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## Educational Aspirations of Migrant Parents and the Relationship With Educational Success

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### Abstract

Adding to the strand of research which shows that when taking into account accumulated disadvantages, descendants from migrant families succeed to a higher amount in education than natives, this paper analyses if and how parental educational aspirations act as a protective factor for educational success. Based on the Swiss longitudinal TREE data (Transition from Education to Employment, n= 7,971) of the second cohort we answer this question using a multinomial logistic regression analysis. Our results show that some migrant groups have higher parental aspirations and that these aspirations serve as a pushing factor for several second-generation groups to take up higher education at upper secondary level. To have a closer look at the underlying mechanisms we assess the definition of success by taking into account qualitative data chosen by a criterial-based sample of TREE respondents. The inductive definition of success, based on a content analysis with n=119 young adults and their parents from migrant and Swiss families will add to the existing theoretical reflection on the narrow definition of success and its interplay with parental aspirations.

### Keywords

parental aspiration, educational success, second generation, mixed method

### 1 Introduction: Success Against the Odds and Parental Educational Aspirations

Compared to their native counterparts, students with a migration background - the so-called second generation - are generally less successful in attaining tertiary education and more likely to be NEET<sup>1</sup> in most OECD countries (OECD, 2020). This is especially true for Switzerland with its highly selective and early segregated pathways that stream students after sixth grade into different educational tracks at lower secondary school (ibid.). Nevertheless, within the

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<sup>1</sup> Neither employed nor in education or training



group of second generation youth large differences in terms of educational achievement exist when taking into account socio-economic status (SES), country of origin and language spoken at home (Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung (SKBF), 2018). For the transition towards post-obligatory educational pathways children of immigrants are overrepresented in intermediate solutions (Sacchi & Meyer, 2016). Moreover, several studies reveal a discriminating effect for second generation youth, and particularly females, in the selection process towards vocational education and training (Hupka-Brunner & Kriesi, 2013; Hupka-Brunner & Stalder, 2011; Imdorf, 2010). In addition, particularly vulnerable young adults with a migration background – from Turkey and former Yugoslavia – participate less frequently in tertiary education (Murdoch et al., 2016).

Another strand of research focusses on those second-generation who ‘succeed against the odds’ – meaning that when taking into account accumulated disadvantages (low SES, parents with lower educational attainment) – descendants from migrant families succeed to a higher amount compared to natives from the same strand. Research on success against the odds has a long tradition in the US: studies show unexpected successful educational pathways - measured by test scores, academic achievement and participation in post-secondary education (Fuligni, 1997; Glick & White, 2004). In Switzerland, the context of this study, there is some evidence for success against the odds of students with a migration background: Schnell and Fibbi (2016) show that second generation youth (Turkish, Balkans) more often experience upwardly mobile education-employment pathways than Swiss (with similar characteristics). This phenomenon is referred to as the ‘immigrant paradox’ (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017).

Parents’ and young adults’ educational aspirations as well as parental co-agency or involvement in the education of their children are discussed as possible explanations for this paradox (Liu & White, 2017; Schoon et al., 2021). Our analysis of the second cohort of compulsory school leavers of TREE<sup>2</sup> shows an interesting relationship between lower secondary tracking with students and parental educational aspirations. Tracking seems to influence aspirations toward a more realistic perspective on students’ future educational pathways – meaning that parental aspirations tend to be lower if the student attends a track with basic requirements and higher if the child attends a higher one. However, we observe group differences: migrant parents tend to keep their high aspirations, even if the child is streamed in a less demanding track at lower secondary level. Furthermore, high aspirations remain when controlling for socioeconomic status and educational attainment of the parent. Referring to the concept of Bernardi and Valdés (2021) parental aspirations of migrant parents seem to be more “sticky” (high educational expectations that are irresponsive to lower academic achievement) in comparison with Swiss parents.

Based on this strand of research and our own data exploration, the present article focuses on how parental aspirations contribute to a successful pathway for second generation youngsters in Switzerland on the transition towards upper secondary education. Taking into account the comparatively good reputation of the Swiss vocational education and training system, success at upper secondary level is defined as either attaining general education or an apprenticeship with vocational baccalaureate (Berufsmatura). Based on the mixed-method-design of the PICE-project<sup>3</sup>, we will further discuss the definition of (objective and subjective) success at upper secondary education.

