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Beyond Educational Aspirations: Family Meanings of Education among University Students with a Migration Background

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Beyond Educational Aspirations: Family Meanings of Education among University Students with a Migration Background

Barbara Segatto

Abstract: Research on students with a migration background has consistently highlighted the importance of educational aspirations in promoting access to higher education. However, much less attention has been devoted to understanding the different meanings that families attribute to education and how these meanings shape educational trajectories. Drawing on 52 narrative interviews with university students with a migration background enrolled at the University of Padua, this qualitative study explores how participants interpret their families' understandings of education. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the study develops an empirically grounded interpretative typology of four family meanings of education: education as intergenerational advancement, education as personal development, education as family continuity, and education beyond family expectations. The findings show that immigrant families cannot be understood as sharing a homogeneous educational culture. While education is consistently valued, families differ substantially in the purposes they attribute to it, the expectations associated with educational success, and the relationship between individual aspirations and collective family projects. By shifting attention from the intensity of educational aspirations to the qualitative diversity of family meanings, the study offers a new conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between migration, family, and higher education, with implications for research and educational practice.

Keywords: Migration Background, Higher Education, Educational Aspirations, Educational Trajectories, Immigrant Families

1. The Role of Immigrant Families in Children's Educational Trajectories

A substantial body of research has shown that educational inequalities affecting students with a migration background cannot be explained solely by individual characteristics. Rather, they emerge from the interaction between structural constraints, family resources, and migration-related experiences that shape children's educational opportunities and trajectories over time. Within this perspective, scholars have distinguished between *hard barriers*, referring primarily to structural and economic constraints that limit access to educational opportunities (Azzolini & Barone, 2012), and *soft barriers*, encompassing the family, social, and cultural processes through which educational aspirations and school careers are constructed (Finnie et al., 2008).

Among the latter, the migration experience itself represents a crucial dimension. Family migration is rarely an instantaneous event; instead, it is typically a prolonged process involving phases of separation, transnational family life, and eventual reunification in the receiving country (Ambrosini, 2008). Throughout these stages, parents and children are required to renegotiate family roles, reconstruct disrupted emotional relationships, and adapt to new social and cultural environments. Such transitions may generate considerable stress and intergenerational tensions, increasing children's vulnerability to educational difficulties, school disengagement, and early school leaving (Bertozzi & Lagomarsino, 2019).

Migration also reshapes families' social capital, which has consistently been identified as a key determinant of educational success among students with a migration background (Portes & MacLeod, 1999; Zhou, 1997). Social networks provide emotional support, practical assistance, information about educational opportunities, and access to institutional resources. However, migration frequently disrupts these networks, depriving families of important sources of support precisely during the period in which educational transitions are most demanding (Ravecca, 2009; 2014; Santagati, 2019). Consequently, the educational integration of immigrant children depends not only on their individual abilities but also on the extent to which families are able to rebuild supportive social relationships within the receiving society.

Another important dimension concerns parental educational resources. Parents' educational attainment constitutes a major component of the family's human and cultural capital and has consistently been associated with children's educational achievement (Bowles et al., 2005). Although qualifications obtained abroad are not always easily transferable and parents may be unfamiliar with the educational system of the receiving country, higher educational attainment continues to foster children's educational aspirations by shaping parental expectations, educational values, and family habitus (Ra-

vecca, 2014). Importantly, even parents with limited formal education often demonstrate strong confidence in education as a pathway to social mobility, encouraging their children to pursue ambitious educational goals despite being unable to provide direct academic support (Crul et al., 2017).

Language proficiency represents another critical factor influencing educational integration. Limited competence in the language of the receiving country may initially constrain children's participation in classroom activities, academic achievement, and communication with teachers and peers (Fragai, 2000; Giovannini & Queirolo Palmas, 2002). At the same time, contemporary research increasingly challenges deficit-oriented interpretations of multilingualism. Rather than constituting a disadvantage, bilingualism has been shown to represent an important cognitive, social, and cultural resource that may enhance academic performance and facilitate educational success (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Family characteristics further contribute to shaping educational trajectories. One relevant aspect concerns age at migration and migration generation. Following Rumbaut's (2004) typology, children who enter the receiving country's educational system at younger ages generally experience more favourable educational trajectories, as earlier exposure to schooling facilitates linguistic acquisition, social integration, and educational continuity (Colombo, 2004).

