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CLASSED CHOICES:

Young people's rationalities for choosing post-16 educational tracks

by *Aina Tarabini, Judith Jacovkis, Alejandro Montes**

Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between educational tracks and social class, focusing on the reasoning behind the choices made by young people. The analysis is conducted in Barcelona (Spain), where upper-secondary education starts at 16 years of age and is segmented into two tracks (academic and professional). The analysis employs a mixed-method design based on a survey of 1,318 students in the first year of upper-secondary education and 38 in-depth interviews with middle class and working class young people from both educational tracks. The results explore the differences and similarities in young people's discourses when explaining their choices as more or less naturalized processes or as guided by future options. The meanings and realizations that both processes acquire among young people of different social classes help to further understand the nexus between choice, tracks and the (re)production of social inequality.

Keywords

Educational choices; educational transitions; social class; tracking.

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

The sociological literature has repeatedly highlighted the socially situated nature of educational choices (Archer, Hasall and Hollingworth, 2007; Tarabini and Ingram, 2018) and the importance of analyzing them as a result of complex processes of negotiation between opportunity structures and social actors' frameworks of meaning and interpretation (Evans, 2007). As Reay (2018) states, it is important to realize that rather than being made in a vacuum, educational choices are part of broader processes in which power structures produce and reproduce social inequalities. These structures, in turn, are internalized by individuals, generating dispositions, identities and action logics that lead to cognitive and subjective frames of choice (Ball *et al.*, 2002). It is in the interaction between objective opportunity structures and subjective dispositions (or *habitus*) that different horizons for action are generated as a definition of the limits of what is thinkable and on the basis of which educational choices are made (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

The segmentation of education systems into different tracks is one of the main factors explaining the processes of social reproduction through educational choices (Seghers, Boone and Van Avermaet, 2019). In fact, most education systems are organized around some kind of division between academic and vocational education (Shavit and Müller, 2000; Nylund, Rosvall and Ledman, 2017) that correlates to the social composition, functions and forms of pedagogic and curricular provision of each track (Tarabini and Jacovkis, 2021).

The Spanish education system in particular (the context in which the study presented herein is conducted) is organized as a comprehensive structure throughout primary education (6-12) and lower-secondary education (12-16, compulsory). It is only from upper-secondary education (16-18) that the system is separated into two clearly differentiated tracks: academic and vocational. Previous research in this field has shown that both in Spain and in other tracked educational systems, social class is a fundamental variable for explaining the social composition of those systems (Nylund, 2012).

Our analysis starts from this evidence and aims to further explore the relationship between educational tracks and social class by focusing on the logics, narratives and rationales behind young people's choices.

¹ This article has been written within the Spanish National R+D Project 'EDUPOST16', developed in Barcelona and Madrid for the 2016-2020 period. (Ref. CSO2016-80004P. PI Aina Tarabini. <http://www.edupost16.es/en>)

As we will see, these logics are generated by the relationships between social class and educational tracks in young people's mind-sets and practical senses. And this produces horizons for action that, as noted by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), are segmented. Moreover, we understand that this segmentation is not only reflected in the upper-secondary tracks that young people of different social classes choose but also, and above all, in the ways they explain those choices, their meanings and their implications in terms of the reproduction of social inequality.

The paper presents, in the first section the theoretical background of the analysis. The second section explains the methodological approach and specifies the fieldwork undertaken. The third section presents the analysis of the young people's rationales to choose the upper-secondary track. The final section reflects on the relationships between choice, tracking and the (re)production of social inequality.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH: SOCIAL CLASS, EDUCATIONAL TRACKS AND CHOICE

Our theoretical approach combines two main lines of research. On the one hand, the analysis of educational choices, above all through the development of Bourdieu's theory and his concepts of capital, field and *habitus* (we include here Hodkinson and Sparkes' theory on careership and their notions of horizons for action and pragmatically rational decision-making); on the other, the study of educational tracks and forms of differentiation at school (specifically but not only vocational education and training – VET) based on class relations and dynamics (Dupriez, Dumay and Vause, 2008; Nylund, Rosvall and Ledman, 2017). The articulation between the analysis of educational choices and the structural and institutional factors in which they are inserted helps to shed further light on social reproduction in the transition from lower to upper-secondary education.

As shown by several Bourdesian studies (Ball *et al.* 2002; Ingram, 2018; Reay, 2018) any choice process, be it of a school, track or subject, must be viewed within the framework of specific fields of action and relation, which have their particular internal logics and rules. This is also suggested by Hodkinson and Sparkes when they state that «career decision-making can only be seen as part of such interactions in the field» (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997: 37). Within each field, different relationships of power and privilege are configured on the basis of the capital structure that each individual possesses. Hence, in the transition

from lower to upper-secondary education, the financial, social, cultural and symbolic capital of young people and their families will determine the available choice opportunities (Seghers, Boone and Van Avermaet, 2019). Moreover, each field defines a choice-set that is conditioned by historical, political, socio-economic and institutional factors.

Cultural capital plays a central role in explaining the unequal conditions in which young people of different social classes deal with the processes of school choice in general and the choice of educational tracks in particular. Said capital provides, according to Gale and Parker (2015), the archives of experience required to define educational choices and aspirations and successfully navigate the education market. These archives are materialized as privileged information about the field of transition; familiarity with the codes to make sense of what is taken for granted in choice processes; and a different and unequal capacity to articulate and pursue aspirations.

