

# Migrant parents' contributions to students' negotiations of their educational futures: A case study at a Norwegian high school

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## Abstract

The educational futures students aspire to and make specific choices in shaping are formed in the encounter between school practices and family dispositions. More research is needed to understand whether and how migrant parents are invited to contribute to high school students' negotiation of these possible futures. Drawing on observations and interviews with students and parents from a single-school case study, this article explores how migrant parents contribute to students' decision making. Seen through a Bourdieusian lens, the logic of the high school education field sets boundaries around what is regarded as feasible and valuable parental involvement. Parents are experienced as acting indirectly through hints and suggestions. The study indicates that providing guidance is complicated by expectations of student autonomy. The findings warrant further research on school parental involvement practices that can support students' negotiation of possible futures.

**Keywords:** high school, educational aspirations, choice, parental involvement, Bourdieu, migrant parents

## Introduction

High school, as a point of transition to adulthood and thus higher education and work, is critical for students' educational and occupational choices. In the encounter between teacher and school practices and family dispositions, students negotiate who they are at school, what their futures can and should be, and the educational

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strategies that are and are not feasible for them. International research has explored the tension between the host countries' socioeconomic contexts and the "migrant drive" (Portes, 2012) shaped by the workings of student families' social capital, commonly specified as ethnic capital in the form of expectations, values, and social norms (Modood, 2004; Zhou & Bankston, 1994). Migrant parents tend to communicate greater educational aspirations about and to their children than non-migrant parents of similar socioeconomic status. This tendency may be sustained to a different degree depending on the migrant group, the receiving educational system, and the educational stage (Friberg, 2019; Lessard-Philipps et al., 2014). However, the pursuit of high social goals by migrant families has been shown to be misrecognized by schools and society (Hegna & Smette, 2017; Portes, 2012) and does not necessarily translate into higher educational or occupational outcomes (Fekjær, 2007).

Norway's legal and cultural norms give significant recognition to children's rights to autonomy, particularly in terms of educational choices (Gullestad, 1996; Hegna & Smette, 2017; Vedeler, 2020). Southern European migrant mothers interviewed by Herrero-Arias et al. (2021) experienced parenting in Norway as strongly directed toward developing children's self-sufficiency and autonomy. The mothers both appreciated and found it difficult to keep up with Norwegian society's emphasis on engaging in dialogue with children and encouraging decision making and independent learning from an early age. They experienced this emphasis as more pronounced than in their home countries (Herrero-Arias et al., 2021, p. 8). Looking at older children in analyzing the results of a survey of 2,029 youths from Oslo, Hegna and Smette (2017) concluded that even at the age of 15-16, educational decisions regarding choice of high school tracks were constructed as autonomous. Young people with migrant parents were more likely to agree that their parents had a large impact on their educational choices, but very few, irrespective of background, experienced any conflict or pressure in that process (Hegna & Smette, 2017, p. 1117). In a retrospective study by Kindt (2022), 28 university students said they grew up with expectations of high academic achievement that could come from both their migrant parents (born in Asia, the Middle East, Somalia, Chile, Russia, and Poland) and their broader ethnic communities. They also experienced parents setting clear external educational goals for them. Kindt attributes these educational strategies of purposefully developing specific instrumental skills through schooling and after-school activities both to high social status parents held in their home countries and to their effort to safeguard children from future discrimination (2022, p. 201).

Norway offers a compelling case for studying the shaping of students' educational futures not only because of cultural norms but also because access to higher education can be obtained without much financial support from the parents. The choice

of 15 three-year academic or four-year vocational high school tracks is based on student interests and grades from middle school (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022); it is possible to switch from the vocational to the academic track in the third year. At the university level, there are no significant student fees, and students living away from home can apply for low-interest loans to cover rent and other living expenses and even partly cover study abroad. Norway thus appears to offer extra room for what students, families, and schools might deem “doable and not doable” (Bourdieu, 1984) for students with a migrant background. In this context of lower financial dependence on family, studying the perspectives of students is especially significant.