Parents' labour market position also has important implications for children's schooling. Immigrant parents are disproportionately employed in occupations characterised by long working hours, job insecurity, and limited autonomy (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). These conditions reduce the time available to support children's educational activities while simultaneously affecting parents' psychological well-being and family relationships. As Ravecca (2014) argues, persistent occupational disadvantage may weaken parental authority and children's perceptions of education as an effective pathway to upward mobility.

Finally, household composition has received considerable attention within the literature. Larger family size may reduce the economic and relational resources available for each child, leading to lower educational achievement through a process of resource dilution (Downey, 1995). Consistent with this perspective, Besozzi et al. (2009) found that only children are more likely to attend academically oriented secondary schools and aspire to university education. Nevertheless, evidence remains mixed. Other studies suggest that older siblings frequently compensate for limited parental resources by supporting younger children in learning the host-country language, understanding school expectations, and navigating educational pathways (Crul, 2000). These contrasting findings indicate that family size does not operate

independently but interacts with broader family resources, migration histories, and patterns of intra-family support.

Overall, the literature suggests that the educational trajectories of students with a migration background cannot be reduced to socioeconomic disadvantage alone. Instead, they emerge from the dynamic interaction between migration experiences, family resources, institutional opportunities, and broader processes of social incorporation, highlighting the need for multidimensional approaches to understanding educational inequality.

Although previous research has extensively documented the importance of family resources and educational aspirations in shaping the educational trajectories of students with a migration background, considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding how families themselves make sense of education. Existing studies often assume that high educational aspirations constitute a relatively homogeneous orientation. However, families may attach different meanings to education, and these meanings may shape expectations, support practices, and educational trajectories in different ways. This study addresses this gap by exploring how university students with a migration background interpret the meanings that their families attribute to education and by developing an empirically grounded typology of these family meanings.

2. Method

2.1 Study design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive design to explore how university students with a migration background understand the meanings that their families attribute to education and how these meanings shape their educational trajectories. Given the study's focus on participants' subjective experiences and family narratives, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate for examining the complexity of educational choices within migration contexts.

2.2 Participants and recruitment

This article draws on qualitative interviews conducted with 52 university students with a migration background enrolled at the University of Padua (Italy). Participants were selected from a broader qualitative research project involving 67 students with different migration experiences. For the purposes of the present study, only interviews with students who had a migration background - either born in Italy to immigrant parents or born abroad and reunited with their families during childhood or adolescence—were included in the analysis. International students and refugee or unaccompanied young

people were excluded because their educational trajectories are shaped by substantially different migration experiences.

The final sample comprised 36 women and 16 men, aged between 20 and 42 years (M = 24.5). Participants had family origins in a wide range of countries, including Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Cameroon, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Albania, Romania, Moldova, Croatia, India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. Following Rumbaut's (1997) generational classification, the sample included both second-generation students born in Italy (n = 21) and students who had migrated through family reunification during childhood or adolescence (n = 31), thereby capturing diverse migration trajectories within the population of university students with a migration background.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling aimed at achieving variation in gender, migration history, country of family origin, and field of study. Recruitment was conducted in two stages. First, an invitation to participate was disseminated through Facebook pages associated with degree programmes at the University of Padua and through university lecturers. Subsequently, participants were invited to share information about the study with other eligible students through their personal networks, generating an additional snowball sample. This recruitment strategy facilitated access to students with diverse migration experiences who might otherwise have been difficult to identify through institutional channels alone.

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected through narrative semi-structured interviews, a method particularly suited to exploring educational trajectories and the meanings individuals attribute to significant life experiences. This approach encouraged participants to reconstruct their educational pathways within the broader context of family histories and migration experiences, while allowing the interviewer to explore issues relevant to the research questions in greater depth.

The interview guide covered six broad areas: (a) family history and migration experiences; (b) school trajectories; (c) motivations for entering higher education; (d) challenges encountered during educational pathways; (e) future educational and occupational aspirations; and (f) participants' suggestions for improving access to higher education for students with a migration background.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised prior to analysis. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before the interviews. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts to ensure confidentiality.