Furthermore, the more segmented the field of transition, the greater the weight of cultural capital on the processes and results of educational choice. As Ingram and Tarabini (2018) point out, young people's educational choices need to be viewed as the result of a complex amalgam of systemic, institutional and subjective factors. Specifically focusing on systemic factors, the authors stress the importance of aspects such as the structure of education systems, the range of different training options, the teaching cultures of different educational stages and the institutional prestige of different tracks as key elements for understanding the transition opportunities within the education system and towards the labor market. These structures not only configure different transition opportunities for young people from different social backgrounds, but also shape ideas about 'normalized' tracks, and project images of success and failure onto their processes of educational choice.

In this regard, although most education systems stratify their students in some way or other into tracks and streams, the type and intensity of this segmentation varies substantially from country to country. International evidence shows that the earlier tracking is implemented, the greater the correspondence between educational tracks and social origin (Dupriez, Dumay and Vause, 2008). Likewise, research suggests that the reproduction of class structures in transition processes is greater when there is a greater division between the pedagogical and curricular provision of academic and professional tracks (Nylund, Rosvall and Ledman, 2017). In the Spanish context, which is based on a sub-protective transition regime (Walther, 2006),

transition from lower to upper-secondary education is characterized by major delimitation between academic and vocational tracks, which corresponds in turn to marked segmentation of the labor market, a limited history of VET and high numbers of school leavers at the end of comprehensive secondary education (Tarabini and Jacovkis, 2020). It is, therefore, a highly relevant context in which to explore the articulation of different forms of segmentation in the educational transitions of young people.

Moreover, as Hodkinson and Sparkes state, segmentation of the curriculum into tracks is not only a response to official division processes but also «draws on and reinforces the sub-culturally-derived habituses of those involved» (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997: 36). Hence, in choice and transition processes, young people project and define their own identity (Cuconato and Walther, 2015); and define, distinguish and (re)signify themselves in relation to others (Reay *et al.*, 2001). Young people's class *habitus* affects their choice of educational track in the form of a 'practical sense' of what is perceived as appropriate and adequate for 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990); is expressed through a shared sense of perception, self-classification and self-exclusion; and is projected onto emotions and feelings that go beyond purely rational or instrumental aspects. Choices, therefore, are as Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) put it, more pragmatic than systematic. A pragmatism that cannot be separated from the family context, culture and life stories of young people; that is constructed from interaction with others; and which explains why educational choices are often little more than matters of 'non-choice' (Ball *et al.*, 2002).

3. METHODOLOGY

The analysis follows a two-stage logic. We first explore the results of a questionnaire answered by 1,381 students at the first year of their upper-secondary education, both in the academic track (697 cases, 52.9% of the sample) and in VET (621 cases, 47.1% of the total). The questionnaire addressed four main topics: 1) socio demographic, familiar and school characteristics of the students; 2) educational trajectories and experiences; 3) choice process and conceptions of different modalities of upper-secondary education; and 4) future expectations and aspirations. In this article we only analyze those results related to the reasons for choosing upper-secondary studies according to social class and the chosen educational track. This analysis provides an

overview of the distribution of students by track and identifies the main reasons they attribute to their choice. These reasons, in turn, are the starting point for the qualitative analytical strategy.

Second, then, a qualitative analysis has been performed to improve our understanding of the reasons for choosing an educational track, as described by young people from different social classes. The initial qualitative sample consisted of 68 young people enrolled in the first year of upper-secondary education in 7 high schools in Barcelona². The sample of the students was based on a maximum variation model that combined four main criteria: social class, gender, migrant background and upper-secondary track. From the purposes of this article, we excluded from the initial sample those students who were either not part of the middle class or the working class, or who had changed track or dropped out of school early. The final sample contains 38 students (19 in VET and 19 in the academic track; 26 from working classes, 12 from middle class backgrounds³).

The main purpose of the mix-method design, following a sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2018), is the complementarity between the quantitative and the qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem. Through the questionnaire we aim at providing a general picture about the relation between social class and upper-secondary choice, whilst the interviews will contribute to further illustrate, clarify and deepen in this relationship.

² Questionnaires and interviews were conducted within a sample of 7 intensive case studies developed during a period of two years (February 2018 - February 2020). The case studies included more than 70 interviews with principals, coordination staff and tutors, plus plenty of informal meetings and observations that allowed building a trust relationship within each school. Delving into the details of the selected schools goes beyond the length and scope of this article but they were all selected based on a purposeful sample that combined homogeneous and maximum variation criteria. The common criterion was the provision of the full range of secondary education (lower-and upper-secondary, both academic and vocational). The diversity criteria combined the ownership (public and private), the social composition (middle class and working class' school social intake) and the modalities of the supply (including 'typical' and 'exclusive' modalities of upper-secondary supply).

³ Students' social class is categorized according to the occupation and the educational attainment of their families. Even if there are class fractions within the middle and the working classes, for the purposes of this article we are not making internal differences among them. Middle class students are those whose families have achieved a relatively good economic position by working as small managers, specialized technicians or highly skilled professionals and who have accumulated relevant amounts of legitimized capital. Working class students' families maintain much more fragile and precarious relations with the labor market and have low levels of dominant cultural capital, economic capital and social capital at their disposal.