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<sup>2</sup> Transitions from Education to employment survey, see: <https://www.tree.unibe.ch>

<sup>3</sup> Parental Investment in Children’s Education: a TREE study, see: <https://www.pice.unibe.ch>. This project is mainly funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) and located at the University of Bern.

## 2 Success Indicators and Measurement Methods

In this chapter, we will first focus on the theoretical definition of educational success and then discuss the measurement methods to answer the question on how parental aspirations of second generation students in Switzerland contribute to a successful pathway towards higher secondary education. Furthermore, the mixed-method-design of our data allows us to reflect on the definition of educational success on our qualitative data.

### 2.1 The Definition of Educational Success

Educational success is a multifaceted construct, which is defined differently according to various research designs and question. When defining it, one has to take into account the level of education in focus, the population of interest and the context-bounded definition of being successful. Educational success in dual systems is mostly measured as objective success that focusses on observable, measurable indicators of success (performance, high level of academic achievement at lower/upper secondary school, successfully finding and completing an academic/vocational training place at higher secondary level) (Beicht, 2011; Häfeli et al., 2015). Recent studies perceive this definition of success as too narrow and not sufficiently actor-centred. Therefore, they further take into account subjective educational/vocational success indicators, that focus on the individual perception of this achievement (satisfaction, educational/vocational fit, self-efficacy) (Kamm, 2019; Neuenschwander & Nägele, 2014; Shockley et al., 2016; Stalder & Lüthi, 2020). Characteristics that are frequently taken into account to operationalize subjective educational success at upper secondary education in a dual system are: satisfaction with education/training, educational/occupational self-efficacy, commitment with profession/school, and educational/vocational fit (Abele et al., 2016; Neuenschwander & Nägele, 2014). This definition is not conclusive and it is of great interest to have an inductive perspective to re-evaluate it. This holds even more with respect to parental aspirations underlying different definitions of success.

### 2.2 Measurement Methods

To shed more light on how parental aspirations influence successful pathways of the second generation with low SES in Switzerland, we use the second cohort of TREE2 (with a nationally representative initial sample of  $n=8,429$ ). TREE2 is a yearly longitudinal follow-up of the AES 2016 (assessment of the attainment of educational standards) sample of compulsory school leavers. It includes comprehensive information on respondents' school situation (e.g., type of requirement track, mathematics test scores), family characteristics and resources (parents' level of education and their occupation, economic resources, etc.) and educational aspirations of parents.

To have a closer look on the mechanisms behind parental educational aspirations, qualitative data of the TREE in-depth study PICE ( $n=71$  qualitative interviews with TREE2 respondents, average age of 20 and  $n=48$  of their parents) provide us with an individual perspective on educational success. The qualitative sample includes 1) students who had been successful against the odds along their educational pathways (attending advanced or high requirement tracks at lower secondary level and who undertook mostly general education or VET at upper secondary level) and 2) one of their parents (Swiss or migrant) with a modest social origin (non-tertiary educated and low SES). The interviews are analysed following a structuring content analysis.

For the quantitative analyses, we measure objective educational success one year after the end of compulsory education ( $\sim 16$  years,  $n=7,971$ ) defining a successful educational pathway

as entering either general education or a vocational baccalaureate<sup>4</sup> which allows the direct access to general tertiary education. In the analysis, we control for individual and familial characteristics such as gender or social origin and for previous educational outcomes as competences and institutional tracking; previous research has shown its importance in the Swiss context (Gomensoro & Bolzman, 2015; Hupka-Brunner & Kriesi, 2013). We use regression analysis to assess parental aspirations of the most important low-SES migrant groups and their relation to objective and subjective educational/vocational success.

In this study, we compare Swiss native students with second generation students, defined as students who were born in Switzerland or who arrived at the beginning of kindergarten and who have two parents born abroad.

### 3 Parental Aspirations and Educational Success

In the following chapter, we will answer the hypothesis if *high parental aspirations in migrant families have a positive effect on the objective educational/vocational success of second generation young adults at upper secondary school (H1)*. In the second part, we qualitatively assess the definition of success by migrant and Swiss parents and their children in more depth, to understand their individual/familial conception of success underlying parental aspirations.