2.4 Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), adopting an inductive and interpretative approach. Rather than seeking to quantify the frequency of particular experiences, the analysis aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of the different meanings participants attributed to education within their family contexts. The aim was not to classify participants into fixed family profiles, but to identify recurrent interpretative orientations across narratives.

The analytical process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data and identify passages concerning parental expectations, educational values, school experiences, and family narratives surrounding higher education. Initial codes were generated inductively across the entire dataset and progressively refined through constant comparison between interviews. Data management and coding were supported by WEFT-QDA software.

Conceptually related codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes through an iterative process of comparison and refinement. The analysis moved beyond descriptive categorisation to identify recurring ways in which participants understood the role of education within their families. This process resulted in the development of an empirically grounded interpretative typology of four family meanings of education: education as intergenerational advancement, education as personal development, education as family continuity, and education as personal agency.

Throughout the analytical process, the emerging themes were continuously reviewed against the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately represented participants' narratives while preserving variation across individual experiences. The final typology therefore reflects shared interpretative patterns rather than mutually exclusive family types.

3. Family Meanings of Education: An Empirical Typology

The interviews revealed that education occupied a central place in participants' family narratives. Across the 52 interviews, students demonstrated a detailed awareness of their parents' views on schooling and higher education, suggesting that educational choices, aspirations, and future plans were recurring topics of family life. While participants consistently described education as a highly valued resource within their families, what distinguished families was not whether they valued education, but the meanings they attached to it. These meanings shaped parental expectations, educational support, and the role assigned to schooling within the broader migration project.

The analysis resulted in an empirically grounded interpretative typology comprising four family meanings of education. These should be understood as analytical ideal types, not as mutually exclusive family categories. Although individual families could display elements of more than one orientation, each represents a distinct way of interpreting the value and purpose of education.

Table 1 summarises the four family meanings identified. Numbers are reported to give a sense of how frequently each interpretative pattern recurred across narratives, not as an indication of prevalence or representativeness within the broader population of students with a migration background.

The following sections examine each meaning through participants' narratives, illustrating how different understandings of education contribute to shaping the educational trajectories of students with a migration background.

Family meaning	Core meaning	Purpose of education	N
Education as Intergenerational Advancement	Education as upward mobility and fulfilment of the migration project	Change family social position	29
Education as Personal Development	Education as intellectual growth and self-realisation	Develop the individual	13
Education as Family Continuity	Education as preserving family values, identity and educational continuity across generations	Preserve educational heritage	6
Education Beyond Family Expectations	Education as an autonomous choice, pursued through students' own determination despite limited parental guidance	Pursue individual aspirations	4

4. Results

4.1 Education as Intergenerational Advancement

For most participants, education was understood as the principal means through which the migration project could achieve its intended purpose. Across interviews, students described families that consistently portrayed educational attainment as a collective rather than an individual achievement. Completing higher education was expected to expand opportunities not only for the students themselves but also for their families, representing the fulfilment of aspirations that had remained unattainable for the first generation because of limited educational opportunities, migration trajectories, or labour market constraints.

Within this broader understanding, four interconnected narratives emerged from participants' accounts: a. completing the migration project; b.

escaping occupational disadvantage; c. education as protection against discrimination; d. family commitment beyond school participation.

Completing the migration project. The first narrative frames education as the fulfilment of parents' interrupted educational aspirations. Participants frequently described parents who had been unable to continue their studies, either because of socioeconomic constraints in their country of origin or because migration had redirected their life trajectories. Supporting their children's education therefore became a way of ensuring that the sacrifices associated with migration would generate opportunities for the next generation. Educational success was narrated not only as individual achievement but also as a form of intergenerational redemption, enabling children to reach goals their parents had been prevented from achieving.

