Internalizing Unequal Access to Higher Education in High School Students' Perspectives on Studying for the Baccalaureate Examination in a City in Northwest Romania

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Abstract: The present paper investigates the differences in how meaning is ascribed to studying for the Baccalaureate examination by 12th grade students attending a technological and theoretical track high school in Northwest Romania. Building on ten semi-structured interviews with high school students preparing for the Baccalaureate examination, the present paper argues that the unequal access to high quality academic education in high schools is internalized by students through the ways in which they relate to this exam. Technological and theoretical track students both aspire to attend higher education at some point after graduating. However, whereas theoretical track students view the Baccalaureate as a necessary step that will likely validate their learning efforts already confirmed through their previous educational pathways, technical track students view the Baccalaureate as a serious potential obstacle and major event that will determine their future educational and professional pathway and that makes their aspirational horizon appear uncertain. Students internalize the different preparation received and chances for passing the examination through the ways in which they relate to learning in preparation of the exam. Whereas theoretical track students discuss preparing for the exam as a positive emotional experience, negative emotions prevail in how students from the technological track discuss the same process. Moreover, whereas the aspirational horizons of theoretical track students seem clearly delineated and are discussed as being within their reach, the opposite is true for technological track students that view their academic future as desirable, yet uncertain, and who face pressure to seek paid employment soon after graduation. Our paper seeks to contribute to the debate surrounding the subjective dimension of the reproduction of socio-educational inequalities in the Romanian educational system.

Keywords: Access to higher education, educational inequality, high school tracks, students' meaning making practices, students' perspectives on learning**.**

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Introduction

Writing for the *Prospects* journal at the beginning of the 1980s, Romania-based sociologist of education Fred Mahler (1981) discussed the relationship between reproduction and social change in the Romanian education system in light of Romania's educational policies aimed at integrating education with production and research. In Mahler's view (1981), this policy could contribute to overcoming the school-related dynamics that led to the reproduction of social inequality through the unequal opportunities that students had upon graduation. Published in English in an international journal edited by the UNESCO, Mahler's position can be read as a reply from within state socialism to the widely circulating theory of cultural and social reproduction of inequalities through education of Bourdieu and Passeron (published in French in 1970). For Mahler, the Romanian education system of his time held the potential to overcome the reproduction of inequalities through, among other points, granting all high school graduates the right to access higher education. However, despite his declared optimism, he was cautious on the point of how successful this transformation was in practice, because as academic educational aspirations were increasing, technological high schools were becoming centers of negative selection in which students who did not perform well enough academically came to be placed. This negative selection of student participation in technological upper secondary education was for Mahler (1981) a transitory phenomenon that would in time be overcome, as long as the possibility for sitting the Baccalaureate examination remained open for all graduating upper secondary students irrespective of the track they had followed.

More than forty years onwards, we open with a short discussion of Mahler's thoughts, as he outlines features of state socialist educational policies that still haunt the system today, despite the rapid expansion of higher education immediately during the transition years (Eisemon et al, 1995). Despite this expansion, Romania remains one of the EU countries with the comparatively lowest levels of tertiary educational attainment (Eurostat, 2024).

According to Mulescu & Ruth (2021), the Romanian pre-university educational system is structured as follows: the early education (nurseries and kindergartens, ages 0 -6), followed by primary education (the equivalent of ISCED 1: ages 6 -11; grades preparatory – 4th grade), lower secondary education (or 'gimnaziu'; ages 11- 14; grades

5th to 8th), followed by upper-secondary education in theoretical, vocational or technological high-schools. (grades 9th – 12th /13th). Students are required to sit national examinations after 8th grade and the exam results heavily impact the possibility of accessing the high school of their choice. Students who score high grades in these exams go on to theoretical high schools (Miulescu & Ruth, 2021: 769). Students that graduate high school can in principle access higher education, provided they pass the Baccalaureate examination. The grading system operates with a scale from one to ten, where one is the lowest mark and ten is the highest mark. The Baccalaureate exam is considered passed if the average of the marks obtained in the three exam subjects is at least six and the student obtains a minimum mark five in each examination. Students who have been in vocational education for three years also have to attend the last two years of secondary education to take the Baccalaureate exam, as there is no alternative pathway into higher education[7].