#### 3.1 The Relationship Between Parental Aspirations and Objective Educational Success

Our descriptive results confirm that, as in many other countries, migrant parents express higher educational aspiration levels for their children compared to Swiss parents (see Table 1). In our case study, the differences are especially important since several groups (particularly Portugal, Turkey, Balkans and Sri-Lanka) have a more modest socioeconomic status and parental education levels compared to Swiss families. Below, we investigate if higher parental aspirations in migrant families transform into higher educational success and into an “immigrant paradox”.

**Table 1**

*Parental educational aspiration for their children by country of origin*

	Don't know/no opinion about it	Want me to complete a VET programme	Want me to go to university	n
Swiss native	29%	47%	24%	5844
2G Italy Spain (Greece)	16%	37%	48%	140
2G Portugal	22%	36%	42%	221
2GTurkey	7%	39%	55%	112
2G Balkans (Albanian countries)	14%	38%	48%	286
2G Balkans (others)	18%	43%	39%	229
2G Sri-Lanka	15%	31%	54%	129
2G Other countries	25%	22%	53%	536

(2G=Second generation; reported by the young adult at the end of lower secondary level)

To answer the research question on the role of high parental aspirations in migrant families for objective success (measured by the type of education undertaken one year after the end of compulsory school), we carry out two multinomial logistic regression models. In the first model, we show the difference in the type of education undertaken at upper secondary level between Swiss native students (reference) and students with a migration background while controlling

<sup>4</sup> In Switzerland, there are two major possibilities to achieve a vocational baccalaureate: BM1, an integrated VET option with additional classes to obtain the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate at the end of training and BM2, where young adults attend baccalaureate classes after finishing VET. According to the sample, we can only integrate BM1 students, which make around half of the total vocational baccalaureate (BFS, 2018).

for diverse potential moderating factors.<sup>5</sup> Model 2 includes all these factors, adding the parental aspiration, reported by the young adult at the end of lower secondary level. The model statistics (Table 2) show that both models are statistically significant ( $\text{prob} > \chi^2 = 0.000$ ). The models suggest integrating parental aspiration as an explaining coefficient, as the log likelihood decreases for the second model. Furthermore, the difference of 6283.623 in BIC' strongly supports model 2.

**Table 2**  
*Multinomial logistic regression on t1 educational status*

Model 1	Model 2	Difference
(sex, language region, math competence and track attended at the end of compulsory school, parental education and HISEI)	(all variables of model 1 PLUS parental aspiration)	
N = 7'889	N = 7'889	
Wald Chi2 = 1930.99 ( $\text{prob} > \chi^2 = 0.000$ )	Wald Chi2 = 1878.46 ( $\text{prob} > \chi^2 = 0.000$ )	
Log likelihood full model = -67749.242	Log likelihood full model = -64567.051	3182.191
BIC' = -64019.676	BIC' = -70303.299	-6283.623

Given the focus of this paper, the included covariates in the model will not be discussed in depth<sup>6</sup>. To test our hypothesis, we take a closer look at the regression coefficients for different groups of second generation students and examine how they differ between Model 1 and Model 2 compared to the Swiss native students. For this purpose, we compare the average marginal effects (AME) and confidence intervals for each group and educational track in Figure 1 below.

If we look at the Swiss and migrant groups regarding the type of education one year after the end of compulsory school some differences reveal between the first and the second model. Part of the differences between Swiss natives and migrant groups can be attributed to parental aspirations.

For young adults who, at the age of ~16 years, are not in certifying education and training we see no significant effects for the second generation and few differences between the two models. The picture gets more interesting if we look at VET attainment: By adding parental aspirations we notice a reduction of the difference compared to natives, meaning that high parental aspirations prevent different migrant groups to attain VET. This is true for Portuguese, Turkish and Sri-Lankan young adults, while there are no significant differences for the second generation from Italy/Spain and both Balkan groups that are quite similar to the native group. There are no significant differences for attaining a vocational baccalaureate when we control for parental aspiration. On the contrary, there are significant differences regarding general education for the Portuguese and both Balkan groups when adding parental aspirations, meaning that high parental aspirations make them undertake more often this type of education.