> *My mother always told us, 'I want you to achieve what I never had the opportunity to achieve.' Seeing me graduate with my bachelor's degree was one of the happiest moments of her life because, as she said, 'at least my children have gone further than I did.' My father would always tell us, 'I work hard and make every sacrifice I can—your responsibility is to study.' (INT2)*

> *For my parents, education is important because it gives us a better future and the chance to find a good job. But it's also important because they never had that opportunity themselves. In Senegal, going to university isn't something everyone can do, whereas here it is. Since they couldn't study themselves, they see investing in their children as a way of achieving something they never had the chance to accomplish." (INT3)*

> *Education has always been extremely important to my parents. They always wanted me to do well at school and to keep learning because they realised how much not being educated had affected their own lives. They often said that lacking an education had been one of the greatest obstacles they faced, especially when dealing with paperwork and institutions. Looking back, I realise how difficult that was for them. That's why they always impressed on me how important education is, and I think that has been fundamental in my own journey. (INT52)*

Escaping occupational disadvantage. A second narrative associated education with the possibility of escaping the occupational disadvantages experienced by the first generation. Participants described parents employed in physically demanding, insecure, or poorly paid jobs who repeatedly encouraged their children to pursue higher education in order to obtain more stable, protected, and fulfilling employment. These accounts framed education not simply as a means of achieving social status, but as a pathway towards better working conditions, economic security, dignity, and an improved quality of life. For several participants, educational attainment also carried a reciprocal

dimension. Achieving a qualified occupation was seen as a way of repaying parents' sacrifices by eventually providing economic and emotional support to the family.

> *My parents always told me, 'Study, otherwise you'll end up like me, cleaning toilets.' They didn't really know which educational path would be best, but they were determined that I should go to university and pursue a degree that would give me a better job than theirs. They didn't want me to go through the hardship of doing low-status jobs just to make a living. They wanted my sister and me to have the chance to aspire to something better.(INT16)*

> *Education is extremely important to them. They always tell me to study as much as I can because it will allow me to secure a good, well-paid job and build a good life for myself. But they also say that, one day, it will allow me to support them, just as they have always supported me. (INT12)*

> *Because my parents had always worked in hard, physically demanding jobs, they constantly told me, 'Study, so you can work in an office. You won't have to spend winters out in the cold. You'll have employment rights, a regular salary, and job security. That's why you need a degree.' It was a mantra throughout my childhood. For them, education has always been a pathway to a better quality of life. Even though our family is doing well now, they have always believed that studying is the key to securing not only a good job, but also a healthier and more secure future. (INT37)*

> *Both of my parents have always seen education as an opportunity, but especially my mother. She sees it as an opportunity she never had herself, and because I do have that opportunity, she believes it can open many doors for me. She hopes it will lead to a future and a job that I enjoy, without having to work as hard physically as she does. She works ten hours a day in a factory, so she has always seen education as my opportunity to build a different kind of life. (INT39)*

Education as protection against discrimination. For another group of participants, educational attainment was understood as a strategy for confronting the inequalities associated with having a migration background. Parents openly discussed discrimination in education and the labour market, encouraging their children to invest in education because they believed they would have to demonstrate greater competence than their native-born peers in order to receive equal recognition.

Education therefore assumed a protective function. Higher qualifications were viewed not only as credentials for labour market access but also as symbolic resources capable of challenging negative stereotypes and legitimising social recognition. Some participants also described education as

an instrument for developing cultural confidence, critical thinking, and the ability to navigate social environments in which they often perceived themselves as outsiders.

> *For my parents, education has always been the most important thing. They used to tell me, 'Remember that whenever you submit your CV, your name will be printed at the top, and your name isn't an Italian one. That means you'll have to prove your abilities more than others just to receive equal recognition.' For them, education is the strongest asset you can rely on. As someone with a migration background, it's your best resource not only in the labour market, but in society more generally. (INT5)*

> *On the one hand, education represents a form of social mobility, but it is also a way of becoming an educated person. It helps you develop your own opinions and, above all, my parents always said that when you're surrounded by educated people, you don't feel out of place. That mattered especially in our case because, as my father used to say, 'Most Africans here don't study and don't do anything, so people look down on them and they don't achieve anything in life.' Those are his exact words. My parents didn't want that for us. The reality is that, if you're African, many people already look at you differently. If, on top of that, you're uneducated, struggle to express yourself, and say inappropriate things, the prejudice becomes even stronger. (INT1)*

> *My parents have always placed a high value on education. They know that, nowadays, even a university degree doesn't guarantee employment, but they believe that the more qualifications you have, the better. At the very least, earning a degree gives you something to build your future on. (INT48)*

Family commitment beyond school participation. A final aspect emerging from participants' narratives concerns the forms through which parents expressed their commitment to their children's education. Several interviewees challenged the assumption that limited participation in school meetings or institutional activities reflects a lack of parental interest. Parents often faced demanding work schedules, language barriers, or unfamiliarity with the Italian school system, making direct involvement difficult. Nevertheless, participants consistently described families that strongly supported educational activities, encouraged participation in school initiatives, and prioritised educational expenses despite limited financial resources.

