less dependent on economic resources than on family strategies and motivations.

The family arena must be observed in order to explore the factors and mechanisms involved in enrolling in different tracks: it is here that school experiences and destinies are built.

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