4. RESULTS

The results of this article address the way the social class of young people moving from lower to upper-secondary education affects their choice of educational track. We first present a descriptive analysis of the distribution of the students who took the questionnaire by educational track, social class, and the reasons for their choice. We then explore the differences and similarities between the discourses of middle class and working class students when describing their choices as more or less naturalized processes or guided by future options.

The results of the questionnaire reflect a distribution by educational track that is clearly influenced by social class. Almost 70% of the middle class students have opted for the academic track, while for working class students the figure is below 40%. Table 1 shows the reasons for choosing an educational track according to social class.

Table 1. Reasons for choosing a track according to social class and track⁴

		Future	Personal fit	Prestige	Taken for granted	Family influence	Teacher guidance	Work	Ability	Ease
Middle class	Acad.	75%	51%	23%	29%	15%	14%	14%	5%	1%
	VET	48%	69%	5%	5%	3%	12%	9%	25%	22%
Working class	Acad.	70%	44%	18%	25%	21%	21%	15%	10%	1%
	VET	46%	60%	7%	9%	2%	15%	11%	18%	17%

Source: the authors.

As shown in Table 1, regardless of social class or track, the main reasons behind young people’s choices are the future options offered by their chosen track and their personal fit with it. Although the percentage responses for both tracks are lower among the working class than among the middle class, the patterns are very similar. However, the academic track is the one to which the greatest prestige is attributed regardless of social class, and is the one that is chosen most

⁴ The questionnaire had a closed question design with a phrasing of the potential options such as: ‘because of the future it offers’; ‘I has more prestige’; ‘It was my parents recommendation’, etc. In Table 1 these sentences have been synthetized to provide better visibility.

automatically ('Taken for Granted'⁵). Families and teachers seem to have a slightly greater weight in defining the choices of working class students than they do for middle class ones; and family influence is more inclined towards the academic track, regardless of social class. The choice of the track by specific work reasons is higher in the academic track for both social classes, even if the working classes slightly attributed a higher value to VET to access the labor market. Finally is higher the percentage of middle class students who chose VET because they believe 'they are not academically ready for anything else ('Ability'), and both the middle and the working class students assume that VET is more easy than the academic track.

In the following sections we address these elements by grouping them into two large dimensions of analysis. We first analyze the characteristics of the choices that form part of the hegemonic mind-set of each social class and how they naturalize their choices through arguments of prestige, personal fit, taken for granted decisions, individual ability and supposed ease or difficulty of the tracks. Secondly, the arguments used to justify their choices in terms of the future are explored, either from a broader perspective that refers to the horizons for professional action ('Future options') or from a specific reference to the unequal opportunities offered by the different educational tracks ('Work reasons'). Teacher guidance and family influence are factors that reinforce the class nature of the upper-secondary choices and, as so, they will be approached transversally in the two sections.

4.1. *Naturalized choices*

In this first block of results we address the elements that help to explain the naturalization (in the practical sense, in Bourdieu's terms) of the choices of young people going into upper-secondary education in terms of social class. We ask whether choices that are considered automatic, i.e. that are not questioned or that barely appear in discourses as choices, have the same content for the working and middle classes.

The educational track is, for both middle and working classes, the track *par excellence*, the most prestigious and the one associated to 'normal biographies' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). However, the percentage of enrollment and the academic and emotional connection to the academic track are higher among young people from middle class

⁵ The written option for this question in the questionnaire was 'I never thought of anything else'.

rather than working class backgrounds. According to our analysis, the fact that the academic track is the natural choice of the middle class can be explained by at least three reasons: the unequal prestige attributed to the respective tracks, the possibilities that the middle class has to delay their decisions, and guidance practices during lower-secondary education.

Although, in general and regardless of social class, our interviewees view the academic track as more prestigious, their comments present differences in what the choice of each track represents and the way such perceptions of prestige materialize in their choices. As shown by Olga's quote, for the middle class the possibility of doing VET does not even come into consideration, and this is related to the image that the academic track represents in her mind.

I never considered doing FP [VET]. [...] I think people have a better opinion of Bachillerato. [...] In ESO [Compulsory Secondary Education] people always spoke of Bachillerato as if it's better, and I think that influenced me (Olga, MC⁶, academic track).

This prestige is linked to the subsidiary nature of VET and way it has long been viewed in Spain as a 'second-tier' option. Although efforts have been made in recent years to change this view, different factors make it hard for it to be recognized as an acceptable track among the middle class. In fact, the segmentation of horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) implies that not all possible tracks are viewed equally in young people's mind-sets. The articulation between the available opportunity structures and the class *habitus* explains why, in global terms, VET is not perceived as an acceptable or appropriate track for the middle classes, or at least as the first option. Indeed, institutional and systemic issues – i.e. greater entrance difficulties and limited places (Tarabini and Jacovkis, 2020) – and the prevalence of clearly academically oriented curricula and pedagogies during lower-secondary education influence young people's choices, especially among the middle class. Likewise, the segmented nature of the tracks permeates young people's narratives, generating a 'practical sense' of what is suitable for 'people like them' that evidences the role played by *habitus* (together with institutional and systemic factors) in the choice process.