Interviews with eight students and, in three cases, their parents, combined with observation at the case high school, revealed a complicated negotiation process about educational choices that involved schools, families, and the larger socioeconomic context. That process is explored here to help understand how migrant parents contribute to the negotiation of the students’ educational futures in a Norwegian high school context.

## Conceptual background

Starting with his own educational system studies with Passeron (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990), Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field have been highly influential in research that aims to make explicit the mechanisms of social reproduction of disadvantage and the symbolic violence behind school practices. Bourdieu’s theoretical and methodological toolbox has also been used to shed light both on parents’ strategies related to their children’s schooling (Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2004; Vincent, 2017) and on educational choices and identity (Katartzi, 2021; Kindt, 2018; Uboldi, 2020). In the present study, these tools are applied to see how school practice meets influences from home in negotiating high school students’ educational futures.

Bourdieu (1984) calls attention to how cultural, social, and economic capital are transformed into performance in the social space (or field) of education in terms of learning, cultural consumption, behavior, and values. Students with early exposure to specific forms of primary socialization in terms of class, culture, and language possess privileged dispositions (or habitus). Working in the same theoretical tradition, Lareau (2011) empirically demonstrates how middle-class parents develop—often unconsciously—desirable skills, values, and aspirations in their children. From childhood to young adulthood, children are encouraged to ask teachers or university professors for help and accommodations, which creates lasting educational

advantages over children with other types of cultural and social capital (Calarco, 2018; Lareau & Weininger, 2008). Middle-class parents communicate with schools in ways that are viewed as legitimate by teachers and involve children in extracurricular activities that generate cultural and social capital in a process Lareau calls concerted cultivation (2011). As middle-class students transition from high school to university, they can take advantage of their parents' detailed knowledge of the university admission process and favorable subject choice strategies once at university (Lareau & Weininger, 2008).

Education is always a secondary form of socialization, which limits its power to develop and validate students' dispositions (Stahl & McDonald, 2021). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the inequality of students at school is visible, for instance, in terms of dispositions toward language and conversation acquired at home. In the case of migrants, this difference can become tangible in terms of language and the ability to understand and appreciate abstract teaching or in the ways that parents do and do not involve themselves at school. From a Bourdieusian perspective, school is a place not only for developing dispositions but also of competition for acquiring "field-specific capital according to field-specific rules" (Burawoy, 2019, p. 57). Students acquire some of the rules in the schooling process and can be somewhat successful in playing the game in the high school education field. However, the ease with which students play the schooling game depends on the degree to which their new dispositions are orchestrated with those embodied in at-home socialization (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This dependence on a student's past limits both student (and family) agency and the influence of the high school education field in terms of acquiring new dispositions.

The school and home can compete with or complement each other in terms of inscribing what is and is not worth attending to for different categories of students in terms of acquiring certain forms of capital:

*People are "pre-occupied" by certain future outcomes inscribed in the present they encounter only to the extent that their habitus sensitizes and mobilizes them to perceive and pursue them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 26).*

Based on this reasoning, it can be argued that the migration experience and socialization in the country of origin and along the migration path tend to mobilize some families to develop higher aspirations for their children and encourage them to persevere at school. The size of this relative aspirational advantage over non-migrant families once social background is taken into account varies with home country and the receiving country's educational contexts (Feliciano, 2020; Friberg, 2019; Lessard-

Philipps et al., 2014). Norway's comprehensive school system appears to be more likely to sustain and in some cases fulfill the migrant students' (and their parents') ambitions than schools with early tracking (Frieberg, 2019). Still, as the generations succeed one another, habitus tends to adapt to the receiving country's school-related expectations. The migrant drive has been shown to wane in follow-up generations as students, to differing degrees that vary with receiving country context, become disposed to act and work "like everyone else," and their advantage in academic effort over their non-migrant peers may disappear (Frieberg, 2019; Portes, 2012).