Today pathways through and access to higher education are still riddled with socio-economic inequalities. Even though Romanian higher education facilitates a limited number of means-tested scholarships for socio-economically disadvantaged students, and a limited number of public funded places for Roma students and students with disabilities (Mihuț, 2022), additional living costs may push economically vulnerable students into dropping out of university (Bădescu, Sum & Mihuț, 2018:22).

However, the main driver of higher education-related inequalities is the unequal access to university education. The most significant barriers that still limit access to higher education are the high rates of school drop-out and the low rates of enrollment for the Baccalaureate examination (secondary school leaving examination), as well as the relatively low rate of passing the Baccalaureate examination (Mihuț, 2022: 35). Early school leaving disproportionately affects children and young people from poor families, rural areas, marginalized groups, including Roma children and young people (Popa, 2020).

In terms of the training tracks completed by students at secondary school level, data from a recent European Commission report (2023) shows that only just over half of

[7] Unlike in Romania, in the Finnish education system, students who complete vocational education without taking the national matriculation examination can also access higher education, as it is stated in the Law of Applied Sciences University no. 932/2014. This is possible without the national matriculation exam, but with the professional diploma. Thus, whether in secondary or vocational education, students have the possibility to attend university.

the students from technological secondary schools obtained the Baccalaureate diploma, gaining potential access to university education. On the other hand, the marks in this exam and, therefore, the chances of the student going on to higher education are the result of a combination of economic, social and geographical factors that are not widely publicized. The recent report, *Nonparticipation of High School Students in the Baccalaureate Exam* - June 2023 session, a research report released by the Ministry of Education (Ministerul Educaţiei, 2023a), highlights the myriad of factors that lead to Baccalaureate non-participation and restrict students' access to higher education. These include school absenteeism, difficulties with school transportation for commuter students, learning difficulties accumulated since secondary school, material and financial difficulties of the families and finally, their plans after graduation (Ministerul Educaţiei, 2023a). Unequal access of students to university education is therefore maintained and perpetuated by the unequal participation in the national Baccalaureate examination. However, it may also be perpetuated by the ways in which the students internalize their own positionalities in relation to this exam.

This form of assessment plays its full role in selecting and prioritizing students, highlighting the discrepancies between educational institutions, training pathways and students' access to higher education. At the same time, passing this exam is the only way that allows students to access university education (Ministerul Educaţiei, 2023a) and implicitly to continue their educational path. However, the inequality of opportunities for students to pass the Baccalaureate is supported by the current configuration of the upper secondary education system, but also by social factors. Thus, as not all students have equal chances to pass the Baccalaureate, the chances to access university education are also unequal.

Moreover, due to the high levels of educational inequalities of previous educational levels, the low educational attainment is unequally distributed. This is a product of a system that considers schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas as inefficient, whereas highly selective schools are viewed as efficient (Ţoc, 2018: 158). Furthermore, opportunities and performance are strongly correlated with the cultural capital of parents as visible in the number of books owned in a household (Botezat, 2019), the socio-occupational status of parents and the resources available to the school (Ţoc, 2016).

On a general note, the education system is one of the most important social stratification structures (Domina et al. 2017), which are defined as “social structures that divide people into categories" (Massey, 2007 apud Domina et al., 2017). From this perspective, the configuration of upper secondary education in Romania emphasizes the hierarchy of educational institutions, further developed at the level of the hierarchy of sections (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Within the Romanian education system, secondary and dual or vocational technological secondary education operate (Bocoș and Jucan, 2022). According to the law on pre-university education no. 198/2023, the tracks that segment the curriculum horizontally and on the basis of which the high schools operating in Romania are classified, are: theoretical, vocational and technological. In turn, each of these tracks is divided into profiles and specializations, which make it possible to differentiate even more sharply the educational paths followed by students with apparently similar schooling up to the end of the eighth grade. Depending on the grade obtained in the National Assessment that students take at the end of the 8th grade, they can choose which high school or VET school to attend. However, Gheba (2018) draws attention to the fact that the centralized student allocation mechanism "sorts" students into high schools according to the grade obtained, without taking into account other student characteristics. In addition, theoretical high schools are much more sought after because of the specializations they offer, while technological high schools end up being accessed by students who did not obtain grades high enough to enter a theoretical high school. One of the lines along which this unequal distribution of educational attainment happens is the rural/urban divide that is visible in consistently lower grade averages in National Assessment (an exam that is sat after the 8th grade, the results of which are used to rank students for high school entrance), as well as in enrolling in university after successful completion of the Baccalaureate examination (Florian & Țoc, 2020: 4-5).