As Delia's quote shows, the choice of academic track is discursively related to a capacity and taste that is perceived to be eminently individual and natural; and, at the same time, it is recognized that there

⁶ MC corresponds to Middle-Class and WC to Working-class.

is no content beyond that which is strictly academic during lower-secondary education. In fact, this absence, added to the unfamiliarity of the middle class with the kind of knowledge that is most typically required for the vocational track, helps to explain why even when middle class students identify a VET track that clearly meets their expectations, as in Francesc's case, they still opt for the academic track.

I don't know if I have a passion for mechanics because I'm good at languages and maths and have never looked any further. I've not looked at the options and though: "well, I'd like to be a hairdresser" (Delia, MC, academic track).

At first I wanted to do Bachillerato. I had my doubts but in the end I went for something scientific. I considered FP in nursing, which what I want to do professionally [...]. But I said no, I like challenges, and to be honest I'm very happy now (Francesc, MC, academic track).

Francesc's quote raises another relevant issue that seems to be much more present among the middle class than the working class: putting the choice of track (academic) ahead of the specific subject matter (scientific, social, humanistic, etc.). As well as the prestige of each track and how it affects objective and subjective choice structures, the material possibilities of the middle class, and the guidance they get from their teachers can also help to explain this strategy.

Various interviews suggest that the academic track is chosen as a way of buying time while deciding what to do. Naila's quote refers to it as a period of uncertainty in which schooling is continued while still thinking about what will come next. David's quote, on the other hand, suggests that the academic track (and not a particular choice of subject) is a strategy to delay specialization and thus «leave more doors open». In working class discourse, however, this notion of biding time is totally absent. Choices are made in certain contexts that are marked not only by such factors as familiarity and prestige, but also by notions of material possibility. As we shall see in the following section, these factors clearly have an unequal impact on young people depending on their social class. It is here where the capital structures available to different social classes exert their weight on the choice processes.

I didn't know what I wanted to do. [...] As I didn't know, I said, "well, I'll do Bachillerato as its more general". In the modality that I like the most, so I can see as I go along (Naila, MC, academic track).

It's daft to do FP, because there you get trained and then go on to work. And if you don't know what you're going to do it's a bit silly. So I thought: "Bachillerato" and I've got two more years to think about it (David, MC, academic track).

The last element that helps to explain why the academic track is considered the natural choice of the middle class mainly relates to the guidance given to students. On the one hand, in case of doubt, such students are usually advised to take the academic track. On the other hand, and in a complementary manner, middle class students have more information about the (complex) procedure for accessing VET, which tends to dissuade them from choosing it earlier than occurs among the working class. As the following quote from Sandro shows, both the guidance received and awareness of the restrictions on access to the vocational path reversed his initial choice and encouraged him to enroll for the academic track.

At first I was totally drawn towards FP, but I when I started looking into it more, there were too many options and I started having quite a lot of doubts about what to do. The teacher told me to go for Bachillerato [...]. There was so much information and the pass mark made it hard for me because I was failing quite a lot (Sandro, MC, academic track).

VET options, paradoxical as it might seem, help to reinforce the academic track as the 'normal' one among the middle class. On the one hand, as Paula's quote shows, among the middle class, choosing the vocational track is 'justified' by its increased prestige in recent times and because it is valid for university entrance. So, what makes VET a legitimate option is not so much its intrinsic value but the fact that it can be used to get to the same place (university) as the academic track.

Before it was like the people who did FP were the ones who couldn't do Bachillerato or a degree, and so they'd get a little FP certificate instead. But that's not the case now. I'd get to the same place but take an extra year (Paula, WC, VET).

Meanwhile, choosing VET may also appear to be a transgression if it occurs in a context where the academic track could have been accessed, but was rejected. This is shown by the following quote from Roger. Hence, either as a substitute for the academic track (Paula's example) or as a kind of transgression, middle class students always explain their choice to take VET in reference to the academic track, thereby helping to uphold the latter's status as the natural upper-secondary track.

Educational choices are of an eminently relational nature (Tarabini and Jacovkis, 2021).

[I was going to take Bachillerato] *but when I saw that option, it was like, "I really like make-up" and I don't care what they say, know what I mean?* (Roger, WC, VET).

Turning to how working class students make their choices, VET is not only more frequent, but is also more normalized. When it comes to deciding what upper-secondary track to follow, it is not that VET is taken for granted, but it is considered not only a feasible but also an acceptable option. The following quote from Laia shows how she turned down the 'normal' and socially prestigious track and opted, with her family's support, to take VET, even though that was not one of her original intentions.

I was always convinced that I wanted to do a scientific Bachillerato [...]. But as I had had such a tough time in the final years of ESO [Compulsory Secondary Education], I'd get stressed out if I went there. [...] My parents told me I should look for an FP. Of course, the idea I had in my head at first was one of "you get a good grade, Bachillerato; you get a bad one, you're no good, so do FP" (Laia, WC, VET).