## The study

The data drawn on in this article are part of a qualitative inquiry into encounters between migrant families and schools carried out at three high schools located in different areas and contexts in Norway. The present study focuses on one such school, Park High,<sup>1</sup> an urban school that primarily enrolls Norwegian-born children of migrants with medium levels of academic achievement. According to the staff, they also recruit some high-achieving students with migrant backgrounds who feel unwelcome at "majority Norwegian" schools because, for example, they wear a hijab. Park High was selected because the staff shared a particular interest in involving parents, more than is usual in the Norwegian context. The school offers several tracks qualifying for higher education, some of which require a higher grade point average (GPA) in middle school than other schools in the area. I interviewed and observed students from three different tracks. At the time the case study was conducted, the established Academic General track was the most competitive, while both the Academic Science and Academic Business tracks were new and attracted fewer applicants. Academic General tracks in Norway all offer a general introductory year, after which students gradually specialize in humanities or sciences.

I visited the school three times from December 2019 to November 2020. The first visit lasted three days and evenings, and the two subsequent visits lasted one day each. The evenings offered important opportunities for observation, as Park High offers free tutoring and exam preparation after regular school hours, and the teachers called an extraordinary parent meeting on one of those evenings. The school case also included one day of online observation under the COVID-19 lockdown. I also familiarized myself with the school's online communication with parents and other relevant data. The observation, teacher interviews, and other background data, although only occasionally explicitly cited in this article, provided important foundations for situating the Park High case and the students' process of negotiating their educational futures in that social context. I interviewed students (six male, two

female), their teachers (three female, one male), and, where students agreed, their parents (three mothers, one father).

As seen from the case overview in Table 1, the students had different backgrounds and chose different academic tracks. Six of eight were born in Norway, and all eight had parents who immigrated to Norway as adults. Three of the eight students had apparent middle-class backgrounds, as their siblings had completed or nearly completed education at the university level and their parents were teachers or scientists, although they were not necessarily employed in those occupations in Norway. One student had several relatives who had completed education at the university level and a mother who received more education than would be expected for a woman in her home country, indicating relatively high social status prior to migration. The informants thus offer accounts of various viewpoints and experiences at Park High, although they are too few in number to be viewed as representatives of their respective groups.

**Table 1 Park High case overview**

Informants	(Parents') Region	Study Tracks
School leader (1 female)	Non-migrant	
Students (6 female, 2 male)	Eastern and Central Europe (3) Western Europe (1) Middle East (2) Asia (2)	Academic General Academic Science Academic Business
Their parents (3 female, 1 male)	Eastern and Central Europe (3) Asia (1)	
Their teachers (3 female, 1 male)	Non-migrant	

*Background data:* Observation of student-teacher conferences (7 hours), other communication with parents, documents, website, local newspaper.

The students talked about their previous school experiences, aspirations, and educational plans in interviews that lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. I asked parents about their own school experiences, their hopes for their children's future, their thoughts on Norwegian schooling, and their approaches to supporting their children's education. Material from interviews with Park High school leaders and observation of 19 teacher-student-parent conferences and general parent meetings is used in Melnikova (2022), together with interviews from two other high schools. All interviews with students and parents were conducted in Norwegian, with the exception

of one student-parent pair, who both chose to speak a Central and Eastern European language that they shared with me. Speaking a home language may have created additional mutual trust during these interviews, and during the analysis process, I made sure I have not unduly emphasized insights from these informants. I have not experienced any language difficulties when interviewing the other informants at Park High, as all those people were migrants who had studied or worked in Norway for at least four years. In the study, I positioned myself both as a teacher educator and as a migrant mother, albeit not one with a child in high school. Being a parent may have made me more accepting of the migrant parents' concerns and possible interference in their children's education than some of the teachers.

The research question for the project and the interview guide structure were informed by a Bourdieu-inspired interest in family and school histories and contexts and the structures that students and families navigate. The NVivo qualitative software was used to facilitate the organization of data from three cases in the project, but each case was analyzed independently (Stake, 2013). I found common codes that constituted thematic patterns identified in the Park High case, including backup plans, language, fears, and wider horizons. There were also breaches in these patterns of what can be referred to with Bourdieu's term of practical logic of the field. It was important to mark the occasions on which the school's logic and the students' and parents' engagement with it appeared to be incoherent (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 23).