These accounts suggest that parental educational commitment should not be assessed solely through visible school-based participation. Families demonstrated their support through continuous encouragement, material investment, and the symbolic centrality attributed to education within everyday family life.

> *Education has always been one of the most important values in my family. I grew up hearing the same message over and over again: 'Study, because if you don't study, you won't get anywhere. If you don't have qualifications, you won't get anywhere. You have to study, you have to go to university.' They used to say it was the only way to become somebody. Over time, I made that belief my own. Education was always my top priority. (INT47)*

Overall, this family meaning portrays education as an intergenerational project through which migration acquires purpose and continuity. Educational attainment is not understood merely as an individual accomplishment but as the means of transforming the opportunities available to the entire family. At the same time, participants' narratives reveal that this orientation is articulated through multiple, interconnected meanings—including redemption, occupational mobility, protection against discrimination, and sustained family commitment—highlighting the complexity of the educational aspirations characterising many families with a migration background.

4.2 Education as Personal Development

For a second group of participants, education was valued primarily as a process of personal growth rather than as a means of achieving upward social mobility. While these families also recognised that educational qualifications could improve future employment opportunities, participants consistently described this as a secondary consequence, not the principal purpose of education.

Parents encouraged their children to pursue education because they believed that knowledge, critical thinking, and cultural development would enrich their lives regardless of their future occupations. Education was portrayed as a lifelong resource that could not be lost and that would enable individuals to better understand themselves, relate to others, and navigate the complexities of contemporary society.

Several participants recalled that their parents explicitly distinguished between obtaining a qualification and becoming an educated person. In these families, the value of education extended well beyond the labour market, encompassing intellectual curiosity, personal fulfilment, and the acquisition of cultural capital.

> *My mother always encouraged all of us to go to university because she believes that higher education shapes the way you think. The knowledge you gain stays with you throughout your life, whatever you end up doing. Even if you become a waiter, she says you can always tell the difference between someone who has studied and someone who hasn't. That's her belief: you can always recognise an educated person. And even if you never work in the field you studied, eventually someone will value you for what you know. That's what my mother has always said." (INT4)*

Education has always been extremely important to my parents. I clearly remember them telling me over and over again that studying was fundamental—not simply to obtain a qualification, but for personal growth and for becoming a knowledgeable, well-rounded person. (INT14)

Education has always been incredibly important in my family. Not because of money or future earnings, but because of its cultural value. For both my mother and my father, that was what truly mattered." (INT50)

Participants also described families in which parents shared a strong commitment to education while attaching different meanings to its value. In these cases, one parent - more frequently the mother - emphasised education as a pathway to secure employment and economic stability, whereas the other viewed education primarily as a source of personal enrichment and cultural growth. These narratives suggest that different educational meanings may coexist within the same family, combining instrumental and intrinsic understandings of schooling without generating conflicting expectations.

If I had to rate how much my parents value education on a scale from one to ten, I'd give my father a hundred and my mother a nine. For my mother, doing well at school and completing a good course of study has always been important, but finding a good job matters even more. She is more focused on the outcome. My father, instead, has always said, 'Once you've learned something, no one can ever take it away from you.' For him, what matters is that you've gained that knowledge. Whatever it leads to, you'll always know it and understand what you're talking about—and that's far more important. (INT25)

My father certainly expects that pursuing a particular course of study will lead to better career opportunities. I hope so too. My mother, on the other hand, sees education in a broader sense. For her, it's also about expanding your cultural horizons and enabling you to engage with all kinds of people without feeling limited. That's what education really means to her. (INT41)

Overall, this family meaning conceptualises education as a form of cultural and personal development. Educational success is valued not only for the opportunities it may create but also for its capacity to foster autonomy, critical reflection, and lifelong learning. Unlike the previous orientation, where education primarily serves an intergenerational migration project, here it is understood as an enduring personal resource that contributes to the formation of the individual.