Laia's quote reflects another central element of working class discourse: the weight of the difficulty attributed to the different educational tracks, and of their ability when deciding between tracks. On the one hand, difficulty still tends to be associated with the academic track. This discourages many young people from choosing it, so not only are they ruling out an option that might be available to them, but they also view VET as being easier, which may not actually prove to be the case. On the other hand, and in a complementary manner, there is a prevalent idea that VET is chosen when one is incapable of taking the academic track («They've always said that VET is for idiots», Virginia, WC, VET). Moreover, there is a feeling that VET is not about continuing to study: «*Well, they actually said that I could carry on studying, but I ended up having second thoughts and chose this*» (Pol, WC, VET). This notion is shared by the middle and working classes but, judging from the tracks that most of them tend to end up taking, it has very different impacts since, as we have seen, the former tend to follow the track for «people who study».

The difficulty attributed to the academic track and easiness associated to VET seem to be grounded on school and guidance

practices that reinforce this dichotomous and biased view (Bonizzoni, Romito and Cavallo, 2016). First, streaming by level during lower-secondary education⁷, and its impact on choices, appears much more frequently in working class rather than middle class discourses. The possibility of accessing the academic track is, for many young people, limited by their assignment to low-level streams at earlier stages of their education. This explains why the academic track is often not even an option for the working classes, not only in cognitive but also structural terms. A large part of the literature shows how the working class is overrepresented in low-level streams and this explains why it is materially and structurally impossible for these students to opt for an academic track. Omid, for example, never even considered the option of pursuing an academic track.

No, I didn't think about it. To be honest I wouldn't be any good at it. As I told the teacher, if I want to do Bachillerato I'd need to get into the intermediate stream; the bottom stream can't do Bachillerato (Omid, WC, VET).

Second, teacher guidance tends to offer fewer alternatives to struggling working class students than those offered to a similar kind of middle class student. As Amaia's quote shows, the academic track is discouraged as an option for working class students who struggle to pass lower-secondary education, but that does not seem to be the case with middle class students. On the other hand, as Albert points out, the best-performing students are encouraged to choose the academic track in order to have «a good future». We will return to the matter of the future in the following section.

I don't think they should say that. Teachers shouldn't say anything. They could have told me that I wasn't up to Bachillerato, because of my grades, but I was in a stifling atmosphere (Amaia, WC, academic track).

Someone in my class got 8 and 9 but wanted to do FP and the teachers said "you're a clever lad, why would you want to do FP?" (Albert, WC, VET).

The elements that characterize the natural choices of the working class tend to reinforce a more negative image of VET than that of the academic track. We note that, unlike the desirability of the academic track, VET is acceptable: it is chosen because one does not have the abilities required for the academic track, and because one's record and

⁷ Although formally comprehensive, lower-secondary education often recurs to practices involving streaming by levels, especially in the final years.

guidance during lower-secondary education recommend it. So what happens when young working class people choose the academic track? As we saw when middle class students make unconventional choices, when working class students pick the academic track, their arguments help reinforce the hegemonic choices within their social class.

On the one hand, Amaia was surprised to begin the academic track and find it was not as difficult as she had expected, which frames her choices in a context of individual ability rather than collective possibilities and limitations. It is not so much that she has a better assessment of her own ability but a lower one of the track (it's not that I am capable, but it's easier than they told me). Implicitly, then, it is acceptable for students to be classified on the basis of attributed abilities that, far from being neutral, are linked to what is considered valid and valued by the school institution.

Bachillerato is overrated. In fourth year [the last year of lower-secondary education] they'd say, "Bachillerato is very difficult". But it isn't that bad. OK, you have to study, but you can pass it if you want (Amaia, WC, academic track).

Meanwhile, the transgression represented by choosing the academic track despite being advised to enroll for VET refers again to what young people are considered to be or not be capable of doing. This is in contrast to what we saw with middle class 'transgressive' choices, which somehow suggests that students are wasting their potential when opting for VET.

But I had second thoughts. I said I didn't want to do VET and although my mum was on the headmistress's side, and the teachers were on the headmistress's side too [...]. I did what nobody thought I would choose to do. I chose Bachillerato (Darío, WC, academic track).

So, the type of discourses that explain choices, whether natural or unconventional, contribute to the hierarchical image of the tracks, and to an individualization and naturalization of young people's choices.

4.2. Choices guided by the future

While the previous section showed how young people from different social classes naturalize their educational choices based on arguments related to prestige, inertia and/or ability, in this section we will see what arguments they use to explain their choices in terms of the future,

exploring how that future is imagined, projected and materialized in a profoundly unequal way depending on social class.

The first element that emerges from the analysis of the interviews with young middle class people is that their expectations and aspirations are associated to liberal professions that are closely linked to university degrees. Thus, their choice of upper-secondary education track, and more specifically the academic track, appears to be a necessary and taken-for-granted step towards university entrance and maintaining the family's social position. On the contrary, their narratives suggest a clear relationship between the choice of a vocational track and access to less qualified segments of the labor market. María's quote exemplifies this idea. In her opinion, the academic track was the only possible option for maintaining her employment horizon.

I was quite sure that I wanted to do Law, there was no other option. So, if you know you want to be a hairdresser, you do VET. I didn't want to do that.
(María, MC, academic track).