Only excerpts used in the article text were translated into English from the languages in which the interviews were conducted and transcribed. In transcription, I have made the language more "written," partly to make the text easier to read and partly to help protect informants' identities. Ethically, I was cautious to protect the well-being and anonymity of the informants<sup>2</sup>. The well-being concerns were addressed by limiting the time and subject matter of the interviews and not insisting on gaining a complete overview of all the young people's family stories if they were uncomfortable with sharing some of those elements. I have also withheld some information to secure anonymity. I ensured free and informed consent by discussing my project and the informants' rights orally instead of merely having them sign a form. A case study makes it easier for informants to be identified and to identify one another, but the students who participated have now graduated from Park High and are

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2 I use pseudonyms for the school, teachers, and students; some details, such as specific school demographics, are also withheld to maintain informant anonymity.

thus unlikely to be recognizable in text as it is formulated now. The project received ethical approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

## Students negotiating a limited range of possible educational futures

### Backup plans and some lost dreams

In this section, I discuss the students' dreams and plans for their future education, including the relative value they placed on humanities subjects and education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Most students I interviewed at Park High had rigorously defined academic plans. They told me that they had discussed them with classmates, teachers, siblings, cousins, and guidance counsellors at both middle and high school. All shared some version of their plans with their parents and were aware of their parents' expectations. All student informants in the first, second, and third years of their studies named specific university programs to which they planned to apply.

When asked about their dreams (what they would do if they had perfect grades, money, and time), all but one student—a recent migrant from Western Europe who dreamed of becoming a teacher—were less clear. Boris, a first-year student whose parents come from Eastern Europe and hold advanced degrees, says what comes to his mind is becoming “rich, driving nice cars and eating at expensive restaurants.” But he prefers to be realistic and not have dreams, “just plans.” His mother believes that Boris, with his Western education and what she recognizes as skills of a diplomat in interactions with his friends, could do almost anything in life, but Boris himself is thinking about going into information technology like his father and studying at a local university. In another example, Hana, a third-year student whose parents come from Asia and hold Norwegian vocational certificates, was hoping for a dental career after regaining confidence in mathematics with the help of a private tutor. However, her chemistry class ended up being too difficult and she had applied to a program for her second choice—a university course in pharmacy, as she discussed in her senior year:

*Hana: Dreams and plans? I don't really have any; I really have no such special dreams. But I want to become a dentist. And that's why I take science. And medicine was never a big thing for me. Besides, the GPA there is quite high. So, I always had a little bit like that ... if I were to be anything, then it's a dentist. But if it's not a dentist, then it's becoming a teacher. Because I like to explain things, and then there is the fact that it's not just you alone, but it's also students. If I could do anything...*



*Author: Travel?*

*Hana: Travelling was always a dream. To travel around the world, to really experience it all—that's one thing. But other than that, I can't come up with anything.*

Like Hana, several informants across tracks talked about backup plans, with four of eight naming teacher education in that regard. They often moderated their aspirations with time, as their grades were too low to qualify for programs they had counted on at the beginning of high school. Hana ended up entering a pharmacy program rather than going into dentistry. Other examples of what students experienced as downgraded educational plans include going from becoming a veterinarian to a teacher and from being a business owner to an accountant. Arina, a junior student, said she had always aspired to become a veterinarian but now had no chance of making it, and she was unsure about teaching because she “was not especially fond of kids.” The new and more modest ambitions that Arina considered in her backup plan were not a mere readjustment, as would be the case for some students; rather, they resulted from a dawning realization that in the transition from high school, she would be forced to give up her long-held dream.