Therefore, it can be said that the Baccalaureate examination is a larger-scale replication of the National Assessment that is nevertheless conducted on unequal grounds for the participating students. Formally, educational performance-based segregation has been explicitly prohibited through the *Ministry of Education Framework Order nr. 6134/2016 Regarding the Prohibition of School Segregation in Pre-University Education Units (Ordinul nr. 6134/2016 privind interzicerea segregării școlare în unitățile de învățământ preuniversitar)*, Article 7. However, Article 7c establishes that high school admission procedures are not affected by this legislation, de facto allowing for systematic

separation of high-achieving and low-achieving students into high school tracks. Most notably, this is visible in the most recent ranking of high schools in relation to the results of the National Assessment and Baccalureate, in which the similarity between admission grades based on National Assessment averages and Baccalureate grades is clearly visible. Moreover, the first technological high school in the ranking can be found in position 266 and interestingly manifests a clear tendency of improvement of students grades from admission to graduation (for the data see Bacplus, 2024).

Moreover, the national report *The State of Pre-University Education for the 2022-2023 School Year* (Ministerul Educației 2023b, original title in Romanian: *Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România 2022 – 2023*) shows that "by training tracks, the lowest pass rate [for the Baccalaureate examination] is recorded in technological high schools and the highest in theoretical high schools". Moreover, the European Commission report for 2023 indicates that only 56.6% of the total number of candidates enrolled from this track passed the exam. Furthermore, Gheba (2018) suggests that the precondition for passing the Baccalaureate is ensured by attending a theoretical high school itself. Thus, secondary school, and then the training track followed by the students, accentuates and perpetuates the educational inequalities between students in terms of their chances of success in the Baccalaureate examination.

From a different angle, educational inequality prevalent in the Romanian educational system is internalized by both high-achieving students that attend so-called 'top ranking' high schools (Țoc, 2018), as well as those who are underperforming (Borș, 2020). As Borș (2020) has shown, the ways in which students with low socio-economic status discuss school learning reveals the fact that they see themselves as being 'the problem' through internalizing a deficit-oriented discourse promoted by teachers. In this context, structural features that shape learning, such as the need of support or communication, or contradictory demands on the time of students due to care responsibilities are ignored, and learning is internalized as an act of individual responsibility that makes students appear as 'lazy' in their own eyes (Borș, 2020). From different contexts, we know that the internalization of cultural values in relation to appropriate classroom behaviors also happens in relation to how parents who are differently positioned in class terms (working class and middle class) coach children differently in relation to appropriate classroom behavior (Calarco, 2014), an aspect that is also reflected in their classroom behavior, facilitating the expression of views and

needs in middle class students, while working class students are encouraged to refrain from these behaviors (Calarco, 2011).

Furthermore, another aspect that has been stressed in relation to the reproduction of inequalities through education, namely the participation in paid extra-educational activities. On the one hand, as Hatos (2006: 227f.) has shown, private tutoring classes are a vehicle by which economic resources come to be normalized at the end of high school in an unequal competition for access to higher education. In the time since Hatos' study, a further vehicle for reproducing inequalities through education has developed, namely the participation in extracurricular activities (Savu, Lipan & Crăciun, 2020).

In this paper, we seek to look at the ways in which high school students from different high school tracks internalize their unequal access to higher education through the ways in which they discuss preparing for the Baccalaureate examination. The present paper is based on ten semi-structures interviews with ten 12th grade high school students from one theoretical and one technological high school from the same city in Northwest Romania. The research aimed to identify the differences between the perspectives of students from the two tracks, theoretical and technological, regarding the Baccalaureate examination as an educational experience – pointing to how the unequal access to higher education in relation to the unequal possibilities of succeeding to pass this exam are discussed and experienced by the students in advance of the examination.

Methodology

The research question that we explored is "*How do the perspectives of 12th grade students on learning for the Baccalaureate exam differ according to their high school track?".* As it can be seen above, the current configuration of secondary education in Romania, branched into three tracks, each in turn divided into different profiles and specializations, directed the purpose of this research. We anticipated that the unequal access to higher education is reflected in the ways in which students reflect on the process of preparing for the Baccalaureate exam, as well as in how they relate to the (un)likeliness of passing the examination in relation to their aspirational horizons.