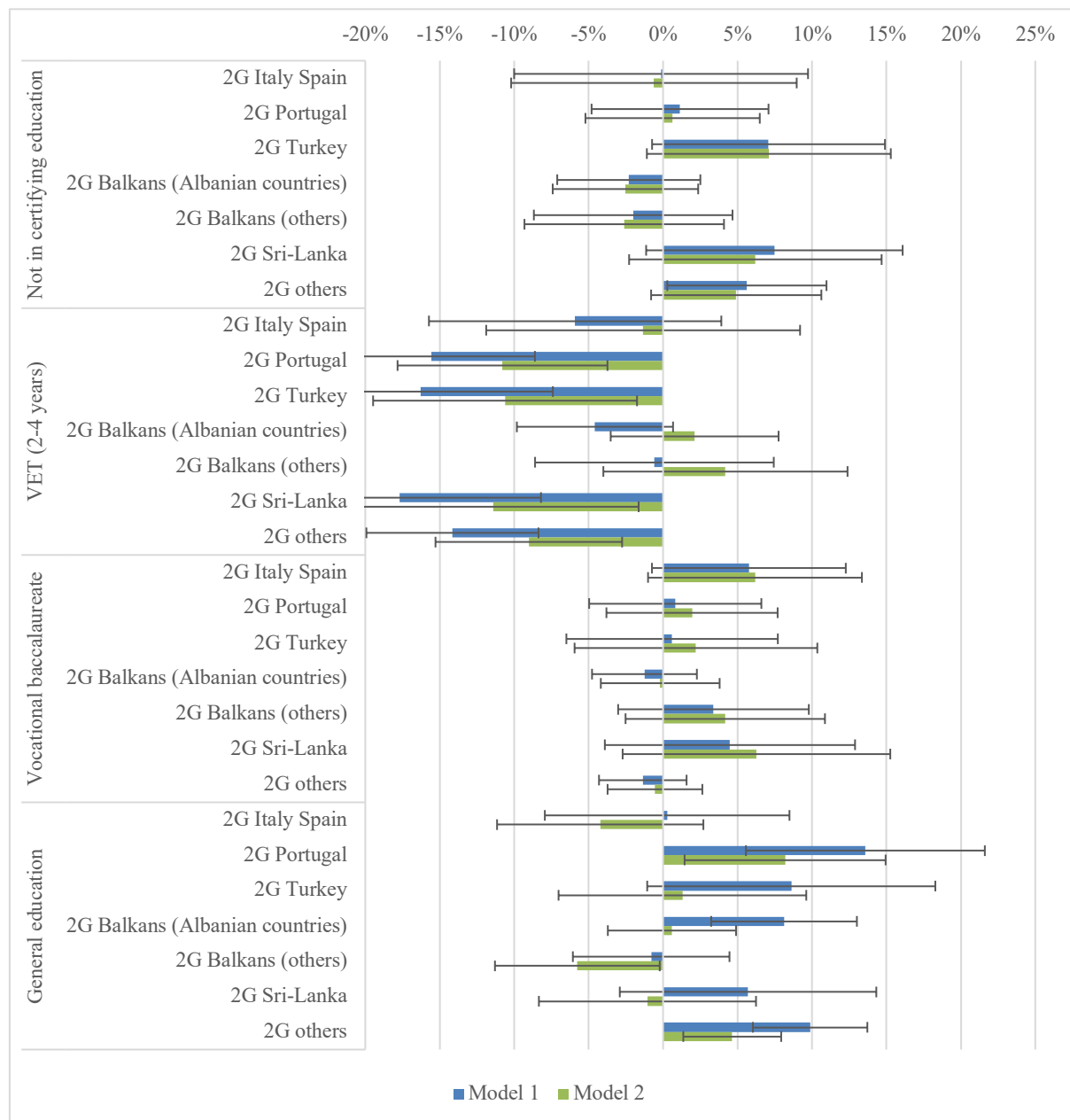
To sum up, parental aspirations can be considered an explanatory factor if we look at attaining different types of education at upper secondary level. To test our hypotheses, we analyse the differences of regression coefficients for the migrant groups in more detail: high parental aspirations serve as a pushing factor for attaining higher educational tracks at the upper secondary level for some of the second generation. This is especially true for the second generation of Portugal, Turkey, the two Balkan groups and Sri Lanka as well as for the first generation for all countries, while the coefficient for the second generation of Italy/Spain is not significant.

<sup>5</sup> Sex, language region, math competence and track attended at the end of compulsory school, parental education and HISEI.

<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there are significant differences for some of the covariates for each and between the two models.