### Languages and choice of subjects

All the interviewed students said they liked languages, and most had been successful on exams in their heritage languages. Many had visited or even frequented their countries of origin, with several naming religion, psychology, and sociology as subjects they found relevant and accessible. However, none of the informants saw language, humanities, social sciences, or the arts as suitable future trajectories. There were also very few students who invested their time in after-school activities. The teachers said that being part of student parliament or participating in the annual school musical could be excellent ways to expand students' horizons; to their regret, they noticed that this involvement often resulted in declining grades, which the students at Park High could not afford because they already had mid-level grades and lofty ambitions. In addition, the teachers noted that the students' parents could not provide extra financial support for the traditional school trips abroad. Their summer holidays in their parents' home countries did not appear to possess the same cultural value in the teachers' eyes.

Aspiring to careers like doctor, lawyer, or engineer are commonly associated with model minority students (Lee, 1994) and were prominent in the student interviews. Unlike in other research (Leong, 2000), these aspirations were not limited to Asian students, although many students at Park do have Asian backgrounds. Both teachers and students talked about how many parents they meet see medical studies as the perfect choice. Only one mother invited to a teacher-student meeting

I observed presented this as a deliberate strategy, mentioning that the student's two older siblings were studying medicine. Teachers at Park High said that they hoped to change the relatively narrow patterns in students' (and parents') aspirations. However, according to the local newspaper, the school's Media Design and Communication track had recently shut down because students with migrant backgrounds preferred tracks focusing on subjects that could lead to careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). I also observed that the homework assistance available at the school focused mainly on science and exam preparation in mathematics.

### **Breach in pattern: Success outside STEM subjects**

Todor is a first-year student whose family arrived in Norway from Central Europe in the 1990s. He says that even though he was born in Norway, he would never call himself Norwegian because of his pride in his heritage language and culture. He is socially engaged; he works on many projects with his friends after school and organizes events at school. He is also an exception to the general tendency to see mathematics and science as proxies for school success. During my observation of a meeting with Todor's teacher, he resisted the teacher's attempts to involve him in extra mathematics tuition, saying he was satisfied with a 3 (out of 6) in math and would "rather concentrate on my geography grade." However, despite this below-average math performance, his plans in life include being what he sees as "successful" by going to business school, starting a business like a restaurant or—as a worst-case scenario—becoming a teacher to take advantage of his outgoing nature. As I observed, he also agreed with his teacher that he should not be put into a study group with his friends because, like other students and teachers at Park High, he admitted that friends could distract him from studying. Todor mulled over studying abroad in the distant future and perhaps taking some courses in religion as a minor subject. He did not, however, see himself as a student who could turn studying religion into a job that could bring him the success with which he was so preoccupied. Similarly, working as a teacher did not meet the definition of success for Todor or the other students who had that career as a backup.

To summarize, dreams were difficult to discuss for most students in my study. They generally had rather specific plans for education after high school; STEM subjects were viewed as the key to success, with medicine regarded by Park High students and their parents as the zenith but also as largely out of reach. The humanities, social sciences, and arts were not considered, while a teaching career was regarded as a backup. The students appeared not to have inherited the extra resources to invest in cultural capital in the forms of extracurricular interests or international trips, and friends were seen as limiting rather than enriching their futures.

## Family history is not directly translated into educational futures

### Little direct pressure

This section focuses on how family history translated into students' thinkable and unthinkable futures in the school context before analyzing how some families dealt with the educational choice dilemmas they encountered at school. The students I interviewed generally talked about their parents' ideas about their futures without intimating any feelings of direct pressure or threat. One exception was a student who reported that her parents may have plans to send her to study in her home country, which was not something she wanted. Hana, a third-year student, sensed the pressure to excel academically in the stares and questions from other members of her ethnic community to such an extent that she found it "funny" how "the first thing everyone wants to know is if you have top grades." She was, however, free from this pressure in her family; on the contrary, her mother said that her daughter worked too hard. Todor also did not experience any direct interference in his choices, although he did say that "other parents" could pressure their children to be doctors or lawyers. Boris mentioned that his parents initially had high expectations for him, but they "did nothing" when his grades were not as high as they would have liked:

*My parents, they had very good grades. My mom had all the top grades in university, for example. ... And at first at least, they expected [the same] from me. ... What's important is that no matter what grades I get, they always support me. ... They don't like it when I get 4s [out of 6]. Mom doesn't like it, but it doesn't matter. They don't do anything about it.*

As the excerpt shows, despite being a student from a family with a history of high academic achievement, Boris did not directly experience pressure to work especially hard during high school, although he was aware of his mother's disappointment. Bashra, a junior whose parents come from the Middle East, wanted to become a police detective and eventually study in another city. She described the process of negotiating with her parents:

*I would have really, really wanted to work in the legal field, something like a lawyer, yes. But my plan is to study to be a police detective. ... I haven't said I want to move from [anonymized city]. But I told my mother I wanted to become a police detective. And at first, she was, like, "No, don't you want to be a doctor or something, or an engineer?" Because I don't know why, but she thinks I'm so good at drawing and stuff. And I do like to draw, but I don't want, in a way... I just want to draw for fun, not to work with it. So, I just said, "No, I just want to be a police investigator."*

The model career of doctor or engineer thus existed in this mother's world of aspirations but did not translate into pressure or a realistic trajectory for Bashra. Even though she cited becoming a lawyer as a dream job, she also had more specific and pragmatic plans, with a specific police school in mind.

## Fears

It was fears about their futures that Bashra and the other students shared with me, rather than disappointing parents with their grades. Structural racism in the job market was also an issue. For example, Bashra admitted that her greatest fear was having difficulty finding a job because of her name, after applying for over 10 part-time jobs and having no luck. This experience contrasted with the experience of a friend of hers with a "Norwegian" name: she applied "for many of the same jobs, but she gets answers, while I never get any."

Another fear that often emerged in my analysis is "doing nothing." This was a fear that the students who reported experiencing success at school said their parents did not have for them, while those who said that their parents had failed to realize upward mobility in Norway often shared the fear of "going nowhere, not getting into a university or a program that I do not like or want; being looked down on" (Amira, second-year student). "Ending up like them" on social aid or without enough money because they (the parents) did not live a good life was an intense fear that lay behind the careful and fearful calculation of future trajectory, where adult life sometimes appeared as something worse than the still-undefined present.

In essence, family history for students at Park High was not directly translatable into specific trajectories or dreams. The parents might have some vague ideas about stereotypical professions, but by the time those students reached high school, their dreams had turned into specific plans for which parents could at times serve as negative models.

## Family indirectly involved in the negotiations

### More subtle involvement with school

This section illustrates the subtle ways in which parents were involved in the negotiation of their children's educational futures through carefully formulated advice about present educational strategies and possibilities for future choices. In the interviews, the students did not seem to perceive that parents had any direct say in their choices. Neither were they, as demonstrated by the three-school case study (Melnikova, 2022), involved in negotiations happening at school with teachers or guidance counsellors. With a few exceptions, my informants—students, parents,

and teachers—shared a common view of the world in which parents were not involved directly at school except in extraordinary cases. This understanding was presented by all students and their migrant parents, irrespective of the economic or cultural capital available to a given family. There are some indications that several families were engaged in concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011) at a younger age. Three students were involved in ethnic or religious weekend schools, and all had at some point tried organized sports. Boris's mothers talked about how she and even his grandmother, a teacher, tried but failed during middle school to convince him to talk to the teachers to get better feedback on assignments. These strategies, as they appeared in the interviews, were no longer seen as appropriate once the students entered high school. In the end, it was clear that all the informants' parents, siblings, and other relatives were involved in the negotiation of educational futures; that involvement, as described below, was simply more subtle.

The previous section has shown that students experienced conflict between their long-held dreams and the opportunities that were open to them, between their friends and academic success, and between spending time studying and devoting time to expanding their social and cultural horizons. The mothers and one father I spoke with and those I saw at meetings with teachers were there to support their children deal with these conflicts.

### Parents pointing to the wider horizon

The parents were often concerned about their hard-working and stressed-out young people's limited social lives. One mother spoke at length about how she tried to support her son in making friends, suggesting that he take money from her to go to the movies with a girlfriend or involve himself in a sport. Another said that high school was a time to get a boyfriend and maybe begin thinking about having a family.