1. Secondary research questions

To approach our research question, we formulated two more specific secondary questions that guide the analysis presented in this paper:

Q.S.1. *How do students' meaning making processes surrounding the Baccalaureate examination as an educational experience differ depending on the high school track attended?*

This secondary research question refers to the ways in which students understand their experience in relation to and ascribe meaning to the Baccalaureate exam in relation to their own past (biographical) and future (aspirational) educational path. This question attempts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning making processes of students in relation to the Baccalaureate exam.

Q.S.2. *How do students project their aspirations in relation to the Baccalaureate exam, depending on the high school track?*

The second secondary research question aims to investigate students' aspirations and look at how they relate to their own aspirations. Furthermore, this question explores a possible link between the subjective experience of preparing for the Baccalaureate exam and what students aspire to in terms of their educational and career aspirations.

2. Research design

Given the research purpose stated above, as well as the secondary research questions described, the research design used is a qualitative one, the research method used in order to carry out the study is the semi-structured interview because it "directly solicits the perspectives of the people we want to study" (Saldana, 2011, p.75). Moreover, we considered the interview method appropriate to answer the research question, "How do the perspectives of 12th grade students on learning for the Baccalaureate exam differ according to their high school track?" because it offered us the possibility to investigate in depth and contrast the subjective experiences of students who have been differently positioned within the educational system.

3. Participants

Ten twelfth grade students participated in this study. Two high schools were chosen as emblematic for the two different tracks (theoretical and technological), within the school context convenience sampling was practiced. The first author introduced the

possibility of participating in the study in class and was contacted by students who were willing to participate in the study. The interviews took place in the spring of 2024, therefore the students were preparing for their Baccalaureate examination (held in summer 2024) at the time of taking part in the interview. We chose the timing because at the time of interview, the students had not had the experience of sitting the Baccalaureate examination, so their discussions of this exam in the interviews reveals how they connect their past and present educational experience in an unequally structured system with the positioned anticipation of results in the examination, as well as how this positioned anticipation structures their aspirational horizons.

Five of them studied at a technological track high school, specializing in Electronics and Automation, and the other participants studied in a different, theoretical track high school, specializing in Natural Sciences. Both high schools were based in a large city in the Northwest of Romania.

Demographically, the total number of participants amounted to seven women and three men. All participating students were eighteen years old at the time of research and lived in urban areas. Whereas the theoretical track students were all female, the technological track students were both male (3) and female (2). This reflected the convenience sampling technique used and interest and availability to consent to participating in the study. As such, the disbalanced gender composition did not, unfortunately, allow for a thorough investigation of relevant gender differences in relating to learning and education, that should form an object of a future study.

4. Semi-structured interviews

Data was co-generated through carrying out individual semi-structured interviews that followed a previously elaborated interview guide consisting of 29 open-ended questions plus demographic questions. The interviews were conducted by the first author and both authors were involved in the elaboration of the interview guide, as well as in the data analysis and interpretation process. The questions in the interview guide were formulated after browsing several scientific resources on social inequalities perpetuated by educational inequalities.

The interview guide contains introductory questions, thematic questions, transition questions to the next topic, and final questions. The thematic questions are each subordinate to a secondary research question presented above. Thus, the question

Could you describe what you feel when you think about the Baccalaureate? develops the secondary research question *How do students' meaning making processes surrounding the Baccalaureate examination as an educational experience differ depending on the high school track attended?*

5. Steps in the research process

To gain access to research participants, we contacted the head teacher in each class of students from the technological track and presented to the whole class the purpose of the research and the way it would be carried out. Given that most of the students in the class commute and do not live in the city where the high school was based, we agreed with the students to conduct the interviews in the high school. After this first meeting, in two other days this paper's first author went to the high school and conducted the individual interviews with the five students who had agreed to participate.

In the case of the interaction with the theoretical high school track participants, the first author spoke with five female students and was able to set up interview appointments according to their preferences. All five meetings were held outside the school.

The first author assured all participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their answers, as well as of the processing of the information provided solely for the purposes of the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participating students prior to the actual interview. All 10 interviews were recorded using a personal cell phone, with an average duration of 40-45 minutes (30 minutes the shortest and 60 minutes the longest). Transcription of the interviews was done using the Voice Typing function within the online application Google Docs and was edited retrospectively.