4.3 Education as Family Continuity

A smaller group of participants described education as a means of preserving an established family tradition rather than creating new opportuni-

ties for upward mobility. Unlike the previous family meanings, these participants did not portray education as compensation for missed opportunities or as a strategy for overcoming disadvantage. Instead, educational achievement was presented as the continuation of an existing family trajectory in which schooling had long been regarded as a central value.

Participants frequently referred to parents and extended family members who had attained relatively high levels of education in their countries of origin and who expected subsequent generations to maintain this educational legacy after migration. Continuing one's education was therefore experienced less as an individual achievement than as the continuation of an established family educational tradition. Higher education represented the fulfilment of expectations that had already been established across previous generations.

> *On my father's side of the family, education has always been highly valued. Most of my relatives have a high level of education. Not everyone has a university degree, but many have specialised qualifications. We have a pharmacist, an uncle with a degree in agricultural sciences, and a doctor. Education has always been an important value in my family. (INT30)*

Several participants also described the transmission of a broader family ethos centred on commitment, discipline, and personal responsibility. Parents evaluated their children's educational experiences against the standards that had characterised their own upbringing, conveying the expectation that educational effort should remain a defining feature of family life regardless of the country in which they lived.

> *In our family, we all grew up with the same idea. My parents always told us that, when they were young, everyone studied hard, achieved excellent grades, and worked in the afternoons. Then we came here, and seeing us not doing particularly well at school and not even having a job made them feel that we were somehow making less of our opportunities than they had. (INT23)*

Participants also highlighted that, for some families, the value attached to education predated migration itself and reflected broader cultural expectations within their countries of origin. Educational participation was therefore understood as part of an expected life course, not as a strategy generated by migration or aspirations for upward mobility. Families did not develop these educational values after migration; instead, they sought to preserve them within a new social and institutional context.

> *In Senegal, everyone—literally everyone—goes to school. I don't know any young person in Senegal who doesn't study or who isn't at university. At least in the larger cities, it's simply the norm. Even in poorer*

villages, children grow up hearing, 'You have to study so you can become a doctor,' or 'You have to study so you can become president.' Education is deeply valued. Sometimes people don't have the financial means to continue, so over time those ambitions may fade, but the expectation that education matters is always there. (INT17)

Overall, this family meaning frames education as a mechanism of intergenerational continuity. Whereas the previous family meanings conceptualise education as a means of achieving change—whether through social mobility, personal development, or students' autonomous initiatives—this family meaning assigns education a conservative function. Educational attainment is understood as a way of preserving family identity, transmitting educational values, and maintaining an educational legacy across generations and migration contexts.

4.4 Education Beyond Family Expectations

Unlike the previous three family meanings, participants in this group described educational trajectories that originated primarily from their own aspirations rather than from explicit family expectations or parental educational projects. Parents neither actively encouraged nor explicitly discouraged university attendance. Instead, participants portrayed their decision to attend university as an autonomous choice that reflected their own interests, ambitions, and commitment to learning.

Parents generally neither actively encouraged nor explicitly discouraged these educational trajectories. Instead, they often expressed uncertainty about the value of higher education, questioned its economic returns, or felt unable to advise their children because of their limited familiarity with the Italian educational system. Nevertheless, once students demonstrated determination and responsibility, families tended to accept and support their choices, even when they did not fully understand them.

My father wasn't in favour of my decision to go to university. He used to say that, in Italy, having a degree isn't what matters - what matters is earning a living. Looking back, I think he had a point. Many Chinese families would rather their children learn a trade than spend years studying only to earn the same as someone without a degree. If your family doesn't support you, it's very difficult for a Chinese student in Italy to continue their education. My mother used to tell me, 'If you enjoy studying, we'll support you. But if you don't, we'll help you learn a trade instead - there's nothing wrong with that.' (INT34)

My parents are really happy that I went to university and chose this rather unusual course of study. I made those decisions almost entirely on my own because I couldn't really ask my mother, 'What do you think? Is art school really as bad as people say?' She would simply reply, 'I don't

know anything about it.' I think they're still quite unfamiliar with how the Italian university system works. But over time they've come to see it this way: 'Well, our daughter wants to study, thank goodness she's committed to it. Let's support her and see where it takes her. (INT26)

For some participants, pursuing higher education also required assuming considerable personal responsibility. Students described financing part of their studies, independently managing educational decisions, or negotiating family expectations that prioritised early labour market participation or other life trajectories. In these accounts, educational success emerged primarily as an expression of personal agency.