Further, according to student interviews, families also contributed to the academic side of schooling by teaching them their heritage language or by paying for private tutors. The students also reported that their parents made cautious attempts at extending what to them appeared narrowed horizons for their children by suggesting that they study abroad or encouraging them to consider a profession that did not require mathematics. For example, Hana's mother wondered whether her daughter needed to work so hard:

*I don't like it that there is so much stress for her. I told her, "You can't stress so much." I do not press her to go into medicine. "No," I said, "no matter how far you'd come, you can take a job." ... We study, we have a job. That's enough.*

What emerged in the interviews was not a direct pursuit of concerted cultivation but parents refraining from most interference in school choice matters or at least carefully avoiding pressure when attempting to influence student decision making. This navigation of students' worlds involved, for example, resolving a conflict with a teacher so that a son could receive extra mathematics tutoring, restoring his hope in his academic skills, and sometimes meant saying it was alright to try something else. As Helena's mother put it,

*I am a little afraid that she maybe won't make it into [specific program]. But I always say that if you miss one way, you should find another way that suits you. And it will come, little by little. ... My older daughter also always tries to talk a lot to her, to give her hope. You should ... you should just work at it, yes.*

Other older siblings were reported to be involved in the informants' choices, university and school applications, and learning processes invisible to the school. In short, when the family's social and cultural capital was not directly recognizable by the school, it was still operating behind the scenes, although in this study it was not possible to compare its effectiveness to the value of family capital that is more readily and traditionally recognized by schools.

## Discussion and conclusion

In my study, the parents at Park High were highly engaged in their children's education and were concerned with the educational choices they made. At the same time, they chose to proceed cautiously, and the students I interviewed did not appear to be under intense pressure from their families. This is in line with findings reported by Kindt (2018, 2022), who interviewed successful university students with minority backgrounds: They said that despite societal assumptions, the pressure in their lives did not come directly from their parents. In the last decade, policymakers in Norway have granted parents a more powerful role in their children's education. However, my study, as well as other research in the field (Melnikova, 2022; Vincent, 2017) indicate that, especially in the case of parents disadvantaged by society and the school system, a distance from school remains.

Among other factors establishing distance, the normative Norwegian value of individual autonomous choices (Gullestad, 1996; Hegna & Smette, 2017; Herrero-Arias et al., 2021) appears to be clearly communicated, at least to migrant families. Some families may not fully accept this value and actively engage in their children's education and choices at home, as demonstrated by Kindt (2018). However, the parents in my study were particularly careful about sharing experiences and knowledge that

could help guide their children's choices. Thus, the negotiation of student educational futures in my study, when viewed in Bourdieu's terms, may demonstrate how a secondary socialization system leads students to gradually limit their aspirations to something practical and doable, thus adjusting the habitus to the rules of the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These rules are determined not only by teachers, who sometimes resist their students' rigorously defined market-driven choices, but also by broader social processes in the metafield of power. The global educational market and policy powers affect all other fields; they shape the students' and their families' perceptions of what is realistic and "safe" for them (Kindt, 2022).

The students may be driven by what Bourdieu (1984) saw as the logic of necessity. He recognized that it is more acceptable for the representatives of the middle and upper classes to choose something that is not practical or appropriate, even something vulgar. The working classes, by contrast, tend to be more conservative in their aspirations and tastes (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 134–145). In terms of contemporary Norwegian society, students viewed by the school as having less economic and cultural capital available from the family would be advised and eventually find it natural or in line with their habitus to avoid risky choices. This means that they adjust their aspirations and choose educational programs that are more likely to secure stable employment. The high aspirations in the dreams that they and their parents once had were waning in the face of specific constraints such as ability in mathematics, stress management skills, and racism in the job market. These findings are similar to the descriptions of migrant choices in other Nordic studies (e.g., Hegna & Smette, 2017; Varjo et al., 2020) and the constraints that were recently described for middle-class students in Greece (Katartzi, 2021).