The data was analyzed through inductive coding. The interview guide was structured around thematic areas (emotions, motivation, interactions, aspirations, beliefs, attitudes). Within these thematic areas, we coded the data into core codes and sub-codes from the perspective of how they related to the main research question. The codebook followed the design outlined by Mihas & Odum Institute (2019). The final codes and sub-codes are as follows:

a) Representing learning as an intellectual activity: Through this code we investigated how students discussed the intellectual aspects of their learning in

preparation for the Baccalaureate examination. The sub-codes reflecting ways of representing learning employed by the students were:

- Difficult effort
- Benefit.

b) Emotions associated with learning: Through this code we investigated how the students emotionally related to the process of learning in preparation for the Baccalaureate examination. The sub-codes reflecting emotions associated with learning were:

- Negative emotions
- Positive emotions

c) Anticipated exam performance: Through this code we investigated how students discussed their perceived likeliness of passing the Baccalaureate examination:

- (Hope of) passing the exam with minimum marks
- (Aspiration to) high scores in the examination

d) Private tutoring ('meditații'): Through his code we investigated how students discussed their access to, need for private tutoring, as well as the goals they set for engaging in private tutoring.

e) Meanings attributed to the Baccalaureate exam: Through this synthetic code we investigated how the students attributed meaning to the Baccalaureate examination. The code brings together aspects from all other codes in relation to the research questions. The two sub-codes that describe the meaning attributed to the Baccalaureate examination by students are:

- Directing the future
- Possibility of self-validation

f) Aspirational horizon: Through this code we investigated how meaning making surrounding the Baccalaureate examination shapes students' aspirations after graduation, in relation to the following sub-codes:

- Income
- Educational aspirations
- Professional aspirations.

We structured our interpretation of the data following these codes. In this paper, we focus on the codes "Meanings attributed to the Baccalaureate exam" and "Aspirational

horizons" of students – since these codes show synthetically how the Baccalaureate examination is perceived unequally by the soon-to-be graduates of different tracks within the Romanian high school system.

Analysis and interpretation

1. Meanings of the Baccalaureate exam

The specific question *How do students' meaning making processes surrounding the Baccalaureate examination as an educational experience differ depending on the high school track attended?* revealed significant differences in how participating students from different tracks anticipated the Baccalaureate examination. Three out of the five students studying in the theoretical track, specializing in Natural Sciences, perceive the Baccalaureate exam as an opportunity for self-validation of their own intellectual abilities and of the information they have acquired throughout their secondary schooling. Moreover, they also describe the exam as an opportunity to offer proof of gratitude to teachers, revealing a moralizing dimension of the anticipated results. They want to get high exam grades to reaffirm their own intellectual abilities, already demonstrated through the high grades previously obtained in the National Assessment (after 8th grade). From the students' perspective, the high marks also represent the efforts made by the class teachers, as well as the realization of the teachers' expectations regarding the performance of the students in the Natural Sciences specialization. All these students want to go to a *good university and degree program.* In this case, from the students' perspectives, the university admission does not appear conditional on passing the exam, but on obtaining an excellent grade. This is due to the fact that students in the theoretical track viewed as self-evident that they would pass the Baccalaureate examination without any difficulty. Moreover, as admission criteria to many BA degree programs in Romanian higher education take into account the results obtained in the Baccalaureate examination as part of the admission average, in contexts with competitive admission requirements the grades obtained in the Baccalaureate examination are relevant. Thus, the following extracts from the transcripts of the interviews illustrate the meanings attributed by the students to the Baccalaureate exam:

(...) but it's simply also something I do for myself, after so many years of studying, I wouldn't want to mess up and get a low grade. And in gratitude to the teachers who have been there for us.

(L – student of the theoretical track, specializing in Natural Sciences)

I want to demonstrate that, although the Baccalaureate exam is not so complex, at least in terms of critical thinking, I want to demonstrate that I can learn a very large volume and that I can organize myself in such a way that I can learn so much.

(I – student in the theoretical track, specializing in Natural Sciences)

At the same time, three of the five students in the technological track, specializing in electronics and automation, consider the Baccalaureate exam as a moment that can largely determine their immediate and even distant future: on the one hand, the possibility to study at university, and the need to build an alternative route for their professional future, on the other hand.

Here we can also see the difference between students' perspectives about the Baccalaureate exam as they relate it to access to the university: the students from the technological track perceive the passing of the exam as the most significant step for their educational future, whereas the participants from the theoretical track perceive the exam as an intermediate step towards their future. As it has been shown previously, students can apply for university admission only if they have passed the Baccalaureate examination. At the same time, all the five interviewed students want to access university studies. Yet, they feel that the grades obtained in the Baccalaureate examination might become an obstacle in this regard. That's why they feel mostly negative emotions in relation to the examination. This is also why they make an extra effort trying to assure that they will pass the examination, by taking private (tutoring) lessons.