In fact, the idea of choosing an educational track to ensure quick access to the labor market is totally absent from young middle class people's narratives, but as we shall see later, it is a central element of working class ones. As we have seen, for young middle class people the future inevitably involves academic continuity and going on to higher education. For them, VET is perceived as entailing the risk of downward mobility (Bourdieu, 1979), and if they can avoid it, it is not a risk they are willing to take. In terms of its different meanings, our analysis hints that this drop in class is viewed as a loss of both inter and intra-generational social standing (Peugny, 2009). On the one hand, young people from the middle class are worried that they will not achieve the equivalent social status to that of their parents; on the other, they express uncertainty about the risk of losing their social position or the difficulty holding down a stable job throughout their professional career. Faced with these uncertainties, which are so typical of the changes to society and labor of our time, middle class students choose the educational track that can best equip them for this uncertain future.

I wanted to do performing arts, a bit of dance, but I thought again and chose Bachillerato, partly because my parents were against the idea... "It's difficult, you won't find work, you'll struggle to get by". So in the end I chose audiovisual Bachillerato and we were all good with that (Pau, MC, academic track).

A second element to understand the role of the future in middle class narratives is linked to the maintenance of job expectations, even when people's initial plans change. When they realize that due to their academic performance they will probably not be able to access the job sectors that they had always imagined, they employ choice strategies that allow them to continue aspiring to employment in the liberal professions sector. These strategies usually involve taking the academic track options that are perceived as 'easier' or, as will be seen later, the more prestigious VET options. Francesc, however, didn't even change his choice of track. He simply opted for a labor niche that, with no loss of social prestige, is better adapted to his situation. Furthermore, as seen in the previous section, Francesc's professional target (nursing) would fit with the choice of a VET program that would qualify him to practice that profession. However, he still prefers the academic track because he assumes that it will open more doors for him in the future.

When I was small I wanted to be a surgeon, but I realized that would be very difficult. Then a doctor, but even that would be difficult for me. I've ended up as a nurse. Well, not as one, but wanting to be one (Francesc, MC, academic track)

In the case of young middle class people who opt for VET, we have already seen that they do so from a strategic logic that, underpinned by the mobilization of the capital available to them, will enable them to maintain their high employment horizons. So, after a process of systematic collection of information to find out which track would offer them the best future opportunities, middle classes students opt for a VET program that, in a very internally segmented sector, offers considerable prestige. As previous research has noted (Atkins, 2017; Tarabini and Jacovkis, 2020), VET is not only highly segmented compared to the academic track, but is also internally hierarchized, which helps to reinforce the logic behind middle class strategic choices and, therefore, the processes of social reproduction through educational choices. The tendency to segment education systems and school choice processes hence adopt a clearly two-way relationship.

As a result of this dual segmentation (in relation to the academic track and within VET itself) young middle class people who choose VET only consider options that, due to the kind of jobs they lead to, will enable them to maintain or improve their social position. As Bourdieu (1979) affirms, as a result of contemporary social changes, in order to maintain their social status, the most advantaged groups not only need to accumulate capital, but also need to be able to expend it in the most

strategic way in each social field. A change of direction towards new professions, such as characterization and sport, on the basis of VET is a strategy that the middle classes precisely use to conserve their place in the class structure.

When I finish this I was hoping to do VET, but not aesthetics and beauty, but makeup and characterization; and once I finish that, there's a really good course at a makeup school, and you come out there with a job. It's private and expensive [...]. So I'd have lower and upper-secondary and the course, and I think that would be enough to get me into what I want, which is characterization... movies, theatre, TV... as my father is lucky enough to know people on TV3 and Antena 3 (Roger, WC, VET).

Likewise, given the material or perceived impossibility of being able to take the scientific academic track, as shown by Paula's quote, the choice of a health VET is discursively legitimized as the best strategy to ensure successful employment and, at the same time, to develop one's personal tastes and skills.

I have always enjoyed the sciences. I think it has to do with my school experience because in science there's a practical part, when you get to touch things, and I like it. When they told me what you study on an assistant nursing VET course, I decided not to do Bachillerato. It was doing another two years of social science, Catalan, Spanish, English, all stuff that I'm not bothered about (Paula, WC, VET)

Moreover, when young middle class people choose VET, they do so, as we saw in the previous section, without renouncing a university horizon, which continues to be part of their future aspirations. So, unlike working class students who, as we shall see, choose VET because it can help to find employment quickly, the middle classes choose it as an 'alternative track' towards the same destination: university. In fact, it is because middle class youngsters still aspire to university that they are able to keep up the standards of their social class in terms of lifestyle and quality.

As we observed in the previous section, the choice of VET by the middle class is also related to their knowledge of the educational and employment options offered by the different educational tracks. They not only collect information from official sources, but also from informal social interactions – 'hot knowledge', as Ball and Vincent (1998) called it –, which puts them at a considerable advantage because, first, they are able to decipher the complex VET entrance procedure and, second, they are able to make the best possible decisions in terms of their professional future. It should be noted that although we said earlier that a part of the

middle class chooses VET as an alternative means to get into university, not all VET options lead directly to university degrees. Expansion on this matter would be veering too far from the objective of the article, but it seems clear that having adequate information about the VET options that can open the most doors in the future is undoubtedly a middle class strategy for maintaining status with regard to their educational choices. Marina's case exemplifies how the middle class utilize information when deciding between educational tracks.