Everyone interviewed, except for two students and one parent, saw mathematics as the key to success—the ultimate cultural capital that opens up the world to the supreme goal of studying medicine. However, access to this form of capital is limited by the results of previous socialization, which Bourdieu and Passeron regard as "irreversible" (1990, p. 43). Because of this limitation, the vision of equality of educational access in Norway, as in the rest of the world, is showing some cracks, especially at the high school level that is the focus here. In my data, the students needed to direct their educational trajectories to more realistic and less attractive goals. These findings align with Walther's categorization of universalistic transition regimes, which assume guaranteed access to—but not successful completion of—a high school education (2006).

My study also indicates that parental contributions to translating students' dreams into specific futures are complicated by the boundaries of what knowledge and expe-

riences schools and other social contexts view and communicate as valuable. For example, the majority of students evaluated academic success as more relevant than social success or expanding their knowledge outside school subjects. Experiencing their home cultures or becoming involved in out-of-school activities were seen as distracting. This finding contrasts sharply with how middle-class parents negotiate their children's educational trajectories in Lareau's study of concerted cultivation (2011) and a more recent study of academic pressures experienced by children of middle-class parents in Norway (Eriksen, 2021). The new horizons of students' future and present lives in the present study often appeared to be narrower than the horizons envisioned by their parents, but only indirectly communicated because of the autonomous choice norm. The students could end up having even fewer options when they were dissuaded from pursuing strategies that include investing in less school-related cultural or social capital. They would thus be voluntarily excluded from the global middle class (Ball & Nikita, 2014).

It is recognized that migrants are usually positively selected from their home country population: in many cases, because of the difficulties entailed in the journey, it is those with the most resources and firmest sense of purpose who arrive in receiving countries (Feliciano, 2020; Portes, 2012). At Park High, the acculturating forces translated through the school appear, in the case of several interviewed students, powerful enough to eventually cause a decline in the original migrant drive, which eventually gives way to the idea of becoming "like everyone else" (Portes, 2012). These forces create barriers to school-based parental involvement in student choices and indirectly devalue the cultural capital in the form of knowledge and experience possessed by the migrant parents and their ethnic communities. To some extent, these barriers are justified by the common middle-class pattern in Scandinavian cultures of giving students the visible autonomy of choice while communicating expectations vaguely and indirectly (Bach, 2016; Hegna & Smette, 2017; Kindt, 2018). However, through this justification, for high school students with migrant parents, the school appears to win the competition for communicating what is and is not worth attending to (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For example, the students gradually become convinced that math should be prioritized over the humanities and arts, and that specific instrumental goals are more important than broader dreams and interests.

To conclude, the school system may be seen from a Bourdieusian perspective as successfully creating an advantage for families that can communicate their expectations to the students in the indirect way that has become acceptable in Norway. For these students, what emerges in my study is a story of dreams that the school's socialization process transforms into realistic choices. These students win in the compe-



tition for the capital required to advance in the high school education field through hard work, which is at least partly a response to the pressures that are indirectly exerted on them. Some minor readjustment of plans is aligned with the expectations and capital combination that were translated through family socialization that may have included direct help despite the ideal of an autonomous student. Nevertheless, for many students with migrant parents, the story is one of a rather dramatic adjustment to the new school context. The renegotiated educational trajectory is restrictive when compared to the dreams that they and their families once had. When what can be interpreted as direct pressure is unacceptable, the students are left alone with weighty choices. In this context and in a school system with the explicit goal of promoting social equity, the way family aspirations and knowledge may be devalued in the school context should be critically assessed to arrive at a more complex understanding of the parental role. Without ruling out the interpretation of migrant drive sometimes acting as unwelcome pressure on student autonomy and a result of less than fully realistic assessment of possible student futures, the present study indicates that not all parents are unrealistic and that their carefully communicated views of the global possibilities and challenges their children may face in the world need to be heard. The students' negotiation of their educational futures during high school occurs not solely between school and student but also includes the family, the ethnic community, and the wider social context.

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