Moreover, to the question *What relevance does the Baccalaureate exam have for your plans?* one of the three students uses an absolutist language, emphasizing the role he attributes to the Baccalaureate exam regarding the shaping of his future path, as can be seen below:

Well, ... what can I say... I mean it's important because it affects my life, that's why it's important, that's about all, it doesn't really help me to grow.

(D – student in technological track, Electronics and Automation specialization)

All ten participants want to pursue university studies, but the ways in which they discuss their chances are not the same. The study reveals that students from the technological track perceive the Baccalaureate exam as a compelling moment due to the uncertainty of passing the exam with the minimum grade. Furthermore, technological track students are additionally confronted with the uncertainty of accessing university at all after the examination.

Nevertheless, the interviews also bring to light the fact that students in the technological track feel that they have to ensure that they pass the Baccalaureate exam, more specifically, that they obtain the minimum passing grade. For this reason, they turn to private tutoring services and are subjected to an additional financial effort. In comparison, in the case of students in the theoretical track, passing the exam with high marks is ensured by the educational institution, through the quality of the educational services they receive. However, some of the theoretical students use private tutoring services, but only in preparation for highly competitive university admission examinations, e.g. for degrees in medicine.

Moreover, one of the research participants from the technological track describes that many of her classmates are commuters and therefore unable to attend the extra exam preparation classes offered by teachers at school, as can be seen bellow:

We only solved subjects for Romanian when we had tutoring at school with the Romanian teacher, but during in the Romanian classes, when all the children could be there, we didn't do it. In tutoring, she would give us a subject. But in tutoring there were 5-6 students. Not everyone can stay, because the tutoring is after school, and many colleagues are commuters and have to leave.

(S – student of the technological track, Electronics and Automation specialization)

As Webb et al. (2015) pointed out, students' expectations to attend university are affected by neighborhood factors, particularly for regional students. In this case, for these students, commuting implies a restriction of the available learning time in the subjects

for the exam, as well as physical and psychological exhaustion. Therefore, commuting students are more likely to experience fatigue, need for rest, and thus learning for the examination is restricted to a smaller number of hours, and certain opportunities are unavailable such as accessing tutoring sessions provided by the school. It can be seen how the qualitative and quantitative differences in the preparation offered to students at school, students' financial situation or geographical factors accentuate the differences between students in terms of their chances of passing the Baccalaureate and furthermore their chances of accessing higher education. Thus, the influence of socio-economic factors on the perpetuation of educational inequalities and on access to higher education is highlighted.

2. Higher education and students' aspirations

The student body of the high schools where the participating students are studying is the result of an unequal distribution of the results obtained in the National Assessment exam and conversely of unequal access to resources that were mobilized to facilitate preparation for this exam. Students who entered the technological track did not obtain high enough marks to enter a theoretical high school, and this may have been a result of the lack of resources to invest in private tutoring, as well as the unequal quality of education in the rural areas where a significant number of the students came from. Therefore, the inductive data analysis outlined secondary insights that were not anticipated through the research questions. This was visible in the fact that technological track students would live in rural areas and commute to attend high school in an urban area, as opposed to theoretical track students that lived in the city in which they went to high school. Thus, from the reports of the participating students from the two tracks, they appeared to differ in terms of socio-economic background. This was visible in the way the students from the technological track internalized pressure to become independent financially and how this pressure then translated into different aspirations for the time after they would graduate high school. The following extracts are illustrative:

I'm going to get a job. If I go abroad, I'm still going to get a job. (…) It's useless to say what I want it to be. I want it to be an easy life, but it won't be easy at all.

(D – student of the technological track, Electronics and Automation specialization)

After the Baccalaureate, I have plans to go and work abroad and so on, to go during the summer, to go and work, to make money for the future. For myself, for the house...

(R – student of the technological track, Electronics and Automation specialization)

Then I started to work full-time [while still attending secondary school], to help my family to support myself and I started disengaging from school [tasks].