They didn't discourage me, but they didn't really encourage me either. They basically said, 'If you want to give it a try, that's fine, but you'll have to find some money because we can't afford to pay for everything.' They were never particularly enthusiastic. They're proud of me now, but I think, for them, finishing high school would probably have been enough, mainly because university doesn't guarantee an immediate income. For me, though, earning two degrees has been a personal achievement—a way of proving myself and investing in my own future. It was much more my accomplishment than theirs." (INT35)

Overall, this family meaning differs substantially from the previous three. Here, higher education is neither the continuation of a family educational tradition nor the fulfilment of a collective migration project. Instead, participants describe educational trajectories in which individual agency becomes the principal driver of educational participation. Families ultimately accepted these choices, but the motivation to pursue higher education originated primarily from the students themselves.

5. Discussion

This study explored how university students with a migration background interpret the meanings that their families attribute to education. While previous research has consistently documented the high educational aspirations of many immigrant families (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Kao & Thompson, 2003), these aspirations are often treated as relatively homogeneous. Our findings suggest a more nuanced picture. Participants described multiple family meanings of education that reflect different understandings of why education matters and what it is expected to accomplish.

The first contribution of this study is therefore conceptual. The analysis identified four family meanings of education - education as intergenerational advancement, education as personal development, education as family continuity, and education beyond family expectations - showing that the

educational meanings constructed within immigrant families cannot be reduced to a single logic of upward mobility. Although all four meanings attribute a positive value to education, they differ substantially in the purposes assigned to educational participation, the expectations associated with educational success, and the relationship between individual educational trajectories and family projects.

The dominant family meaning identified in this study, education as intergenerational advancement, is broadly consistent with the literature on immigrant educational aspirations and segmented assimilation (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Participants frequently described higher education as the means through which the migration project could achieve its intended purpose, allowing children to realise opportunities that had been unavailable to their parents. However, our findings extend this literature by showing that educational mobility is understood not only as economic advancement but also as the symbolic fulfilment of parental sacrifices and migration aspirations. Education emerges as an intergenerational project through which migration itself acquires meaning, continuity, and moral legitimacy.

A second family meaning highlights education as a process of personal and cultural development. Unlike the instrumental orientation commonly emphasised in studies of immigrant educational aspirations, these families valued education primarily for its intrinsic capacity to cultivate knowledge, critical thinking, and personal growth. Although improved employment opportunities remained desirable, they were presented as secondary outcomes rather than the principal objective of higher education. This finding broadens dominant interpretations by showing that education is also valued as an intrinsic good associated with cultural formation, intellectual curiosity, and lifelong learning.

The third family meaning, education as family continuity, further complicates dominant assumptions within the literature. Some participants described families with long-standing traditions of educational achievement that predated migration, suggesting that migration did not create educational aspirations but provided a new context in which pre-existing educational values were maintained. For these students, attending university represented the continuation of an already established family trajectory rather than a break from the past. This finding challenge deficit-oriented representations of immigrant families by showing that migration may also involve the transfer and preservation of educational cultures that predate migration. In this context, higher education functions less as a vehicle for upward mobility than as a mechanism for reproducing family identity and educational continuity across generations.

Perhaps the most original finding concerns education beyond family expectations. Here, university participation emerged primarily from students' own aspirations, while parental educational projects played only a marginal role. Parents neither strongly encouraged nor actively opposed higher education, often because they were unfamiliar with the Italian university system or uncertain about its economic returns. Educational trajectories therefore resulted largely from students' own initiative, with families gradually accepting and supporting these choices despite their limited capacity to guide them. This finding suggests that the meanings attached to education are not shaped exclusively within the family but may also be actively negotiated by young people within specific family and migration contexts.