In third year ESO [Compulsory Secondary Education] I went to the teaching fair, even though the school didn't encourage us to go, and I also accessed it through a website, and you could see each option and the professional opportunities they had; in the third and fourth years I was especially looking to find out more (Marina, MC, academic track).

Turning to the logic behind the choices made by working class students, their employment horizons suggest very different future scenarios. For these young people, access to the labor market seems to be a more pressing need and their imagined jobs do not necessarily require university entrance. Indeed, for them, access to VET and learning a profession, represents a 'quick' opportunity to improve (or not impoverish) their current socioeconomic conditions. The risk of downward mobility that we alluded to earlier therefore operates in a clearly different and unequal way for middle class and working class youngsters, both because of their mind-sets and their practical achievements. This coincides with the idea explored in the previous section that the working class views VET not only as a feasible option, but also an acceptable one. It is a suitable option for 'people like them'.

I chose electricity because of the work that comes after, because I have friends who've worked in it before and they told me that if I could study that, then it would open doors in the future (Pol, WC, VET).

In fact, the choice of VET fits with the immediate environment of working class youngsters, mainly because of the large number of friends, acquaintances and relatives who have followed the same educational track. This generates a stock of experience archives (Gale and Parker, 2015) that marks the difference between possible and reasonable options. For young working class people, VET is not only a reasonable option because of the employment opportunities it offers, but also because it fits materially and symbolically with their universes of reference.

Alexia's quote is most enlightening in this regard. She dreamed of studying Fine Arts and to do so she considered studying an artistic academic track option. However, art was not perceived as a professional sector with a future and less so for 'someone like her'. She ended up opting for a mechanics VET influenced by her father's tastes. Unlike young middle class people, for the working class a change to one's initial plans is associated with what is available in one's most immediate environment, and so the needs to be covered are too. This situation highlights the importance of the social and family context for constructing different and unequal vocations among young people of different social origin.

In fourth year ESO I was wondering what I was going to do. I first thought of Fine Arts, but then I said: "there's no future in that, art today doesn't..." So, I chose mechanics [...]. It came from my dad, because he loves cars. (Alexia, WC, VET).

While the majority option among working class youngsters, as we have seen, is VET, those who choose the academic track do so while maintaining the instrumental logic of being guaranteed access to specific training. Although the young working class people who choose the academic track also aspire to a place at university, their choices seem to be oriented towards the options that are considered 'easier', and in their narratives they emphasize the importance of not over-prolonging the time invested in their studies. Likewise, several young people express doubts about the choice, saying that in case of 'failure' they would choose to switch tracks to VET.

In my case, I chose a social Bachillerato because it's what opens most doors. In a scientific one I'd be doing retakes [...]. So I spoke to my parents and they told me to start, and if I found it too hard, no worries. Not everyone is cut out for the same thing, and I could go do something else (Amaia, WC, academic track).

Once again, knowledge of the educational and employment options offered by the different tracks helps to understand the framework in which the choices and future horizons of young people of different social classes are configured. Hence working class students frequently base their choices on the information available via official channels (mainly websites) and they do not get the 'hot knowledge' that the middle classes do (Van Zanten, 2009). This means they are unaware of

some of the implications of choosing one track or another, for example, in relation to the labor niches offered by different VET options.

Finally, it is important to highlight the role and influence exerted by the family and teachers when it comes to modeling the 'most suitable' future scenarios in the mind-sets of working class youngsters. As the questionnaire has shown, families and teachers seem to play a bigger role in the choices of working class students than in those of the middle class. In fact, the family plays a central role in restricting the choice processes of working class students to the extent that, rather than the existence of limited aspirations, it is precisely families that foster the profound effect of structural conditions on the possibilities for choosing, imagining and specifying future scenarios.

There are five of us at home, and at the moment my father is the one who's working. He told me I could do Bachillerato if I wanted but I should do VET so then I can work and do a bit to help at home (Albert, WC, VET).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article has been to further our understanding of the relationship between tracks and social class, focusing on the logic behind the choices made by young people with regard to upper-secondary educational tracks in Spain. The existing research in this field has shown evidence for the close relationship between the stratification of education systems and the reproduction of inequality in terms of social class (Nylund, Rosvall and Ledman, 2017; Shavit and Müller, 2000). Furthermore, the earlier the split into academic and vocational tracks, the more segmented they are, and the greater the correspondence between social, educational and labor structures (Dupriez, Dumay and Vause, 2008).

Likewise, research in the field of school choice has evidenced their social, relational and contextual nature (Tarabini and Ingram, 2018; Reay, 2018). Any choice process within the education system (or the educational field and its respective subfields in Bourdieu's terms) implies a mobilization of capital, networks, affections and aspirations that cannot be understood from a purely technical, instrumental or rational perspective. Rationality, as Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) claim, is pragmatically defined in the framework of contexts of opportunity that are simultaneously objective and subjective; structural and cognitive (Ball *et al.*, 2002).