(S – student of the technological track, Electronics and Automation specialization)

As is apparent from the data, quoted above, that most students from the technological track did not feel that they had ownership over their educational trajectories and felt that they needed to earn money to make a living through getting a job and were well aware that this will have costs in terms of their potential and current intellectual attainment. Similar to how Goldthorpe (2006: 169f) working class students engage in 'strategies from below' in relation to education and social mobility: in order to preserve their class position they leave education early or deprioritize it in order to earn money, rather than maintain their engagement in education, despite being aware that this might have costs in terms of not accessing upwards mobility pathways through education. On the other end, students who come from middle class backgrounds access 'strategies from above' (Goldthorpe, 2006: 169f) securing their position by remaining on educational pathway. This trend was also visible in our sample, where aspirations were shaped by the presence of a need to earn money quickly among several of the technological track students and a disengagement from financial concerns and a focus on shaping their own educational trajectory among theoretical track students.

Related to the specific question *How do students project their aspirations in relation to the Baccalaureate exam, depending on the high school track?* relevant differences were identified between the two groups of students from the technological track, Electronics and Automation specialization and the theoretical track, Natural Sciences specialization. Thus, for the students participating in the research from the theoretical track, the Baccalaureate exam is perceived as a mediating, intermediary element in relation to educational and professional aspirations. All five students described with determination both the future educational path, i.e. the desired university and degree program, and the anticipated professional perspective. When asked *What do you imagine your life will look*

like in ten years' time? four out of five students gave a clear description of the profession they would have, but also of the level of education they would have attained. Here is an illustrative answer of one student:

> *I will probably have my bachelor's and master's degree. I will be working on my PhD. I think I will have a career in graphic design.*
>
> (AN – student of the theoretical track, specializing in Natural Sciences)

Therefore, higher education is not an option for these students, but a self-evident path for them. As they anticipate high exam grades for the Baccalaureate, it is natural for them to anticipate high performance also in academic contexts. Furthermore, none of the students mentioned terms such as *money* or *salary*, it is obvious that participants from the theoretical track consider that they have the resources that allow them to project high educational and professional aspirations.

In contrast, for the students in the technological track, the link between the meanings attributed to the Baccalaureate exam and the way in which educational and professional aspirations are projected is evident. All five students aspire to higher education, but all of them realize that access to university is conditioned by passing the Baccalaureate exam. Also, it can be noticed that students' desire to access higher education is placed differently in their aspirational hierarchy. For these students, finding a job after high school is the first point to which they refer, and later they express their intention to attend university. Moreover, the subsequent educational path conditions the projection of professional aspirations, so that for three of the five students the professional horizon is described with uncertainty and lack of clarity. At the same time, the other two students seem to project their future with more certainty.

Thus, we can notice successive constraints on the aspirational horizons that have as their initial point the Baccalaureate exam, for three students participating in the research from the technological track. The following sentence is representative of the above:

I don't know, to go to college, if I pass the Baccalaureate, of course. I don't know, make something of myself. I'd really like to be a physical therapist. I don't know, I'd like to be able to end up having money to help other people.

(S – student of the technological track, Electronics and Automation specialization)

At the same time, the interdependence between anticipated performance and the projection of educational and career aspirations can be observed, which reinforces the results of more recent studies. Thus, the interaction between school performance and students' aspirations projection (Astleithner et al., 2023, Miko & Hatos, 2024) were also highlighted by the present research. Moreover, in line with Reay's (1998) assertions regarding the influences of family and educational background on decisions about pursuing higher education, the results of the study reveal how this interaction differs according to the students' track and specialization. Thus, the context of the Baccalaureate exam highlights the profound uncertainty, on the one hand, and the categorical determination, on the other hand, shown by the students regarding the design of their own educational and professional aspirations.

Concluding discussion

All interviewed students aspired to continue their studies after graduating from high school, immediately or at a later point in time. This aspiration took the form of a carefully laid out plan in the case of students attending a theoretical track, whereas in the case of students attending a technological track, it was noted as an unlikely desirable outcome of their present educational trajectory. Our paper reveals a relationship between the ways in which students from different high school tracks perceive the Baccalaureate examination, their previous experiences and their aspirations. This interdependence points to the mechanisms by which educational inequality operates through the Romanian educational system in the form of performance-based selection for high school admissions that in turn is reflected in the unequal chances of passing the Baccalaureate examination and of accessing higher education. Moreover, the paper shows how educational inequality is internalized emotionally and intellectually in how students relate to learning in preparation for the Baccalaureate exam.