Three of the four family meanings identified - education as intergenerational advancement, as personal development, and as family continuity - share a common feature: in all three, the family remains the primary author of the educational project, even when the specific logic differs (economic mobility, intrinsic cultivation, or reproduction of an existing tradition). The fourth meaning, education beyond family expectations, breaks with this pattern. Here, the educational project is authored primarily by the student, with the family occupying a more passive, accommodating role. Our findings show that the family is not always the primary source of educational meaning-making among students with a migration background. Educational meanings may also emerge through individual agency, independently of family migration projects. Existing frameworks centred on family transmission of aspiration (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Ravecca, 2014) do not fully account for this pattern, since they assume the family as the primary locus of meaning construction.

This typology also complicates deficit-oriented and culturalist readings of immigrant family involvement in education. The family continuity meaning, in particular, challenges the assumption - implicit in much of the literature on hard and soft barriers (Azzolini & Barone, 2012; Finnie et al., 2008) - that immigrant families necessarily approach education as a strategy to overcome disadvantage. For some participants, higher education represented not a break from a disadvantaged past but the continuation of an educational culture that predated migration itself. Read together with the personal development meaning, this suggests that the instrumental, mobility-oriented framing that dominates research on immigrant educational aspirations captures only part of what education represents for these families.

The typology proposed suggests that research should move beyond conceptualising educational aspirations as a single construct varying only in intensity. Instead, our findings indicate that education is embedded in distinct family meanings that define its purposes, the responsibilities attached to educational success, and the relationship between individual aspirations

and collective family expectations. Shifting attention from the question of whether immigrant families value education to the question of what education means within different family contexts provides a richer understanding of how migration experiences, family cultures, and educational trajectories become interconnected. Distinguishing between different family meanings also helps explain why families expressing similarly high educational aspirations may nevertheless interpret, support, and experience higher education in markedly different ways.

6. Conclusions

Almost two limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies exclusively on students' retrospective accounts of their families' educational meanings. Future research could compare these perspectives with interviews involving parents themselves, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of how educational meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transformed within families. Second, the study was conducted within the Italian context, characterised by specific institutional arrangements and migration histories. Comparative research across different national contexts would help assess the transferability of the typology proposed here.

Despite these limitations, this study suggests that educational aspirations should not be understood solely in terms of their intensity, but also through the meanings families attach to education. The typology developed here shows that families may express similarly high aspirations while assigning very different purposes to higher education, ranging from intergenerational mobility and personal development to family continuity and individual self-determination. Recognising this qualitative diversity moves beyond homogeneous representations of immigrant families and offers a more nuanced conceptual framework for understanding how migration, family cultures, and educational trajectories intersect.

These findings also have broader implications for educational practice. First, they suggest that schools and universities should move beyond homogeneous assumptions about immigrant families' educational cultures. Educators should recognise that parental commitment cannot be assessed solely through visible forms of school involvement, such as attendance at meetings or direct monitoring of coursework. Families may express educational support through different, and often less visible, practices, including symbolic encouragement, the transmission of educational values, or the framing of education within broader family projects and life trajectories. Second, recognising the plurality of family meanings may help universities develop more responsive forms of student support. Guidance and widening participation initiatives could benefit from exploring not only students' educational as-

pirations but also the family meanings that underpin them. Understanding whether higher education is experienced primarily as a collective family project, a process of personal development, the continuation of an educational tradition, or an individually constructed pathway may enable institutions to provide forms of mentoring and academic support that are more closely aligned with students' lived experiences.

More broadly, these findings suggest that educational institutions should move from a deficit-oriented understanding of migrant families towards a relational perspective that recognises the diversity of educational meanings and resources that families bring to students' educational trajectories.

Future research should examine whether the family meanings identified here are also found among young people who do not access higher education or who leave education prematurely, as well as across different national contexts. Including parents' perspectives would further deepen understanding of how educational meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transformed across generations and migration experiences.

Ultimately, this study suggests that the key question is not whether immigrant families value education, but what education means within different family contexts. Recognising this diversity moves beyond homogeneous representations of immigrant educational aspirations and provides a richer framework for understanding the relationship between migration, family, and higher education.

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