Research in this field has also proved the relationship between the stratification patterns of education systems and the effects of school choice processes on the reproduction of social inequality (Seghers, Boone and Van Avermaet, 2019), i.e. the most institutionally segmented systems reinforce an interpretation of the logic behind these choices as a result of individual interests and abilities rather than as a product of specific opportunity structures. In turn, systems with the greatest margins for school choice encourage the social segmentation of educational options by seeking differentiation in order to attract different profiles of students. Overall, the articulation between segmented choice logics and the differentiation of the educational offer reveal the relational nature of choice processes at school (Tarabini and Jacovkis, 2020).

Our analysis provides new evidence to understand the dual segmentation of educational choices, by class and by track. It does so by analyzing how young people explain and give meaning to their processes and reasons when making their choices. The analysis was conducted in Spain, a formally comprehensive system up to upper-secondary education and a sub-protective transition regime (Walther, 2006). Specifically, a mixed method research study was designed based on two phases: in the first phase we have seen how young people of different social classes are distributed across the two upper-secondary education tracks and we have identified the main reasons that they attribute to their choices. In the second qualitative phase we have examined the differences and similarities between the discourses of middle and working class students when describing their choices as more or less naturalized processes or guided by future options. The main results of the analysis are as follows.

First, we have observed that the academic track is, for both the middle and working class, the educational track par excellence, the one that forms part of choices that are taken for granted. However, the naturalization of the academic track is manifested differently by the different social classes. This has profound implications in terms of the reproduction of social inequality. For the middle class, the automatic choice of the academic track is explained by the combination of symbolic and material possibilities that leads them to choose the most prestigious educational track. On the one hand, VET is not perceived as an acceptable or appropriate track for 'people like them' (Bourdieu, 1990) and, on the other, they are able to access the capital with which they can identify and sustain the best possible choice of academic track. It is also the middle class that has the most time to delay their

educational choices and that has the support of teachers who systematically guide them towards the most prestigious educational tracks (Bonizzoni, Romito and Cavallo, 2016). Moreover, when middle class students opt for VET, they do so from a logic of transgression that, paradoxically, helps to reinforce the idea of the academic track as the 'normal' one. In other words, if they do not take the academic track, it is not because they can't or do not recognize its value, but because of a process of self-affirmation of their own agency that associates that educational choice to personal requirement.

Second, the naturalized choices of the working class allow them to apply a practical sense through which VET is perfectly acceptable to 'people like them'. Moreover, rejection of the academic track by young working class people is often explained by the attribution of greater difficulty to the academic track and by students questioning their own ability to cope with the demands. As previous research has pointed out (Colley *et al.*, 2003), the learner identities of VET students are often configured, and this is especially so in the case of the working classes, from a lower-secondary education experience marked by low grades, fails, retakes and, on many occasions, assignment to remedial or low-level streams. This downgraded identity prevents them from aspiring to the academic track, which is socially and institutionally articulated in terms of closed social parameters within which only the 'most apt' can have a place. Furthermore, such educational experiences not only generate inclinations towards self-exclusion among working class youngsters, but also materially and structurally dissuade them from taking the academic track. That is why VET can be viewed as a 'non-choice' among these young people.

Third, and regarding future horizons (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), the analysis has revealed that the expectations and aspirations of young middle class people are aimed at liberal professions that are closely associated to university degrees. These ideas play a central role in explaining the choice of educational track. Based on a behavior aimed at avoiding any downward mobility at all costs, middle class youngsters choose the educational tracks and options that can offer them the best future opportunities. If they are unable to see out their initial plans, especially with regard to entrance to the academic track or some of the most prestigious VET options, they utilize their sources of information (Van Zanten, 2009), their contacts and their archives of experience (Gale and Parker, 2015) to ensure that, whatever they eventually do, they will uphold the status and differential nature of their educational choices.

Finally, the future horizons of the working class are shaped by the need to find employment as quickly as possible. While for the middle class the future is projected onto a distant, hazy horizon, for the working class it is part of the most immediate present. There is no future without work. And there is no time to indefinitely delay entry in the labor market. That is why for such young people the connection between educational track and employment plays such a central role in their choices. However, the high segmentation of the education system in which they move, together with their lack of capital, means that their choice strategies are materialized in profoundly different ways to those of the middle classes, and this has a major effect on their educational opportunities. This (among other factors) explains why it is the working and not the middle class that chooses less prestigious educational tracks, that is concentrated in educational sectors that will lead them to the most unstable jobs, and that often ends up opting for tracks that have no opportunities or future.

Overall, the article contributes to the existent literature on choice, tracking and social inequalities by proving that class differences are not only a matter of objective positions but also of incorporated and embodied dispositions in the selves. Class is about processes and relationships that combine material structures of inequality with diversity of personal experiences (Bathmaker *et al*, 2016). That way, the choice of an upper-secondary track is not only connected to the material possibilities it entails, but also a question of symbolic attributions; of complex senses of (dis)entitlement, (lack of) belonging and (dis)possession. Ensuring equal conditions for working and middle class' students to develop their educational trajectories implies a broader understanding of the impacts of class in all the domains of young people's lives and schooling experiences. Class is embedded in the grammar of the schooling, in the tracking of the system, in the valued knowledge of the school, in the social relationships outside of the school, in the neighbourhoods, in the feelings, in the selves. This generates radically unequal opportunities, both structural and subjective to choose Post-16 educational tracks and, overall, to ensure successful educational trajectories for all the students.

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