**Figure 1**

*Average marginal effects (and confidence intervals [5%]) of upper secondary education attended by students' migration background (reference: Swiss native)*



Next, we have a deeper look at the definition of educational success by young adults and their parents of the second generation migrant groups and natives who mostly attain general education or VET with high requirements. This can help to understand the relation between parental aspiration and educational success observed above.

### 3.2 The Individual Definition of Educational Success

One possible explanation for the group differences regarding parental educational aspirations identified in the previous chapter could lie in ways in which different groups define educational success. Therefore, we now focus on the definition of educational success of young adults and their parents. Based on the qualitative data of the PICE project the following inductive aspects of the individual definitions of educational success appeared in the material:

- **Performance-oriented:** 1. Good grades in education, 2. Do your best (own capacity)
- **Output-oriented:** 1. Tertiary A degree, 2. Employability/completion of apprenticeship, 3. Education creates opportunities, 4. Best/highest education (system options)
- **Process-oriented:** 1. Matching education/training – skills/interests, 2. knowledge acquisition, 3. Linear path of education, 4. Continuing education/lifelong learning
- **Occupation-oriented:** 1. Good /sufficient income, 2. Job satisfaction, 3. Social relevance, 4. Job security
- **Individual:** 1. Good work-life balance, 2. Build a social network, 3. Overcoming challenges, 4. Achieve own goals, 5. Many roads lead to success

Not surprisingly, we find the dominant meritocratic logic of educational success in society and academia to be one of performance and output as well in the data (Dietrich et al., 2013). The first two inductive definitions **performance-oriented** and **output-oriented** are thus in line with the theoretical definition of *objective* educational/vocational success (Häfeli et al., 2015). While performance-oriented points at the process (having good marks respectively doing the best that one can by taking account one's capacity), the second is targeted to an output (diploma, degree, opportunities). Nevertheless, the inductive subcategories of **output-oriented** adds the importance of vocational education and training in the Swiss education system as “employability / completion of apprenticeship” underlies a conception of success by a vocational pathway. Except this last aspect of an output-oriented definition of educational success, this definition is more pronounced amongst Non-EU students (Balkan, Turkey, Sri-Lanka), to a somewhat lower degree in families from the EU (Italy/Spain, Portuguese) and least in Swiss families. Non-EU families mostly define educational success as attaining a university degree or attaining the best/highest education. The output-oriented definition referring to VET is more pronounced in native families. This is in line with former research showing that migrant parents and their young adults have a more pronounced tendency for academic achievement, while Swiss parents and their young adults tend to value vocational education and training as equal, especially if they have completed it themselves (Cattaneo & Wolter, 2013; Kost, 2018).

Next to this, **processual** and **occupation-oriented** understandings of educational success, especially matching education/training with skills/interest and job satisfaction are closer to the theoretical definition of *subjective* success (see Neuenschwander & Nägele, 2014). These two aspects are the ones most mentioned in the interviews and can be considered as having a high importance for the young adults and parents interviewed. If we look at group differences “continuing education / lifelong learning” seems to be a mainly Swiss understanding of educational success. As we see in the quotations, this could be explained by the frequently propagated slogan “*kein Abschluss ohne Anschluss*” (no educational qualification without the possibility for further training) (Pfister et al., 2015; Spellenberg, 2001) that Swiss parents and young adults have internalised.

Sabine: Well, you have to do something for yourself/ I don't think there's good and bad as long as you're doing something (.) and you're always continuing your education. So, from the moment you stop on the spot (.) the successful educational path stops, so to speak? But (.) if you keep going and it doesn't matter what you do (.), I think it's neither good nor bad.

The quote of Sabine, a Swiss young woman, reveals an idea of a dynamic understanding of educational success that can change over time (due to one's career). Furthermore, there are other aspects that focus on the importance of stability and reliability in working life (good /sufficient income, job security, linear path of education). Likewise, subcategories point to an idealistic/philanthropic understanding of success, such as gaining knowledge, lifelong learning or

doing something that has social relevance. In the words of Sofia, a parent from Portugal, this would mean:

Sofia: Academic success for me is (.) if you have a hunger for knowledge and are able to satisfy it. If you don't have a hunger for knowledge? Well, then/ you won't feel a satisfaction if you can quench it. But if you have one and are able to satisfy it through school? Then it is a success for you.

So educational success is understood as fulfilling one's hunger for knowledge focussing on the process, in opposite of arriving a certain output/outcome.