In this line, it is relevant that the difference in the way in which students relate to the Baccalaureate exam may reflect their different socio-economic backgrounds, a point that is suggested by the ways in which technological track students were aware of financial constraints and felt responsible for earning a living soon after and in one case even during their high-school studies. Moreover, they conceptualized this in relation to not only their own needs, but also those of their families. Students from the technological track currently have limited access to financial resources and the immediate need for income is evident. In comparison, students in the theoretical track did not explicitly mention terms such as money or income, which emphasizes that they do not feel the need for financial resources. For them, educational aspirations represent the first element of the aspirational horizon described by them, followed by professional aspirations. These students are confident and accurate in describing their aspirations, which indicates the financial and social support available to them. It can be seen in both groups of students that aspirations for higher education are to some extent driven by access to financial and social resources. It is therefore evident that socio-economic status is an element that can significantly influence the educational aspirations of graduates (Järvinen et al., 2023).

Therefore, students from both tracks have aspirations for higher education, but their different socio-economic backgrounds increase the unequal chances of access in terms of the resources they can mobilize to access higher education. However, given the small sample and qualitative design of the inquiry, our analysis can merely point to the fact that inequality and class positions should be taken into account in a next step when designing a more comprehensive study of high-school students' educational aspirations and how they relate to both the unequal structure and performance based selection operating in the system, as well as socio-economic inequalities related to students' families' class and educational backgrounds.

Moreover, the difference in the anticipated performance on the exam is relevant: students in the technological track want to pass the baccalaureate with the minimum grade required (six), whereas students in the theoretical track anticipate results as close as possible to the maximum grade (ten). While students in the technological track describe the exam experience as a decisive moment for their future educational and professional path, students in the theoretical track perceive the exam rather as an intermediate step in their path. Considering the socio-economic difference as a secondary information provided through inductive analysis of the data, these results are in line with

those conducted by Berger and Archer (2018). They emphasize that students from different socio-economic backgrounds relate differently to the goals they want to achieve.

It also reaffirms the results of Borş (2020), which draws attention to the fact that students with lower socio-economic status relate differently to school learning than students with higher socio-economic status. Moreover, it also related to Goldthorpe's (2006) observations regarding social mobility strategies 'from below', aimed at preventing downward social mobility through earning a living, and 'from above', in terms of securing access to upward social mobility through education. Disadvantaged students, in our case attending the technological track, saw it as their priority to earn a living and as a desirable outcome to do so as a prospective university graduate, students attending the theoretical track saw university education as a 'natural' next step in their career path.

Furthermore, this is also reflected in the difference in chances of accessing higher education of participating students from the two tracks. Since students in the technological track also consider the possibility of not passing the exam, the chances of being able to go to the university of their choice is not seen as likely, only as a relative possibility. Thus, the Baccalaureate exam is also a sorting mechanism, ensuring unequal access to higher education. It is interesting that although aspirational horizons differed to the perceived likeliness of passing the examination, all students intended to eventually attend higher education if they succeeded in fulfilling the prerequisites. This finding may inform policymaking in the future that could help facilitate access to higher education for technological track high school students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, this point should be taken with caution as it may also reflect the particularities of our sample of interviewees. As participants were selected based on interest to discuss their learning in preparation for the Baccalaureate examination, it might also signal that aspirations to attend higher education were uncharacteristically overrepresented in both samples since academically minded students are more likely to engage in being interviewed to discuss their learning.

Moreover, the study highlights secondary aspects that can significantly deepen the difference in the chances of passing the Baccalaureate exam between students from the two tracks. Qualitative differences in the learning experiences offered to students from the two tracks in schools are thus observed. The different reasons why students use tutoring illustrate precisely these differences: students in the technological track use tutoring/private tutoring to ensure that they will pass the Baccalaureate exam with the

minimum grade required. At the same time, students participating in the theoretical track access private tutoring in order to ensure that they pass the entrance exam for the desired university. On the other hand, as the interviews with students in the technological track show, it is more difficult for their commuter peers to attend the extra tuition hours provided by their teachers at school. Therefore, the shorter learning time, physical and mental fatigue are elements that may contribute to reducing commuter students' chances of passing the Baccalaureate exam and, consequently, of attending higher education.

Finally, this paper is meant as an exploratory small-scale study and should be followed by a more targeted approach to the relationship between socio-economic background, educational biographies and pathways and perspectives on learning for the Baccalaureate examination that could involve quantitative data collection methods and/or a larger and more diverse sample of interviewees. Such a study could set the stage for better understanding how higher education access could be improved for socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged young people.

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