A last alternative understanding of success came together in the bundle **individual**. Most important is the notion of "achieving your own goals" independent of educational certificates or pathways. This is more pronounced for families from non-EU countries (Turkey, Balkans, Sri Lanka) as we see in the citation of Mila, a young woman of a Sri Lankan family.

Mila: I think you can be successful in every educational path if you simply do what you like and if you are fulfilled by the education, and you also achieve your goal, so if you can strive for your goal with this education.

This sub-category shows the relevance of individual goals, challenges, networks that go beyond a hierarchical understanding of educational pathways and that are defined highly subjectively. So, the educational aim differs from a societal definition of high/low and from what research commonly does, for example by taking into account an ISCO-Classification (International Labour Organization, 2012). The path is less important than the goal, as the sub-category "many roads lead to success" pointedly states. This should not be understood as that the young adults do not know what they want to achieve. On the contrary, the aim is very clear and they integrated adaptive strategies to arrive and even overcome (systemic) barriers:

Ella: It's a successful career, even if at one point you had to repeat or if at one point you thought of giving up or whatever. If you're here today, it's thanks to everything you've done. And so I think for me, in any case, it's a successful trajectory no matter what we do.

In the representative citation of Ella (young woman from Italian parents) we see that success includes the idea to overcome obstacles that were imposed by the educational system (had to repeat a grade). This might be a hint on the permeability of high aspirations for second generation youth even if the achievement is less favourable.

To sum up, there is a tendency that the understanding of educational success has a slightly different meaning for Swiss parents and young adults than for migrant parents and their children, whereas the first group tends to give more credit to VET and lifelong learning as the second. Especially Non-EU families define educational success more often with a connotation of achieving a general education pathway (output-oriented) and its own goals (individual). Nevertheless, professional oriented understandings of success, as "matching education/training to skills/interest" or "job satisfaction" are of high importance for all groups.

#### **4 Conclusion: The Definition of Educational Success and Its Interplay With Parental Aspirations**

Adding to the literature about the so-called "immigrant paradox" (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017) stipulating that children of immigrants outperform native peers when taking into account social background, in this paper, we have focused on the interrelation between parental aspirations and educational success at upper secondary level in Switzerland. High parental aspirations can



be understood as a protective factor for some second generation groups to attain education with higher requirements at upper secondary level. This is especially true for young adults from Portuguese, Balkan, Sri Lankan and Turkish families, while there is no difference for young adults from Italian/Spanish families. If we consider the high requirement tracks at upper secondary education, we see no significant differences between the groups for vocational baccalaureate but for general education.

One potential explanation is migrants' preference for general education (Cattaneo & Wolter, 2013); this also reveals in the group-specific definitions of educational success in the qualitative data. Our data suggests an interplay between the definition of success and parental aspirations. For the targeted group (successful young adults with families of low socioeconomic status and non-tertiary educated parents) the identified differences between groups could add to answer how parental aspirations enable second generation youth to "succeed against the odds". We see that some migrant groups (especially non-EU) have a strong notion of success towards performance and outcome. This is less the case for the Swiss interviewees who are more VET-oriented and have a processual understanding of success (lifelong learning, "many roads lead to success").

Overall, the definition of educational success via attaining a high demanding upper secondary school is too narrow when looking at the variety of further definitions by parents and young adults. Especially subjective indicators of success represent an important gap in many existing studies (Shockley et al., 2016). Our mixed-method design speaks in favour of integrating a broader definition of success, as it helps to better understand their interrelation with parental aspirations. A plural definition of success seems especially important for research on success of immigrant parents and their descendants, as Santagati (2021) points it out as well. This helps to reveal group differences, which might explain parental aspirations and their interrelation with success.

Our paper has some important limitations. We have focused on parental aspirations as one possible explanative factor for the immigrant paradox-hypothesis. In the PICE project, we consider the interplay between aspirations with resources and strategies as further important aspects, which is highlighted as well by other research (f.e. Schoon et al. 2021). A further limitation results from the definition of the sample in the qualitative part. The definition of success corresponds to that of families with high performing young adults. It would be interesting to find out if there are differences to low performers. A final limitation concerns the context-bound nature of the concept of success. Switzerland, with its dual system and high VET participation, can be considered a special case when we talk about educational success at upper secondary level. It would be interesting to compare this case with other countries and different school to work transition types (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Smyth et al., 2001).

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